

COLORS OF REVOLUTION
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CHAPTER 1

Hercules sat on the rock next to the field, his ass connecting to the Earth, his eyes fixed on the horizon. It was morning, his favorite time of day. The time when the birds were singing, the sky not yet daylight blue, the smell of 'fresh' everywhere. This morning it was the pines next to the East swamp that caught his nose. Hercules always saw the world most clearly through his nose. It was big, with large nostrils, and he couldn't help but bring in lots of air every time he breathed in, even when he was sleeping.

Hercules let the eyes imagine what his nose smelt beyond the East swamp. He had never been East of the swamp, but he smelt its every mood. On some days it was sweet, on some days a little sour, and on some days, like this one where the morning fog gave way to blue sky real early, it smelled salty. Hercules had heard about the ocean, a swamp bigger than the eyes can see where all the water was salty, all the time. He had heard about places on the other side of the ocean too. Europe, where his Master's father was from. Ireland, where his Master's mother was from. And Africa, where he was told he had come from. Though not by Master Johnson or Mistress Sally.

A gator swam by Hercules as he looked down at the smooth, reflective surface of the pond. "Hey there, gator," he said to the ferocious creature with the sharp teeth opening its mouth, grabbing some baby carp, hoping for something more filling. "You look like me, or does I look like you today?" Hercules smiled. "Ya knows, that what you imagines yerself ta be somethin else, ya might become that somethin' else," he continued, dreaming about seeing on the outside what only he knew, or hoped, he was on the inside.

Like every other morning, the gator got its fish, and went on its way, leaving Hercules with the truth about the way things were rather than how he wanted them to be. He had a big smile, a black as spades face, short arms that were more bone than muscle, but legs that just kept goin, every morning, of every day, for so many years that he lost count. Unlike the gator, he hadn't ever caught a fish, hadn't ever hunted anything that wasn't dead already, and hadn't snarled his teeth at anyone or anything. No need to. He was Hercules, scrawniest Nigger on the Johnson plantation, who never had, or had to have, a heroic idea in his life. Didn't need to. It sat good like that with Master Johnson. And Mistress Sally. And all the other Niggers on the Plantation. And himself. There was always cornbread on the breakfast table, a piece of ham in the soup every night and a dance every full moon or so where Master Johnson and Miss Sally let everyone have an extra day off after workin full time during the full moon.

He wore what he picked, too. Good Southern cotton. In a good year. A year which was like any others in South Carolina. The year of 1776, to those who was taking count, or needed to. No, nothing in Hercules' world would change. And even though he hoped it would, he prayed it wouldn't. Little did he know that the Good Lord had something else in mind, for him, the other Niggers, the Johnson's and even the gator.

CHAPTER 2

Hector hated his name, almost as much as he hated his life. Though many envied it. Some said he had a strong head, or a pig head. But he was smart enough to not let folks really know what he was thinking, or feeling. Particularly the horses he trained for Master Johnson. “Break them gentle enough for me to gallop two miles but gentle enough for Miss Sally to ride sidesaddle even on those days when she’s having female problems,” was his assignment.

Most horses took to ‘Sub-master Hector’s’ command when they came of age to be useful adults rather than spirited colts or fillies. Hector never told anyone what kind of voice he used in the ‘private conversations’ with the animals he was assigned to break. He kept the secrets about the ‘touch points’ to himself too. Some said that those touch points were inside the manure-making hole, or lower in the mares, but as long as Hector made the horses do what Master Johnson and Mistress Sally wanted them to do, he had most of the day to himself.

On some days, Hector looked at the books from which his name was picked. Greek literature mostly, readable enough if you understood most of the words. Homer, the half-blind Plantation carpenter, had taught Hector about letters, and words, with the secret blessing of Miss Sally, some of the field hands rumored. Putting the words into sentences was up to Hector, a slow task he had to master by himself once Homer was found out, and sold to another Plantation, ‘for his health’, Overseer McGilvrey said.

McGilvrey was not a true Scotsman of course, his face being half Injun, something that made him almost as ugly as the half-Nigger faces that were everywhere on the Plantation. Half Nigger and half... ‘somethin else, child’, their mothers would say to them with a tear in their eye, and sometimes a spark in their smile.

But Hector learned to relate to horses more than people. Some more than others. Some he kept wild, for as long as he could. One of them was ‘Ebony’, a black colt who was an Arab from the neck up, a quarterhorse from the fetlocks down, with a trunk shaped like one of the ‘wildies’ that roamed in from Shawnee country West of the Alleghenies. Though Ebony’s family jewels were taken out whole and intact, he was still very proud cut, his defiant manhood coming from someplace inside his mis-shapen body.

“He’s better off as meat than for saddle, or even harness,” McGilvrey slurred out to Hector on the eighth straight day of ‘lessons’ in the round pen. “Neither you nor anyone else has been able to take him around the pasture without eating dirt. Or maybe that freak you call a horse tossed you on yer head and you enjoy eatin’ dirt now,” he laughed.

Hector took a deep breath as he put the saddle on Ebony, sensing that on THIS ride, he would break a bone instead of just bruise a muscle. Considering all the options, for himself, and the animal, the thinking Nigger who never let the Whites know what he was really thinking opened his teeth in a wide smile, showing off his off-white teeth. “What would you say if I liked ridin this horse, and eatin dirt after he tosses me off, Masser?”

“Would save on a whole bunch of troubles with runaways if we can get ALL you Niggers to enjoy eating dirt,” McGilvrey smiled back.

Hector kept his faced fixed in that ‘no expression’ smile.

“That was a joke, Hector,” the Overseer who was enough White and not enough Injun to racially qualify for his position boasted. “A smart man knows humor when he hears it. And knows when to laugh.”

Hector faked a chuckle. The best he could do for the Overseer who disposed of laborers who didn’t appreciate Master Johnson’s generosity in the dead of night. But to be fair, the Johnson plantation was a Nigger’s Paradise. No one went hungry, and when anyone got sick, the Doctor came by and gave you something for the pain. And when babies were born, the mothers would be allowed to give them names of their own choosing. And as long as those babies made money for the Johnson ‘family’, which McGilvry said included the Niggers too, they weren’t sold. Unless, of course the price was right, the opportunities elsewhere were better for them, or they violated the rules. And if they tried to run away...there was no return to any garden.

On most Plantations, the first runaway was punished by a lashing. The second by branding. The third with removal of a limb valued by the ‘family member’ in question in keeping with making that ‘child’ useful to the Plantation owner. But what was an offense? Master Johnson saw his Plantation through the eyes and ears of McGilvrey, and the Scot-Injun-something didn’t like the way Hector was laughing at his joke. Perhaps the punch line needed clarification.

“I said, Hector, maybe if more of you Niggers liked getting on wild horses that threw you off and made you eat dirt, you’d enjoy eating dirt and it would solve our runaway problem,” McGilvrey repeated again to Hector while he was trying to find his head after it hit the ground after yet another fall from Ebony. But yet again, Hector mounted the horse, being careful to not put both feet over his flanks until he could feel the torso of the beast stop bloating.

The field hand atop the still-semi-wild horse nodded. But still it wasn’t enough. McGilvrey pulled out his whip, snapping it in front of the horse’s feet. It was all Hector could do to not get reared up and tossed on his arm, or back, landing with a snapped neck.

“I said!!! You Niggers should learn to enjoy eating dirt, and it would solve the runaway problem for all of us!!! That’s a joke, you stupid, dim-witted, high-steppin’, son of a----“ McGilvry yammered out.

Before McGilvry could finish the accusation, or historical account, of Hectors REAL birth, Ebony entered into the conversation, kicking the Scotsman on his thick head, knocking him to the ground.

“Easy son, easy,” Hector said to the horse, trying to calm it enough to dismount. But before he could give aid, comfort or even a look at the Overseer lying on the ground, a carriage full of visitors, the Jacksons, had driven up to the house, their son, Master Edward pointing at the event. “That Nigger killed the Overseer. With his horse!” a seven-year-old model citizen said in a crisp English accent.

Young Master Edward’s parents and escorts whipped out their guns, shooting at Hector. The White foremen, one of which was rumored to be McGivlrey’s son, ran out with pitchforks and ropes.

Hector had no time to think of anything except the obvious. These were armed White men on foot, with weapons. He was an unarmed Nigger on a horse. In a split second he gave thanks to God, the one who looked after Niggers and Injuns. Finally, he was being pushed off a rotting cliff into flight. Hopefully, Ebony understood that he was in the same situation. They would both be meat for the hogs, or worse, if they didn’t find their way to ‘someplace else’ and fast.

Finding brains in his feet and courage in his hands, Hector led the colt into a flat out gallop, through the woods, over the swamp trail, and deep into a field of fog. He thought it led West. He hoped it would anyway. Maybe Injun territory, West of the Alliganies. He only hoped that the stories about them taking in runaways on their own terms were true. He dared not consider anything otherwise. He dared not think about the Johnson family, and the members of it which were, by birth and heart, very much his own family.

CHAPTER 3

Athena was no raving beauty by standards of the field house, but as for the big house, she was perfect. Small nose, narrow face, chicken hips barely big enough to give birth to a chicklet, and arms better suited to lifting a tea-cup than a bail of cotton or a pile of lumber. Nothing from the field fit Athena very well, even the songs, but a corset did. Mistress Sally's daughter Pamela had chosen her as a playmate, something which Master Johnson, her father, appreciated very much as he felt some kind of special responsibility for the Nigger girl who popped out of the womb of her mother more White than Black. It was something that Athena never talked about to anyone, but always wondered about.

Athena poured the hot water from the wood stove in the kitchen in the big house. She looked out the window at the horse in the field, being their own masters now that their trainer was absent. She wondered about what happened to Hector, the smelly and loud-mouthed 'horse Nigger' who repulsed her sensibilities and continuously had eyed her womanhood with delight even as a child, constantly tipping his hat with the intention of courting her one day. Hercules did a 'sort of' courting as well, with a gentle kind of persuasion more in keeping with Athena's temperament and Big House training. "You never mind them Niggers, those two ain't for you, child," head woman Nigger Thelma kept telling her. "It be against God's own laws." Athena never asked why 'against God's laws' never applied to any other Black, or even off-White, suitor she had in mind, but she figured that it had something to do with 'biology'. It was a word her Thelma picked up from Miss Pamela, or someone else, in places she never talked about.

With Miss Pamela in finishing school in Charleston, Master Johnson and Mistress Sally saw fit to keep Athena up in the house as a servant. The visitors seemed to like her and she was pleasant enough company, the kind who could be anything to anyone. Serving tea at social functions was what she was best at. As for what the tea was from that day, that was another matter.

Isaac Williams tasted the tea, let it swirl around in his mouth, then spit it out. "Who made this tea?" he demanded to know of his host.

"Athena, just as always," Master Horatio Johnson responded.

Williams tasted it again, finding something missing. "I always heard that tea from this part of the country had a dash or two of spirits in it to give it a special spark, kind of--"

"---Madness!" Johnson interjected, speaking from that private place which Athena never knew about, but knew enough to not investigate further. "A clear headed mind is a man's most powerful tool to see the world as it is, and change it."

"According to what the woman who made him stop drinking want it to be?" Williams mused, pointing to a portrait of Johnson's wife, Mistress Sally, done at the prime of her most fertile womanhood.

Athena noticed all of the men laughing, and Johnson letting them do so. After they were through, Williams resumed his line of inquire.

“So, Horatio. This tea, in its own crude way once I knew it is supposed to be tea. It is very tasty. Who made it?” ‘Master’, at least on HIS plantation, Williams, asked again.

“As I said, Isaac. Athena, just as always,” Horatio’s reply.

“Your slave?” Williams pressed. “Who should be out in the field picking cotton, I should suggest, Sir. As more than one familial dispute between God fearing White husbands and wives have been precipitated by the less developed Races becoming too familiar with ours, Sir.”

Athena shuttered, as Williams was the unofficial ‘boss’ of all the bosses in the township. What he suggested usually became an order which was obeyed. As the main buyer for European markets who set prices as he saw fit, there was no one higher than him on ANYone’s mountain, or molehill.

“Where did you get this slave, anyway? Under a pile of mating roaches?” Williams demanded to know regarding Athena. The rest of the guests in the room, businessmen who were about to become political men one way or another, chuckled, some as they wanted to, some as they felt they had to.

“She is my adopted Ward, Sir,” Johnson protested, still maintaining the Southern gentleman’s smile offered to all enemies and superiors.

“Ward my ass,” Marcus McMann replied, smacking the behind of the property in question, wondering about what kind of arrangement could be made to get a Nigger who was so non-Black in HIS own bedroom.

Johnson stood up, his back arched, the 50 year old white whiskers on the side of his face standing straight up on end, ready to do battle with McMann or any other 26 year old brat from England who inherited his father’s estate. “Sir! I must ask you to treat my Wards with respect.”

Williams intervened. “Because they are your property, or your----“

“----Responsibility.” Johnson asserted, before Williams could say ‘children’, or ‘mistresses’, another one of those facts that everyone knew but no one talked about.

It was like that a lot at Johnson Manor. There were things men talked about in front of women. Like how they carved gardens and plantations out of swamps and pine forests, stump by stump. How they fought off Injuns, French soldiers and Spanish river pirates to keep what they got once they got it. How the Colonies would deal with England’s new rules about how they were supposed to be run.

Athena bowed her head. “I’ll go into the kitchen and make some more tea, Sirs,” she said.

“No need,” McMann said, tasting his brew, “This is fine. Exceptional actually.”

“It was probably pissed on by the Yankees up in Boston after their tea party in ‘73”, Elias Klause said, his German accent muttering up the Carolina English manner of speech he so desperately was trying to talk with. “Boston Revolutionaries relate their grievances to the King by dressing up like Indians, getting drunk, throwing the tea off the ships, then pissing on it. Of course, Ben Franklin doesn’t report in his newspapers how many of them fell in the water drunk.”

The gentleman laughed. Athena found herself chuckling, allowed to do so, even courage to do so. Particularly by Elias, the man who told the joke.

“And his paper will report how us Southerners who are still loyal to the Crown, are drinking tea that the Boston Yankees pissed on,” Williams asserted.

Silence fell upon the room. Whether the tea was indeed recycled by Patriots in New England to Loyalists in South Carolina after Yankee urine tainted its flavor was not the issue. It was something deeper than that. Everyone in the room had some kind of view on the matter of King George or General George Washington. And sometimes that view was the same as what that man would do. But who would win? All the men in the room were winners because they never backed a loser.

Athena didn’t know very much about the Revolution. It was a word that never made any sense to her. Some folks said it was about freedom, but for who? Master Johnson had read Tom Paine’s ‘Common Sense’ to her, along with some stuff by Rousseau, a French philosopher, and even some of Ben Franklin’s newspaper articles as ‘bedtime reading’ during those nights when all the other Niggers were in the field, and she was in the big house being treated like a daughter, long as she acted as a ‘ward’.

Athena looked to Master Johnson for instructions as to what to do in the here and now of it. “I’ll be getting some more tea, Sir?” she asked.

“No,” he replied firmly, staring firmly into William’s stone cold face. “This Yankee outhouse brew we bought in Charleston is fine.”

Master Johnson drank the tea, pursing his lips the way he did that time Athena accidentally put salt in the sugar shaker and he ate a large spoonful of ‘salted’ porridge, or when she put broccoli into the venison stew, the only vegetable that made Master Johnson gag. No, whatever was in ‘Yankee tea’ and the Revolution imported down to the Carolinas, Master Johnson was determined to like it, or make others like it. Even if he didn’t like it himself.

One in three men drank the tea. Another one in three threw it out the window. Another one in three let it sit there, and walked out of the room. They said goodbye to Master Johnson in the kind of way that McGilvry said goodbye to Niggers who would never be seen at Johnson Manor again.

Athena picked up her tray and gathered the tea cups left by those who summoned their carriages and hightailed back home. It was her place and pleasure to clean up after Master Johnson's guests. But this time, that pleasure would be ended in a way she never anticipated.

"I'll do that, Athena." Master Johnson said as he gently took the tray from her, bowing his own head as a servant, and doing the 'servantly' duties of gathering the china. It seemed like the men in the room were impressed. A White Master doing a Servant's work, and giving Athena the rest of the day off for whatever she wanted to do? It was a scary question. Most particularly....the part where she had to figure out what she wanted to do.

CHAPTER 4

Hector looked at the mountains from the Piedmont below and wondered what the white stuff was on top. Lester, the 8 fingered field hand who was purchased from the Vaughn's up in Virginie, said it was called snow. "Rain that fell like white specs of cool cotton that melted in yer mouth and cleaned yer face like rain from Heaven itself". The description of the snow was beautiful. How everything else felt around it wasn't. Eight finger Lester never did say anything about why he lost a two of his digits, but the cold, pain, then numb in every finger of Hectors hands was giving him an idea. This wasn't the kind of cold that you got on a Christmas morning near the swamp, but thankfully his brains knew about how to get a fire started more than his shaking hands did.

The runaway who was forced to do what his heart demanded warmed himself by the morning fire. There was some kind of Master plan working here, Hector thought as he considered everything that had happened to, or for, him. He was riding West into and beyond the High Country on the fastest and, when you respected him, most obedient horse on the Johnson Plantation. The saddle he was on when Ebony accidentally reared up on and killed Overseer McGilvry was provisioned with a blanket, matches, a knife and even a pistol, a pocket watch to tell time in the event that Master Johnson's nephews needed to get home in time for supper. The abandoned farm house he ran across beyond the Township line had powder, shot and beans, bacon and even some coffee that looked liked it belonged to someone who didn't need it. The pocket watch he left behind after he took what he needed was enough payment, he hoped, to cover the costs of the supplies he took.

Not stealing from those that didn't have was the line that Hector made for himself no matter how hurt, desperate or angry he became. He hated himself for having that habit inside him, though Athena up in the big house said it was a good thing. Hercules said it was a 'gift from the gods' but to Hercules, rich in the heart, poor in the head, everything was a gift from the gods, even a lashing from Overseer McGilvry. When asked about who those gods were, he had no idea. He just looked at the blue hills in the West that became white on top as Christmas time approached.

As Hector's fingers warmed up, they started to hurt. Worse than when they first got cold the night before. Ebony snorted, nuzzling in for another one of the apples he ripped off the orchard they ran through a few hundred feet below.

"You still hungry, Nathaniel?" Hector said to the horse who he renamed, thinking that the name might suit Ebony on the inside. He fed the animal an apple, then some beans, and even offered his ration of venison, freshly killed yesterday. "Nathaniel" fit somehow, the way it sounded fitting the horse on the inside, as best as Hector could see his inside. "Ebony" described him on the outside, something too many Black and White folks did to each other. Men and women too. How dark your skin was or how close you were to being a 'man' in the image of Master Johnson or a 'woman' like Miss Sally was how people treated you on the inside. "Boy" was easy to say to the horse, a Nigger

becoming a Black man by having someone he can have as a Slave, but Nathaniel had become more of a friend than a servant.

The horse nibbled on the meat, then spit it out. Grass was better, even though it was scarcer this high up than back home where all he had to do was lower his head to eat as much as he wanted. Nathaniel picked up a handful of the scrub grass, offering it his partner in crime, according to the law down below. Nathaniel passed it up, asking for another apple.

“It’s all we got, Nathaniel,” Hector said. “Fer now.” The runaway assessed his newly acquired possessions and prospects, the latter shared by horse and rider. “I know that down below all you had to do to keep yer belly fed was to nod yer head down and eat another mouthful of hay. And all I had to do for an extra piece of cornbread, which I sorely miss now, is...was...to lift up another bail of cotton. And that we always bed down without the wind, rain, and cold. And that we had company to talk about things with, enjoying yappin about things we hated so our mind’s be on somethin else. But we be rich between our ears now, Nathaniel. We got... freedom. We both be....free.”

Hector finally voiced the words and reality, holding onto the lead line on Nathaniel for dear life. He told himself that it was for the horse’s own good that he kept it tied up in ‘camp’, and that he enjoyed finally being able to sleep without listening to some other Johnson ‘ward’ snore, belly ache or sing Gospel songs about God, Jesus and what it would be like in Heaven for God fearing Niggers. But he couldn’t sleep, or sing even his own tunes now. He didn’t know why. Maybe because there was no one to share the freedom with. He dreamed about buying Athena’s freedom, then marrying her. But it was a forbidden romance even within the Plantation, for reasons his mother never told him.

As for Hercules, that was another person of special responsibility Hector felt himself indentured to. Hercules was a poor excuse for a man with regards to his muscles and bones, but the short, scrawny Nigger always managed to do his quota of work, making up for anything else expected of him with a smile and a need to serve whoever wanted to be his boss at the time, even if it was another Nigger trying to act like Master Johnson, or Overseer McGilvry. Hector tried to make Hercules think for himself, but Hercules wouldn’t, or couldn’t.

Hector dreamed about freedom, almost as much as he tried to get the hunchbacked, always bowing Hercules to stand up for himself, or even stand up straight for ANYone. When it happened, he thought that it would be a day of joy. But the only joy Hector got back on the Plantation was with Nathaniel, when he was still Ebony. When he was taking care of him. Serving him. But there was something to this servant thing that was different than at the Plantation. Hector now CHOSE his equine master, and the four legged beast who was now the person he served or answered to, and maybe was even living for.

Hector had heard stories about Niggers who ‘wandered off’ then came home because of reasons they never talked about. He saw every one of those reasons in what eight finger Lester DIDN’T say, but revealed to him in a conversation once, when the women, children and Overseers weren’t listening.

“A man needs certain things to be a man,” eight-finger Lester had said sorrowfully on more than one occasion, holding back the tears behind his glossy eyes. “Food for his belly. Warm for his skin in winter, cool breeze in summer. A woman to hold onto at night so he don’t rub his private parts raw or pull a rope round his own throat. A HUMAN person to talk to, with or, or at. A job to do in the mornin so he can make sense of the day when nighttime come. And children to...well....”

Lester never completed the rest of it. The man with the scars between his legs who was turned into the kind of Nigger who couldn’t have children was found hung in the outhouse the next day on an adjacent Plantation. But there was something else Hector remembered Lester saying before he said goodnight, on that last night. “A man who values nothin ain’t a man at all. He’s less than human. Less than dead.”

Hector wondered what ‘less than dead’ meant. With no home to go to, no town to get any kind of job, purpose, or life in, a price on his head, and no prospect of ever seeing Athena, Hercules or Lester again, it hit home. This was freedom. Something that you had to enjoy alone. A ‘gift from the gods’ that came with more fear than joy, more hunger than laughter, and not even any books to read so you could try to figure out what to do next.

Nathaniel snorted, then stomped his foot. In ‘horse talk’ he was saying that he wanted to get moving, maybe to find a pasture or a meadow with a different kind of scrub grass on it to fill his empty belly. As the mentally and physically exhausted Hector heard, and felt it, it was another rule that Lester never told him, or maybe didn’t know himself. “The only real rest is in motion itself.”

CHAPTER 5

If cotton was king in the Carolinas, rice was queen. Both crops brought in good money in France, England and even the uppity, hot-headed colonies up North. Hercules knew the ‘easy’ ones like New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island, but he never could say ‘Massachusetts’. Funny name for a strange brand of white folks who, according to some, didn’t need Black folks to do their work for them. Hercules figured that folks in Massachusetts didn’t do no real work, or stole from those that did. Johnson’s gentlemanly neighbors seemed to support that when they talked about ‘our prospects’ with Master Johnson while Hercules tended to their horses at the door. It was a cool day, the kind when you could see your own words in the fog front of ya after you spoke them, but the gentlemen talked on the porch. They sent the women inside where it was warm.

Hercules didn’t hear much, but he did smell that something was different about this after Church social. Firstly, the gents weren’t socializin’, they was talkin’, about things that worried them a lot. Second, the gents was new, some of them talkin like they was from someplace else with strange ways they sayin’ ‘r’s sharp and assertively, and never sayin’ ‘ya’ll’ ‘bout no one or nothin’. Third, they was talkin’ about armies and generals with a kind of excitement, money and figures like they all was about to go broke if they was wrong about the armies and generals.

“The die is cast, Sir,” one of strange-dictioned gents said to Master Johnson, shaking his fist like no Southern gentleman Hercules ever saw. He owned a brown Morgan, her feet wore out, her shoes looking like she’d been rode 400 miles or better in the last two weeks. “You Carolina gentlemen can sell your rice and cotton to England for top dollar and stay rich, but when the New Republic is established, ‘you all’ will be poorer than Church mice. It’s a matter of good business, and honor, that you support the Patriot cause, Sir.”

“Some call it a rebel cause, Sir. Revolting against common sense and loyalties we all gave to the King, and each other, Sir,” Elias Klause said to the Northerner in Carolinase, puffing his Virginia-growed tobacco, blowing smoke into his face to get a rise out of him.

Another Northerner spoke up. “Mister Klause, do you say that because you have financial interests with Mister Williams, or because you have financial interests with---“

Klause answered the accusation with a drawn pistol, his hands shaking, his angry eyes bulging out of the sockets. “I have interests in my family’s welfare, and survival, Sir, as you should. Those who fight against the army of King George, which happens to be the strongest army in the world today, also dishonor their heritage. Only fools and braggarts with nothing to lose will join this ‘patriot cause. I have no desire to start nor continue a War!”

“Which you will start if you kill Mister Quincy in the name of the King, or neutrality,” Master Johnson said calmly, stroking his chin like he was thinking on something real hard, and real ‘final’.

Maybe it was because it made sense, or because Master Johnson was, in some ways, more powerful than Mister Williams. Mister Klause put away his pistol, bowed to the visiting gentleman from what had to be up North by the clothes on his saddlebag and sat down.

“What do you have to share with us?” Master Johnson asked Mister Quincy.

The small man with the big head started reading the document he had guarded in his saddlebag for 500 miles closer than his own life. “The leader of the Continental Army, General Washington, calls upon you to---“

“---General GEORGE Washington?” Klause interrupted

“The same, Sir,” Quincy answered.

“Richest man in America,” Klause muttered, thinkin on something he kept behind his shifting eyes.

“And one of the most honorable, Sir,” Quincy declared. “General Washington needs able bodied men who value honor and freedom, to fight for mutual honor, dignity and freedom.”

“What kind of men?” Hercules found himself asking, his heart pounding, feeling ten feet tall.

The Northern gents smiled with delight. The Southern ones felt embarrassed, caught in some kind of lie. Master Johnson, as usual, kept his hand over his chin, so no one could sense what he was thinkin before he said it with his mouth. “Men who I will deliver to him. Men and women who serve me will serve General Washington,” Master Johnson said after a long and thoughtful pause.

“Who serve the cause of freedom, Sir, for all of us,” Mister Quincy said as he shook Master Johnson’s hand, like it was the whole reason why he rode his horse nearly dead getting down to Carolina. Mister Quincy offered up his hand to all the Southern gents. They all shook his blister-infested, stubby-fingered Yankee paw, some with a little delay and some with a the kind of smile that said they wasn’t all that happy with the arrangement. “Freedom for all, prosperity for the deserving,” Mister Quincy said with each handshake.

Hercules didn’t know the meaning of prosperity, but he had heard about freedom. Sort of. It was something that White folks had and used to take care of Black folks, so he was told, and so he believed. The more freedom Master Johnson won by fighting the English

with General Washington, the more freedom Niggers would get. And freedom was good, or so Hercules believed, because all the White folks on the porch seemed to be saying so.

CHAPTER 6

“Dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” Mistress Sally read from the papers left by ‘the men’ as Athena pulled on the corset which made her look fifteen years younger than she really was, at the price of increasingly more pain every day. “An interesting proposition,” she said, combing her thinning hair so it would look thicker, or perhaps less gray, passing on Athena’s offering her the wig she often used on ‘bad hair’ and ‘bad aging’ days.

“Why is it an interesting proposition, Ma’am?” Athena asked of the women whom she hoped would never find out that she was her husband’s most intimate confidant when she was away, or ‘suffering from melancholia’.

“Cause that only means that this Revolution or Revolt, or whatever the gents call it, is about one in five of us, Athena.”

“Don’t get your meaning, Ma’am,” Athena replied, her head bowed, as she pretended to not read the rest of the documents cleaned up in the parlor after the ‘men’ had their talk.

“God created all men equal, so what about those that aren’t men?” Mistress Sally offered.

“The boys?” Athena mused, pretending to know less than she did about the documents, and the man who had just dedicated his life to fighting for them.

“Exactly my point, child,” Mistress Sally said, inviting Athena to sit down, in front of her, in a chair that was NOT lower than hers in height or comfort. “You see, when the men talk, it’s about men. Not women. Understand?”

“Think so, Ma’am,” Athena said, contemplating that the color of a man’s skin determined whether he was a ‘full’ man in the eyes of the law, or the men who had money.

“Men are always fighting wars,” the aging Southern belle who still could hold on to that title and station on a good day related in a maternal tone to her ‘adopted Nigger Ward’. “It’s what they do because it’s what they think they have to do to impress us. Coming home with shiny swords on their left hip, maybe an alluring wound on their right arm, a scar on their forehead that makes them handsomer than when they left home. Understand, child?”

“Think so, Ma’am,” Athena nodded, thinking about what would happen to the White AND Black men who would leave for the War, and those lucky enough to come home. Though Master Johnson related tales of glory about his role in the French and Indian War to the gentlemen and ladies in the parlor, the stories he told Athena were quite different during her ‘lesson time’ in the study afterwards.

“And this pig manure about freedom,” Sally mocked with a limp wrist and ‘can marry me but can’t own me’ smile. “No man has real freedom. The way things are is the way they are always gonna be.”

Athena wanted to know more about what Sally was really thinking, as she thought to herself that no ‘Ward’ or slave was being offered freedom if they joined General Washington’s army. The Niggers with ‘special skills’ on the Plantation were being allowed to join Master Johnson’s battalion, but who were they fighting for? WHAT were they fighting for? Few had even held a gun, and now they were being ordered to use them, or the pick axes and shovels they were given as substitutes during their ‘training exercises’ against the most powerful army in the world. Athena found herself worrying about Hercules most of all, the most eager to fight, the least qualified, the worst at the ‘training exercises’ and the first to be defended by Master Johnson when the other Niggers laughed at him. She found herself wondering where Hector was, and how he was. And after all this killing, and dying, ‘the way things are is the way they are always gonna be’, according to Mistress Sally. Knowing that knowledge was far better than ignorance, or even happiness, Athena demanded that Miss Sally tell her the real story, by asking a question.

“The way things are be the way they always gonna be?” the ‘letter trained’ house Nigger asked in playful and lyrical field hand diction. “In what way’s that, Ma’am?”

“In the most important way,” Sally smiled, turning to the mirror, adjusting her cleavage while spraying on the ‘dinner’ perfume behind her ear, under her chin and between her legs. “Men control the affairs of the world, but as long as we women control the passions of a man....”

Athena pursed her lips discretely into the ‘I got it’ smile, the way it’s done in the House on the Hill, so only those in the know can see it. She put a shawl over Mistress Sally’s shivering shoulders, then watched her saunter out the door and down the stairs to dinner, to hear the latest news from her husband about the War, or perhaps their daughter in Charleston. Athena wondered which side of the War her female ‘guardian’ was really on. She had manipulated Master Johnson into some business decisions he regretted later, and some which he didn’t. And since war was about business, maybe this would be a woman’s war. As long as a White wife could control the passions of her husband, and a Black ‘confidant’ could manipulate the mind of her very much older ‘Master’. Athena was often the last person Master Johnson spoke to at night, and he made his most critical decisions the first thing in the morning. “Interesting” she thought, reflecting on her real potential power. “Frightening” she pondered, realizing that if Master Johnson was on the wrong side of this War, EVERYone she valued as family would lose, even his wife.

CHAPTER 7

Nathaniel muscled up fast in his rump and upper legs, as Hector did he same between the ears over the next weeks, months and longer measurements of experience. At least it felt that way. He had learned to survive in the woods, staying away from White men who would probably turn him in for murder while escaping capture and ‘wardship’. And there was no shortage of Indians who looked as fierce as they sounded most everywhere in the distant woods. Hector was leaner than in most winters, but stronger somehow. Usually, a man’s strength was measured by how much cotton he could lift, his smartness by how quick he break a horse or out-think a hog at slaughter time, his character by how many woman wanted to grab his ass. But no such measurements were out here, where people were survival opportunities you met, spoke little to, and formed freindships with carefully.

The British did everything they could to keep the American Colonists East of the Appalachians after the French were defeated in ’63, and maybe it was for good reason. The only law out here was what a man made for himself, or what was told to him by another man with a gun, a knife or a tomahawk. Hector was no exception. Though he ate whatever food that could be had back at the Plantation, he never took to eating animal flesh as his only source of nurishment. Out here, he had to. No corn bread or grits to go with the rabbit, possum or venison obtainable by the hunter who needed them. And with the hides, one could make a good trade for oneself, though a White man could get three times more for a beaver pelt than a Nigger. At least it was in cash, rather than the smelly blankets and moonshine the ‘tavern’ owners paid to the Injuns.

The ‘Stanford Arms’ was such a tavern, little more than a cabin with a wood burning stove, that was fueled by as much cow dung as wood. But bullshit aside, it was a place to get warm, have a meal that wasn’t all meat and find out what was happening in the ‘civilized’ world down below. It meant little in the mountains, but it passed the time and made the problems of the present livable.

While eating a bowl of porridge with fresh fruit cut into it, Hector saw a woman come in. Not White, not Indian, not Black. Something in between, who reminded him of Athena. She was with a ‘Pierre’, an undefeatable French Trapper who considered her more of a trophy than a wife. She carried the skins and furs in from the horses, he handled the bottle of whiskey from the clerk, twenty-something ‘Old Jake’.

“Good whiskey, Jake,” the Trapper said of the brew.

“Good merchandise,” Old Jake commented as he wiped the top of his pre-maturely balding head. He looked at Pierre’s goods, most particularly the one walking on two very good looking female legs. “How much you want?”

“For the furs....I want, no I deserve...” Pierre counted the numbers on his fingers, once in English and twice in the hybrid language which he still called French, getting a different figure each time.

Meanwhile, Old Jake saw a way to feel young again. He walked over to the squaw, gently placing one of his newest shawls on her. She turned around, terrified, the fading sunlight shining into her forelorn face. Even with the mud caked on it, she was as beautiful as any woman Hector had ever seen, or remembered.

“What do you want for her?” Old Jake asked Pierre.

“With or without her clothes, or yours,” Pierre smirked, then laughed.

Old Jake looked at her breasts, felt her fingers, then opened her mouth. “Good set of everything. Including teeth.”

The ‘prize’ closed her mouth around Old Jake’s fingers, but before teeth could bite into his always clean grubby digits, he stick a knife between her legs, holding it in place. “Lick it, or I’ll open you from belly to---“

“She doesn’t understand English,” Pierre said.

“Of course she does,” Old Jake smirked as the woman licked his fingers, then his kissed his hand. “She got a name?”

“Mine!” Hector said, throwing over ten pieces of coin on the table.

“Hmm...” Old Jake said. “Price for a Nigger to buy a half Nigger is---“

Hector answered the insult with another coin. Then three more. Then after he emptied his money purse of the money which had been left in Nathaniel’s saddlebag before their getaway, Pierre nodded in the affirmative.

Old Jake removed his new knife from harms way, whipping it back into its sheath, then proclaimed, “Sold, to the Nigger with the----“,

Before the deal could be finalized, a soldier walked in. His red coat shined like bright sunlight, displaying the only color nature didn’t provide in the woods unless it was a prelude to dying. By his rank, he was a Corporal, a rank of insignificance but an affiliation of pride. “By order of King George of England, we will be availing ourselves of your establishment,” he proclaimed. Backing up his boyish face were several older men of lesser rank behind him, well armed, not prepared to tolerate any Colonial nonsense or insolence.

“My establishment is at your disposal,” Old Jake said with an extended bow.

“Quite,” the Corporal replied, cautiously, seizing pamphlets lying around the room. “What are these?” he commented. “‘Thomas Paine. Common Sense’, ‘Excerpts from

the Declaration of Independence'. 'Poor Richard's Almanac.' You know what we call these lies?"

"Same as what we call them here," Old Jake said with terrified lips, his head sweating bullets regarding the presence of reading material he really seemed to know little about. "Asswipe" he continued. To demonstrate his point, he accompanied he very armed guard to the outhouse, where other 'Patriot' literature was stored.

"So it is, so it is," the Corporal acting as a Captain said, instructing his men to tear up the pro-Patriate literature, replacing it with their own. In the outhouse, on the tables and on the front door of the establishment. "Asswipe indeed. Carry on."

The Corporal mounted his white steed, the older soldiers getting on their swayback nags. Hector noted that they didn't take supplies from the cabin or any of the storage barns, as was rumored that all British soldiers did everywhere they went. They didn't confiscate stock, weapons or even a single stick of sugar candy. They even seemed to buy, or be deceived by, Old Jake's story that the Patriot literature was being used as reading material in the outhouse. It was, but only because Old Jake knew that the outhouse was where a man felt private space, and did most of his reading, in private. For whatever reason, they did not avail themselves of any goods or lodging, choosing to leave, but not after posting important notices on the wall and table where the 'asswipe' had previously been prominently placed.

"For every White man who fought for the Crown, a promise of ten acres of land. For every Black one who enlisted in the King's Army, his freedom," Jake read in full hearing range of every civilian in the room.

"Didn't say nothin about Frenchman who enlist, aye?" Pierre mused.

"Or Nigger squaws" Old Jake added, with a smirk. "And thank God, Washington has the good sense to not promise freedom to Darkie spearchuckers of ANY gender or---"

Before Old Jake could finish his very accurate, and insulting, comment, he found a knife in his throat. Delivered through the hand of the unnamed squaw. And into her back, a hatchet held by Pierre.

"Why!" Hector asked Pierre as he helped himself to the best bottle of hooch in the house.

"Because she said she didn't understand English, the bitch!" Pierre growled. "But YOU--"

Hector didn't know why, but he was holding the shooting side of a loaded gun, prepared to kill a man for the first time, intentionally

"Why?" Pierre asked his potential executioner.

“I don’t know...” Hector said through cold lips, the taste of fear in his mouth. Saltier than usual. “I don’t know, but...”

With that, Hector fired into the Frenchman’s heart. He fell to the ground, disrupting the neat pile of ‘political information’ the Redcoats had left. It was addressed to General Greene, from the Continental Army headquarters. Taking note of the notice left by the English, and the destruction initiated by the Americans, Hector, the Carolina born field hand who had graduated into ‘freedom’ knew what he had to do in order to defend it for himself, and others he hoped he might see one day.

“King George pledges freedom to every man of color who leaves his Master and serves his King in the British Army,” Hector read on the notices left by the men with constipated looks on their faces and ridiculously-frilled red coats on their torsos. He wondered how many other ‘men of color’ could read the White Man’s print. He speculated about what kind of pledge would be made to ‘men of color’ who left their Loyalist Masters once the ‘Patriot Revolution’ was squashed. He thought about how many WOMEN would like to leave their Masters for ‘freedom’, the gift that all Nigger dreamed of but few had the balls or brains to actually use, or appreciate. He shed a tear, remembering ONE woman of color who now lay dead on the floor, and another back ‘home’ who was cleaning Master Johnson’s floor with his broom, or perhaps his more private parts with her tongue.

CHAPTER 8

Though it was the Revolution of the people, the rules about the Revolutionary Army were passed down from the Continental Congress, to General ‘George’, then to General Gage, then to now Colonel Johnson. Hercules found it strange that he and the other Black-skinned soldiers in the Army were carrying hoes and shovels instead of guns, but he heard that it was because Niggers who was still owned wasn’t allowed to carry or shoot guns. It made sense to Hercules. Along with the other rules about ‘benefits’ for service to General George, and Colonel Johnson. Three years in the Army where the fightin was could buy a Black man his freedom. Eight months of service anywhere in the Continental Army would purchase for any White man claim to land when the Lobsterback Redcoats was kicked out of America. “America” seemed like a wonderful country to Hercules, and Colonel Johnson was lettin’ his Niggers fight so they could get their freedom! How generous! How saint-like! Master Johnson really musta believed in this Cause.

On this late summer morn, Hercules woke up before revelie, eagerly awaiting ‘drill’. Most of the other Niggers hated it, and to be fair, the Carolina-born and bred field hand missed the smell of the pre-dawn Carolina swamp and breakfast with the gators. But Virginia, where he was not, did have pine trees, and on this fine day, he could smell the ‘big swamp’...the ocean. As he looked over the ridge at the gray fog giving way to blue sky, he imagined all the different kinds of fish swimming in it. Big fish, like whale that could swallow up a man like Jonah if he wasn’t doin’ his job on land. So the story went, and so Hercules believed. God made man in His image, and God, being White, was a stern taskmaster.

Hercules brought his shovel with him to his early morning observation spot. As the bugle called the men to drill, he already had practiced five about faces, left shoulder arms and twice as man ‘present arms’. “Sharp” he thought of himself. Such was another matter when he performed those accomplishments on the field to the Drill Sergeant.

“I said LEFT shoulder arms, Nigger!” Sergeant Miller barked at Hercules as he got straw foot and hay foot mixed up, again. ‘Right’ and ‘left’ still made no sense to him, but he did notice that the strand of straw and the stick of hay were on opposite feet from where the White Seargent had put them the night before. The other Niggers in line chuckled as Hercules kept firm to left shoulder arms on his straw side. But everyone else’s straw feet was on the other side. Yes, something or someone had to have changed them around on Hercules while he was in slumberland dreaming about being a soldier. He wondered who did it and why. The other Niggers in camp, particularly the big ones with small, beady eyes, warned Hercules to not sleep too soundly because he could be convinced by the Devil to take out the straw and hay and put them in opposite feet if he slept to soundly. If Hercules ate too much, Leroy, the littlest big one with the smallest eyes, was more then willing to help themselves to half of his rations to insure that he didn’t sleep too much.

Confused, and worn out, Hercules figured out that left was right today. After presenting arms five times, the way Miller seemed to want it, it was time for exercise. “A strong

soldier is a live soldier,” Miller said before each of the exercises. “And work makes for strong soldiers.” Today, it was using the shovels to dig holes which were used as latrines by the White soldiers, and some Injuns who came in from the hills.

Hercules never saw Injuns close up, noting a few trading furs and information for guns, knives and whiskey. He found it strange that their hair was so long, so black and so straight. They must have been a smart people, he thought, thinking on what Sergeant Miller said about Black people’s hair. “The kinkier the hair, the slower the head that grows it!” he barked out whenever Hercules screwed up. And, of course, Hercules had the kinkiest hair in the battalion, or so he thought. He tried to shave it off one day, but he was ordered not to...by Colonel Johnson.

By lunchtime, Hercules’ muscles ached, and his brain was tired. It wasn’t all the digging, which for him required thinking, because he was always figuring how to be the best digger in the Army. It was about something else. As a ‘treat’ after lunch, everyone in the battalion was given a treat, the Whites and the Blacks. A man was brought into the camp by Lieutenant Williams. His hands were tied, his coat making him look more like a schoolteacher than a soldier, roughed up almost as bad as the soldiers who wandered off from camp saying they weren’t going home, just out for some venison to feed the camp. He was put up on a stand, papers taken from his oversized coat pocket, and some from the lining. Colonel Johnson read them.

“So, Captain, you say that Colonel Turner and General Cornwallis are heading North?” he asked, with respect. “Colonel Turner who obeys none of the rules of warfare, or common decency,” he continued, remembering the stories he was told about the band of Niggers and Injun savages masquerading as British Soldiers.

“Yes, Sir,” former schoolteacher Miller said with an accent that made him sound a lot like one of the English lobsterbacks. He held his chin up, like he was better than everyone else. Maybe he was, Hercules thought. “And as for this coat,” he continued regarding the clothes that made him look more like royalty than any picture at the Old Plantation. “I was sold it, along with its contents, that I didn’t know about, by a man in Jamestown.”

“This man have a name?” Colonel, and still Master, Johnson asked as he snuck into the drill area real quiet-like.

“Harold Jackson, Sir,” the Miller said, snapping to attention.

“General Harry Jackson?” Colonel Johnson asked.

“The same, Sir. He’s turned traitor, Sir. Abandoned his post to go home to tend to urgent family matters, so he said, Sir. And some of the Injuns say he was speaking very cordially with some Redcoats on the road back to where he had those urgent family matters, from which he didn’t return, Sir.”

Colonel Johnson gave it some thought. ‘Summer patriots’, men who fought with the Army when times was good and sketattled back home when they was bad, were becoming more common every day. Even General Harry ‘Lightening Bolt’ Jackson was probably tired of fighting the English by now, willing to make peace with them by turning in his neighbors and friends, for their own safety of course. Or maybe for more money, land or Niggers. Fighting for freedom seemed to turn a lot of men into cowards or turncoats, particularly after they faced the Redcoats in person, with loaded guns, drawn swords and blasting cannons. And if the Lobsterback soldiers were holdin’ yer wife and kids back home hostage and won’t let them go unless ya tell them what they need to know.... Such were the stories, anyway. And Master Johnson seemed to know everyone’s story in camp.

“You say ‘Sir’ a lot for a man who is dedicated to the cause of freedom,” the Colonel asked schoolteacher Miller, smellin’ somethin’ not quite right about the man.

“A habit, ‘Sir’,” Miller answered, as a few sheet of Redcoat ‘political paper’ fell out of his pocket, along with some gold coins that the King used to pay his Redcoats. Lots of coins. Then the pocketwatch that General Jackson said he’d take to the grave with him, no matter who tried to take it from him first. Miller looked around the woods around him, like he maybe there was a hole he could make a run through.

Colonel Johnson raised up his finger. The Seargent-schoolteacher closed his mouth shut and licked the inside of his lips, just like a Nigger who was caught stealin’ a bagful of extra pork or an inappropriate glance at his Master’s wife, or daughter.

“You know what has to happen here,” the Colonel said.

Schoolteacher-Seargent Miller nodded, then put his fingers into a sort of fist and made the sign of the cross on himself. “A Catholic?” Hercules thought, remembering the strange gesture from one of the Sunday visitors from Maryland at the Carolina plantation. “We fighting the English AND the Catholics?” he pondered. Every day, the list of enemies was growing. The English Army, then the German Hessians, then the English Injuns, and now the Catholics, too? It was all so confusing, the only Catholics Hercules knew of being French, and the French bein’ throwed out of America by the English way back in ’63 when General Washington whipped their asses.

But what wasn’t confusing was seeing the schoolteacher hang. His face showed fear, then terror. Five horrible seconds later, it was done with, the noose snapping Miller’s neck. If he knew what he was fighting for while he was alive, he didn’t seem to believe so at the time of dying. Hercules had never seen a man get killed before. He wondered what it would be like if one day he was killed. Or what would happen on the day when he would be ordered, in the name of freedom, to kill someone else.

“Such is the fate of turncoats!” Colonel Johnson barked out to the Niggers now completely in his charge, as their training officer was now gone, being replaced within

two breaths by an Irishman, who by his being Irish was half-Nigger in the eyes of all the other White men.

“And if any of us if turn tail and run,” Leroy said just over his breath from his position just behind Hercules’ monster-sized shoulders. “The hangman won’t make the nose snap so quick. We be killed slower than Jesus on the cross, my brothers.”

The remark scared the other Niggers. But Hercules felt stronger by Leroy’s statement of the fact. Yes, Hercules sweated fear on his forehead and the taste of salt in his mouth was stronger than ever. But he felt alive, in motion towards something there was no turning back from now.

CHAPTER 9

Mistress, or as Athena often found herself grammatically-inaccurately calling her, 'Mistress' Sally knew about it from the War with the French. Her husband's favorite ebony-skinned ward Athena, was learning about it now. "Sewing a man's uniform is a wife's honor, particularly a man whose honor was hard earned, and completely on his own, knowing what little I do about his father, and mother," the still beautiful lily White Southern belle of over forty-five years said as she pricked her fingers with the needle, yet again. Still, she was determined to make HER mark in this war, and on her Warrior. "Though it is not regulation for the Colonial Army, I do insist on a special insignia on the inside of the uniform which my beloved Horatio will feel on or near his private parts."

Athena smiled, politely and discretely of course. Sally put another stand of thread through another needle, and pointed to the pieces of cloth spread over the bed which would eventually become part of Colonel Johnson's uniform. Until it got shot to pieces by a musketball or ripped by a sword blade, of course. Then, the morning sun rose to that point in the sky which enabled it to penetrate through the window into the faces of everyone on the other side. Once again, like every morning for the past week, Mistress Sally put aside her Mistress and Revolutionary duties to read the letter that had been delivered from points Northward to herself, saying nothing about its gut-wrenching contents, in keeping with her upbringing as a proper Southern Lady. But today, Athena demanded an answer.

"Something wrong?" Athena asked Mistress Sally, more like a Nurse or Doctor than a servant, or adopted daughter, a role she found both useful and dangerous.

But Sally could not bare to say what her tearful eyes had read, and still refused to believe. She handed to tear and sweat-stained letter to Athena.

"So, Miss Pamela, your daughter, and my closest friend, says she is engaged to that English Army Major, but she'll come to her senses," Athena paraphrased and projected with a sorrowful yet hopeful smile. When she looked up at Mistress Sally, the Iron Lady of the Johnson Plantation was shaking like a dried up willow tree that was being chopped down by an axe. No literary White words from the books Master Johnson educated Athena in could console Mistress Sally. No, some other kind of language and message would be needed so the tree could stand up on its own, or absorb the fall in a way that is could grow again, someday, somehow. In the innocent rhythm of her childhood Black and ancestral African diction learned before being brought into the Big House permanently, Athena became 'Mama Atti', laying her assuring hand on Mistress Sally's shaking shoulders. "Miss Pamela be love with you, her father and the family's Cause at the root of it all. An antelope put in with a hyenas figure out real fast that she better than a hyena, and that the hyenas want only one thing from an antelope, no matter how much the hyena say he's an antelope too. And as the Old Chief Kilabta said once..."

Athena's words of comfort, and perhaps wisdom, were stopped dead in their tracks by Mistress Sally's stare. "All these years of schooling and special treatment and you talk like a field hand!"

"Sorry, Ma'am, I---" Athena confessed.

"---And it isn't your place to tell me what my daughter is, or isn't!"

"Yes, Ma'am," the off-White Black chosen as a playmate for Pamela continued, cutting another piece of cloth for the stripe on Master Johnson's trousers.

"Even though you probably know her better than I do," Sally admitted, tending to her sewing. Stitching as hard and fast as she could so she could forget the troubles in her head, and heart. The same way that the field hands picked cotton every day. Day after day. Year after year. Generation after generation.

"This War won't last long, I'm sure of it," Athena smiled. "The men out there will get lonesome for home and figure out that they miss us here more than fighting with each other there."

Sally shrugged. "You'll learn differently some day," she said. It was one of those lines that Sally always said to Pamela and Athena. "You'll learn differently someday, child," Mistress Sally said to Athena as if she meant 'child' in the most sincere and familial way. And to a child who had to grow up very fast.

Maybe what Master Johnson had told Athena was right. Wars are won by whoever decided to stay out in the battlefield longest, not the one won the battles, and the news about battles wasn't good for Master Johnson's cause. General Washington was on the run now, even after whopping the Hessians in Trenton while they were drunk on Christmas night. Winters were cool down in the Carolinas, but according to all the stories, nights fighting where Johnson's batallion was were cold.

Athena felt the wool Sally was sewing into Master Johnson's uniform. Wool, not cotton. With each stitch, it felt like she was embroidering the coffin of a dead man. Finally, she gave words to her thoughts. "A man should fight with a good uniform. And when it comes time for dying, he should look like the gentleman he was when he was still..."

Tears flowed down Sally's face. Athena felt it her place, duty and privilege to comfort her. The 20 year old woman born a slave never felt the vulnerability of her Master's wife more intensely. She was a woman, as Black, White and Red as anyone else. She deserved to know the truth about a lot of things. What her only daughter would REALLY do if her new fiancée was ordered to get information on the enemy. What her beloved husband Horatio really thought about the War. And the real reasons why Horatio brought Athena into the House as a trusted member of the family rather than let her live out her days as a field hand.

Athena considered all the options, and responsibilities. Master Johnson said that ‘the truth is the ultimate Master of us all,’ but so much of his life was a lie. As were the lives of everyone at the Johnson Estate, even the black skin ‘Wards’. And the better fed and clothes the Ward, the bigger the lie. Maybe one more lie would work its way into everyone honoring the spirit of the Truth. It had to be said.

“Mistress Sally,” Athena said. “Colonel Johnson’s fighting for all of us. He’d want us to be strong. To believe in him, and his Cause. Our Cause.”

Sally nodded an affirmative ‘yes’. Though she didn’t know the political realities of the Revolution, she knew its human costs, and stakes. She was, for better or worse, a Patriot’s wife, who had to put Liberty before everything else, even love.

Such was another lie, perhaps one which could become the truth if one believed in it enough.

CHAPTER 10

Hector rode his steed Nathaniel hard at night and quietly during the day, avoiding contact with settlements that seemed to have Rebel affiliations or sympathies on his way to the British Army Camp in what he thought was still the Carolinas. Not quite North enough to be Virginia yet, or so it seemed. It didn't matter anyway. "These trees, mud and mosquitoes still be sproutin leaves, pullin' my boots into the ground, and bittin' my Black ass red no matter who says they's owned by," he said to Nathaniel as he heard the sound of Nature stop, the birds' chirping replaced with something more rhythmic, and regular. And between the thick woods that made a quarter mile seem like a quarter of a continent for a man trying to get from one place to another, that color Nature didn't often show, or express unless something was very wrong.

"Bright Red," he said to his horse, wiping the sweat off it's neck. "Redcoats beating drums. With that kind of roll to the stick that my grandfathers didn't do in Africa, according to the songs that we passed down by---"

"Who goes there!" Hector heard from behind, the voice sharp and vengeful, a Scottish accent to it which sounded all too familiar. "Hold it right there, Nigger!"

Hector raided his hands to the sky, fearing the worse, giving voice to his best claim. "Overseer McGilvry?" Hector asked. "Didn't know you were still..." Hector turned around, slowly, expecting to see the man who he thought was dead still alive. Or perhaps McGilvrey's brother, who by chance and the Devil's own luck. Hector wondered why the Runaway Slave bounty hunters had given up on finding him of late. Why the 'Wanted' posters with his description, and sketches, done interestingly enough in better times by Hercules and Athena, weren't posted on the boards of the Taverns, Inns and Trading Posts. Why only now, when he was about to sign up to fight the American Slave Holders, he was to be hung by a Scottish Overseer, his brother, or....

Upon seeing the man in the reflection of his canteen, Hector was shocked. His complexion was dark, even darker than his own, made all the more Black by the whites of his eyes, which were wide open. "Now that you've sneaked a look at me through that canteen, get off of that horse," he continued. "Or I'll shoot you where you stand, after I shoot him."

Hector smiled, seeing for the first time, a Black man, other than himself, armed, defiant and prepared to die for a Cause HE chose for himself.

"I said get off that horse!" the Nigger with a brown coat bearing the insignia of a battalion from someplace called 'Nova Scotia' repeated. He cocked the hammer on his musket a second time, then a third.

"I've come to join the Cause," Hector said, still mounted. "To fight for Freedom, Sir."

“No Nigger in these Southern Colonies calls another Nigger ‘Sir’,” the Scottish man of Color, and determination, affirmed, edging closer to Hector, showing him his face, and the business end of his fire-piece.

“That’s a Kentucky rifle,” Hector said. “Spiraled on the inside so the bullet shoots straight. Call it a rifle. Not like the muskets the English Army has. That would make you a Son of Liberty, or a spy, Sir.”

“Who is fighting for Liberty, Sir!” he affirmed. “For the King,” he continued, unbuttoning his coat, showing insignia that looked shiny, made someplace on the other side of the ocean and undoubtedly British. “You’re coming with me,” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” Hector smiled, getting off his horse and letting open a warm, joyful smile. “I come to join up.”

Hector’s escort to the British Camp held his rifle en route, but opened his heart, so it seemed. “You ride and walk like a man who has tasted freedom.”

“And learned to like it, and need it,” he boasted, still fearful about the rest of what ‘freedom’ had to offer a man of Color in a Colony owned by Whites.

“Great horse,” the Scottish Nigger from Nova Scotia said. “Solid muscles, strong back.”

“And kind eye,” Hector noted, with pride.

“Hopefully a WORKING eye,” the reply, said with cynicism and disdain for the quality of kindness which Hector had learned, by temperament and necessity to value, even at the Johnson Plantation. “We need men AND horses who can see danger a mile away.” He looked at Hector’s beard and hair, grown to ‘Injun’ length, and his footwear. “Indian moccasins.”

“Made by a Black man, which would be me, Sir,” Hector said. “Learned a lot up in the hills,” he said with a love for the wild which was more remembered than experienced when there. “Like how to value the wind when it come up, and when it calms itself down. How to smell where wolves are so you can take the skins of the deer after they feed their babies the meat. How to respect life, and not fear death.”

“And to fear one other thing, laddie,” the Escort said, in a way that could have sounded like ‘boy’.

“What’d that be, Sir?” Hector asked, sensing that this nameless contradiction in diction, alliances and Color would be his Superior, in some way that was related to ‘Freedom’.

“If you fit into our Army, our Cause, the way I hope you will, you will learn to fear weakness, kindness and vulnerability, Sir,” the Escort said, extending his hand out. “I’m Sergeant Ian McDougall.”

“Hector,” the new recruit found spewing out of his mouth as he gazed at the Camp in front of him, ignoring for the moment that he had never heard the word ‘vulnerability’ before. He beheld Redcoats in bright red uniforms. White Colonists in brown coats. Red Injuns in warpaint. Black men in other kinds of coats, most of them carrying shovels, some of them carrying muskets, and rifles. “Hec...” he continued, finding himself caught in the first trap, letting his old identity be known, to someone he didn’t know.

“Your given name, Sir?” Sergeant McDougall inquired. “I heard of a Hector who was a runaway. His Master wants him back.”

“Coincidence,” Hector said, pulling out his biggest, most ‘English’ word.

“Stupidity, Sir,” McDougall replied sternly, handing Hector his rifle. “But you look like a man we can use. See that piece of paper stuck in that tree?”

Hector turned around, noting the misshapen object amidst the branches, twigs and leaves, its ‘straight’ angles very obviously making the brown and green colored pamphlet stand out. “Yes, Sir,” he said, using that “S” word as a token of mutual respect rather than fear, or manipulation.

“See what is in the middle of it?” McDougall allowed Hector a closer look, three strides, not one more.

Hector smirked, then snarled. “A man’s face. A White man.”

McDougall allowed one more step, Hector sensing what was there, and what was expected of him. “An old man who thinks he’s a young man, a smart man, a kind man and a gentleman...a ‘gentleman’”. His smile turned angry, which made McDougall seem all the more satisfied. Hector took aim at the man’s face. “Between the eyes, Sir?” he asked.

“Or anywhere near it would be satisfactory to Colonel Turner’s requirements IF you can...”

Before McDougall could wax his military Scottish poetic, Hector fired the rifle. Examination of where the shot landed into the Patriot pamphlet on the tree bearing the likeness of an American Soldier Patriate Slave Owner. “Straight between the eyes, Sir,” McDougall noted. “You are quite a good shot, Sir. Good eyes, too.”

“When there’s a bastard as a target,” Hector snarled.

“By the name of...” McDougal asked.

“Horatio Johnson,” Hector replied, having recognized his Master’s likeness on the ‘Freedom for All’ pamphlet which his old master had made of himself, though the hand

of Athena, on that night when she seemed to be more depressed and degraded than any field hand on the Plantation. It was also a likeness that was on the Wanted Posters which were everywhere in Rebel country, with a price on Hector's return to the Johnson Plantation 'in sound and workable condition' that was more like the kind of reward a king would offer for safe return of a prince. Though what awaited that Prince upon his return would be more of a horror tale than a fairy tale, from the stories Hector had heard about slaves who were returned to Horatio Johnson's father's plantation from Thelma, a woman older than God's own truth, and far more reliable.

Hector contemplated the whole thing. He was on the run from a man who was now dedicated to the Cause of freedom, for White folks anyway. And Black folks who would serve under them.

McDougall looked over the 'Freedom for All' pamphlet in Hector's shaking hand. "So you be him," he said with more of a Scottish lilt to his tongue than any other Scotsman Hector had met, or overheard. "A man who stood up fer his rights against a man who seems ta reckon that freedom is the right to own his own land withou payin' any taxes on it, and do whatever he pleases with his human property on it. "

"I...did what I had ta," Hector said, turning his head away from McDougall, thinking about how the series of accidents led him to where he was now. Better to let McDougall and everyone else think he was a brave man rather than a desperate one, who just lucked into survival. And better to not think at all about who Horatio Johnson really was behind his finely tailored suit made of Nigger-picked cotton, yet somehow over-caring and guilty eyes. But, McDougall required an answer, as in his world someone was a friend or a foe, a realm that Hector now, through a series of accidents, was neck deep into. Finally, he crumbled the pamphlet and threw it into a mud puddle, squashing it down into the muck. He turned to McDougall and made his most personal and immediately important demand. "I hate the color Red. Makes me look like a goddamn clown or one of them court jesters. You got any other Color uniform that I could wear?"

"The one you're wearing right now, on the inside and outside! Welcome to Colonel Turner's regiment!" Sergeant McDougall said with a warm smile, welcoming him into his new life with a one-armed embrace around his shaking shoulders.

"Corporal...eh...Johnson?"

"...Freeman, Sir. Corporal Hector Freeman."

Hector was honored by the promotion, and as for his new Surname, he knew he would have to do much more than shoot the eyes out of a pamphlet to earn it. However, 'Hector' was his name to keep. Named after a Trojan hero who would not hide from any man, begging, and hoping that the Greek-obsessed Master would materialize in the flesh for a final showdown, for the honor of a woman he seemed to need, and Hector realized he really loved.

CHAPTER 11

Hercules woke up before dawn, as usual, and went out into the woods to listen to what the birds were singing. Today, it was the sound of something he never heard from them. They knew something was up across the valley where the Redcoats had set up camp. So did Sergeant Brady, the new Irish Drill Seargent.

“What are you listening to?” he growled through gritted teeth, his white face paler than usual.

“Nothin’” Hercules said. “Quiet, I guess. Strange kind of quiet.”

“Shhh...” Brady said, pushing the kindest and therefore most abused Black man under his command down into the brush. The thorns pricked his face, his mouth tasting dirt. A familiar taste with all the training exercises he tried to do, and failed.

Hercules looked up and saw a red-colored animals walking through the woods. It seemed strange to see red deer in the woods, and so many of them. “Red deer, Captain Brady?”

“I told you, I’m a Sergeant,” he said, his hand shaking and his lips moving up and down when he wasn’t talking. “And if those Red deer are carrying what I think they are, I’ll be promoted to Lieutenant, maybe Captain, by taps tonight. IF I survive, or if you can get me to OUR field hospital before the English bring me to theirs.”

“Don’t you worry, Cap...eh...Sergeant Brady,” Hercules said with a servant’s smile, and a slow-minded lion’s heart. “I gots fast legs, strong arms, and even if you’re a might overweight, I be sure to bring ya back to the doctor’s tent if’n you get shot.”

“You are saying that I am overweight, Private Hercules!” Brady barked. “Or predicting that I’ll be shot,” he continued, shaking his lips again, even though it wasn’t cold. “You know, there’s a one in two chance that if a man gets shot or wounded, he’ll die in our ‘hospital’, or whatever other tent we put the stretcher. One in three chance if the British get him into their infirmaries. You Blacks know how to stitch up wounds and fix broken bones better than most Whites I know, probably because you had to do them yourselves. Injuns know more than our doctors do to, so I hear, and saw when we were fighting the French, for the English.”

Hercules didn’t understand most of Brady’s words, partly because he spoke English with so much German behind the letters. And because he used big words he hadn’t heard before. Like ‘hospital’ and ‘infirmary’. He presumed they were doctor words, which Doctor Quincy would teach him soon enough. Turned out that the gentleman who visited the Plantation who talked strange was also a Doctor, though he said he hadn’t practiced medicine for a while. A place called Connetikit. Almost as hard to say as ‘Massachusetts’. Hard sounding places that probably made hard-talking men, and probably women.

Quincy treated Niggers a bit different than the Carolina talking officers. He even gave them special names, like 'Black Angels'. That's what Hercules was, assigned the job of taking men away from the field on stretchers, steada' being out front with a sword or rifle shooting Redcoats who, according to former Master and now Colonel Johnson, wanted to take away freedom AND land from ALL Americans, and according to the Colonel, Hercules was now an American.

Sergeant Brady didn't scream at Hercules for going off on his own before revile. Hercules thought it odd. He was more scared than angry. They 'squat-ran' back to camp as fast as they could, and as quietly. When they got back, Colonel Johnson was giving orders to the officers, his officers giving more orders to the men, and everyone grabbing their weapons, or such things as they was supposed to take into battle.

"This is not a drill, gentleman," the Colonel said to everyone, quiet-like, and he even called the Niggers in camp 'gentlemen'. Like he meant it, too.

Some of the Niggers got shovels, mostly the ones who was owned. The 'free Niggers', a term that didn't make no sense to Hercules, or even those who weren't owned, grabbed their knives, sticking them on their rifles, or muskets, if they had them. They were given shot and gunpowder, almost as much as the White soldiers. Leroy, .now a Corporal, looked like he was ready. The only thing he killed was a the dummies during training, but he looked like he had 'killer' in his eyes. Like the slave hunters who brought back half their cargo laid over saddle 'steada hog-tied on top of it. Like Overseer McGilvry, whose funeral was attended by everyone on the Johnson Plantation, 'specially the Niggers who gave a beatin' to. All except Hector, who disappeared the day Overseer McGilvry got into an accident with one of the horses.

Hercules lined up to get his bag of bandages and 'papoose' stretchers at the tent where the doctors were doing their drill, which Colonel Johnson said wasn't a drill no more. Fancy knives they called scalpels to cut open bullet wounds, big saws and butcher knives for what Doc Quincy called 'bigger wounds' when asked, before he changed the subject. Needles with stitching needles on it. Bandages made from tore up uniforms and mud-stained bed sheets. Enough so they didn't have to use horse tails and dog skin, 'thankfully', according to Doctor Quincy, who seemed to have experience with the kind of things Niggers used to repair Nigger wounds.

Colonel Johnson got on his horse and rode by the 'hospital' tent, all decked out like he was a hero in a picture painting, a sash, a big sword, and a blue coat as bright in its color as the redcoats wore their colors. As he did on all mornings, Hercules greeted him with a respectful smile. As always, the Colonel gave him a quick nod, without looking at him. An 'officer' thing, Hercules figured. But today, the Colonel looked into Hercules eyes, straight into his soul. Like they was born from the same mother, related in some way that the Creator knew, and valued.

“Hercules!” the Colonel said. “You are named after a hero. I expect you to not disappoint me.”

Before Hercules could answer, Quincy intervened. “It would be easier for your men of Color, one in five men in this ‘army’ by my last count, to be heroes if they ALL had weapons. Guns. Knives. Even rusty swords, Sir.”

“Which they will use on each other before beating them into plow shears,” Colonel Johnson said with his eyes looking far away, and back into his own head like he did at the Plantation when he was thinking on something important, too important for anyone else to be able to understand. “Our Wards of Color, who we have domesticated, like the horse we love so much, are our responsibility to educate, protect and defend. Some say giving the Colored soldiers non-working weapons will draw British fire and drain their supply of ammunition, but such is NOT the way WE fight. Besides, the Colored soldiers haven’t tasted the stench of blood yet.” he said, gentle-like.

“Except for their own,” Doc Quincy barked back. “They bleed red just like we do, Sir.”

“No one will bleed at all today, if we work together, Sir,” the Colonel assured the Doctor.

“And if the English do their job better than you do yours?” Quincy asked. “Which both of us KNOW they will if you insist on attacking them on their---“

“---you do your job, I’ll do mine, and Hercules will do his,” the Colonel growled back at the doctor, knowing something that he wasn’t saying to anyone. He scratched his forehead, and pulled back his hair. That thing he did when he made a decision that worked out. And for some decisions that didn’t. But it didn’t matter to Hercules. He was an American now, and when he was told to fight for freedom by a man looking so ‘free’ as the Colonel, he had to obey.

CHAPTER 12

Athena never slept soundly even as a child, something her mother told her a long time ago before she passed on. At least that was the way the ‘Wardess of Letters and Etiquite’ remembered it. She always feared dawn. Henry, the field carpenter, said it was because she was afraid of new beginnings. Hector, a man she found herself missing for reasons she couldn’t figure out, said it had something to do about death. Hercules waxed on that she had a special sense of hearing, and that the sound of the ‘whispering birds’ woke her up, no matter how tight the window was closed. Her mother didn’t live long enough to know who was right.

Half-sleeping on Miss Pamela’s bed in the house, at the request of her mother, Mistress Sally, Athena heard thunder. Saw mountains spitting out fire. Heard heads split open. Felt demons coming out of them. Smelled their burning flesh coming into her room. Not one of her senses remained untouched by the ‘dawnmare’. She tried to put a face to the victors and the victims of a ‘fox-and-hound’ hunt in the fair woods which turned into a slaughter, the green trees becoming drenched with blood each time a man became a fox, or a hound. And after the men who were victorious emerged, they turned into demons. Red, eviscerated walking skeletons with their livers, kidneys and lungs exposed, picked at by crows sent from a gray sky that turned black, then beet red.

It was the ‘red’ that woke Athena up. A very British red, it was, but with a deeper texture. No, something was afoot and ajar, and closer than she thought.

Thankful that her feet could still touch solid floor, she stumbled over to the window and opened it. Yes, Hercules was right. She could hear birds chirping, but it was a requiem. The singers were clad in black, her eyes seeing them congregate in a tree.

They were crows, cooing, cawing and making all manner of human noises in her head. They looked at her, laughed, cried, then flew straight North, disappearing into the sunrise. The light of the morning star shone on a map, the shadow from the window ceil pointing to a place Horatio Johnson talked about a lot. Greenville, North Carolina, named such because its forests were greener than any woods seen by Englishman or American, ideal for fox and hound hunts. Greenville, North Carolina. Or was it Virginia in now? It didn’t matter. It was still the place where three major rivers met, leading to the ocean a day’s sail downstream. A place of political power that was fought over hard during the conflict with the French. A ‘place’ which would be the inevitable center of the chess board in this new fight for freedom. Hopefully, the last one, for everyone.

Athena knelt, crossing herself like the Catholics, folding her hands like the Baptists and rolling her head like she was told her Black ancestors did in Africa. She promised God her devotion, Jesus her love and the Pagan gods of her grandmothers whatever was left. The answer to those prayers and offerings came when she peered her head out the window, from a bird atop a tree. A white bird atop the pine overlooking the roof chirped, turned its head, released a fistful of ‘manna’ from its ass, tried to fly away, then fell to the ground, dead as any ‘player’ in Athena’s dream.

CHAPTER 13

“There’s one rule about prisoners that’s always truer than a real Highland man wearing his wife’s lipstick under his kilt,” Sergeant McDougall boasted from his Nova Scotia-trained tongue through his black-as-spades mouth, riding into Camp with his most recent ‘catch’ from the woods and the surrounding Plantations. “Something every prisoner from General Washington’s Army of Rebels fighting for the right of every white man to get rich and own slaves is always trying to do.”

“Tryin’ to escape, or thinkin or dreamin about it?” Corporal Hector Freeman answered, adjusting the ropes on the wrists of the very White and once rich Slave-owning Rebel prisoners captured in the last raid to procure supplies for the British Army, and its ‘Soldiers of Color’. “Or is it that they think they deserve to be captured by White-faced Redcoats on foot steada us brown-coated Black folks on horseback?” he smirked as the captured gentleman of wealth, rumored to have been a delegate to the Continental Congress, sneered at him in disgust. Hector recognized him as one of Master Johnson’s friends from the ‘good old days’, whose Plantation produced more cotton and dead field hands than any in the county. “Master Klause is this Christian name. Stupid as an ox. Stubborn as a mule. He won’t talk.”

“Everybody talks,” McDougall said, recalling untellable histories behind his down turned eyes. “ALL prisoners talk, sell out their closest friends, and family, when pushed to it. Sure as ‘shaking a wicked hoof’ on a Sunday will get even a White man arrested in Boston, or Halifax,” he mused.

Hector sighed a breath of laughter regarding the penalty for dancing on the Sabbath in the ‘educated’ Northern Colonies. They treated Niggers far better than their Southern counterparts, but seemed to be more repressive of the White folks and their expressions of freedom. It gave Hector pause to think again about that elusive word ‘freedom’ that meant different things to each man who dreamed about it, or used it to take away freedom from another.

But there was no time to think. Major Thomkins was pissed off, and anxious to get the goods on the Rebels on the other side of the valley. His men had been playing cat and mouse with the American rebels for a month or better, and it was time for action. Besides, Greensville was a strategic location which he had strict orders to take, and hold, at any cost. Under his command was guerilla fighter ‘Colonel Turner’, Blacker than even MacDougall, and twice as determined to get information on the prisoner Hector identified as one of the ringleaders in the evasive Rebel ‘army’ that had grown from nothing to a force which could very well be greater than his in number or effectiveness.

“You know this man, Corporal Freeman?” Turner asked his best rider and marksman.

“Used to, Colonel,” Hector snarled.

“And his profession?” Major Thomkins spouted out in crisp ‘English’.

“An artist,” Hector’s reply, as he unbuttoned the still abstinent Patriot prisoner’s shirt. “Specially with a whip.”

Turner’s heart grew even angrier when he saw the scars on Hectors back. Major Thomkins merely took note of it. McDougall smirked, grabbed hold of a whip and handed it to Hector.

“The two rules of War, Corporal Freeman,” he said coldly. “Firstly, an ounce of information about the enemy is worth more than a pound of gunpowder.”

“And those Colonials have to be stopped today,” Major Thomkins noted, looking at his gold watch, given to him by his loving wife Pamela, Pamela...Johnson, as Hector read on the inscription. “We have already moved some of our men in position, and I know that the Colonial leader those hypocrite traitors have ‘elected’ is planning his. Colonel Horatio Johnson will NOT defeat MY army on MY watch as long as---”

Hector grunted with a growl fueled by something beyond rage, tearing Klause’s shirt off, snapping the whip on the ground in front of his terrified eyes, the second ‘warning’ lash taking off a slice cloth and flesh between his shaking legs. “Everybody talks Masser Klause. But you, you gotta sing and dance while you talk! Real respectful like.”

“The sooner the better,” McDougall smiled, lighting up his corn-cob pipe with a celebratory smoke, knowing that he had not only recruited the best horse trainer and sharp shooter Colonel Turner could hope for, but a freedom fighter who was finally free of something a man can’t afford in a War for Independence----forgiveness.

CHAPTER 14

No one seemed to miss Major Klause very much as Colonel Johnson led his men quietly to the point of the surprise attack on the Redcoats, sneaking amidst the tall grasses and low trees ‘Injun style’ but still in rows and columns like they practiced in the drills. “Major Klause probably had to plant his daisies, or his own Johnson into his Daisy bitch, or Daisy cow. The yellow-bellied ‘gentleman’ from Charleston’s horse looked real satisfied this mornin,” Corporal Leroy commented to his men, within hearing range of the other Colored soldiers who were deemed suitable to bear arms, within smiling range of Sergeant Brady, who rode the mare left behind by Klause after his disappearance.

Hercules’ big elephant ears heard it, though. He hear lots, but learned not to listen to what he wasn’t supposed to. He tried not to hear Leroy’s attack, then joke, aimed at Major Klause. He said nothing to anyone about how the Major was relieving himself in the woods the night before, then got approached by a pretty Injun woman who looked more red than white, then walked into the woods with her for ‘evening refreshment and cultural discussions’ as he told Hercules, ‘which you will not speak about to anyone.’

Hercules was always good at following orders from smart people, and from where he saw it, all Whites was smarter than Coloreds. What DID confuse Hercules was why so many smart people had different ways of being smart and make others do what had to get done. Major Klause told the Colored soldiers that once the musket balls started firing, they should protect their White Masters, since those Masters was protecting them from starving and freezing for their whole lives. Sergeant Brady said that those with shovels should stay behind those with guns, then pick up the guns and pretend like they know how to shoot them when them with the guns get shot, runnin like a hungry hound to an open chicken-coup soon as the Redcoats start re-loadin’. Doc Quincy said that the ‘Black Angels’ should listen to the men who scream in pain the loudest, the ones who stop screaming even more, and bring back whoever they can to get stitched up, from wherever they can. Master, now Colonel Johnson, didn’t say anything to Hercules. Not for days. Not like at the Plantation at least. He seemed quiet, and protective. The only thing he said, real quiet, lookin at the ground, or back inside his head, was “Hercules, my orders to you are to stay alive. If you die, a part of me will die also.”

The army moved as quiet as they could. Hercules could hear the birds chirping, even louder than the footsteps of the soldiers or even the imitations Leroy made in whisper-talk about Major Klause, Sergeant Brady, and Hercules himself. “Look over there at Elephant Ears,” he said. “He’s listening to all that air between his ears.”

The men laughed, the Coloreds mostly. It made Hercules feel good that something he did made people laugh. Seeing that some of the Whites were listening, he continued, Sergeant Brady seeming to allow it. “And the Lord is with us today. He made the White men in His image, the Colored man in the White man’s image, and Hercules in the image of a Colored man who was drunk on moonshine and waked up under the milk-cow’s teat the next day.”

Again, the men laughed. Hercules smiled, and waved at Leroy. He looked so brave, and smart, and as soon as the birds stopped singing---red. A spot of blood spilling onto his chest near the heart not two counts after Hercules heard musket fire from the trees.

“Down. Stay in formation!” Sergeant Brady yelled out to the Coloreds. “Take cover!” the other Commanders yelled out. Gunfire came from the trees, all at once, from three directions, pushing everyone’s head into the dirt, some men trying to run back the way they came. But not Colonel Johnson. He stayed on his horse, riding as fast as he could to see where the gunfire was coming from, looking into the woods to see where the Red and Brown coats were, thinking something different than just how to save his own self from getting shot. He ran to each of his companies, tellin all of them the same thing.

“Take cover, shoot only what you can see, stay a hundred yards from the forest, and wait my signal for the attack, gentlemen.” He said that to the Coloreds too. “Gentlemen” he called them. And there he was, riding his horse out in the open while the trees and men behind them were firing guns at him.

“Come out and show yourselves! Cowards!” Colonel Johnson screamed at the woods. He let the men in the rear who was running away have their way, holding his hand up so Sergeant Brady wouldn’t shoot them, like he promised to when they was in training. “Run back to your mother’s breasts, you cowards! A hero dies but once, a coward dies a thousand deaths.”

Some of the men trying to save their own asses stopped, then ran back to help their Comrades. Same number of Whites and Coloreds, so it seemed. It also seemed such with the British musket balls. Most of them missed their mark, but lots didn’t, and all a man of any skin color needed was to have one ball hit him. The British fire was doing most damage to the men, not the officers, though it seemed that a few brown-coated sharpshooters was aiming at Colonel Johnson. One of them looked familiar to Hercules, seeming to look a lot like Hector. But all of the men in the ‘irregulars’ on horseback looked the same. Black faces covered in white clay to make them look like ghosts sent from the devil his-self.

It all happened so fast. Men as brave as Leroy, or even Colonel Johnson, screaming as they were hit by musketballs and cannon fodder, calling for their mama’s, prayin’ to God for what seemed to be the first time in their lives. Colonel Johnson put his best men around Doc Quincy’s wagon, then rode back into the middle of the field. He looked into the woods, and the men now coming out of it, with bayonets on their muskets. The cannons behind them. The tent where the British officers were looking down on the battle behind that. And then he looked behind his eyes again at a plan inside his head, seeing nothing else.

“Forward, Gentlemen!” Colonel Johnson announced all confident-like. He lifted his sword up to the sky with his writin’ arm. One of the more familiar black ghosts shot him in that shoulder. The Colonel threw the sword into his other arm before it could drop to the ground, then pointed to someplace in the woods. “Forward, gentlemen!” He trotted

forward. The men followed, walking at first, then jogging, then running. Those men who had horses, or could find them, got behind the Colonel as he kicked his 'cavalry' into a gallop.

Hercules rushed up, but Doc Quincy held him behind, giving the same command to every other member of his command. "Black Angels stay behind the line of fire. Pick up the wounded, bring them here. Keep them, and yourselves, alive."

The Redcoats in front of the Colonel stood solid, then ran into the woods. Lots of them, like scared jackrabbits in front of a hound that was out for a big supper. Quincy was as shocked as anyone else. "Looks like the Colonel has found the Achilles heel in the Goliath of the British army," he said as Hercules brought in two wounded soldiers, two white soldiers on the one-wheeled stretcher and one Colored on his back, all bleeding the same color blood.

Hercules heard the name 'Achilles', the name of one of the children born on the Plantation that left soon after it was born. No one said why. He did remember Goliath, and the story of David. And his David, the Colonel, his Master who would teach him about freedom one day, was leading a charge that would win the war. Send all the lobsterbacks back over the ocean to England. Win freedom for all Americans---when from the back woods, the cannons that looked like they was just for decoration let out a pounding fire.

In an instant, the clear sky turned gray then black. All Hercules could see was red, Redcoats coming out of the woods, more than ever. And red blood from all the freedom fighters laying on the ground, or holding onto it. "Regroup!" Sergeant Miller commanded of the Colored, and White soldiers. None of the other officers seemed to be talking. Most particularly, not the Colonel.

"Save those closest to you first!" Doc Quincy screamed out, his arm bleeding but still working. "Save those closest to you first" he continued with the command that, in training camp, was supposed to keep the Black Angels out of trouble and wandering into places where they would be killed themselves. As 'replacement doctors', Quincy valued them far more than any armed foot soldier or sword-wielding Cavalry officer. But there was one officer who Hercules had to find, and save.

"Colonel Johnson! Master!!!" Hercules screamed out as the line of halted Americans ducked for cover, looking for an escape from the advancing line of Redcoats, their drums beating, the bagpipes coming out of the woods, one of them played by a Black Ghost with a brown coat and white face. "Master!!!!!" the freedom-fighting Black Angel screamed again with desperation for the man who defined his purpose in life, and more recently, reason for asserting himself against oppression. "Masterrrrr!!!!!"

A single arm rose up from amidst the bodies on the ground. Hercules stumble-ran to it, ignoring the blood coming out of his own arm. Bullets were supposed to hurt, he thought, but this one didn't. Something else hurt even more...the sight of Colonel

Johnson on the ground, a broken right arm, and what looked like a busted left leg. “I’ll be getting you some help real soon,” Hercules said, whipping out bandages from his pack, and then stripping open his shirt. Somehow he was able to stop the bleeding, then whipped on a splint that caused more pain than the bullets made, and made his arm and leg even more twisted than it was. “Ahhhh!” the Colonel screamed.

“I’m sorry, Colonel I’ll...” Hercules adjusted the splint with a quickness and medical instinct he never knew was in his fingers.

The Colonel nodded ‘yes’, his approval of the work, and the man who did it.

Hercules saw Miller talking with what looked like another officer, one that was dying according to the way his arm fell to the ground after he handed the Sergeant, now an Officer himself, a white flag.

“Nnoooo!!!!” Colonel Johnson said with the last ounce of his fading breath. “Noooo....!” He continued, fading into unconsciousness. Quincy arrived on the scene, stripping off the Colonel’s coat, injecting something into the Colonel’s arm. It seemed to make him rest easier, but he still wasn’t talking.

“Gentlemen, take care of my horse...” slurred out of Johnson’s mouth. “And my...”

Only God heard the last whisper from the Colonel’s lips, but as Hercules felt and saw it, it was the flag that mattered most. The Cause. Feeling something more than air between his elephant ears, something like fire, as Hector described it once. With the ‘brains in his hands’, Hercules put on the Colonel’s coat, secured his hat over his head, and grabbed the starred and striped flag lying on the ground, then the Colonel’s sword, holding them up like a re-lit torch. “Forward, gentleman,” he said, holding a handkerchief in front of his mouth, in his best Colonel voice. How to mount a horse with a flag and a sword was hard enough, but riding it was another matter. Fortunately, the steed was well trained by Hector before he, according to the local sheriff, used one of the horses to viciously kill Overseer McGilvry.

“Forward, Gentleman!” Hercules continued, as he rode around the battlefield, arousing everyone off the ground by his remaining in the saddle. “Forward! Gentlemen. For Freedom!” he proclaimed, riding head on into a round of musket fire, alone. “Forward! For those closest to us, Gentleman!” he continued, ignoring the blood coming from his leg, streaming down the side of Colonel Johnson’s best saddle. “Forward!” he proclaimed as the cannon were being reloaded by smirking faces of Redcoats whose uniforms still looked freshly pressed. Their officers behind them pouring some kind of celebration brandy. “Forward, gentlemen!!!!” the lone horseman proclaimed as he was joined, in bits and pieces, by what was left of the army, now determined to drink the British Celebration brandy for themselves before the smoke of battle cleared.

“You can only find real rest if you’re moving,” Hercules found himself remembering from so many smart White folks who said it with so many different meanings. Overseer

McGilvry said it when the quota to keep food in the Johnson household and keep ALL the children on the Plantation fed meant that the field hands had to double the amount of cotton picked or bags of rice loaded up before dark. Doc Quincy talked about how important moving was when you had more patients than medicines. Colonel Johnson said ‘freedom was a verb’, and that verb had something to do with moving. As Hercules was moving, in the first battle he had ever seen, and a horse he never rode, his world became smaller, and larger, both at the same time. Was he scared? Was he smart? Was he stupid? Or maybe this was ‘courage’, being scared crapless and doing what you had to do anyway.

Thinking on it didn’t last long. All he saw was the fear in front of his face, the movement of the horses feet, and the British guns, from a hundred yards, fifty yards, then real close up. Without Redcoats around them. Hearing cheers from behind him that rapidly replaced musket fire, clanking of sword and cannon blasts. But from who? As he fell to the ground, Hercules saw the thirteen-stared flag, more holes than cloth, flying in the wind. Then, the taste of dirt coated his bloodsoaked tongue, as he saw Sergeant Brady, sipping the British officers’ wine. He smiled, gave thanks to Jesus, and begged His Father for one last wish. “Please, Lord Jesus. Take care of Master Johnson.”

CHAPTER 15

Athena cooked the apple crisp extra crispy, the way she knew the Colonel Johnson liked it, and sprinkled the top with cinnamon, not sugar like everyone else did. She was the only White or Nigger member on the Plantation that also knew he hated things too sweet. And, as she looked at the prompted up and pretty-petite Southern belles, and beauties, collected at the house to greet him home, his hatred for 'sweet' seemed even more apparent, particularly as he looked at their lily white skin and blister-free hands. But they all came to greet home the hero of Greensville who, according the local papers, led the charge against the British cannons and over-whelming odds single handed.

From Athena's vantage point in the kitchen, it seemed that the more he was being told he was a hero, the more he felt shame for the acknowledgement. And something else that his Soul didn't share with his mind. But Athena was used to lies at the Johnson Plantation, as was Sally, the wife who the off-White Black woman half Master Johnson's age noted was smiling most widely, and artificially as she sat by her 'faithful' husband's side. But lies were kinder than the truth, and probably necessary for victory against the British. For better or worse, men of power and influence followed Horatio Johnson's lead, and example, and the Patriot Cause needed Southern heroes very badly as the War kept edging its way South.

Athena sharpened a kitchen knife and landed it into the apple crisp, but couldn't make the first cut. Something oozed out of it, raspberry by its name, red by its color. It normally was just what happened when you cut an apple crisp made with raspberries, but it looked too familiar. "Blood," she thought, noticing a slice of loose flesh in her finger. "Like all those sons of Liberty and Freedom shed on the battlefield. And what Colonel Johnson, no, Horatio must have bled out when he..." She found herself choking, imagining what it must have been like when the man she feared, admired, respected and loved felt the saw going through his arm as it cut off the hand he used to write so much inspiring works for aspiring men, and poems for off-White Black women. Then the axe chopping off his left leg, the one he used to lead the ladies when dancing with them, making them all feel special, and needed, at least for the evening.

Horatio's evenings would be very long now, particularly as he related what he days would be like as a one handed, one legged hero in a War that seemed as unwinnable now as it had been at its conception.

"My daughter writes fast, and fancy," one of the ladies said as she batted her eyelashes and shook her fan over her sweaty breasts. "You can dictate your stories about the Revolution to her, and my husband will print them, free of charge, and send them out to the world."

"Yes," another 'lady' offered, 'outsweeting' the last woman's voice. "You were a hero, and my boys will be inspired by your exploits as a soldier, Sir."

“I wish they would be inspired by the IDEAS behind this Revolution,” the Colonel related, looking at the floor, then towards the kitchen, stealing a stare at Athena. “And that they remember who they fight THEIR battles, and why. And what freedom REALLY costs.”

Mistress Sally felt her husband’s pain. The fact that their only daughter was married to an officer in the English Army was common knowledge. That Pamela’s loyalty now lay strictly with her husband was only seen in the letters she wrote home. The reality that she would serve her new husband at the expense of her father’s welfare, and possible life, was between the lines. Mistress Sally shared them with Athena, as the head-smart and heart-kind house Nigger was all she had left. The only woman she could still trust. And, the only woman who Horatio seemed really interested in upon his return.

Athena pursed her lips in, squinted her eyes, and went on with the business of cutting the apple crisp, placing the slices on the pewter plates, with wooden spoons. The China was long gone, sold to buy guns for the Revolution, replaced by cutlery that Ben Franklin insist his wife use, being the wife of a man of the Common Man. Maybe it was just another lie, as Master Johnson was never really broke. And, besides, if he really needed money for the Revolution he would have sold the ‘Wards’ in the field house at the Slave Market. Indeed, he must have thought of it, but someone had to keep the Plantation going, the cotton picked so it could be woven into Continental Army uniforms, the rice harvested so it could feed soldiers in the field. But there was one Ward who the Colonel felt something very special about, even more than Athena.

As Athena brought the apple crisp into the parlor, the issue was brought up by one the ladies, Annabelle Miller, whose source of information seemed different than the newspapers or their husbands’ war stories. “I heard that one of your own Niggers showed himself off as quite the hero at Greensville,” she said.

“Hercules, yes,” the Colonel said with pride.

“I heard that he led a charge of his own,” Annabelle added with eyes wide open in wonderment.

“Yes, he did,” Johnson said, pouring himself a lemonade-glass portion of Kentucky Whiskey with his left hand, holding onto the glass with the shaking hook attached to his right. “He did his duty admirably, as did your husband.”

“As did MINE!” Sally asserted, still within the limits of ‘ladylike’ behavior. She hugged the Colonel with something Athena felt her Mistress was incapable of feeling or receiving---love. The kind that was about HIM, not her.

“I meant no offense,” Annabelle smiled, sitting back and sipping her tea. “It’s just that my husband, Sergeant Brady, still Sergeant Brady, despite the fact that he deserved to be promoted, said that---“

“---We were all following orders,” Colonel Johnson slurred out, allowing the whiskey to numb the pain in his recently amputated limbs, and heart. Against Sally’s orders he rose, limping around the room with as much youthful assertion as he could muster. “General Greene was following General Washington’s orders when he ordered me to keep the British in my sector contained or harassed, or eliminated, and I gave my orders to Sergeant Miller to think of the Revolution’s reputation, and to Hercules who I ordered to....”

The pain inside the Colonel’s chest, and heart took away his breath. No one dared ask him to continue, except one. “Hercules, who you ordered to do what, Colonel Johnson?” Athena asked, shocking the ladies, and Mistress Sally, forcing her Master to serve her, and himself, with the Truth.

“I ordered Hercules to stay alive, under Doctor Quincy’s command, instead of being promoted to ANY kind of rank carrying a weapon, which would get him killed,” he screamed into Athena’s face, tears coming down his own.

“Because we’d shove the swords you give us into each other before we beat them into plowshears?” Athena asked, and asserted.

None of the White women in the room could believe it. Even Mistress Sally. Master Johnson, the ghosts inside of him fought for control of his Soul, and his left hand, which was held in a tight fist, braced to inflict its wrath upon Athena, perhaps by necessity. He had confessed so many of his sins, and revealed so many of his kind vulnerabilities, to Athena when daughter Pamela and wife Sally were at ‘socials’, or asleep. The Colored fieldhand who he had trained to be an independent thinker was one independent thought away from being sentenced to a lifetime of subjugation. But, from somewhere inside of him, came the explanation for what he did and who he had become, and now must be. Maybe God would understand, as no people never could anymore. Johnson took in a deep breath underneath his still broken ribs, hobbled across the room to a window overlooking the woods to the North and gazed prophetically into the sky. “I was commanded to take charge of the home sector, to aid in supplying the troops with goods, arms and the best kind of men I can find,” he said, in as monotone and unemotional, and cold, tone as General Washington’s, Johnson’s hero and role model. But Colonel Johnson was now ‘retired’ from active service with full honors, an honor that degraded him every time he looked down at his uniform, and the medals upon it.

CHAPTER 16

“Very good work, very good indeed, Sir,” Doctor Quincy commented to Hercules when he finished stitching up the bayonet stab that tore up most everything underneath it.

“Thanks to you, this man will be able to use that arm to lift up his grandchildren. And with that repair job you did on the wound between his legs, those grandchildren will by his own seed, Sir.”

“Two ‘Sirs’”, Hercules thought as the last of the casualties came into the barn which the new Commander turned into a hospital. Colonel Stone wasn’t a bad commander, but he valued his reputation and the casualties inflicted upon the British more than the lives of his own men, and on one occasion, he was seen riding his horse away from a battle that seemed to turn against him. But by all the official accounts, he was ‘regrouping’ and ‘reassessing strategic options’. The only options Hercules saw was that each time Colonel Stone tried to save more lives, Hercules would wind up having to stitch up more bayonet wounds, or bury more bodies.

The field hand turned surrogate physician washed his hands in the water bucket like he learned when fixing up busted flesh at the field house at the Johnson Plantation, then rinsed them off in moonshine before he got ready for the next patient, like Doc Quincy did. “This one’s too far gone,” Quincy said over the man with the intestines hanging out of his belly, the pale liver beside it, thick pus around the hole carved into his skin at least three different kinds of blades. “He’ll eat up supplies, and time. Move on to the---“

“---But he’s the one who’s closest to me now,” Hercules said, looking at the man’s face, or what was left of it underneath the burnt flesh. “That’s Sergeant Brady! The man who---“

“---is going to die, slowly or with some ‘help’ if there is ANY mercy left in this Godforsaken war.” Quincy painted a cross on his forehead with ink, just under the hairline above the portholes that had once been his eyes. “He can’t even see what we’re doing. His pupils have been burnt to a crisp, and whatever is left of his brain---“

“---But his heart’s still beating!” Hercules said, listening to the chest of the ‘Irish Nigger’ drill sergeant who was more vicious to Niggers than any White military overseer. “His heart’s still beating, Doctor Quincy.”

“At over 160 beats a minutes, and faintly at that,” Quincy said, putting his hand atop Hercules’, placing a knife soaked with ‘special sleeping medications’ into it. “He’s in shock. Undoubtedly in pain. Which we can stop. And as for me, I’m needed by those two soldiers who the stretcher bearers just brought in. One of them needs my help now, the other can be saved by you if you tend to him even sooner than now, Doctor Hercules.”

En route to his best-chance-to-save patient, Quincy passed by a row of the patients who the stretcher-bearers deemed as savable, assessing, confirming, and giving the first shot of 'special whiskey' to them that dulled pain on those who could live, and shut down the lungs on those who wouldn't.

Hercules looked at the knife soaked with the quick-acting cyanide bead on its end that was put into his hand by Quincy, then at Brady, whose wounds were becoming as purulent as they were painful, their odor smelling of death. So as to not alarm the other patients, Hercules leaned down to Brady and let him feel the knife, its bead at the tip, and its black handle into which was engraved a skull and crossbones. Edging closer in to the blood-soaked ear of Sergeant Brady, Hercules softly said the words that needed saying. "Sergeant Brady, Sir, there ain't nothin' we can do as doctors, but as men we can do as---"

"Just keep this conversation between you and me. The Lord finds out that I let you do this, he'll have quite the whipping waitin' for me when I..." Brady muttered the rest of what he had to say in Gaelic, then looked up to the sky. The rest of the conversation Brady had with whatever was up there was said with lips that moved but words that could not be heard. Then a nod of the head in the affirmative that said 'yes, it's good with you, me and Him.' With that, Hercules edged the knife containing the poison through the spaces of the ribs on his left chest, penetrated in half way into the wall, and twisted the specially designed blade so that the bead would go into the chambers of the heart. It was something that Hercules became very good at. Too good. Before he could say "Glory Hallaluliah. Praise Jesus," Brady was with Jesus, or so Hercules hoped anyway. In the five seconds of 'leisure' time he had before having to move to the next patient, Hercules heard intense heavenly silence, then the wind, then perhaps other messengers from above his head.

The birds chirped in the trees outside the hospital tent, but Hercules paid them no mind. Instead of making the day more musical, and meaningful, they were just noise now, their songs making his head ache and ears hurt. Reminders of times he could never have again. Calling him back to the realm of the dying who could still remain in the living was Quincy. "Hercules...Cot three. Now." Everything was set up for Doctor Hercules to do what he could, by White soldiers, some of them officers. They laid out the surgical instruments, alcohol and sponges in preparation for the lowly field hand to save their wounded comrade. A White slave owner from Georgia who begged Hercules to enable him to go back home with his legs and arms intact, each one of those appendages in danger of being lost to the wounds inflicted on them. Hercules had to say something to make the event significant. "I save these arms, they won't be used to whip no Niggers no more, right?" he asked, and demanded. The answer was of course a 'yes'. As Hercules proceeded to work his medical miracles, as Quincy called them so often, he found himself not quite believing that the Slave Owner's promise would be kept. Still, there was some hope that he would, or his son would, or his grandson. Such was enough to keep going. And where it was going was Hercules living up to his name, finally.

He had led a charge against impossible odds at Greenville which saved the Continental Army, or maybe even the War, according to what he was told anyway. As a Black Angel now promoted to Black Healer, he brought more broke and busted bodies back to where they could get mended than any three men put together, Black, or White, and knew more about medicine in his hands than even Doc Quincy did with his head. But, Hercules also discovered that could shoot pistols and rifles as straight as any man and learned real quick how to use a sword, even outdoing any of the Seargents in the practice duels he snuck himself into when the officers wasn't looking. Yet...he was still ordered, then forced to remain in the medical tent, disallowed entry onto the battlefield. Special orders from Colonel Johnson, now left with Doc Quincy and followed by everyone else in command. Above all else, Hercules wanted this war ended and he felt that he could end it by being in the FRONT lines, not the rear. After saving the slave owning White man's limbs and, assuming infection didn't set in, he pushed his way into Quincy's face while he was finishing up on his own patient. "If'n you put me in with the free Niggers who has guns, I could make them the best fightin' unit in this Army. Scare the British even more than Turner's Regiment scares us, Doc."

"Out of the question," Quincy said. "I can't lose the best set of medical hands I have."

"Which still can't get used on most White soldiers once they open their eyes, or the officers is looking, Sir," Hercules barked back.

"Yes, I know," Quincy confessed, recalling the inexcusable number of White soldiers lost who had insisted on being treated by doctors of their own color or not at all. "But we don't want to lose you, Hercules. And I made a promise to the Colonel." The Doctor kept his eyes down, like when a Nigger at the Plantation accidentally killed a hog and them spilt a bloody knife outta his pocket.

"What kind of promise?" Hercules said, hands on the double-barrel pistol, clenched tight on it with anger, the kind he never thought was in him.

"The kind I have to keep," Quincy said. "For those closest to me, and you," he continued.

Hercules saw his head taken away from his heart. With the brains still left in his fingers, tired of trying to figure out another one of Doc Quincy's riddles, he lifted up the pistol and pointed it at the good Doctor's head.

"What do you want, son?" Quincy said.

"To use a gun to end this War, steada patchin up men who get sent home, back out to get shot again, or buried outside of camp before we have to keep movin' the next mornin'."

"I see your point, Hercules, but---"

Hercules grabbed hold of a hand-musket next to the wounded soldier's cot, cocked the hammer on the barrel that was still loaded, aiming it towards Quincy's brain stem.

"You have tasted blood," Quincy said, calm-like, as he finished sewing up a laceration on a leg that had been broken in three places. "And if you insist on shedding it."

"I do, Sir!" Hercules asserted. "In the cause of Freedom!"

Quincy pulled piece of paper from his pocket. Hercules tried to read it, but there were too many letters on it "Major Kensington," Quincy explained. "One of the outriders brought in here said he needs Colored men with brains and courage."

"Which outrider?" Hercules asked, smiling with pride and confidence, holstering the pistol under his belt.

"The one who just died an hour ago," Quincy said. He put his hand out, like White men do with each other. "Good luck, Sir."

Quincy's hand shook, and his eyes started to let out tears of fear and regret.

"Why is YOU cryin, Doc?" Hercules inquired.

"Because you people WILL shove the swords we give you into each other before you get a chance to beat them into plowshears," he answered.

"Don't get what your meaning. Didn't get what it meant when Colonel Johnson said it either."

"You will, soon enough, God help and bless you, Son." Quincy put down his hand and hugged Hercules. Like a father hugged his own son. Hercules felt himself wanting to go back to the way things used to be, when he was the hardest worker in the field and the last to eat in the field house, trusting that his Masters would know what's ahead of him. But he couldn't. "Being 'free' is scary", he said to himself, so no one else but Hercules could hear his lips or head. "And fighting for it is..."

"All we got left now?" Hercules answered, wishing he was simple again, knowing that he could never be such ever again.

CHAPTER 17

Hector quenched his thirst from the bucket brought around by the water boy, his dry throat soothed by the cool fluid running down his parched mouth. The mid-afternoon refreshment was even more pleasant because of who served it. “Another cup, ‘Missy,’” he said, extending his cup out for more.

Former Master Klause looked good in his new outfit as ‘mobile prisoner’, limping in a colorful dance-like step after Hector gave him the interrogation ‘warning’ snap with the whip between the legs. And wearing a clean white garment befitting his now gilded status as the ‘servant wench’ for the Turner Company, its ranks of runaway and rescued Coloreds now swelled into almost a Regiment.

“Right away, Sir,” Klause stammered with shaking hands, adorned by the new dress Hector and company confiscated from the last Plantation raided. The Master of the house was away on business, and the Mistress didn’t say if it was for the English or the Rebels, so according to British orders, it was assumed that whoever wasn’t for the King was against him.

‘Mistress’ Klause poured the water, Hector and his band of sharpshooter guerillas shooting rounds around the former Slave owner’s feet, making him stumble and nearly fall off the high-heeled Marie Antoinette shoes ‘acquired’ during the last raid. But to be fair, Hector, McDougall and the other ‘Black Devils’ who rode with Colonel Turner into heavily-guarded Patriot sectors did bring back more than outfits to further degrade American Rebel prisoners. The British Army moved on its stomach, which was well supplied by Turner’s recruits, and were the best fed Coloreds in ANY of the Colonies, by all accounts. And as for where to move that Army, Hector acquired more information from Whites who knew nothing, or wanted to know nothing, than any recruit in the Army. The man who couldn’t watch a dead pig being skinned was not skinning men alive, or threatening such. But it was all in the name of Freedom, and Well Being of the Coloreds who were still in Yankee slave-owners chains, Indians who were being pushed further West with every Yankee-sympathizing village built, and even the White folks who were too poor to own Slaves, or too compassionate to think about doing so even if they had the money. There were lots of those White folks, some who fought for King George, some for General Washington and some for even themselves and their families.

Yes, it was about families now. Recruitment was less about ideology and more about who burnt out who. The McCoys joined up with Major Thompkins mixed group of Redcoats and Loyalists because four of the McDonald brothers were wearing Patriot colors when they burnt out Grandpa McCoy and killed his two sons who were defending the farm. The rest of the McDonald clan joined up with General Greene, and Colonel Johnson’s replacement, Colonel Stone. According to former Sergeant, now Captain McDougall, the ‘Black Nova Scotian Brigade.’ “The best thing for us about Colonel Stone is that he spent ten years in the English Army, three years learnin’ how to kiss George Washington’s ass, and ten sucking on his mother’s teat.”

It was an assuring, and probably accurate statement about the ‘American’ Army, which had people of many callings and motivations in it. Hector noticed ‘Mistress Klause’ stumbling on his new petticoat with the hobbles around his feet, continuing his afternoon duties of serving ‘tea’ to the Colored soldiers who were now fighting for the Slaves he bought, sold, killed and tortured in the name of ‘profit’ and ‘protection’. Another kind of bitterness was building up in the functionally-castrated man of wealth who now owned nothing, even his honor. If Klause ever recovered from the shame of giving out information about his Patriot Comrades in Greensville, and the other locations he was taken to afterwards, he would extract revenge on the English, and all who sided with them. Or maybe it was all about a ‘deal’ he would make with Major Thompkins, or maybe even General Cornwallis at a future date. So many people’s motivations in this War, particularly land owning Whites, were about ‘deals’, some gone good, some gone sour.

“And one thing about General Washington that the history books won’t never put into ink,” Hector remembered from another one of Captain McDougall’s gospel Scottish-African ‘talks’ around the Campfire, and the confiscated Brandy bottles. “General George asked for a commission in the British Army when he was fighting the French back in ’63, and for God knows how many years afterward. ‘Hard cheese, man’ was the answer the rich Virginian Colonel in the Colonial Militia who married into most of his money was told each time. By my best reckoning, a New Englander at the Boston Tea Party who smoked some of the tea he was supposed to throw overboard tipped off King George that General George Washington was into little boys even more than Doctor Benjamin Franklin, and would bring dishonor to the Crown if he was given a Commission in the British Army, or even try to hump the King himself if he got the chance.”

If it was true or not, thinking that it was so made the cold nights warmer, the hot afternoons cooler, and mourning the loss of Colored Comrades who DIDN’T shoot straight or ride fast enough from pursuing Patriot soldiers and bounty hunters easier. It did provide another pause for thought, and as war was long periods of boredom broken up by brief periods of terror, inflicted or felt, Hector had all too much time for thinking. He thought about Master Johnson, a slave owning man who DID believe that the Black man was less than he was, or for that matter, that most White men was less than he was. ‘Colonel Horatio’ was a hero in the War against the French, and didn’t have any military blunders to hide away from the diaries and the history books like ‘Colonel George’ did. Master Johnson invited the British Generals for tea, supper and whiskey lots of times before the War started, the Redcoats leaving with stuffed bellies, their host left with a broken heart.

Relieving himself in the outhouse, the only place in Camp a man could have real privacy, Hector decided to catch up on his reading. The asswipe this week was about Colonel Johnson, the hero of Greensville, writing another book which brought in another three Companies of volunteers from the Carolinas, and even some Georgians. “Hell,” Hector shrugged to himself. “Didn’t know ANYone in Georgia could read,” he boasted with Carolinian pride. But there was mention of something else in the article printed on

material required to be used as asswipe. “Contribution to the efforts of the Patriot Cause at Greenville are also acknowledged from...”

The rest of the writing was blurred. Cleaning the brown crap from the black and white bullshit in print, Hector pulled up his trousers and took the paper to someone who he knew could read it and tell him if what he thought he read was true.

Major Thomkins smiled, with relief, then sadistic joy. “Yes, it is what it appears to be.”

“That the man who helped win the battle of Greenville, according to the Patriot version, was a five-foot-five simple-minded Black Indian named Hercules, Sir?” Hector had seldom used ‘Sir’ when addressing the Major, because the British officer never said ‘Sir’ back to anyone else, especially Colored guerilla soldiers who got their asses shot up, or put back in chains, stealing supplies from Patriot Camps, towns and Mansions.

“That’s what Doctor Quincy seems to think,” Major Thomkins looked at the writer’s signature on the officially forbidden outhouse reading again. “Hmmm...I thought he would have the good sense to stay out of this police action. He was a good man, a fine doctor.”

Hector contemplated the half-truths, and half-told facts. He went on his way to inspect, and repair the new batch of powder, shot and Kentucky long rifles commandeered from the last three villages. Then with fear at the Nigger and half-breed poor White recruits trying to figure out how to use them. No doubt, reference to Hercules’ height and mental deposition in the seized rebel propaganda dispatch identified him as the boy, now apparently man, who Hector grew up around. It was an interesting twist on the truth that Hercules was now an Indian and a Nigger in print, but such embellishments were expected. The British were better at keeping promises to Red Skins than the Americans were, and General Washington had put his own men’s stomachs before the Mohawks survival when he robbed their food and burnt their villages up New York way, according to the English Injuns at least. And the British were the ones who told the Americans that White Folks could have the fertile farm land East of the Appalachians, the Injuns getting the scrub grasses and bug-infested bush West of them.

Hector felt, for the first time, the conflicts of loyalties he considered weakness in so many others. He was now not only fighting both Niggers who were stupid or greedy enough to fight for General Washington and the White men who didn’t say nothing about ending slavery in their declaration of independence that said that ‘all men are created equal’. Hector now was fighting ‘family’, and it was only a matter of time till his eyes would come face to face with Hercules, the closest man he ever considered a brother, or friend. A brother-friend who was was a pain in the ass, someone you always had to look out after, the kind of dumb-shit Nigger who sang out even when his fellow Niggers wanted some quiet time, but he was Hector’s little brother-friend. And then there was Athena, who he prayed wouldn’t be at a Rebel Patriate plantation that was on the the British Army’s list to raid or destroy. Though dedicated to the Cause of Freedom in the name of the King, fighting the oppressors who called themselves ‘patriots’, Hector would kill

ANY man who violated Athena. There was something... 'familiar' about her, in the family sort of way, and when the War was over, he would ask her hand in marriage....then make the White Folks at the Johnson place do the cooking and cleaning for the ceremony. It was an image that kept him going.

But one image brought more home than Hector ever wanted to know. His chin dropped, the breath stuck inside his throat.

“Yes, laddie, that’d be the Major’s lass, and slave, in a manner of speakin which no gentleman speaks about,” McDougall commented as a white woman of no more than twenty years, immeasurable beauty and a possessed glaze in her eyes slithered out of her tent, grabbing hold of the Major’s arm, falling all over him like water over rock.

“That’s...” Hector gasped in disbelief.

“Lady Pamela, to any of us,” McDougall said. “Assuming you don’t want to wind up being served up as stew to the Major’s dog, or her.”

“Pamela Johnson,” Hector said, “To her father and to....”

“...to who Sergeant Freeman?” McDougall asked Hector feeling an upper hand emerging.

“Someone she played with when I was a lad,” Hectors reply. “Someone...special.”

“And someone you’ll be playing with after the war is done with unless you interfere with her and the Major, and wind up---“

Before McDougall could finish the description of the punishment awaiting any Black or White soldier who got in the way of the special plans the Major had for ‘Lady Pamela’, she caught a glimpse of Hector, her stare fixed on him.

Hector couldn’t believe Pamela’s eyes. Gone was the playful nature, the little girl who cares about petticoats rather than politics, who chose, according to Athena, a black girl from the field house to grow up with than her own kind. A girl who grew up talking about all her secrets to Athena. And a woman who now insisted on confiding in a man from the other side of the ocean who nothing about her own culture, or life.

The Major was curious. McDougall was cautious. Hector was touched, and terrified, bowing his head.

“No, no, no.” Lady Pamela said, lifting her thin arms away from the Major’s arms, slits on both wrists, bruises around the elbows and shoulders. “You!” she mouthed seductively with her lips, pointing to Hector with her index finger like her hands were loaded pistols.

“Me?” Hector said ‘field Nigger’ style. “Don’t know what you’d be wantin with me,” he smiled.

“Yes,” the Major said, seeing a bigger agenda at hand shaping up beyond his expectations. “Sergeant Freeman.”

“Seargent Johnson,” Lady Pamela affirmed, licking her lips at the hot blooded black man.

“Whatever,” the Major commanded. “Who is now a Lieutenant. Who I will speak to privately, in my tent.”

Hector hesitated. If battle was deception, this was War. Deception in the front lines was what men did to be men. But trickery in Camp, and inside the officers’ tents, this was something new. Yet, as a newly appointed officer, the stakes were higher now for Hector no matter how he played the ‘game’. The question was, what was the game and would he be willing to play it...in the name of Truth and Freedom, of course.

CHAPTER 18

They were rock hard on the surface, tender and painful on the inside, and when they peeled open, blood red was the only color inside. And they were all over Athena's hands and feet. "They's called blisters, 'Miss Athena'", Thelma said with a sadistic smile, intentionally not knowing how to pronounce Athena's name, knowing that it was after the goddess of beauty. And as Athena caught a glimpse of herself in the field house mirror after a third week of picking cotton, harvesting rice and chopping firewood for the big house she was now banished from, the beauty on the outside was fading fast. Her hair went unwashed, acquiring the kink that she and Master Johnson hated so much. Her soft skin seemed more hard than off-white, the dirt over every inch of it making her look, and feel, like a Nigger. A creature of the jungle who lived for eating, sleeping, fornicating and when Master permitted it, or wasn't looking, getting the rest of what you wanted by taking it from other Niggers.

But the hour of reflection, all three seconds of it, was coming to a close. The 'men folk' in the field houses needed their dinner and the women folk was assigned the job of fetching the food, cooking it, then cleaning up afterward. Tonight it was cornbread, beans and ham-hocks, a combination that made Athena's stomach puke but she threw the fixings into the pot of boiling and spattering fat just like every other night, trying to duck the splashes that landed burnt holes in the hands of cook Nigger bitch cooks, potholes into the faces of careless ones. Not quite like preparing apple crisp for Colonel Johnson, which was so often shared over a good book, and stimulating conversation. And as for that conversation, after picking cotton all day, the last thing she wanted to hear was the grunting, cussing and moaning from the men-folk, who always found someone lower than them to yell at or make fun of. Now that Hercules was gone, it was the women, and when the women got tired of ranking on the men, they ranked on each other.

"You musta done some kind of real dirty deed up at the big house to end up here at this house," 'big Mama' Thelma said as she poured more cornmeal into the pots, instructing Athena to stoke the fire under them, WITHOUT burning off more of her hair this time. "Yes Sir, Athena, you musta done somethin real bad. The way I heard it you--"

"---Did exactly what the Colonel wanted, and expected me to do," Athena grunted back, remembering the mirror she put in front of her beloved Horatio's hurting face, when all the other women in his life and world, were watching. Saving, or course Miss Pamela. "I did what the Colonel wanted, and expected me to do," she repeated, with pride.

"In public or private, child?" the Mastress of the Small House asked. "Way I heard it you and the Colonel was--"

"---What happens between a gentleman and a lady is confidential."

"Is what Athena?"

“Private.” She let go from a chest tight with anger and frustration for at everyone, especially herself. “What happens between a gentleman and a lady is private.”

“Maybe a White lady, but not a Black bitch like you, child.”

It was the first time that Thelma, who was deemed not worthy of a Classic Greek name, called Athena ‘child’, and it seemed like she meant it, most particularly after it spilled out of her mouth. “I had a child like you once, who thought she was a lady.”

“What happened to her?” Athena asked, feeling on the same level with Thelma, which felt a whole lot higher than any level she shared with Horatio, Sally or even Miss Pamela.

Thelma answered with her silence, and tears. “Best get that bacon fat a lot hotter than that, or we gonna get shit from the men folk as well as liquid shit comin out of our own asses tomorrow mornin’,” she said, taking out her anger on handful of dough destined to be bread. Or crackers if she remembered anything more about her daughter, who was noticeably NOT in residence.

Hector and Hercules told Athena that she had eyes on the side and back of her head. It was a gift, if you saw things clearly. While letting her fellow Coloreds believe that she was one of them now, Athena sneaked a peak outside the window. Master Johnson was on a wagon, wife Sally by his side. Both were talking to Big Joe Whitaker, a Chippewa Indian who educated himself in how to manage White Man’s wompan while his fellow braves were training themselves in how to use tomahawks and bows against the pale faces. Most of the Chippewa were gone now, or out West someplace. But Big Joe, all four-foot-ten of him, stayed on, turning his ten acres of land into the most productive crop of beans, cotton and sweet potatoes in ten counties, and into hundreds of acres that grew crops as fast as the Paleface buyers in the Carolinas, Britain and even France could buy them, and at top dollar. He did it, by all accounts, with the help of ‘Black Injuns’, as he called them. Some of their number were in the wagon behind him, chained with leg irons, not one of them with a back not mutilated by the whip, and most of them women.

Athena wondered what they were talking about, then caught Colonel Johnson’s glance through the window, with one his most dangerous ‘looks’.

“If that be Colonel Johnson, as Master likes to be called now, that be his ‘buyin’ face, or his sellin face,” Thelma said with sorrowful eyes and an upturned smile. “And as for what he’s buyin’, or sellin’, nothing you, me or even that Greek God Athena you be named after can do about it. Life go a lot easier on everyone if you understands that.”

“Athena wasn’t a god,” the off-White once-comfortable and, thank God still literate Negress now at the bottom of the field house totem pole said, noting Miss Sally give her husband the ‘you have to do what is best for everyone’ stare in response to Big Joe’s offer. “Athena was a goddess, and a lady.”

“Ladies be the first ones to get sold down the river by gentlemen,” Thelma said, with the wisdom of Zeus, Solomon and if still anywhere in the Thirteen Colonies, God ‘His-self’.

CHAPTER 19

“You sure I’s supposed ta be here?” Hercules asked his new Commander, the third ‘new Commander’ since he presented himself to Camp and asked for Major Kensington, seeing everyone else BUT him. Hercules peaked over at the letter in the officer’s hand, the one written by Doc Quincy again, pretending that he could read it. “That letter there say I can ride, shoot, stab and jab as good as the next man, White, Colored or even Injun,” he boasted.

“That you have the courage of a lion, surgical hands of a genius, and the good sense of a donkey who just beat his own brains out,” the chisel faced Blue Coat with the Northern accent answered, stroking his peach-fuzzed chin whiskers. “Signed, Doctor John Quincy.”

Hercules grabbed the note back. “But he say that he---“

The old-before-his-time Lieutenant put his arm on Hercules’ shoulder. “Doctor Quincy is a good man, and there is good reason why he sent you to me.”

“So I can sew up the holes in that uniform?” Hercules spat back, noting the poor work of whoever had stitched up the ten bullet holes and four stab wounds in the uniform that the young Lieutenant wore like an old veteran. “I joined up to kill British Lobsterbacks.”

“You ‘joined up’ because your Master leased you out to the Army,” the young officer said with a Northern pride that the gents from the cold Colonies used to talk about the rich and poor folks from the warm ones. “But, according to General Washington, his NEW decree, you’ll earn your freedom twelve months after you enlisted. And as for this War, the winner won’t be the one who wins the most battles, but the one who stays on the battlefield the longest, God help and bless us.”

Hercules did the counting on his fingers, trying to remember how many full moons he’d been in the Army. It was coming close to ten now, but there was something more disturbing than distressing. “Don’t recall me signin’ any enlistment papers, Sir,” Hercules flashed on.

“Colonel Johnson probably signed them for you,” the Lieutenant answered. “I hear he’s a good man, and a fair one, dedicated to the Revolution above everything else.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hercules said. “I heard that too,” he continued, doubting those words, for the first time in his life. There was evidence to say that Master Johnson didn’t sign his ‘Ward’s’ freedom papers, but no reason to say that he did either. But, accordin’ to what a Son of Liberty was required to believe, the War was about Freedom, and a country where ‘all men are created equal’. A Cause still worth fighting for, the slow-minded field hand now blessed and cursed with a faster-thinking brain thought to himself.

There was one question that Hercules HAD to ask. “Where does I get my gun, knife and sword, Sir?”

The Lieutenant pointed Hercules in the direction of the medical tent. “Doctor Jones is our new surgeon. He doesn’t like Niggers much, but he needs good doctors more.”

It could have been worse. Hercules could have found himself with the ‘Engineering’ Company, Coloreds with picks and shovels who dug trenches and latreens, and carried supplies and artillery the horses couldn’t, or wouldn’t. But given the fact that this new country said that ‘all men are created equal’, they had to make good on their promises after the War was done with. Another fact was that if the British won, or the Americans left the fight early, the “General Washington Niggers” would be the first ones to be hung, or worse.

CHAPTER 20

“Crumpets or scones?” Lady Pamela asked Hector, extending the tray of delicacies to her guest, her toe ‘discreetly’ extended under the table, working its way up his legs to his crotch. Sitting in the Command tent, with all the trimming of English aristocracy, he contemplated the plan laid out to him by her husband, Major Thompkins. Even on a good day, Hector didn’t know the difference between an English Muffin or a Yankee biscuit, not that there was a whole lot of difference anyway. They were ‘White folk’ food, nothing special when compared with cornbread baked special by Thelma at the field house, or Athena at the Big house. Hector’s stomach yearned for cornbread, the way it was at home, having been away for at least four long winters now, as many Springs and summers too.

“Crumpets or scones?” Lady Pamela asked him again, her very married toes caressing, then grabbing his testicles.

“Scones, please, Miss Pamela,” he replied with what he hoped would be the right mixture of servitude and dignity. It was a skill all men of Color who wanted to be men had to learn, acquired more by accident and experiment than skill or moral fiber. He turned to the Major, who reviewed the maps one more time, then dismissed his White guards AND Black servants, all dressed and fed as well as any Officer.

Such was the world as seen by Hector’s left eye. King George did seem to take care of his loyal servants. But his right eye developed a twitch, the kind that happened when there was a bear lingering behind a fruit-laden tree, or a snake under a well-buried bush.

“Now, then, Lieutenant Freeman” Major Thomkins announced to his guest, ignoring the advances made by his wife on his Hector, but irritated at her nonetheless. The kind of irritation that Overseer McGilvry had just before giving a slow moving or slow listening Nigger another whipping. “The plan I’ve outlined here will, to the best of my assessment, stop the War in the South. Or at the very least, grind it to a halt for a while.”

“Give us a chance to count our dead, and heal our wounded, Sir,” Hector replied. “And hope the wounded don’t become dead before they get home. And don’t wind up being walking dead ifn they DO get home in one piece.”

“Quite,” Major Thomkins answered. “ And our casualties, living and dead, are higher than anyone expected.”

“And your plan, Major?” Hector asked as Lady Pamela tickled a button that made his third leg rise, and his voice, despite the fact that his mind was on other matters. She started to breath heavy, shake, then sweat.

The Major pulled a vial of something small from his coat pocket. He put it in her tea. She drank it up fast, feeling a whole lot better real fast. The Major lifted his finger, pointing her out to the door. She rose up, stomped her foot and said ‘No’ in the manner

of the most spoiled Southern belle Hector had ever experienced, even when making raids on Plantations that housed young women with pretty bodies and nothing between their ears except hot, empty air. “Nooooo!” she protested, again.

Major Thomkins kept his stiff upper lip firm, and authoritative.

‘Lady Pamela’ put on her warmest smile and grabbed Hector by the collar. “But if you let me whip this boy into shape!” she growled.

Hector felt his throat shut closed, then saw a riding crop with a barb at the end in Miss Pamela’s hand. She lifted it up, threatening to slash Hector across the face. The Major smiled, reached into his pocket. He pulled out five more vials of ‘medicine’, threatening to throw them into the cooking stove.

Miss Pamela put down the crop, then Hector. With hatred in her heart, and fear in her face, she left the tent, with a bow and curtsy to her husband, and his guest.

“My apologies for that, Lieutenant,” Major Thompkins said.

“Yes, Sir,” the recently-promoted Black officer replied, knowing it was not appropriate to ask any more questions.

“She has some medical problems,” the Major continued, putting together more maps and instructions, appending the latter with caution and urgency.

“Yes, Sir,” Hector agreed.

“Quite destructive habits which she acquired from her father, I’m afraid.”

“Sir?” Hector inquired, putting together his partial knowledge of Miss Pamela’s history while growing up, and what Athena DIDN’T say about her ‘adopted sister/playmate’, and what Athena never told anyone about Master Johnson.

The Major answered Hectors question with four envelopes, secured shut with his wax seal, one of them addressed to him. “Open this,” he requested of Hector regarding his next raid. “But at the appointed time, and place,” he commanded.

Those particulars were on the back of the envelope. “Yes, Sir,” Hector noted the dates, and didn’t recognize the place being very close to the Johnson Plantation, thankfully. This time anyway. “And this will end the War?” Hector asked.

“With God’s help, and everyone else’s obedience.”

“Yes Sir,” the freedom fighting Lieutenant replied, finding the stakes and ideologies in the War for ‘Common life and freedom’ were becoming very personal.

CHAPTER 21

Whereabouts of Niggers at the Johnson Plantation after hours were known to Overseer Young, but what the one and a half-legged veteran of the War with the French didn't know was that Athena never considered herself a Nigger. Old "Hawkeye" Young had special orders to never allow Athena entry to or 'free walking time' around the Big House, passed on to Thelma then to Athena from sources Big Mama never told Athena, nor asked about. But Rachel, new arrival to the field house, had special medical needs that Overseer Young saw fit to put off till the morning. Such needs required medicinal that were in the Big House, the Mansion where Athena grew up, and from which she was not banned.

Athena clad herself as one of the house Niggers, taking care to cover her long, straight hair with one of the bandanas now required to be worn by all kitchen staff. Knowing the weak spots in the door, and the tricks to how the locks didn't work, she creaked open the door and tip-toed into the room that was once her favorite part of the Plantation.

The 'cure' for the sweats and night shakes wasn't anything fancy, a mixture of paprika, cinnamon and pepper mixed with some new and very effective German medicinals one of Master Johnson's new junior officers brought over from a captured Hessian officer who decided that he would be better served fighting for George Washington rather than waiting to be parolled back to the custody of his wife and her oppressive family back in Prussia. The medicine wouldn't be missed by the ladies and gents in the 'victory is around the corner' feast to be given on Sunday, she hoped. But Rachel, afflicted with multiple diseases of the mind and the body, needed it. She had just walked into the Plantation one day, saying with words even simpler and slower than Hercules that she was burnt out of her old home, Master killed by the English, wife raped by the Injuns with them, Overseer put in chains, 'resta the Niggers run off or chopped into meat for the hogs'. Rachel had no place to go, and was less able to take care of herself than a three legged, half-blind kitten who wandered into a vulture's nest. And with all the talk going around about 'them that has and them that doesn't', the chain of cruelty inflicted upon the Negro 'citizens' of the New Country was being passed down the line by said 'citizens' in the field house to Niggers at the bottom of the totem pole. Just like Master Johnson said, as did Horatio.

"Cruelty, like energy, once created gets passed on," Athena recalled as she measured out enough the Bavarian-manufactured medicinals to take care of Rachel, sneaking them into bags put into the pocket provided by the kitchen dress burrowed from the clothesline and those pockets provided by her own anatomy, leaving enough so that the missing 'German spices' wouldn't be noticed. "Unless we WISELY do what we can to stop it in its tracks," Athena remembered from Horatio's mouth and heart during the late night conversations at the supper table when everyone else was asleep, on ALL the houses at the Plantation.

Athena also saw something else in the Big House to keep herself healthy, and sane. Books, new ones, some in French. She had heard that the French would come to the aid of America in the Cause of Freedom, but even Rachel could figure out that it was to give the British a kick in the ass. Athena opened the leatherbound volume sniffing the freshly opened pages and started reading. "Rousseau," she said to herself, noting the flowery language of the new politic which would overtake the world once the guns stopped firing. And there were others. "Don Quixote", a book about the old man who tried to kill dragons that were threatening the world, but was actually whacking his bladeless sword against windmills, to the DIS-delight of his tired horse. The others were more 'practical'. "Plato's Republic", Thomas Moore's "Utopia", and Machevelli's "The Prince". All seemed to have been read, part way in, then abandoned.

"I never would have let the Horatio start a book without finishing it," Athena said, thinking about doing the unthinkable. Stealing the books would be easy, but noticed....perhaps. Horatio had become Master Johnson after being retired as the Colonel by his wounds, and she smelled the purulent odor from them frighteningly close by, in the next room, the door partially opened. Athena tip-toed her way to the downstairs 'study' she had visited with Horatio on the occasions when the rest of the women in the house were away, sneaking a look into it. Athena saw her former 'mentor' just lying there now, under the sheets with Lady Sally, who was snuggled up next to him. Lady Sally seemed to have a smile on her face, sleeping with a well satisfied Soul, and most probably body. Master Johnson was master of nothing, his blank eyes staring at the ceiling, his mind empty, his soul tortured. Athena remembered that she offered her own body to him on many occasions as an adult with all of her anatomy mature, but that he refused. "It would not be natural, a violation of God's laws," he had said with wisdom, and guilt, never explaining the 'why' of it. Something else was evident to Athena. Sally really DID love Horatio, but in ways he didn't and couldn't care for her. Horatio Johnson would give his life for Sally, and her well being, but to give his passion and heart was too much. Maybe the less than intelligent but always elegant Mistress Sally DID understand Horatio's heart, but so did Athena. And Athena was the only woman who understood what Horatio valued more than his heart---his mind. All those 'whys' that went wrong now, the balance of power in the House now gone because Athena had dared to challenge Horatio, in public rather than behind closed doors. She wondered why she did such a rude, stupid and cruel thing such as embarrassing him in front of his own people.

But 'whats' soon had a bigger impact than 'whys', particularly when the 'who' was someone Athena knew all too well. On the table next to Horatio's 'reading chair', now surrounded by papers rather than books, was a bill of sale, and a promissory contract. Athena maneuvered her way through the shadows in the dimly lit room, crawling under the tables, moving the papers into the moonlight popping in and out of incoming night clouds. "Bill of Sale of two superior physically and mentally fit Black female Wards from Horatio Johnson to Joseph Whittaker for..."

The moon ducked between the clouds, Master Johnson getting up out of bed, and leaving the room, inches away from Athena's quivering arms and now blistered legs. He hobbled

his way to the kitchen and helped himself to a glass of water, accompanied by three shots of whiskey, grumbled and listened to the quiet.

Athena froze her body, breath and mind. “If they hear a Nigger thinking, they can always find where you’re at,” she remembered from Hector so long ago. It was true, most particularly when Athena played hide and seek with Miss Pamela. Athena would always get caught, one way or another. She hoped, and prayed, that Master Johnson wouldn’t catch her now, for his sake and hers.

The retired Colonel returned to the study, gazed at the table, and the printed materials on it which had been moved. Athena, trying to make herself small under the tiny table, thought herself found out, closed her eyes, preparing for the worse. A series of whip like thunderbolts opened them again. Johnson had slammed all of the books on the table shut, placing them into the cabinets, then upon reconsidering it, put them in the bucket of firewood to be burned. Grumbling and agonizing again, he stumbled towards the reading chair the whiskey taking hold of his mind, and spirit and, thankfully for Athena, consciousness. He fell into the reading chair, snoring his rancid breath in every direction.

Athena rose slowly, noting the ‘youngest old man’ she ever met now very, very old. Horatio’s face had aged a year for every day she had been away from him, his ‘wisdom lines’ on his face now deep wrinkles that drew down the margins of his lips into a position that said ‘anger’, ‘sorrow’ and ‘regret’ more than on any Colored man or woman he had ever owned. His eyes stared at bottles of ‘medicinals’ which reeked of whisky. Never before had there been hard spirits in the house, or for that matter, anywhere on Horatio Johnson’s Plantation. At least without Horatio knowing about it. This time, he held one of the bottles in the only good hand he had left. “I deserve this!” he said of the hook that now replaced most of his right hand and the wooden stump which replaced one of his amputated feet. “Lord, I do deserve all of this and more. And there is nothing left to lose now,” he continued, gazing at the bottle.

“We had some wild times together,” he said to the bottle of spirits containing medicinals, according to the label anyway. He opened up the bottle, smelling it. “My father’s brand, ironically, which he invited me to drink with him. And now, I am ordered to imbibe you on doctor’s orders. Alone...Alone...Alone.” With a painful left arm, and aching chest, Johnson lifted the bottle up to his lips, about to let the demon inside re-enter his body, and life. Finding it heavy to hold, he used the hook on his right hand to support it, breaking to bottle, the glass splattering over his exposed wound-covered chest. He laughed, looking up to the sky. “Lord. You do have a sense of humor. You sadistic, absent, and underproductive son of a...” Johnson’s rant with the Lord who he always said was ‘a Creator of noble plans who is now non-existent for his creation’, who could be ‘awakened only by human beings being more human than He ever was’ felt excruciating pain running through his chest. He screamed out a cry of pain, that was so severe that it made him lose feelings of everything. He passed out into a restless, but hopefully less painful slumber as he slumped further into his chair.

Athena was horrified and shocked at it all having seen some of it directly, and others from reflections in mirrors in which she was not spotted. But something else caught her eye as she felt her brain say ‘think, don’t feel, for my sake and yours.’ She recalled what she had read on top of the table, the sheet drifting down to the floor in front of her horrified eyes. The bill of sale to ‘Injun Joe’ was set to take place tomorrow, for the price of ‘active economic and political participation in the Revolution’ and ‘the trust that these Wards will be treated with humanity, respect and mercy in accordance with their temperaments and abilities.’ Maybe Injun Joe WAS good for it, and everyone knew that more Indian support of the American Cause would be necessary if the British were to be defeated, as well as for peaceful dealings West of the Appalachians afterwards. Maybe Athena wasn’t slated for ‘education elsewhere’, and Indians weren’t treated much better than Niggers after they were disarmed.

Such was the key word, and agenda---to be armed. On the mantle above the fireplace were two pistols, a British musket worthless for anything beyond 50 yards, and two Kentucky rifles that could hit most anything at a range of a hundred, according to the stories. Athena found her hands clenching the weapons, grabbing two horns full of powder and fistfuls of shot. Above the guns was something else...Master Johnson’s sword. Athena took it into her shaking hand, and felt its power. Her eyes caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She saw what she had become, and what her friend, educator and almost lover Horatio had sunken into. She was still not as Black as the other Niggers, her nose smaller, her face far more narrow, her hair...”straight, long and still flowing, like Horatio and me likes it,” she whispered to her self. “Or liked it,” Athena continued, taking sword to head, chopping off the three foot mane that remained straight, and more or less intact, despite the hazards of wearing it loose while doing field work or around jealous women who wanted to chop it off themselves.

Be it for revenge, closure or practicality, it had to be done. Athena hardly recognized herself in the mirror with hair cropped close to the skin in the manner of what she was told her ancestors from Africa wore it. “Maybe it was time to GO to Africa”, she found herself thinking. “With any other Nigger left on this Plantation with enough brains or courage to do what they have to, and what Colonel Johnson lost his leg and arm for...Liberty.”

Master Johnson was still out cold. Athena kissed him goodbye on the cheek. “Goodbye, Horatio,” she said, sauntering out the door with the quickest of urgencies. And with that, she made her way through the rest of the house, extracting out anything that could cut flesh or blow it open.

Athena slithered down the hill to the field house with the ‘burrowed’ medicinals from the Big House, past a dozing Overseer Young, his gun laying on his lap, his back upright, his head perched above a small pillow under his chin. It was a position that looked good to Mistress Sally, giving anyone who saw him from a distance the impression that he was always on guard against thieves, robbers, renegade Injuns and Redcoats. And most particularly against upstart Coloreds who decided to leave the loving protection of their Master. The temptation to do what finally had to be done overtook Athena. Carefully,

she poured tar down Young's 'ever guarding' rifle barrel, taking care to clean up the tip of the rifle so as to not arouse suspicion, doing the same with the loaded pistols strapped to his overfed belly. They wouldn't backfire, but it wouldn't let any shot out either. Young wasn't a bad man, just an ordinary one in a bad situation, and rotten job, all he could get to feed HIS dirt poor White family, according to the gossip and facts.

Athena opened the field house door slowly, its creaking hinges sounding like thunder in her ears. Rachel was asleep, if you could call it that, shaking and sweating, muttering sounds that weren't words but meant 'I'm hurtin real bad' in any language. Athena poured the medicine across her lips. It stopped the shakes, and quieted her voice, though the words of pain were still being spoken loudly with her half-open, half-closed eyes.

As the men folk were asleep, and none of them had a boss among them that had any real power, the Racially-activated ex-house Nigger woke up Thelma first, addressing her by name five times.

"Athena?" Thelma asked of the gun-toting stranger, who blackened her face with ashes from the fire place. "That you without all that hair on yer black as coal face?"

"On the inside. Maybe for the first time in a long time," Athena spouted out, finishing the job of 'Niggering up' her White face that still had a nose and lips thinner than any of her Black Sisters, or Brothers.

"And what in Jesus' name is you doin' with all them guns, child?" Thelma 'loud whispered' through gritted teeth held closed with fear, and anger.

"We're getting out of here tonight," Athena said. "All of us. I have guns, some money, some food..."

"And somewhere to go?" Thelma asked, folding her arms in the 'explain yourself Nigger' way she scolded, and educated, everyone in the field house, even the men when they deserved it most.

"I...I...eh...We'll find someplace," Athena answered. "Anywhere beats where we're going tomorrow if we don't leave tonight."

Thelma shrugged. "So, Masser Johnson gonna sell all of us off to one of his Freedom friends."

"Two of us, tomorrow morning, the rest, probably soon. He has lots of debts to pay off." Athena replied. Athena woke everyone else up, instructing them to be quiet, giving each man, woman or child a weapon she thought they knew how to use, insuring them that she was one of them, now looking such on the outside as well. To all she gave a portion of money which she had taken from the 'discretionary cookie jar' in the kitchen, and Master Johnson's purse, replacing the missing coin with chips of coal.

Everyone seemed confused as Athena felt it, except for Thelma. “Sold to who, child?”

“Injun Joe Whittaker,” Athena answered. “With the usual assumptions that the ‘my two Wards will be respected and assigned work in accordance with their abilities and temperments’,”

The Colonel Johnson imitation was very real, arousing everyone from a confused half-sleep into full awareness of what was going on.

“We gonna attack the main house?” one of the men said as he looked at pistol in his hand, his trigger finger nearly firing it, save for Athena’s quick hands taking it away from him and giving him a kitchen knife, a dull one at that.

“We’re not going to kill anyone!” Athena said. “We’re all going to Canada.”

“That anywhere near Virginie?” a woman nearly twice Thelma’s age with a tenth of her brains, or survival instincts, answered. “I got me a child someplace in Virginie. Would like to see him ifn I can.”

“You can take him with you,” Athena assured the woman with the bashed in face, and probably skull, bought up by Master Johnson to save her from the Master who would have smashed the rest of her head. “You can go anywhere you want.”

“What about Georgia?” Toby Junior said. “I heard they got good peaches in Georgia. And it’s warm. I likes warm sun and sweet peaches.”

“Canada!” Athena insisted. “Or maybe New England. No slavery laws there.”

“And no way to earn a livin’ neither, by the way I heard some of the Northern ‘gents’ talkin about and to us,” Thelma replied, giving her ration of food and coin back to Athena. “Ifn we get there at all,” she continued, taking a pistol from a lad not yet a man, who didn’t know which end to aim and which to fire.

“Your Freedom is at stake!” Athena proclaimed.

“Only fer the two who’s bein sold to Injun Joe tomorrow, if what you heard up at the Big House was true at all,” Thelma continued.

“I saw it with my own eyes, you dumbshit Nigg---!” Athena, the recently self-sheared ‘White Nigger’ blasted out at Thelma. Athena held herself back before finishing, but by that time it was too late. Every man, woman and child gave their rations of coin, weapons and even food back to Athena. She shook, standing alone with the pile of goods she stole at risk to her own life, or worse, for the good of the people she thought she belonged to. Perhaps she didn’t belong to anyone now. Not Master Johnson, or Colonel Horatio, either. Such a condition, her mind said, was ‘freedom’. Worthless unless you could share it with someone, or help them use it for their own purposes.

God answered Athena's quickly put together prayer of what to do next not with a bang, but a whisper. "I'll go with ya," came from the back of the room. Its speaker got up from her cot, walking with childlike innocence to the woman who was keeping her alive so far. "I'll go with ya. And I think I know some Injun trails that go up to Canada, too," Rachel said. She helped herself to a piece of jerky from the supply rations, smiling with delight as her not-yet-16 year old teeth bit off the pieces slowly, singing a happy tune in the language of her own invention. Then the rock candy, which was even better than the meat.

A hush came over the room. Thelma held up her hand, quieting her congregation down. "You say you knows Injun trails that go up Canada way? All the way, child?"

Rachel nodded with the happy grin of a 5 year old girl who woke up on Christmas morning with ALL the gifts she put on her list in front of her. "Yup. Yup...Yuppie...Yup Yup Ho. Ho Yup Yup", the lyrics to her new 'song' as off key as any she sang while in the field, or while in 'St Peter's Pearly Gate brothel' in her 'sleep'.

Athena sighed a breath of relief. Though the 'Nigger of letters and numbers' had a knowledge of geography and a memory of maps that never left her head, what those lines on the paper were really like when you walked, ran, or crawled along them was something else. Maybe Rachel knew more than she thought, and was one of those 'protected' people who the Indians left alone, befriended or even helped when necessary. And as for God, He protects fools, drunks and angelic Negresses who are all heart, and no brains, just like He protected Hercules, according the stories about the War Athena could trust.

"What are the Injuns trails like?" one of the men asked.

"They wide enough ta take all of us?" another inquired.

"All the ways up to Canada?" Thelma added.

"Yup..." Rachel answered, sucking on a piece of dried peach, in a manner that got many of the men, and lads, more interested in her anatomy than geographical accounts. "The Injun trail has soft ground, all the ways up cause you dance on the clouds, flap your arms, open your eyes, imagine the stars like they's in front of your hands, and ya fly...North....to Freedom...to...."

The description led to song, in that 'language.' For the field Niggers, including Thelma, it meant 'Freedom next year, Lord, General Washington and Master Johnson willing'. For Athena, the 'words' spelt out the worst case situations for herself, and Rachel, the most probably two 'Wards' on the Bill of Sale not naming the 'who' but clear about the 'where'.

“You go, child,” Thelma said to Athena with a hug the ‘White Nigger’ remembered from her mother, so long, long ago. “And take Rachel with ya. Fore we she kills us all here with that singin’ of hers.”

Athena was given back all the goods from the house. There in front of her was a mini-arsenal, enough coin to buy several slaves for herself, and the last jars of Rachel’s special medicine.

“Mix this with what you can find on the road, best you can, like a showed ya,” Thelma continued as Athena was assisted in putting the ‘friendly gag’ around Rachel’s mouth, the one she was told made her look ‘perty as a pumpkin’. “The shakes an, sweats medicine I gots left should get ya’ll to Canada, ifn you’s careful, maybe Quaker folk up Pennsylvania way. I hears that they don’t got no Slaves. Maybe too poor to own them, but if you got the money, you make the rules...Maybe you can buy some White Slaves up Canada Way.”

Hounds barked outside the field house. Maybe they were after a badger that was stupid enough to be too far away from its hole. Or maybe they were preparing for something else. Thelma’s congregation rushed back to their cots, at her instruction. With no eyes on her, Thelma pulled off a slab of wood from behind the stove, a back door to the one-door Field House, that Athena never knew about. “Will take ya to the woods. After that---“

“---We’ll take two of the horses, take the Post Road, and work our way down along the---“

“You’ll walk, bitch!” Thelma instructed Athena and her new ‘Ward’. “The Colonel can smell his own horse a mile away. And you can’t ride like Hector can. Ya steal horses along the way, ride em as quiet as ya can, eat them ifn they break down and through the rest in the---“

A farewell hug was dangerous, but Athena had to do it. Thelma needed it as well. “You take care of yourself.”

“I’ll be back for all the rest of you, and when the time is right---“ Athena pledged.

The time was getting very wrong very quickly. The hounds stopped barking, then howled. Rachel stopped singing. She put her ear up to the sky, circling her head around and around, sniffing with her very large nostrils. “Badger, no rabbit, no female hare in heat...at...at...there...” Rachel pointed.

Athena couldn’t hear anything, sharing a raised eyebrow with Thelma. But before the two mothers could give comment, they both heard squeaks outside, and looked out the window. “Female rabbit in heat, running away from some hungry hound dogs,” Athena noted.

“Rachel’s got Hercules’ gift of smell,” Thelma smiled. “Hope the hell she’s got his luck, though looking at what she’s been through, wouldn’t be puttin no wagers on that.”

The moonlight shone on the whip marks on Rachel’s back, and the scars around her wrists. The kind of red Athena had never seen. But it didn’t matter now, the skin, or what was left of it underneath, was Black.

Once in the woods, Athena found every part of her body hurting, but sensing something else. The blisters of her feet tore open with pain, but she felt she was were flying over the ground. The night air was cold, but her heart was red hot with anticipation of freedom, and the chance to bring it to others, on HER terms. With her maps, and Rachel’s ‘smell’ they had gone at least ten miles as dawn approached. Rachel had other senses which seemed more Indian than Negro, or White. By placing her hands outwardly to the ground, and laying her belly on the dirt, she said she could hear the ‘vibratin in the dirt’. Translated into practical use, it meant that she could, and did, detect anything walking on four or two legs from half a mile away, sometimes more. Singing was part of that procedure, done quietly at “Mama Athena’s” bidding, and insistence.

Dawn, with its bright lights that illuminated everything had always been Athena’s favorite time of day. Now it was the most dangerous. Where to hide? And as what? The duo was surrounded by three plantations, patches of wood disappearing in the Northward direction. Rachel put her ears to the wind, her fingers to the clouded, and her belly to the ground. “There” she said, pointing West.

The narrow stretch of brush was barely big enough to hide a jackrabbit, but Rachel found the places where Athena could crawl through. Athena’s head of freshly cropped hair was now covered with weeds, or the prickly products they made. Protecting her arsenal and treasury was vital. Who knew how many sheriffs would have to be bribed, or shot, in order for Athena and the first ‘recruit’ in her OWN Revolution to get to safety, with the Quakers or the Canadians? Who knew what kind of alliances she would have to form with the Indians and how closely they dealt with Injun Joe Whitaker, a jilted Slave Buyer who had a reputation of always getting his runaway men, or women? And who knew that a small village of Indians was so close to the Plantations, seemingly ignored by the world?

Athena smiled She gave thanks to God for deliverance of the three huts which were mansions to forgotten Redmen who were now even less significant than Blackmen. “Your people?” Athena asked of Rachel.

“Yup, Yuppie, Ho Yup Yup, Ho...” Rachel said, then sang, affirmatively.

“Yes,” Athena replied to herself as the World civilized by the White Race with its cleared fields and houses disappeared behind them with each painful yet necessary step forward into the ever darkening and thickening forest. “Yes indeed,” she smiled to herself as Rachel signaled that it was time for her to get up, and pull the stretcher now

carrying her arsenal with treasury into open ground to the campfire. “Quite,” she said as she noted the smell from the pot atop it.

“Yes, indeed,” she heard from behind her, in a very English voice, from someone frighteningly familiar. “It is bacon, with scones, quite tasty,” Rachel said, holding one of the guns on Athena, tearing off the strips of whipmark red from her back and arms.

“I...I...don’t understand.” Athena could hardly believe her eyes, ears and thumping, betrayed, heart.

“You will,” came from inside one the tents, from a Redcoat Officer. He took out his watch. “Rachel. You are a bit tardy, but on time, all things considered.”

“I did my best, Major Thomkins,” Rachel replied in a very White English accept, taking her appropriate share of the coin stolen by Athena, letting Thomkins and his men take the weapons. There was one thing that Athena demanded back.

“Colonel Johnson’s sword?” Thomkins said. “I should think that this is quite the prize. And that I would be quite foolish to give it back to you.”

“Please,” Athena said, finding a loyalty to Horatio she never thought possible. “It was wrong of me to steal it, and it is inappropriate, Sir, for you to acquire it.”

“Ah, yes, the Nigger of Letters and Numbers,” the Major smiled, sadistically assessing Athena’s breasts, thighs, then measuring the size of her skull with a callipered rope. “Even with that long hair chopped off, you have a cranial capacity which gives you away, and reflects your intelligence. ”

“Rachel works for you, and you let her ‘find’ her way to the Colonel’s Plantation so you could spy on RETIRED Colonel Horatio Johnson, Major?” Athena continued. “And you kidnapped me so you’d draw him out...Or something else.”

“If you are any more intelligent, my dear, I will have to use this rope to wrap around someplace else,” the Major said calmly. He lowered the rope below her fear-laden eyes, then under her shaking chin, and to the neck, pulling it taut. “Hanging slowly has it’s pleasures,” he said. “Don’t you think so?” he inquired of the occupant the most heavily guarded tent.

“Oh yes,” came from its inhabitant, who emerged with glassy eyes, fresh bruises on her arms and chest and a Southern belle smile. “Yes indeed,” Miss Pamela said, fanning the wind over her breasts, one of them shown off without her even knowing it. “Who is that Nigger anyway? One of General Washington’s?”

“No!” came from the woods, the man emerging from it armed two Kentucky rifles and two pistols, announcing his arrival by firing one of them at the rope, breaking it in two. “She’s mine.”

Athena couldn't believe her eyes. The armed to the teeth Mountain man's face was hard, his eyes cold, his heart emptied. "Hector?" she said. "You let your...your hair grow out."

"Athena...You chopped yours off." He replied.

"And I'll have both of you scalped by my OWN men unless we move on, according to schedule," Major Thomkins blasted out in aristocratic 'English'. With a wave of his hand, 'Lady Pamela' was given a vial of something which she swallowed in a very unlady-like manner. As soon as the medicine took effect, the Major instructed his men to move aside.

Thompkins whipped Colonel Johnson's sword from its sheath and swiftly chopped off several feet of his uniquely recognizable red wife's hair, with ribbon and a portion of her corset attached, and something from her hand which she didn't mind losing much in her state of 'no-mind'. Rachel was given a heroine's welcome by the enlisted men, and a fresh set of clothes more befitting of her captive and demoted station.

Athena was tied from behind by a group of British soldiers, and thrown over to Hector as 'property'. "What's going on?" she asked.

"What has to get done," Hector said, eyes turned down, feeding Athena a portion of his venison jerky with his fingers. For a moment, Athena felt Hector's passion, and love, through his fingers. He did care about her, more than she ever imagined. "I'm doing here what has to get done," he repeated.

With that claim, a woman's scream came from the third hut. Emerging from it, a Redcoat holding a lock of long, blonde hair with a distinctive ribbon in it. The locks, along with some other items of attire, including a ring-bearing finger, were put on a horse along with Lady Pamela's, a plain-clothes Redcoat saluting the Major and given instructions as to the route.

"What's going on?" Athena asked.

"That haircut you gave yourself saved you a scalping here," Hector said. He looked at his watch, a fine gold piece Athena recognized as being from once-slave owner, now 'coward turncoat' Klause. "And the Major has a plan."

Athena saw part of that plan stumble out the third hut, the screamer holding onto her shorn head, and bleeding hand. "Mistress Sally?" she said. "She's innocent. She's.."

"Bait." Hector said, with a mind that seemed dedicated to nothing anymore, but a spirit that yearned to believe in something he could trust. "Horatio Johnson may not be an active Colonel no more in Washington's Army, but he knows more about General George's Army and their movements than General George does. And when he gets this

hair from the women he cares about, and a promise that the next thing to come is a hand then an arm, then a..."

"Horatio won't be a turncoat against the Rebel Army, nor for even for the safety of the women he loves, or loved anyway," Athena said.

"Benedict Arnold, so the story goes, sold out his country to make his wife's life more comfortable," Hector related. "He's with us now. Fightin for liberty that King George promises to give anyone who stays loyal to him."

"Do you realize how contradictory what you said is?" Athena challenged. "All I, or the American Army, wants is freedom. Plain and simple."

"Freedom weren't never plain or simple," Hector said.

Athena knew he was right. But before Hector could explain anything else, including how and why he had to run away from her, then turn her into one of the hostages, Major Thomkins got on his horse, raising Colonel Johnson's sword as it a charge. "Forward!" he proclaimed with a sadist laugh.

The men broke camp. Athena felt a broken heart. Hector felt nothing at all.

CHAPTER 22

Hercules found it strange, eating supper up at the big house. Even stranger that it was with retired-Colonel, ex-Master Johnson. Stranger still that Professor Horatio Murdock Johnson, III, Esquire was doing all the cooking, cleaning and serving.

“I hope you like it, Doctor,” he said to Hercules. “Ham hocks, corn bread and beans with peach and molasses sauce. Made by my own two...or...one and a ‘hook’ hands,” he continued, staring at the metal and wires on his writing hand which he said he was learning how to use again.

“Tastes fine, best I ever tasted, Sir,” Hercules replied, not saying that the Colonel was as good a cook as Athena was a productive field hand, and not saying that the Colonel probably knew it too.

As Hercules saw it, the Colonel was down below down, the kind of ‘paralyzing depression’, as Doc Quincy called it, that robbed a man of his hope, and everything else a man valued. But Jesus seemed to be pushed back on the horse when a delivery courier galloped in, throwing a package through the open window that landed in the middle of the room, then galloped away again.

“Looks important,” Hercules commented.

“Says so too,” Colonel Johnson commented regarding the writing on the white cotton bag, as he cut an extra large slice and ham and placed it on Hercules’ plate, then cut off a smaller portion for himself. “But what we’re doing now is more important,” he continued, eyes still downward, spirits even lower.

Something told Hercules that he had to take matters into his own hands. Defying the Colonel’s unspoken insistant order, and heartfelt request, Hercules got up from the table and opened the sac. In his hands were human body parts, from white humans, and women at that. The note explained the rest, what he could read of it anyway.

“Colonel, you best look at this,” he said.

“After I, no WE, finish our meal, Doctor. Please,” the once proud and defiant plantation owner begged of the man who, officially, was still his property.

Said property walked over the Colonel Johnson with the delivery package and let it fall onto his plate. “Hair and fingers,” Hercules commented. “From, accordin ta the note here, two people we both care about, or should.”

Johnson’s face went into shock when he saw, then dared to feel, the hair that had once been on his wife and daughter’s head, the lockes held together by a ribbon that contained fingers which bore the rings he gae them both. Anger fumed behind his eyes when he read the note, indicating that a breast or an eye would be delivered next, if still-patriate

Johnson didn't deliver the military information about his fellow rebels, and a tidy sum of money to insure their defeat once their whereabouts were identified.

Hercules looked at the signature of the kind of demon who would deliver such a threat, certain that it was Satan himself.

"He was a lieutenant in Charleston before he met Pamela, according to her letters," Johnson explained, anticipating Hercules' inquiry. "He was promoted to Captain in the British Army when he married her, and it seemed like everything Pamela wrote to me and her mother came from his hand, not hers," the Colonel related as he struggled to swallow the remaining cornbread in his throat that was as dry as his prospects of getting General Washington, General Greene, or any of the ordinary 'gentlemen' who now aspired to be Generals to help out, given the demands in question.

"Ain't yer fault that you didn't stop the Redcoats," Hercules said, and meant.

"Or didn't see them coming when they, or someone, put me to sleep and kidnapped my wife instead of me!!!" Johnson blasted back.

Hercules pondered the matter. "Everyone's getting better at sneakin up on everyone else these days. The War ain't about standin up tall to the enemy no more, like it was at Greenville, where when you led the charge---"

"---You continued it for me, and let me take the credit, God help me!" Johnson rammed his hook hand into the wall, nearly breaking off all the metal, putting a whole bunch of splinters in his wrist, and opening up an artery that had to be fixed, right quick.

Hercules let his 'fingers do the thinking', as instructed by his New England medical mentor, stopping the bleeding, putting the busted skin back where it was supposed to be, and even making a lot of the pain go away.

"You do good work, Doctor Johnson," the Colonel confessed.

"Been trained well, Sir," Hercules replied, trying to put the anger he felt for his 'Comrades' into making the work better, and faster. "Been trained by Doc Quincy, some by that Doc he sent me to be 'safe' with and trained by every patient I had to stitch up or try to pull out of the grave. Even if they was White and tried to shoot me cause I was a Colored doctor laying my hands on their friends, or themselves."

"The World needs healers more than fighters, Sir," Johnson said to Hercules, handing him a paper from a draw from his hopefully still private desk.

Hercules squinted at the print.

"It reads---" Johnson intervened.

“I can read now, Colonel,” Hercules replied. “Specially that word in big print, if’n the longer words in small print under it don’t contradict its meaning.”

“I am giving you your freedom, Hercules,” Johnson said.

“Lord gave me my freedom,” Hercules found himself answering. “Can’t give me somethin that is my ‘inalienable right’, Sir.”

“Still,” Johnson replied. “Before I tell you why I REALLY had you furloughed with orders to come home, and show you what Major Thomkins has to say between the lines of this ransom note.”

“Thompkins’, Colonel?” Hercules’ eyes popped out of his head.

“Yes, Thomkins. Who I...we...YOU pushed out of Greenville.”

“And who’s fightin’ a whole other kind of War now than we was fightin’ then, Colonel. Makes even the worst of Turner’s Regiment look like Quakers, or them Catholics Nuns from up Maryland way who helped us out with the wounded, or...me, fore this War started,” Hercules found coming out of his mouth.

“Please, explain,” Johnson said. He rose up from the table, hobbling to the reading desk with his good leg and the peg of polished wood on the other which could connect boot to stump, but not feet to head. He took another look at the severed fingers and blood-soaked bags of hair taken from the daughter he once loved, and the wife he trusted. With his non-writing hand, the Colonel picked up a big bottle of brandy, hundred or more years old, according to what Athena said once.

Hercules discretely helped Colonel Johnson not drop the bottle and graciously accepted a drink from it after it was poured. “Ya want it as it happened, or as the wounded and mutilated said it did,” Hercules asked.

“The Truth, as you best know it, Captain Doctor Hercules Johnson, or just Doc Hercules, if you prefer,” the Colonel said, falling into a chair like as if he had aged twenty years in the last two, sinking into his grave. “If it was up to ME, it would have been YOU who was written up as the hero of Greenville. But I had orders to tell the newspapers what the Revolution needed knowing, an I needed to know that you would be Alive to see the end of the War, and survive it, no matter who won.”

“Because?” Hercules asked, inquiring once again why now ex-Master Johnson was so overprotective of him, in a Cause he said was more important than his own life or anyone else’s.

Hercules thought of the stories he had heard from captured Loyalists which seemed to horrible to be true, but which the Rebel Officers seemed to want their men to believe. Such that “Gentleman Jimmy Thomkins”, a former actor in London and poet, was no

gentleman at all. How he used branding irons, whips, blades and anything else that could open up flesh in the most painful ways possible on rebel prisoners. How he burnt out eyes, ears, tongues and testicles in anyone who had ANY information he wanted militarily, and most particularly, personally. How he was not above using those ‘techniques’ on his own men, and how he knew how to turn the kindest minds into the most sadistic ones. How he learned to enjoy the pain of others, and because he was so good an actor, probably always was a sadist, his acting skills making him look innocent of all the cruelty around him. And how he particularly relished it when he’d put the gun in prisoners’ own hands and make them squeeze the trigger. How Captain Klause’s suicide soon after his release was another ‘example’, the injuries to his mind far greater than the castration inflicted on him by Niggers turned into killers.

“Don’t know who was the one who took off Master...eh...Captain Klause’s family jewels before he told the Major where we was at Greensville, and ‘bout your Master Plan to get the English Army out of BOTH Carolina’s for good,” Hercules said with a ‘mental anesthesia’ that served, and scared him. “Rumor was that it he was a Slave, who was promoted up the ranks. Name of Freeman, with a black horse. Hector Freeman. Couldn’t of course be OUR Hector, Hector bein a common name and all.”

”Not so common a name, Hercules,” Johnson looked straight into his emancipated Black-skinned friend’s eyes. “Special names always go to special...”

“Special what, Colonel?”

“Expectations,” Johnson smiled back, with a sort of strange pride, contemplating it all, being as truthful about the lies he had to keep as he could.

But there was one Truth that couldn’t be ignored. The Big Grandfather clock in the parlor ticked away the time, as was Major Thomkin’s pocket watch. “We have four days to meet his demands,” Johnson read the rest, keeping them to himself. “With every day we’re late, he takes a finger, leg, arm, hand or eye, ‘depending on my fancy’, according to the script...written in very poetic script. Even more elegant than I used to do.”

Hercules watched the white, rapidly becoming no-haired, Johnson slip back into that ‘down side of down’, a place no one pulled themselves out of. “What are their demands, Colonel?”

“The unthinkable,” Johnson grunted, somehow becoming ‘the Colonel’ again, but with no Army to fight back, one shaking arm to lead the charge with, and an enemy who could turn your closest friend into the worst of enemies.

CHAPTER 23

Hector watched Major Thomkins eating breakfast, from a distance from the woods overlooking the camp. The most sadistic and feared British officer in the Carolina's dined alone, reading as he ate specially-baked crumpets with tea that was most notably NOT pissed on by Yankee agitators at the Boston Tea party. In his hand, the works of Shakespeare. "Mid Summer Night's Dream" by the sounds of it, Thomkins reading every part with a voice that fit each character like a glove. A 'comedy', according to the way he read it, and Hector heard it.

But it was an all day and night Nightmare for everyone else who wasn't under Thomkins' spell, or 'benevolent protection'. Hector felt himself not immune from this either. He didn't say 'no' to a promotion from Slave with crude dagger to Corporal with well-tooled rifle after being 'sic'ed' on former Slave Owner Klause for information about the Rebel lines, and the Colonel who commanded them. He didn't say 'I'd be best servin' King George by serving with my men, Sir,' when he was pulled out of Turner's Regiment and the Colored Companies that fought the Yankee hypocrites and other slave owning 'Patriots'. Losses in this 'War of doomed and ineffective gentlemen', as Thomkins called it, were mounting, particularly as Washington found himself moving Southward, there were rumors that the French fleet loomed off the coast with their ships, and the British calling up re-enforcements from New York and Old York back on home island across the sea.

'Keep fighting till you don't remember what you are fighting for, and then you'll win' was Turner's motto for every dilemma of heart, and mind, which the fellow Black Soldiers under his command encountered. By now, one in five soldiers on both sides were Colored, many of them thinking that 'all men are created equal' referred to them. And at least five times a year the tide turned in favor of the Redcoats, then back to the Rebels, then back again.

But there was one number and name Hector couldn't forget. "Athena. I will see to it that she survives this war safe and sound, one way or the other, and that you get to find an Athena of your own someday soon," he pledged to his horse 'Nathaniel', still sound and still the source of whatever sanity Hector had left. Part of the 'arrangement' for Hector being on special assignment for Major Thomkins was that 'extra rations' would be available. Hector insisted that portions of that go to his horse, and any other four legged beast in camp. "No reason why you four legged folk should be left out of the 'profits' from this war. No, Sir, Nathaniel," he continued, feeding the apples and strawberries 'missing' from the Major's breakfast to his horse amidst the grain filling his hat to the brim. "While we try to kill each other, no reason why you horses should suffer. I admit to killin lots of Blue Coat, Yankees and Rebels, but ain't never killed or shot a horse, not intentionally anyway."

Hector found himself remembering the misfires that wounded five horses ridden by well-armed riders, most of which knew as much about riding as Hercules, his old friend, knew about reading and writing. As he remembered it at least.

He thought of the ironies of it all. Since they were children, Hector felt himself below Athena, yet in love with her. He would dream about the time when he would ride onto the Plantation on a shiny horse, wearing an gentleman' tailcoat, a fine sword and pistol under his belt, and money in his pocket. He'd buy her from Master Johnson at top dollar, and build their own house, with someone else cleaning out the horse droppings. Didn't matter who. It'd give Hector time to be educated by Athena in the ways of the World outside the Plantation, or the horse farm. He'd be HER servant, by his own free will.

Now, it was Hector on top, having been 'given' Athena as a trophy for his services as 'Black Injun scout' for Major Thomkins' personal camp and secret Mission. By all reliable accounts, Athena was being well fed and cared for by his British collaborators, who would insure that no White man could ever own a Black man once slave-owner Washington and his Army of slave-owning 'patriates' was stopped.

"Thinking of something?" a woman's voice said from behind him at his lookout station.

"Someone," Hector replied, pretending not to have been surprised by the intruder. "Sit yourself down, Rachel. I got some beef jerky and dried apples. Dry scones better than any fresh crumpets the Major down there is feeding his belly on."

"No, thanks. I've already eaten," she replied, emerging from the thick bush without so much as rustling a branch.

"You come up here to practice your Injun sneak-up-on skills, or there something on your mind?" he asked, finally turning around to her, noticing that she was dressed as prim, proper and perfect as any captured White Lady he had seen, but never violated.

"Actually, a little bit of both," she replied. "As an educated woman of Color, and breeding..."

"Hmmm..." Hector puffed out at the Colored woman's reference to the English, and 'American' word regarding producing desired offspring that was kinder in theory than practice.

"I have a deal for you." She sat down, Hector observing that he had gone to excess measures to see that her white dress and white shoes never brushed against brown dirt, or Black skin. "It's like this," she continued, shooing Hector's horse away with the arrogance of ten White Masters, twenty Mistresses of the same 'breeding'. "The Major is about to come into a lot of money, as God's own truth, I tell you this."

"From Colonel Johnson's ransom, 'Rachel'?"

"From what Colonel Johnson will have to do to get back the three women he values most in his life," Rachel replied, her hand steady as a rock, her diction perfect, not an ounce of sweat on her body.

“Three woman, ya say?” Hector asked with a Niggerly smile. “I only counts two women who---“

“---I know more about Colonel Johnson that you do, or his wife, or daughter, Sir,” she spat back with a stiff and uplifted chin. “And I know that this War is about only three things.’

“Blade, musket balls and bleedin.” The images all came back, in living, and dying, Color.

“Money, perceived loyalties and manipulated loyalties,” her reply.

“And where do your loyalties stand, ‘Rachel’?” Hector shot back, under a ‘trusting’ and empathetic smile. “Word has it that you’re more valuable to General Cornwallis and King George than the Major or even Benedict Arnold,” he continued, conducting the interrogation in ways that sometimes worked on prisoners of War, or ‘neutral’ bystanders, but most time, in his experience, didn’t.

“Really?” Rachel replied primping up her hair, helping herself in ‘Ladylike manner’ to one of Hectors’ dried apples, apparently more ‘tasty’ to the palate than he ever thought they were.

Hector gave her a handful of the apples, sandwiching them between two pieces of venison jerky. “Sweet and gamey. Good combination. Just like you.”

Rachel smiled, taken by the Colored ‘Mountain Man’s’ charm, or so it seemed to Hector. He edged himself closer to her. She didn’t move. He edged his way in again. She kept eating the jerky-fruit sandwiches, complimenting him with ‘hmmms’.

“Quickest way to a man OR woman’s heart and secrets is through the stomach”, he thought, as quietly as possible, fearing that the clairvoyant and extra-sensory-possessing Black Spy would catch on to his plan before he could figure out hers, of the Major’s. “Way I figure it, and understand it, Rachel,” he said with a smile, returned in kind. “Major Thomkins wants Colonel Johnson to hand over his money, his Patriot friends, and then his public denouncing of the Revolution to get the two women he values most in the world back.”

“Three women,” Rachel said, grabbing more jerky and two sticks of dried apple. “You seasoned this with what?”

“Cinnamon,” just a touch.

“Should ‘cure ma shakes an’ sweats” she replied in a condescending imitation of ‘Big Mama Thelma’, whose real voice Hector hadn’t heard in...lifetimes, so it seemed.

“Way I also see it, the Major’s a rich man. Taking from Colonists disloyal to the King, giving some of it to the Crown. Some of it to us. And MOST of it for himself,” Hector put forward.

“Perhaps,” Rachel replied. “But he who has the money makes the rules.”

“Got that right,” Hector said, taking a twig of wild grass from the ground, chewing on its root and gazing out at the Western horizon. Searching for the monetary number that would work, he remembered how many Colored Soldiers were being ‘rented’ by King George and General Washington, fate to be legally determined after the War was over. One in five on the battlefield, two in five in the infirmary or grave afterwards. “The Major makes a lot of rules. Lots of them. Would make him, by last count, a two hundred thousand pound ruler. Two hundred thousand STERLING, in GOLD, as I heard AND saw it..”

“Really,” Rachel sighed with bitterness. “He told me his holdings were barely fifty-thousand.”

“Colored men...Ain’t really something ya can show off in London Colored women...fine entertainment behind the scenes, but when the Major’s wife finds out---“

“---He’s married?” Rachel blasted back, fire in her eyes.

“Guess he forgot to tell ya. A REAL wife in England, and a family he loves more than anything or anyone, even his-self. Just somethin he talked about amongst the men-folk officers. Of which I am one.” Yes, Hector felt proud of himself for figuring out just what Rachel’s plan in all of this was, and stopping it. And without firing a single shot. He loosened the flap on his jacket, maneuvering the metal pinned into it so that it would pick up the brightness of the sun, blinding his adversary, and now victim. “Yup. We officers know such things about our secretly married superior officers. Officers knows things that no one else knows. Like how other officers are planning on getting their favorite women pregnant, then leaving them high and dry, and forgotten, after this war is done with. And I be a Captain, according to this insignia they put on my buckskins.”

“A Colored Captain, Boy,” Rachel shot into Hectors face, trying to maintain her composure just when her entire perception of who the Major who so successfully masqueraded as her personal emancipator and life-time meal ticket really was.

Hector let Rachel stew about the whole thing behind her shocked and fearful eyes, motioning for Nathaniel to creep up behind her and dump a pile of horse droppings close enough to her dress to make her smell the shit which her world was to become if she didn’t change sides and alliances right quick.

Meanwhile, he remembered something Colonel Johnson said about arming Coloreds in the Cause of ANYthing, particularly freedom. “They would stab the swords we give them into each other before even having a chance at beating them into plowshears,” he

recalled, but did not say. Rachel, by Hector's evolving perceptions, was in the War for some personal reasons of her own, was fighting with the best weapon at her disposal---deception. But the deceptor was deceived, tricked by another deceiver, which was now Hector.

“Maybe skin is thicker than blood,” Hector found himself thinking, considering the notion that there was the American side of the War, the British side, and the Colored side. But could he side with a woman who was dumb, or vicious, greedy or hungry enough to hand over Athena to a man she knew was as sadistic as any officer in either army? Maybe Rachel was putting the welfare of the many in front of the welfare of her few. As for who those ‘few’ were, who Hector now felt first allegiances to, the first was Athena, then the rest of the Johnson ‘family’. Big Mama Thelma who would whip his ass harder than any licking he gave to a horse, or mule. Hercules, who he hoped was still Alive, and valuing his heart more than his head. The other Niggers at the Plantation who stayed behind, waiting for ‘Freedom next year’. And last but not least, Miss Sally and Lady Pamela, women who bled as red as anyone else, and who would do a lot worse than bleed if he didn’t get them out of Thompson’s ‘protective custody’ right quick.

As for Rachel, as long as her mistrust for the Major and his countryman, could be maintained, and her want for fine dresses and vittles could be maintained, she was useful to Hector's new Revolution. Which had at its Core, the Declaration of Freedom, dedicated to the proposition that all men and women who proved themselves worthy were equal, and to be saved at any cost.

CHAPTER 24

“You said they could do WHAT!!?” a confused and outraged Hercules demanded of his former Master Horatio Johnson the Third, now the last.

“As the employment contracts for my White Overseers have been terminated and have relocated everywhere, and I’ve seen to it that everyone else has their emancipation papers, my former Colored wards can take everything they want, or need, or think they---” Johnson answered, with a dangerous kind of ‘calm’ in his voice.

Hercules pulled the 55 going on 90 ex-pioneer, ex-political visionary, and ex-Colonel away from the ‘blank’ behind his glassy eyes and forced him to look at the bedlam around them. “---They’s fighting, not thinking. And fightin’ each other,” the former field hand, now unofficial Doctor, and perhaps soldier pointed out. “Every Nigger from the field house, and even those who lived in the rooms inside the Big House is taking whatever they could grab, from the shelves, and each other. The jewels in Mistress Sally’s room. The dresses from Miss Pamela’s closet. And whatever else was ‘White’, or shiny, from what used to be Athena’s room.”

Everyone was in on the mad rush to grab their fare share of the wages they hadn’t been paid over the years, and lifetimes, of being “Wards” at the Johnson Estate, or Slaves someplace else. The wide-nosed Niggers who had the usual Christian names. The narrow nosed ones who had Greek ones. And everyone else in between. But there was one category of former Master Johnson’s that his emancipated servants did not touch.

“Books,” Johnson said with a sorrowful smile as he looked at the library shelves, untouched and unaccessed ever since Athena made her self-appointed exit. “The most valuable thing in this house, and no one steals my...”

Hercules grabbed hold of the leather bound pieces of paper, in particular the ones in Johnson’s desk, his diaries most likely, hiding them under his shirt and trousers. Johnson smiled with the kind of grin a dying man gives when his last wish is granted, or seems like it’d be kept after his passing.

“What are YOU smiling at, Colonel?” Hercules asked.

“My victory,” Johnson said, hugging Hercules with a strange kind of affection, and pride.

But to Hercules it didn’t seem like any victory at all. The Black folks he worked with, and under, his whole life was tearing themselves open fighting over ‘things’. He’d have to be called in to do medical work on a third of them at least before they would be fit to enjoy their newly granted freedom. And as to what they would do with it, Hercules knew what was ahead of them. “A man not educated in life, don’t know how to use freedom,” he admitted to Johnson.

“But a man, or woman, who is free is the only kind of soldier the New Revolution should enlist,” Johnson answered, combing his long white hair behind his ear. It seemed thinner than usual, the skin on the top now seeable even with the hair pulled over it. Noting the baldness himself in the mirror still on the wall, now cracked by a Turkish vase thrown against it in a struggle for its ownership, the usually vane and highly handsome gentleman’s gentleman shrugged. “No grass grows on busy streets, I suppose.”

Hercules looked at the Colonel’s face, not the wrinkles and frowns like everyone else was looking at. But something deeper. “New Revolution, Colonel?” he asked. “I heard and now KNOW that Revolutions is expensive, and you just gave away everything you owned.”

“An investment,” Johnson said, reaching into his brain for one last plan to make all the other plans in his life right, and all the dreams something people could say was reality. “I want to be sure that history remembers what I did here today.”

“While Miss Sally and Miss Pamela get their hands chopped off, and Miss Athena gets her---“

“---All under control, Hercules,” the Colonel said as the chaos around him continued, the mob now making their way to the library, presumably for the furnishings and china, but perhaps for what was really valuable in that sacred chamber. “All is under---”

Hercules grabbed hold of Johnson’s engraved, and loaded dueling pistol and fired a shot in the air. The mob became a quiet crowd. The Colonel smiled, as Hercules followed up the shot with a proclamation that would be heard around the world, or at least the County.

“Okay, folks. Ya’lls got what ya wanted from the Big House. How ‘bout showing the Mister Johnson here the respect he deserves fer not bein’ Masser Johnson no more. And showin’ ourselves that the all them overseers may have whipped the pride out of us at one time or another, but not our humanity.”

“What do you have in mind, ‘Captain’ Hercules?” Thelma challenged.

“Colonel Johnson’s got a plan. A golden plan,” Hercules announced, hoping that his intuition was right.

“Actually a hundred thousand pound Sterling Gold plan,” the Colonel stated. “Stolen from rich, White fat cat bastards, like me, and like those I bought you from. We will all have a good talking to with my son in law, Major Thomkins.”

“Who’ll do worse to Miss Pamela, Miss Sally AND Miss Athena than anything’s that’s been done to us,” Hercules related, pulling out the blood soaked manes of the two White ladies, along with their fingers as proof of his claim.

Hercules looked around the room, wondering who would ‘join up’ and who would take their chances with the Bounty Hunters who ignored papers of freedom in Virginia and North Carolina, and the Yankees who hired Niggers in New England as last resort, and at the lowest pay, in an economy that was already the shits.

Some left, some stayed. Big Mama Thelma found herself caught in the middle. “What happens if we don’t get Miss Sally, Miss Pamela or ‘Miss’ Athena out alive?” she asked.

“We’ll go to our Makers as heroes steada field hands or them with greedy hands,” Hercules replied. He waited to see who would be in it for the glory, or how many really DID believe the Bible stories read to them by the White folks, stories the Black folks needed most.

“When do we ride?” asked Paris, the field house carpenter who built wagons but never rode anything that pulled them.

“As soon as I...we...can get some horses wrangled up here,” the Colonel replied, with a proud and grateful smile.

Hercules didn’t smile all that much. He had seen more War and blood-tainted glory than anyone in the room, even Colonel Johnson. But one fact justified his supporting the ‘New Revolution’ and the against-all-odds assault against Major Thomkins. “Them that die on their feet meet their Creator with a smile. Them that dies on their knees, go straight to hell, or worse.” It was said by Leroy, one of the field hands ‘rented’ by the Colonel to the Revolution, the best muscles and best shot in the ‘Nigger Army’ the Colonel had raised for the Cause. But Leroy was dead now, and in all the confusion of the battle, the ‘victory’ at Greensville, Hercules never saw his face at the time of dying. Still lingering in Hercules’ mind was if Leroy really was in Heaven as a well-fed and free hero, or just buried under the ground in an unmarked grave somewhere.

CHAPTER 25

“So, his High Highness the Major wants us to do....what out here?” Rachel asked Hector as the two of them hiked further into the brush looking for where Major Thomkins had moved his camp overnight, without telling either of them. Hector looked at the map, Rachel assessing the vibrations of the landscape with her fingers and belly, laying them on the rocks and the ground underneath.

“You listen to where any Armies are, theirs or ‘ours’, or where the water’s at,” Hector answered. “While I see what the fastest way to the ocean is.”

“Where his High Highness will abandon all of us, for good. Like his High Highness just abandoned us now, probably sending us BOTH into a Patriot or Injun ambush,” Rachel speculated.

“Possibly so,” Hector said, letting Rachel’s hatred for the Major lead her to wrong thinking, the kind of thinking he could use for his own purpose, he hoped anyway.

“Or His High Highness thinks that we’ll be happy Niggers, doing his bidding, finding him the fastest route to that harbor where he has a ‘ship’. He’ll give the Captain instructions to head to England, and offer to drop us off in Africa with enough gold to buy our own country. Then as soon as he’s out of range of the British, American AND French ships, he’ll sell us BOTH to pirates, just for sport.” She gritted her teeth, playfully mocking Major Thomkins’ Shakespearian characters, and caricatures. “Maybe his High Highness will write a poem about it, a love poem, Or a comedy. A romantic comedy. Yes, that would be splendid.”

“Probably so,” Hector replied, counting the ‘High Highnesses’, and counting on Rachel still being able to see the enemy, and underground rivers flowing to the ocean, with her hands, now that she wasn’t thinking clearly with her head. “So, where we at?” he asked.

“We head....East, straight on,” she replied. “Just like the map says.”

“Any unfreindlies I should be worryin’ about?”

“Only when we get back to camp,” she replied, her hatred for everyone, except herself of course, making the wrinkles in her face deeper, the whites of her eyes brighter, her stride more like a march now than like the dance that suited her real temperament, and abilities.

Upon arrival at Thomkins’ Camp’, they saw nothing. No horses. No campfires. No men. Just the remnants of blood on the ground, and bits of clothing caked with torn off human flesh.

“I told you he abandoned us!” Rachel screamed, banging her hands , on the rocks near the hastily abandoned cooking pits. Hector thought about informing her that her hands were the most effective weapon she had, in the bedroom with adversaries who thought

her to be an ‘innocent’ beauty or attractive ally, even with the lanterns on, or as a way to see what the earth was doing ahead of her. Instead, he looked for himself at the tracks coming in from the West. Twenty-five, maybe more, Rebel Regulars, by the straightness of the tracks and quality of the boots that left them. Ten English, with horse, running East, then halting their position below the cliff wall where Hector had advised against setting up camp, the location insisted upon by the Major because it reminded him of home, and that it kept out the wind that made the nights so dreadfully damp. Then, coming in from the North, Wagons, loaded up with something heavy. No artillery behind them, but lots of soldiers, Hessians and crack British troops by the looks of the tracks which stopped.

“He abandoned me!” Rachel screamed out, again and again.

“He abandoned US,” Hector replied, realizing that Thomkins was keeping with him all of the booty from White Rebel Slave owners that he said would be returned to the Coloreds who joined up to fight for King George. And surmizing that Major Thomkins would make a very good living for himself in England with all of that stolen booty that did not have to be accounted for. Booty that Hector had stolen from White Rebel Plantation owners to give to Blacks who he had liberated from those and other places.

But there was something else going on here as well. This was a well protected Camp with was bait for Johnson and his Rebel Comrades to make an attack for freedom and the return of his wife, daughter and ‘favorite Ward’. The plan had built into it perhaps Johnson bringing along any Colonial Officer who was not fighting with Washington, or perhaps Washington himself, who was saved by Johnson during the French and Indian War more times than any history book would ever record. And once those rebels attacked the British Camp from the front, they would be decimated from the flanks.

Hector cared little at this point about who would win this final ‘battle’ of the War, but getting Athena out safely before it happened was essential. Once done, his war would be over. Everyone else could work things out for themselves.

Hector led an exhausted Rachel to her horse, her beet red angry face now drenched with tears. Grief, perhaps, as hatred and love were, according to some, two sides of the same coin.

By the time Hector reached the new Camp it was nightfall, and he thought it best to observe before announcing his arrival. The specially-picked platoon of soldiers selected to kidnap Colonel Johnson’s most prized possessions, and people, was now a Company, their numbers swelled to sixty strong, and well armed with the best Muskets available in the British AND American arsenals. Many were guarding the wagons.

Rachel extended her hand out from the bush to one of them, closed her eyes and let her fingers ‘feel the sparks’ in the object at hand. “It’s gold, or something like it.” Hector’s hawk-eye caught a ray of shine in the moon’s reflection.

“Possibly so,” he said, sneaking around to the lesser guarded, two-sentry per load wagons. They more personal measures of wealth, pearl necklaces, gold watches, diamond locket, most of them with a tinge of red on them, some of them in the pockets of the soldiers guarding the goods.

Hector then looked for the kind of wealth that was even more personal, a tent holding three silhouettes which large breasts and hairless-heads. It seemed like they were chained, on their knees, men around them sharing a bottle of homemade moonshine, drinking it in those strange glasses he remembered as ‘Brandy Snifters’ from his Nigger years at the Johnson Plantation. He could never figure out why those thin glasses never broke nor why they were always filled only on the bottom. Just like he couldn’t figure out why he was giving up a promising life in the British Military, or his own life anywhere, by trying to save two White women who used to own him along with Athena, two women who once owned him. But he had to figure out how to get the three ladies out of camp, and to someplace safe, ‘home’ if that was where they wanted to go, ‘someplace else’ if they needed to redefine themselves.

It was Rachel’s hands, and reputation, that made Hector think of the next step. With the moon sneaking behind the clouds, she could slither her way into Camp, be felt more than seen by the men guarding the women, and create the kind of diversion that would defeat any Company of crack troops.

“Diamonds in that tent over yonder,” Hector said, pointing to the hostage tent. “I smell them. And saw them.”

“Diamonds are worth more than gold,” she said, twirling her hair, as long, shiny and ‘Injun straight’ as Athena’s ever was, then assessing parts of her body underneath her corset. “And you, Captain Hector Freeman, can carry them anywhere on you. Hide what you have to for a rainy day in those special places.”

“Hmm... No wagon needed to cart diamonds from one place to another. No boat needed to bring them across the ocean, barely half a day’s march to the East, with ships that can go to Masser Johnson’s grandpa’s home in England or mine in Africa,” Hector noted, seeing Thomkins walking out of his tent in gentleman’s civilian attire topped off with a clergyman’s collar, handing his uniform over to his second in command. “Yeah. Major Thomkins passes himself off as a preacher-merchant, gets on any ship he needs to, and heads off the England with enough to make himself a king there.”

“And his wife a queen, unless he gets a better look at what he’s missing here!” Rachel growled, stripped down to just enough wardrobe to make her look alluring, but not cheap, appending her new outfit with Hectors buckskin coat, and anything else ‘Mountain Man’ on his person or saddlebag. She rubbed red clay onto her face, neck, legs and EVERYwhere in between. Put her hair in braids faster than you could say Injun Joe’s favorite saying, ‘Chief with most Wampum make law for all Injuns’ to make her look ‘Injun-Black’, the kind of dark meat Redcoats liked best. “Let’s go,” she commanded.

Hector ‘followed’ behind, watching Rachel’s back as she entered camp as an Indian princess from the hills, one of those ‘traveling trophies’ the Chiefs would give to the British Officers who pledged that no White man would ever cross West of the Appalachians as long as King George ruled the Colonies. Rachel put the act on masterfully, catching the romantically-oriented eye of everyone in camp, the ‘business-minded’ men ignoring her.

With all the weaponry he had on him, Hector could maybe shoot five redcoats and slash the throats of as many more if sneaking came to fighting, but ‘quiet’ was the name of this new war. Mobile was another one. He sniffed the air, the scent of the hair and excrement of his favorite creature very close. In that special ‘horse language’ he learned with the wildies on the Johnson estate, every other steed ever since, and of course Nathaniel, he ‘shhhd’ the horses into being quiet while he cut their lead lines, saddle girths and hobbles. “Don’t move till I tell ya to,” he ‘instructed’ them as the Corporal on hand watched Rachel saunter across the camp. One of the stallions did, too. “Ho there, son,” he said to the horse. “That bitch is a beauty, I’ll grant ya, but she ain’t into nothing outside of her own breed.”

Hector picked three horses he thought the most quiet, and the least missed, and moved them quietly to where Nathaniel and Rachel’s saddle horse were tied to a tree, oats and molasses poured over the grass them interested in eating instead of running or expressing themselves to the mares in heat at the other end of camp.

By the time Hector made his way to the back door of the ‘Ladies’ tent, Rachel was already inside. “So, which man first?” she said in pidgin English with a Cherokee accent that was impeccably accurate. “Me hear Redcoat men best White men.”

“You heard right, Miss,” Redcoat number one said, a man who Hector recognized as one of Major Thomkin’s regulars, who had spoken to Rachel many times before. He and two other men were given the honor of guarding the ‘Ladies’ tent. “What tribe would you be from? You look like you travel long distance,” he said.

Through a peep hole in the now closed wagon, Hector saw the anger fuming in Rachel’s eyes, as Redcoat number one, a cordial chap all things considered, didn’t even recognize her. But her smile was still on. She took off her blouse then loosened her braids so her hair would cover her breasts in rhythm with a seductive Native song. None of the Redcoats looked at her face. They abandoned their weapons, clothes then dignity. “Me first!” was all they said, pulling Rachel into the a covered wagon. Rachel allowed them to all have their way with her at once, each taking an arm or a leg, commanding, groaning, then begging ‘Me first’, the prize in the middle ‘offered to’ all the ‘me first’, each in turn, each ‘me first’ put as last just when he thought he had his other competitors beat. Each of them slipped off their tunics, Rachel discretely pushing them outside.

Donning the tunic for Redcoat number one, Hector entered the ‘Ladies’ tent where he surmised Athena and the two Johnson women were. Athena lay on a cot, recognizable only by her eyes, tied down by her wrists, her back containing fresh lash marks but her

dress intact. Hector slit the restrains with his knife, then pulled off the gag over her mouth. "I'm getting ya out of here," he whispered to Athena, hearing Rachel's 'cookoo' sound from the nearby wagon, the signal that there was no more than ten seconds left to make a getaway. "Both of us gotta go now!" he whispered.

"All of us gotta go now," Athena insisted, referring Hectors attention to Mastress Sally and her daughter, 'Miss Pamela', in the cots next to hers.

Mastress Sally looked scared, which a good thing, Hector thought. At least she hadn't been violated...yet. Maybe because her daughter was more attractive to the eye and the feel. Miss Pamela was lost in a world of her own, a world of shame, hurt, pain and shakes. Just out of range of her grasp was one of those small bottles of medicine Hector saw the Major give Pamela to 'calm her down' at their first meeting, and in their mobile Camp when she was 'a good girl'.

Hector threw one of the British tunics over Athena's lashed but still defiant back, then threw the other two the Johnson women. Hopefully they fit, and thankfully the hiding of the hair issue wasn't an issue, the cropped heads of the women making them look more like men. After being ungagged, Mastress Sally started to pray, in the Catholic way. Hector told her to be quiet. She obeyed, maybe the first time the Mastress was commanded by a Nigger.

Athena opened a medicine bottle and moved over to Pamela, thinking that it would be best to give her some 'traveling potions' before undoing her gag. "A little bit," Athena whispered with her mouth, all of fingers still intact. Something that couldn't be said about the other ladies.

Meanwhile, the 'me firsts' kicking Rachel's feet and armpits were moving closer to the prize, the breasts and 'hole of delight' in the middle. Pamela seemed calmed down now, travelable at least.

Sally seemed paralyzed by the fear, unwilling to move. Athena slapped her back into reality, kissed her on the cheek, then helped her put the Redcoat uniform on her shaking body.

After a few well-satisfied moans of satisfaction and a 'me be back later, Palefaces close eyes for bigger surprise and stay here' from the wagon next door, Rachel snuck into the tent with weapons and a staisfied smile. Hector directed her to help Sally get into the her Redcoat uniform, but she gave him the 'show me why I should' stare first.

Athena pulled out a box, opened it, and showed her jewels which had belonged to the Johnson women, and other ladies of high society. Rachel grabbed a fistful of them with her left hand, then handed over the weapons in her right to Hector, instructing Hector to turn around while she undressed Lady Pamela, then re-dressed her as 'Corporal McDermott'.

All was according to plan. Hector looked outside, and wiggled his right ear in Rachel's direction. "Injun woman want ask two questions of brave soldiers."

The 'me firsts', now stripped naked at the command of the Injun woman who wanted to, and did, 'inspect' them, clambered to be the first to be questioned.

Hector smirked, noting a long knife in the tent which could be of enormous use. It looked like it could have been Colonel Johnson's sword, still in good condition. Sally hugged her still drug-altered daughter, Pamela still not knowing who she was but at least saying Sally 'looked familiar'. Athena insured that the spoken words were whispered, very quietly, instructing all of them to put on the rest of the male military attire.

The former bearers of those uniforms laid their heads under the breasts of 'Big Mama Injun' when she returned to the wagon, waiting to be asked the question at hand. "Do you love the King?" the first question from Injun Princess Rachel.

"Yes, Mum," came from all the 'me firsts'.

"Do you love your wives?" the next question.

Delivered to Rachel's ear, loud enough for Hector to hear... "She left me heap long time ago", "She about to leave me" and two "I'm not married," one that was probably sincere, the other which wasn't.

"And Major. His Highness Major Thomkins. He love wife?" Rachel's final question, throwing a 'hold on, I have to know this for myself' stare at Hector just as he was most vulnerable, and scared. And at a time when he couldn't show it to anyone.

"Yes Mum", "He writes to her every day", "Misses her a lot," and a "Heap big love between---"

Before the fourth testimonial was delivered, the givers of such were holding their cut throats, the bloody knife that did the job in Rachel's hand.

"Told ya," Hector said, saving the fact that the Major's marital status was wishful speculation on his part for some other time, and place. "Let's go," he said.

The three soldiers' corpses were put in the ladies' dresses, then in restrains atop the cots. Meanwhile, Hector, three British soldiers and an Injun Princess made their way to the horses. Hector matched rider to horse as best as he could, giving them each instructions as to where they would ride together, and where they had to ride if they were split up. "Moon at your front if we're together, moon to your left if we get split up. Meet at the crossing of the creeks," he spouted out, more a Commander than ever before, but more scared than he'd been his entire life.

Hector took up Colonel Johnson's sword, which Athena said she stole for 'protection and good luck' and pointed his 'Army' forward, five strides at a walk, five at a trot and five at a gallop that ended with a single cannonball shot in front of them all.

Hector's brains in his fingers allowed him to hold onto his own horse and make it to a safe vantage point, but as for the precious cargo in his charge, they all fell off their horses, the animals leaving them on the ground. Soldiers were approaching. Too many to fight against. Thirty, maybe forty.

Hector watched helplessly from the bush as Major Thomkins looked at his three hostages. They said nothing, and were taken away, the men ordered to 'be as kind as you can but as vicious as you must'. As for the fourth, Rachel bowed to the Major, begging him for something. He smiled, laughed, put his hand on his thigh, then whipped out his sword, slashing Rachel across the face.

"I take the other eye out if you don't tell me where Hector is, and where he is going," he proclaimed. "Seeing that you have been useful to the Crown in the past, I will give you till the count of ten, rather than five....One, two..."

Logic said that one man against 30 was an impossible fight. But Hector's manhood and honor wouldn't allow reason to interfere with what he had to do. The Major's count reached five, then six. Rachel's one good eye met Hector's, as he was about to show himself, preparing to throw down his weapon.

Rachel shook her head 'no', breathed in, then let out a wad of spit into the Major's face. He answered with a slash across the other side of the face, taking out the other eye. Rachel screamed the most painful of emotions from her mouth, loudly. "That should be sufficient bait for our other Black Fish," Major Thomkins instructed guards to tie her to a tree. He stripped her naked, then instructed his men to put a horse manure into her hair. "Which reminds me, I am feeling a bit puckish. I think I'd like chicken tonight...."

Hector rode into the Major's view, slowly and calmly.

"Yes," Major Thomkins replied. "Dark meat, I suppose. You know that roast Nigger does taste like---"

Before the Major could finish with 'chicken', Hector fired three shots in his direction. Both hit their mark, one into the head of the woman who never told him what she was really thinking, another into the heart that only now he realized she had. As for the third shot, aimed at the Major's swelled and demonic head, it never left the barrel of the pistol due to an accidental jam in the flintlock.

"After him!" the Major commanded.

The chance of Hector's pistol jamming was, as calculated by experience, one in thirty. The chance of him getting away from a Redcoat Army on his ass one in a hundred. But

with Nathaniel under the saddle, three women who were now his closest family dependent on him making a getaway, and a corrupt British Major who would get so many other people's families killed, there was no choice but to succeed, no matter what the odds.

As day four of the 'demands time' passed by, even Hercules could figure out where Major Thomkins was at, sort of. All he had to do was listen to the stories coming into the Johnson Plantation from its new Black-skinned co-owners who went out to trade in their 'severance pay' from Slavery for information about the British Major who was hiding from his commanders and the fighting in Greenville, and by all accounts, several other British 'setbacks' afterwards. Wherever there was a robbed mansion, hung man, raped woman or kidnapped child, there had been Major Thomkins, even if the family were Loyalists who, for whatever reason, couldn't pay the King's new "War for Security" tax in currency determined by His Highness's representative.

As Thomkins was more findable, he also become less defeatable, by all accounts. Not unless General Washington and Mister Lafayette could their asses and Armies to the Carolinas, and right quick.

Mister Johnson limped out of the house, and walked over to the stable. "Impressive bunch of horses you've gathered here," he said to Hercules.

"Wish I could say the same 'bout the people who's gonna be riding them," Hercules related as the fourth ex-Slave got bucked off his horse again, after carrying a loaded weapon under his belt, against explicit orders and common sense. This time, Paris only shot a hole in his oversized shoes, missing the painful part of the foot, and any other valuables he had below the belt line. "You really think we can whip Major Thomkins with this mob, Colonel Johnson?"

"It's Mister Johnson now," Colonel Johnson sighed. "By the order from General Greene. And when General Washington and the Virginia Legislature finds out that I've armed slaves without first making them official soldiers in his Army"

"You've armed free men, and women," Hercules stated, showing off the 'Company' of twenty Freedom Fighters, that number being half of those that Johnson had freed from his servitude that had decided to serve their own futures someplace else, some going West, some North and some even further South. "And you ain't caused no Slave revolts to happen on any of your associates' Plantations," Hercules continued, showing off the new 'a' word he taught himself from one of the books he saved from being stolen in the Colonel's library. "No, Sir. You didn't free no Niggers other than your own. Didn't start no uprising that would scare other White folks into puttin us down, or you at the end of a rope."

“On the contrary, Mister Hercules Jackson, Smith or whatever other name you’ve chosen for yourself,” Colonel Johnson pushed out of a chin with two new worry wrinkles on it. “After we get our ladies back, the other valuables Major Thomkins stole, and redistribute that wealth according to who really earned it...”

Hercules contemplated the matter, and the consequences. Horatio Johnson leading a Slave revolt in the middle of Revolution, defining his OWN ‘side’? Such revolts would threaten British and Patriot interests, and ways of life for everyone. Even if the Army of newly liberated men, women and children did succeed in their military objectives, and even if they delivered Thomkin’s head to General Washington’s dining room table, there would be consequences to pay. And whoever was running the printing presses after the War was over would certainly not take account of the accomplishment for History, that Master Horatio Johnson served most of all. There was one demand that Hercules did make of his former Master, and now Comrade. “I’d like to be known to whoever wants to know me as Hercules Johnson. That acceptable with you, Colonel?”

The Colonel smiled. “Acceptable, Sir,” he said with his mouth. With his eyes he seemed to say ‘appropriate’. With his heart, something else he was still hiding.

The specialness of the moment was broken by the arrival of a rider from the brush, passing by the sentry’s Hercules had set up along the perimeter. He was well armed, carried himself with a stature greater than any Colonel or General, and looked painfully familiar.

Hercules pulled out his pistol, the double barrel which had served him as a stretcher bearer, surgeon and, he had hoped, Commander. “Hold it right there, Hector!” he screamed out at the ghost in front of his terrified eyes.

“Hector Freeman now,” Hector replied, putting down his weapons, getting off his horse, slowly. “Used to be Captain Freeman, but now, I guess I been promoted... to a ‘Mister’.”

“Makes three of us,” Colonel Johnson said, welcoming Hector back with a hug, the kind he had never given anyone. The weeping kind that had sorrow and strength to it.

Hector and Hercules looked at each other, confusion taking over their distrust.

“Eh... ‘Mister Johnson’,” Hector said to his former Master. “I got something for you.”

Hercules walked up to his former ‘older brother’, holding a pistol at his head, just in case, while trying to figure out just what was behind his eyes. Hector kept his distance, pointing Hercules to the long, carefully-wrapped object he was about to pull out. Hercules carefully unfolded the blood-stained cloth, shocked at what was underneath it.

“Your sword, Mister Johnson,” Hercules said, admiring its artistry, recalling the painful, and glorious memories it held, most particularly at Greensville. Where its first holder, the Colonel started up the charge against Major Thomkins, and Hercules, true to his heroic name, valiantly carried out and finished the job in the Colonel’s name, making everyone behind him think that he was the Colonel. “It be yours again, Colonel,” Hercules said, offering it to its primary and rightful owner.

Johnson shook his head ‘no’, terrified of holding that sword again, but Hercules insisted, taking Johnson’s good arm and placing it inside it, holding Johnson’s fingers tight until the ex-Colonel’s grip on it was his own.

“And I have something else ya’ll might be interested in,” Hector continued, unrolling what was in his saddle roll. He gave the papers to now re-enlisted Colonel Johnson for his read. “Plans involving lots of people not a lot of people know about who are more powerful than General Washington or King George. I discovered them after I stole some of his other papers when a good friend of mine was tryin’ to rescue your wife, daughter and...Athena. Accordin’ to what he wrote down here, Major Thomkins thinks that this plan would end the War, on his terms.”

“And ours is to keep it going,” Hercules said, looking over the maps bearing Major Thomkin’s seal and signature.

“And redefine its objectives,” the ailing Horatio Johnson said with sword in hand, between coughs and death-rattle breaths, elevated to his rank and station for one more battle, which history would never record, but which that ultimate authority demanded.

CHAPTER 26

Fighting battles in War was easy. Getting to them with your Army fed, clothed, free of body-killing diseases, mind-paralyzing fears, or mass desertions was the hard part. The British and American Generals knew this all too well. The Black Army still officially under Hercules' Command found this out soon after leaving the Plantation on which most of them spent their entire lives. They found it strange that one Commander gave the orders, but there were 'discussions' with Hector and 'Mister' Johnson first, Hector usually doing most of the yelling with a few words, Johnson doing most of the soft talking with too many words. One decision that the Old Master had suggested was that everyone take with them whatever they could from the Plantation.

Asking 'why' of an order was something new, but the answer given didn't seem all that strange. "If the English Army or the American Rebs burn down the Plantation, we gots ta have somethin' to build a new one," Hercules explained from atop of the horse that seemed as confused at his commands as much of his Army did.

It was a good horse, more kind than agile, the sort of animal who would voluntarily take care of a child who didn't know much about riding. Picked out by Hector, still on Nathaniel, who everyone else kept insisting on calling "Ebony" because of his Color. "He may be Black on the outside, but who knows if he's Black on the Inside. He deserves a name that fits him on the Inside."

"So why Nathaniel, Mister Freeman?" Colonel Johnson replied, noting how well Hector placed the right animal, weapon and chain of 'responsibility' with those who had deprived of all these things for their entire lives, relatively speaking.

"Don't know, Mister Johnson," Hector replied, giving the horse a congratulatory pat on the neck for being who he was as well as all he had done. "Sounds dignified, cultured in the ways that matter. A name to grow into, or up to."

"Indeed, Hector," Johnson smiled, holding back the real reason for his pride, and sense of accomplishment.

"Ho!" came from the front of the 'column' that was arranged in an 'Indian style' sort of circle, so as to keep the troops seeing where everyone was, but not in a straight line so that anyone else could. The horse seemed to want to go rather than stop.

"Colonel Hercules Johnson having trouble with his horse again?" 'Mister' Johnson said from his position along the back right side of the 'column', with the voice, and mind, of a Colonel.

"No," Hector replied from his scouting position on the left flank ignoring, for the moment, that Hercules didn't have the courage, or permission to acquire his own Sir name. He sniffed the air, his eyes sensing something in the woods ahead that didn't quite look right. "I better get back up there."

Hector galloped his horse to the edge of the ridge upon which Hercules finally was able to halt the column. “Good instincts, stopping the column here, Doc.”

“The mare’s idea as much as mine,” Hercules confessed. After settling the horse down he settled his eye into the spy-glass. After assessing what was there, he gave it to Hector for his ‘look see’.

Hector winced. Hercules nervously tapped his foot. Colonel Johnson rode up quietly, dismounted and took a look for himself.

“Thomkins’ private army, hand picked or stolen from the best Army in the world. Fifty Redcoats at least,” Hector said. “Seventy five most probably. With three well guarded prison transport wagons.”

“Well armed by the way they be carryin’ their weapons,” Hercules said. “Not afraid to use them by the coldness in their eyes.”

“So, what do we do?” Colonel Johnson asked the pair, collectively, and not in the special ‘teacherly way’ he normally asked questions of Hercules, Hector and Athena.

Hercules and Hector looked at each other, their eyes communicating the risks, options and agendas. “What would YOU do, Colonel?” Hercules found himself asking.

“I have a suggestion. For it, we’d need someone to fetch an item from my box of personal affects.” He licked his lips in that way he did when he was thinking on something that was hard, new and necessary.

“Free Soldiers don’t ‘fetch’, Colonel,” Hector blasted at him.

“Bad choice of words, gentleman,” Johnson said with the coolness of a ‘think before you act or look dumb’ Southern gentleman. “It’s just that with this hook-handed ‘arm’ of mine, the still diminished strength and stability in my remaining limb, and the haste of packing, the box got nailed shut, and tightly at that.”

“Nailed shut, Colonel?” Hercules inquired, wondering why they were so securely ‘secured’, and why now he trusted someone else to ‘fetch’ it, and open it. “What do you want my Soldiers to ‘fetch’ for you from it.?”

“My youth. I think it still fits me. It’s on the bottom, put in that location....just in case.”

Hector didn’t trust what was going on, and Hercules was scared at the hesitation from the Colonel just before ‘just in case’. Their former Master had a plan in mind, which he wasn’t sharing with anyone. His usual way of doing the business of peace, war and political dealings of all kinds in between. Still, when in the operating room, you give the scalpel to the best surgeon not the most deserving one, and if there was one thing that

former Master Johnson had was far more combat experience fighting White Folks than he did, and perhaps Hector. Using the power invested in him the the mutual arrangement between the three commanders, Hercules gave permission to the Colonel to implement his 'suggestion', assigning Paris, Ulysses and Big Mama Thelma to assist him in the endeavor.

Hector and Hercules assessed the options. Each, with their OWN eyes, looked at the twenty eager and hopefully honorable Colored Soldiers, half of which were women and children. They pondered how many of the well-armed, hard-Souled 75 British or Hessian troops each of their own Colored Comrades would have to inactivate or distract. And what would happen to the now-liberated Black Army enlistees if they were caught attacking, or retreating.

"Good work finding their Camp," Hercules said to Hector regarding the route he suggested for the Black Army to take. "But tell me the truth. You really did it by listening to the ground with your fingers and ears? Or maybe you knows more about Major Thomkins than you're tellin' us, or ya told that Injun sqwaw who helped ya get away?"

Hector didn't say anything. All Hercules could gather from his Silence is that there was hatred, guilt and maybe even love for the woman who helped him in the first attempt to liberate the Johnson women and Athena. "It's a battle we can't retreat from now," Hector finally said, pointing to the figures behind the trees which weren't venison, and very Green in presentation. "They're on our flanks already. Hessian mercenaries who was game wardens back in Germany, who signed up for this fight only for the money, and now get paid bonuses for each kill from Major Thomkins hisself. If we retreat, or even TRY to sneak away, they'll be on our asses." Hector held back his fear as best as he could. "I heard that getting shot in the ass or the back is a whole lot more painful than getting hit in the front."

"Especially when they drag your shot-filled ass back to Camp," Hercules replied.

Hector knew more than anyone else in the 'Army' he was leading what the consequences of getting captured were. He knew that there was no turning back, the 'prize' of a bunch of runaway Niggers, bearing gifts and even KNOWING himself or Colonel Johnson, would be too much for Thomkins to pass up. He'd have everyone in the Company skinned, carved open and served up in stew, while the rest of the body was still breathing for the next meal. Such were the stories, anyway, and Hector did note that the venison stew was tasting more like chicken every night, that flavor belonging to human flesh, according to stories he heard. But one thing about Thomkins was that he was a practical man, a 'manly man' and knew that his own bodily needs required being taken care of.

"I heard you're a better Doctor than General Washington's a General," Hector said to Hercules in a brotherly tone.

“That’s like sayin’ I’s a better dancer than a peg-legged pirate with deaf ears and a hook arm that can’t hold a partner anyways ‘cept...” Hercules replied, thinking that he just described the Colonel, a man who he had to trust now, more than ever. “Sorry, Hector. What was you meaning about my doctoring skills?”

“I know you can stitch up whoever survives today, but I also know that Major Thomkins wants, and needs a personal physician for himself. The British bleed as red as the Americans do, and if they see what you can do to save their wounded, they’ll make you an offer---“

“---No offer that I’d accept. Not now!” Hercules shot back, with an anger Hector hadn’t ever seen in him. The kind of anger that clouded a man’s thinking, and perspective.

“Fair enough,” Hector said. “You surrendering to them isn’t an option. But there is one question I gotta ask, you Doctor-Colonel.”

“Ask it!” Hercules blasted back.

“You saved lots of lives,” Hector said gently, his heart and head open, working with each other for the first time in a long time. “But have you ever killed a man, intentionally that is.”

“Lots of times,” Hercules said, recalling the ‘send them to the Lord’ orders given to him by Doc Quincy, or the patients themselves who were beyond medical help.

“I mean when they were standing UP! And trying to kill you!” Hector pressed.

Hercules remained silent.

“Thought so,” Hector said. He looked down below at the Army under his Command. Twenty Souls dedicated to saving three hostages, maybe more, armed with enthusiasm, justice and the willingness to lay down their lives to do the Right thing, for themselves and their children. Hector and Colonel Johnson were the only seasoned killers, Hector finally realized as he gazed over the most dedicated Black Army of unexperienced soldiers who were willing to die for a Cause, but perhaps unable to kill for it. How many of them had, when on other plantations, volunteered to take the overseer’s whipping in place of another, but never took that whip in hand en masse and killed the overseer? These were Christian Niggers, after all, trained to obey the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’, trusting that Jesus would take care of the rest. “Better for their Souls in Heaven that way,” Hector thought to himself. “Horrible for us on Earth.”

CHAPTER 27

What and whoever was in the prison wagons were not visible from the outside, but it went both ways. As the windowless carts were moved along the road from someplace to someplace else, it created a rocking motion inside which, on a smooth road anyway, had a calming effect on its inhabitants. One allowed those stuck in the uncertain present think about better past.

“You have good ears, “ Athena recalled from the good times with Master Johnson, those times when he insisted on being called ‘Horatio’. “That means I’m a good listener?” Athena would say in those private conversations in the kitchen that always centered around books, adventures of the mind, and liberation of the Spirit, the ‘ultimate and final Revolution’ according to the slave holding Renaissance Man of Enlightenment who Athena yearned to take to bed, a mutual desire upon which he never acted. “You understand my mind, which is the most important part of me,” he said on more than one occasion, particularly after those long small-talk socials in the Parlor attended to by gracious daughter Pamela and loving wife Sally.

There weren’t any books left to read now for Athena, except the ‘hell and damnation’ pages torn out of the Bible, left in front of her and her fellow prisoners, Sally and Pamela. All were kept under strict guard now, chained to their posts, their bellies hungry, their bottoms soaked in their own excrement. “Was like this for my ancestors, so I was told,” Athena related to Sally and Pamela.

“Mine too,” Miss Sally said. “Brought over as cargo from Ireland to work the land for English landlords. Told that if they worked five years on the landlord’s terms, they’d pay their debt to society for crimes against the king. Crimes like stealing bread from overfed English Army soldiers to feed your starving children. But indentured servitude in the New World, as they called it, had its advantages. If you survived it...you could stand up against Mother Nature, the hardest Master of them all, on your own.”

“Your Grandfather Shamus,” Athena said.

“I never told you his name,” Sally said. “To the best of my recollection at least,” she slurred out of a mouth miraculously still bearing all of its teeth but with swollen lips as big as any Negro’s.

“I must have heard it someplace,” Athena said, looking towards Miss Pamela.

“You didn’t hear about my Grandpa Shamus from her,” Sally said of the daughter who for a minute or so every hour now recognized her, but on most occasions didn’t even know who she was herself. Pamela’s mind was still possessed by something Major Thomkins, her loving husband according to Colonial legal standards, did, or gave her.

But there was one state of mind the Major and his minions of medical sadism couldn’t control. “I had a dream last night,” Sally said. “In it, I had all my fingers, actually an

extra one on each hand to boot, and could run them through a full head of long, thick hair,” she smiled as she ran her 9 and a half digits over the shorn inch-long mat which was atop her aching head. “Everyone in the County came over for Apple Crisp, and the kitchen was out of cinnamon. Course, can’t make Apple Crisp without cinnamon, so I got on a horse, rode over to the Jones’, where there was a gentleman quite a bit younger than Horatio, and whole lot more to look at, though, for the moment, looking was all we did. He who only had two sticks of cinnamon, one in his hand, the other in his trousers. Took the one in his hand, rode back home, taking a short cut over a white cloud, and landed in front of the kitchen door with that one cinnamon stick in my left hand, and the others in my right...those two extra fingers turning into...cinnamon sticks....which I...” Sally stopped, the play inside her head ended in the middle of the first act by the sight of her right hand, one finger chopped off, another crushed and hurting so bad that she wished it was.

Athena held her hand out to Sally’s, hoping that it would keep her from going into the terrors, the shakes and the ‘numb’ that would keep her Soul captive, even if the chains on her body were cut loose. “We have to remain strong,” Athena said to Sally as she started to see her real situation without any pain killers or drugs that could transport her to a dream world between her ears. “We will get out of here.”

“In a box, and soon, Good Lord willing,” British-assimilated-Protestant Sally replied, crossing herself like an Irish Catholic.

“Or maybe a...” Athena said, holding back her next image of optimism as something came to her ear.

“You hear something?” Sally whispered.

“Think so. I’m told I was a good listener,” the House Nigger of Letters and Numbers and, as revealed to no one at the House, very sensitive ears, said with hope. The wagon stopped. Inside Athena’s head emerged another agenda. “If I can hear a rescuer, he or she is probably dumb enough to get seen by the Major, and...”

One of the guards opened the back door and pointed his musket at Athena’s vagina, demanding to know what she heard. “Just talking to my imaginary friends,” she smirked. With the barrel pointed at her head, she took the threat more seriously, adopting her speech to being a servant befitting her skin color rather than intellect. “Don’t worry none. Them imaginary friends never helped me in the past, and ain’t gonna help me now neither,” her answer. She looked downward, allowing hopelessness to overtake her. Or so she hoped would be believed.

It was enough to keep the guard satisfied, and get the wagon moving again. Then it stopped, leaving nothing outside except silence, broken only by the sound of muskets being loaded, and men marching to static positions. Then, a drum roll.

“They are going to shoot us,” Sally said. “Thank you Lord! They are going to shoot us!” she continued, taking hold of Pamela and hugging her, assuring her that all would be ended very, very soon.

Athena considered the option as well, imagining herself dead by someone else’s hand. It beat being done in by your own, maybe. From a small slit inside the wagon, she could see four other prison wagons which she recalled had other prisoners in them. A mixture of Black and White ones who were probably pondering the same thing.

CHAPTER 28

“Everything you’ll have to learn, you’ll learn right in the first five seconds after the shootin starts.” “You’re braver and smarter than you think you are.” “When the action starts, just keep movin’ an’ you’ll be fine.” “We’re not doing this for ourselves but for our children, and other Colored Folks’ children and even Red, White and Yellow children, in the end.” “Liberating the women and children who are in those prison wagons down below is God’s Holy Work, and you will be rewarded in Heaven if you have to depart from Earth in the next hour.”

Hector adjusted each of the mottos and realities for every one of the 20 Colored ‘volunteers’ under his Command, as he ‘crawl-ran’ amongst them within the bush that was tall enough to hide people, and when window-dressed with leaves and vines, the horses and carts.

Holding the Colonel’s sword, the symbol of Command, at Horatio’s insistence, Hercules looked down the hill at the British Camp, then at the two ‘roads’ on both sides of him behind the woods. Each brought in more wagonloads, all closed, all guarded real close by serious-minded Redcoats alongside of them. “They wouldn’t have books, surgical instruments or medicinals in there, would they, Colonel?” Hercules asked his former Guardian.

“Hardly, Doctor Johnson,” Horatio Johnson answered back, enlisted in a different army entirely now according to his dress and demeanor. “I’ll have that sword now,” he said in a crisp tongue, the sharp tongue saying all the letter overly clear and distinct like.

“Yessar, Masser Major,” Hercules said. “Never thought I’d be handed over this fine sword of the American Revolution to a Redcoat.”

Colonel Johnson looked more soldierly in his old British uniform from the French and Indian War than any provided by the American Army, or his wife Sally while he was in its active service. He tied the sword to his sash, primped up the epilates on his shoulders and loosened up the chest, his back arched like a young rooster ready to have his way with any hen or fox, ‘stead of a one armed, one legged cripple with aches, pains and shakes everywhere, none of which Hercules could really do very much anything about, even with the right medicinals. “You know, this uniform is British Militia, not regular British Army, and even after I beat the French in places the regular Army couldn’t even find them in back in ‘63, a Sergeant off the boat from London or even Glasgow was in front of me for every promotion,” Johnson said with a wheezing in his throat that sounded more like a death rattle.

“And you be wearin’ that British uniform now ‘cause General Greene had General Washington retire ya from the Colonial Army?” Hercules mused, in comfortable Carolinese.

“Not quite,” Johnson spouted back, adding a British crispness to his diction. “And if you speak like a lazy, comfortable field hand with no room in his head for his own thinking, and no worth except for the weight of the goods he can carry on his hunched back, everyone else will treat you as such,” he continued, sounding and looking more British than any Englishman Hercules had ever met.

Hercules looked at the men, women and children under his Command.

“They need you to be a General today, a Doctor tomorrow, and an Ambassador to the world the next day,” Johnson said, shining the buttons on his uniform, as well as giving a shine to the hook on his right wrist. “A man who speaks clearly, distinctly, accurately...”

“Truthfully,” Hercules added, awaiting the Colonel’s reply.

“...and who knows where to go, a leader, not a follower,” the Colonel continued.

“So...best be getting ‘long with---“ flowed out of Hercules’ mouth in the gentle creek ‘singsong’ voice he spoke as far back as a baby.

It was adjusted in mid stream by a look of urgency, help and disappointment from Redcoat ‘Major’ Johnson. “We proceed with the plan, as discussed,” Horatio Johnson commanded.

“Yes, quite,” Hercules smiled. He rose out of the grasses and waved the signal to the rest of his hidden troops.

Every one of the Colored Crusaders rose to their feet, bowed their heads, and lowered their eyes, leading their horses on foot while the mounted Redcoat Officer in front of them led them forward, doubling back to show them his whip to insure that they would move at the prescribed rate, pace and temperament.. “A song, lads and ladies!” ‘Captain Horatio’ commanded. It started with Hercules, ‘lead Nigger’ aside his Master, sloshing along with a bag over his back, a subservient smile on his face, a ‘dumb Nigger’ carriage to his eyes. Behind Hercules was Thelma, then behind her Paris, and a goodly portion of Coloreds who looked beaten, subservient and happy about such. All singing a song of Salvation and Joy, their white teeth visible to any White eyes within seein’ distance.

It was an old gospel, the words from the White Bible, the music from Black Africa, as it was remembered or imagined anyway. Yes, it was acting, but it felt painful to everyone doing the performance. Either because they were reliving the agony of being a beaten slave prior to being purchased by Masser Johnson, or had friends or relations who were still under the thumb of Whites who were not as Enlightened as Johnson. Hercules lived most of his life as a Slave, and didn’t know how miserable and pathetic he was. But now, somehow, he felt the pain of all those humiliations that were directed at him which he never noticed or minded before. But, that was then and this was now.

If the plan didn't work out between himself, Hector and the Colonel didn't work, Hercules would be in chains, and there weren't any more painful a creature on Earth than a free, intelligent and caring man put into chains.

The column of 'The King's' Blacks escalated the singing of the Negro gospel to a dance as well, to the increasingly rapid beat of Johnson's whip. It immediately attracted the attention of the musically-starved British troops in the Camp. Some bobbed their heads with the tune, some tapped their feet. Most of them lowering their weapons. They smiled with delight at the 'singing jungle monkeys', undoubtedly smelling less labor for them to do themselves, and perhaps some extra, untallied 'payment' they could take back home to England afterwards, in the form of goods or flesh, depending on rank and circumstantial opportunity.

There were some notable exceptions to those who gave voice to the melody, even as an act. Thelma couldn't sing the song anymore. Hector never did. With the aid of a hip and bust flattering dress with many deep and hidden pockets, a new style for of his extra-long 'mountain man' top knot, a quick shave, and some 'ya'll walk like this, child,' pointers from Thelma and some of the other women, he was well disguised for the purpose at hand. Besides, he was a Wanted Man, a hefty bounty no doubt put on him as a Colored Turncoat by Major Thomkins, collectable by ANY soldier, or Nigger, in the British Army

"On my signal, when I scream 'Help me Jesus', and not before", Hector reminded his new guerilla band from the inside of the 'happy crowd' that he led directly into the enemy's camp, a situation that drove fear into many of them, particularly as they noted the blood on the prison wagons containing Colored Nigger and Injun 'cargo', dead bodies from inside being thrown into burial pits while more painful ones still breathing were chained inside.

Hector's used his whimsical 'female in dis-dress' voice and dance as a distraction, evoking some carnal interest from the British Soldiers that seemed to disarm them somehow, and pay less mind to Hector's fellow Black Guerilla soldiers. Some of them experienced a moment of privately or publicly shared laughter. Thelma had something else to say about it all. "Hector, ifn you tear even a seam in that dress with all those guns you got hidden under it, or get shot in it and all stained with blood, I'll kill ya myself, girl," he whispered to Hector as he seemed to be getting more into his role than the director of the play required.

"I got me no intention of getting killed today," Hector replied, deadly serious.

"And us?" Thelma asked.

Hector knew that survival in War was a combination of special skills, a thinking brain, that feeling of 'numb' that the newspaper writers call 'courage', and luck. He had it all, and so many Colored, and White, Comrades in Arms he fought with were under the ground someplace now. He learned early the arithmetic of War, and as sure as one and

one make two, one in twenty Soldiers die in even the best of victories. He looked over the 'Army' of twenty, armed with whatever weapons they could be trusted with, hopefully all well hidden till the time to use them.

"Well," Thelma said. "You says that our loses won't be much more than one in twenty. Makes one of us ain't gonna have supper tonight," she continued. "Which one that'd be? I needs to know so I can give special protection to them."

"Socrates," Hector answered. "He won't be joinin' us for supper, but we'll all be raising a cup to toast his sacrifice."

"They ain't no Socrates here," Thelma answered, looking around, just to check. "Ain't no Socarates here."

"Here I am," Hector said in a deep baritone voice. "Over by Miss Hectors. Standin' right next to her."

Thelma didn't laugh at Hectors imaginary friend joke, one he'd tried to pull off with her since he was a child and she had just become a woman. But she appreciated him saying it.

Another moment of relief, and recollection, Hector thought. "All a man, woman or 'girl' needs," he said looking down at his feet, hoping the high heeled shoes on them would make the British soldiers, or even the Major, look at the legs attached to them rather than his face.

Johnson pulled his horse into an gentle halt, then yelled out a more assertive command to do the same to his captive Black Cargo. "Halt!" he commanded them. "You now have the pleasure and honor to serve King George, and will so so happily and freely. Is this not so?"

Everyone, including Hector, smiled a "Yes Masser That be so."

With that, Johnson dismounted, called a stable boy over to tend to his horse, and arrogantly accepted a salute from a Seargent. "Before I confer with Major Thomkins, I will have personal refreshment. Which is where, Seargent?"

The Seargent pointed to a tent which smelled of a mansion kitchen, Johnson patted his belly and moved over to it.

"Better hide them breasts, child," Thelma warned Hector as nine or ten British eyes fell upon the 'Hectors's' chest. "Else they find out that they's filled with oranges and applies stead of chocolate milk."

"What's all this then?" the voice of ultimate authority range out. Its source strode out of his tent, a barbed riding crop in his right hand, blood dripping from its tip. The men in

Camp took their minds off of Nigger songs, women and cargo, pointing their guns at the Company of Porch Monkeys led by a one-armed, one-legged White Officer whose old and ailing body required his closest aid to help him down from the saddle.

“You summoned me, Major Thomkins?” Johnson said, handing over his sword to the platoon of riflemen aiming their weapons at his throat. Thankful that he had never had a portrait made of himself, and that his son-in-law had never visited him in the Main House, or anywhere else.

“Yes. Yes...Yes...” Thomkins said, inspecting Johnson’s cargo, the carts filled with sellable items, pulled by flesh that could be cashed in as well, or used for other purposes. He took special note of the especially attractive Black woman in the flattering dress, who bowed her head to him, allowing and encouraging him to inspect the rest of her tastefully covered anatomy with his stare. “Yes, indeed.”

“I want to see my wife, and my daughter!!” Johnson demanded, interrupting Hector’s private ‘joke’, or improvised distraction. “And my---“

“----Special Negress ‘Ward’ as you call them?” Thomkins interjected.

“CALLED them, Sir,” Johnson answered. “The services and ownership of all these twenty Negroes, along with all of my remaining worldly possessions, for those three.”

Thelma felt her breath stuck in her throat, as did Hercules and Hector. Yes, it was part of the ‘plan’, but to hear it in words was repulsive. And if it were true.

“And what about your services, ‘Major’ Johnson, I see by the rank of your old uniform, which I trust reflects your new political affiliation,” Thomkins answered.

“It does, Sir,” Johnson replied. “As does this.” Johnson reached into his pocket with his hook hand, stick it into a piece of paper and presented it to Thomkins. “A list of Patriots and Patriot sympathizers with economic power and discrete, yet effective, political influence. Who combined efforts, apparently, to ransack my home. Which they did, so my Wards tell me.”

Hercules, who looked like the property he was back in ’75, thought on it. Master, Mister and/or Colonel Johnson was so good at making the back side of a plan fit the future of it. Or maybe he demoted himself from Master to Mister, or just plain Horatio and freed his “Wards” knowing that they would take what they wanted and thought they needed from the Big House such that it would look like Johnson’s young patriot friends taking out their revenge on the Old Man. And as for who was on that list....

“Fresh on the hook” Thomkins mused, taking out his spectacles to read the names of hidden and hiding Patriots on ex-Colonel Johnson’s list.. “And the writing is quite...illegible.”

“The right hand was my writing hand. My left, arthritic as it is, is what I am using now, Major Thomkins.”

“Please, call me ‘son’.,” Thomkins smirked. “I am married to your daughter. A shame you weren’t able to attend our Wedding, but...perhaps now.”

Thomkins whistled. As if on cue, Pamela walked out of her wagon, clad in her wedding dress, a recently-obtained Indian scalp on her head. It was the first time Horatio Johnson had seen his daughter since the departure from the Plantation just before the War started, and the letters of condemnation for her Father’s politics and personal honor came in every week. Along with a wedding invitation that specifically announced that he and his ‘band of rebel bastards’ are welcome to come, as corpses, served up with Yorkshire pudding’ while toasting the King.

Johnson’s jaw dropped as she strode to a song muttered under her breath with a pleasant tune, a demonic undertone, oblivious to nothing except the melody implanted behind her glassy, possessed eyes.

“Pamela! My Pamela!” Johnson screamed, running then stumbling his way to her. He stopped her ‘march’ to the alter in front of a campfire, but she seemed to feel cold. “What have you done to her!”

“Nothin’ that’s some medicine or formularies I have, or can get, can fix,” Hercules found himself saying, remembering the smell and feel of small medicine jar Hector had taken from the Camp on his last attempt to free the ladies. Then, he remembered that no good act goes unpunished, or unnoticed. “That is, I’s thinks I kin gets some roots and berries that----“

“----Are in a ‘formulary’?” Major Thomkins said, his suspicions aroused at the Nigger who spoke better English than his station should have allowed. “A big word for a small Nigger like you, whose hands do not have many blisters on them, ‘Sir’.”

Thomkins instructed his men to search Hercules. With the pre-arranged two finger signal behind his dress and in front of his ‘aghost’ but ‘perty’ mouth, Hector instructed his men, women and children to get ready, but hold fast. Johnson grabbed Hercules by the collar of what was left of his shirt, and slapped him across the face, throw him to the ground, kicking and punching him.

“This one thinks he’s educated,” Johnson yelled, his lungs ‘open’. “Stole from me more than once, after all I gave him. And he steals from me, too.”

Johnson pulled out the items in question from underneath Hercules’ shirt, NOT according to plan, laying them at Thomkins’ feet.

“A book? Plato’s Republic, father, Dad?” Thomkins replied.

“An antique, son. So this elephant-eared Colored must have heard,” Johnson answered

“And the knife, and some other quite sharp instruments?” Thomkins noted.

“Scalpel blade and other medical tools, which belonged to my father?” Hercules answered, not knowing who or what to trust.

“And a pistol. Double barreled,” the Major noted.

“Which I know he doesn’t know how to shoot. Particularly because of the sub-standard breed of Colored that he is,” Johnson said. “Look at his big nose, and small head.”

“Yes, indeed,” Thomkins said. He pulled the pocket ‘notch’ rope out of his pocket, placed it around Hercules’s head, gently, then tight. “Thirty centimeters...matched to a...” Thomkins pulled Hercules up, throwing him against a tree, red notches on it. “...Five foot four ‘man’,” he laughed taking measurements of Hercules’ testacies, demonstrating the smallness of their size with ruler and smirk. “And as related to his neck.”

Hercules found his neck surrounded by the Major’s rope, held by a man who was more sadistic than any he’d met, or treated, as a Surgeon, or stretcher bearer. Hercules felt terror as his breath became shallow and strained. He felt relieve when someone else started singing from a strange female voice.

Hector didn’t know that he had the music in his feet, and that it could accompany a female voice from his own lips. Whenever Thelma would have dances, Hector would always pass, even when offered the chance to dance with Miss Athena. “The horses under me do all my dancing,” he’d keep saying. But now, a different kind of weaponry was at his disposal---deception.

Thelma joined in, as did everyone else, ‘taken’ by the beat, or so Hercules, Hector, Mister Johnson and everyone else on the ‘right’ side of this War hoped the British would perceive.

“They are a very leadable race, Dad,” Thomkins commented to Johnson, finding his own head nodding with the beat. “Have a certain musicality in our Souls those of us of the Superior Race seem to lack.”

“Yes, Son,” Johnson said, looking at his daughter, bopping her head two beats behind the music, the demonic Symphony Number God-knows-what ended. “My wife and my...” Johnson couldn’t say it. What could he call the woman who understood him most of all, and said the least back to him? Who, until that mis-timed comment and political challenge in the Parlor forced him, for his protect, hers, and the Revolution, to send back down to the field house.

“Your Ward, Sir? The one who called herself Athena?” Thomkins said, his eye caught by the dancing Black Maiden who had led the singing who seemed to be luring him into the woods for a private music lesson. “Instruct Lieutenant Holmes to show them to you,” he smiled. “We’ll be needing them for the wedding, and I’ve arranged for safe passage for all of you to England, Captain Johnson.”

Thomkins departed, leaving real British, and not Colonial, Captain insignia with Johnson. Ironically, after nearly fifteen years, he got his commission in the British Army, the best and most prestigious in the world. But there was the small matter of finishing up his Mission, and term, with the Army to which he belonged now.

Thomkins’ celebratory mood translated to his men, the fear they felt for potentially armed Blacks converted now into ridicule, and admiration, for their tribal like dancing, which brought them to all corners of the Camp. They drank rum and hundred year old brandy from their carts, sharing it then having it be taken by the ‘appreciative’ audience.

Johnson and a, for now, liberated Hercules snuck their way to the tent where Athena and Miss Sally were now kept. Johnson hugged Sally after cutting her loose. Hercules snuck his hand around Athena’s back to cut the ropes around her wrists, the wet leather shrinking slowly, and painfully.

“We’re going home, Miss Athena,” Hercules assured her.

“When?” she asked.

“In as much time as it takes to make these soldiers into slumbering drunkards,” Johnson whispered from the side of his mouth.

“Drugged drunkards, with the medicinals I can put in to get their blood circulating.” Hercules added. “From their head into their fat, White asses, Horatio,” Hercules answered, seeing that the jar of whiskey given to the guards was drunk.

“Colonel Johnson?” Athena asked of former ‘Master’ Johnson.

“Mister now,” along with everyone else here, Horatio answered, hugging Athena with the permission and insistence of his wife. “We’re all Misters and Misses now.”

“Except for the Misses who ain’t Misses,” Hercules whispered to Athena, pointing her and Sally’s attention to a familiar face and dress in a dancing.

“Is that my dress?” Sally exclaimed of the specially-made outfit which looked better on the dancer than on her.

“And is that my...man in that dress?” Athena smiled, able to recognize Hector’s deep eyes and big mouth anywhere.

“And is that the Major NOT drinking the whiskey Hector be offering him?” Hercules said, softly, he hoped.

The guards turned around, noticing something strange, then picked up their guns. Their firing was prevented by daggers knives, one thrown by Horatio’s steady left fist landing in between the eyes on one, by Hercules shaking hand.

Athena hugged Hercules. “Thank you, thank you, “ she kept saying. Hercules couldn’t say anything back, his eyes held hostage by the stare of dying man with his dagger in his chest, begging Hercules for quick delivery to the beyond world.

Sally pulled the knife from the guard’s chest. The blood bubbled out, staining his Red Coat a deep hue of death, causing her, oddly, concern rather than relief. Johnson looked over the damage, then his watch. “He isn’t going to make it, Sally.”

“Pity,” she said, with a smile, caressing the cheek of the dying soldier, now with the face of frightened boy, unable to speak even a scream of pain. “Shhh...Everything is going to alright...” she assured him as she took the handle of the knife and twisted it into the rest of his chest.

“Sally we have to.---“ Johnson said, looking at his watch.

“...Alright for ME,” she replied cutting off the still-alive guard’s testicals, tying them into his mouth, then cutting off his long, brown hair just below the scalp.

Colonel Johnson couldn’t believe it. Sally wasn’t a lady anymore. She put the dying soldier’s ‘scalp’ on, instructing her husband to NOT finish him off. She showed the Colonel her right arm, and the missing finger. Johnson pulled up the man’s arm, and chopped off his two fingers with a single blow. As he was about to ‘reclaim’ a third, Athena reminded him of a higher agenda. “Pamela, she’s heading to the munitions wagon, with a lighted candle.”

Outside, Pamela was in a dance of her own again, a wedding candle in her hand, singing a wedding song that entertained a group of heavily Armed Redcoats sharing rape and pillage stories with two Hessians. Hercules ‘Nigger danced’ his way to Pamela, hoping to pull her away before she was noticed. “Hands up in the air, Boy!” he heard from behind him. When Hercules did so, the red blood on his hands couldn’t be hidden. Two Redcoats moved in to arrest him, a third approaching with a whip and a sadistic smile.

“Jesus help me!” a voice rang out from the woods, in a girlish tone.

Two shots were fired in the woods, ‘Hectora’ emerging from the brush, with a Hector growl, a fresh set of testicles in his hand, held by the hand of the man they were taken from. Major Thomkins groaned out two “kill those Black demons, all of them”, then was silenced, sent to an overdue meeting with demons of his own with Hector’s knife.

Hercules somehow found the anger and determination to attack the three Redcoats about to take him into custody, punch them into unconsciousness with his fists, then take their weapons. He stood up and gazed around him, hoping to not be seen with his black face against the moonlit night, but was.

“Down on the ground, Nigger!” two very on-duty sentries around the munitions wagon screamed out at Hercules.

“Yessar Masser,” Hercules replied, falling the ground, face to the dirt. But not without taking Lady Pamela with him first, and throwing her ‘wedding lantern’ into the middle of the wagon which seemed to be loaded with munions. Hoping it was anyway.

The wagon went up in a blast, its protectors blown to bits, the tents around it ablaze. “There goes our supply of gunpowder and shot to get our Black asses out of here and up to Canada,” Hercules noted.

“Huh?” Pamela said, the blast waking out of one nightmare to another world other than that in which her body was present. “You look familiar, Boy.”

“Miss Pamela?” Hercules asked in his old ‘field hand’ voice.

“Take me home, Hercules? I’m tired of building mud castles out here in the barn,” she said.

“Sure thang,” the Black Commander replied, pulling her over his back like in the ‘good old days’ when he was a smiling, effective and lucky stretcher bearer for Doc Quincy.

The getaway horses were already in Hector’s hands, the hands of the British soldiers busy trying to hide from now-accurate Colored fire and blade slashes delivered from the weapons the ‘Black Recruits’ had hidden under their clothes, along with those taken from drugged and confused English soldiers. Thelma seemed to be the Commanderess in charge, directing the men around her better than any man Commander Hercules had ever seen in action, even Colonel Johnson. The rest, from Hercules’ perspective, was just ‘reflex killing’, something he did with a numb mind and fast thinking brain in a dimension where time and space were as illusory as morality.

CHAPTER 29

When the smoke of battle and the storm of unleashed madness, and fear, cleared, Hector assessed the damage. “With that necessary but bigger than expected explosion in the munitions wagon, looks like we still got half of Colonel Johnson’s things in one peice.”

“OUR things, now,” Thelma insisted. “And you promised me you wouldn’t get all shot up in that dress I was allowed to take from Mastress Sally’s closet, which is mine, even though it be five sized too small for me.”

“Sorry,” Hector said, noting that the blood-stained garment he had been wearing was more rags than dress. And that he was still wearing the intact corset that matched it, very tightly wrapped around his chest. “But I got to wear it for a little while, Doc Hercules’ orders to hold my busted ribs in place.” He laughed, enjoying the moment of relief as much as he could with a chest that pounded with pain every time he breathed hard, or talked enthusiastically.

“You alright?” Thelma asked Hector, noting another wound on his leg opening up. “Didn’t tell Doc about those cuts down there, did ya?” Thelma took it upon herself to rip up what was left of the dress still hanging on Hector and convert it into bandages that she applied right quick, and very tight. “You best be seein’ a doctor about this ifn you wanna keep livin.”

“Doc Hercules, or Doc Johnson, as he says he wants to be called now, has more hurting bodies to mend.” Hector limped on, hoping that the piece of shot he pulled out his leg himself and the splash of whiskey over it was enough to prevent ‘microbe infestation’, Hercules’ new word for ‘the rotting humors’. He limped by the wagons that survived the attack, noting less than a third still standing or carrying even a small proportion of the goods Thomkins had captured for the King, the lion’s share going to his personal treasury, ‘expense account’ if held accountable by anyone with authority.

“All that gold, jewels and silver you say we was going to find here must have burnt up.” Thelma noted.

“Or was taken away by British soldiers who got away before they’d wind up dead, to give as gifts for their wives, or presents for their mistresses,” he smiled. “Funeral and doctor bills for their sons and brothers,” he lamented. “We got our most important possession, Thelma.”

“Our freedom, Mister Freeman?”

“Our dignity, and honor,” Hector said, letting out a painful cough and an even more agonized scream. “For us, and the Nigger, Injun and Paleface prisoners that Major Thomkins took without me and most of his other trusted officers knowing about, as they claimed when we interogated them, and as I believe.” He looked over the people damages for the liberations of the day, counting the numbers in his head, and fingers,

when Thelma wasn't looking. "Twelve British and Hessians wounded, twenty-one killed. And us, ten wounded, one..."

Hector felt a tear coming down his cheek, then a rainstorm, unable to announce the terms of finality. For the first time, tears of sorrow, and grief. Emotions he said no man should have the sense to give into, and certainly have the luxury of showing. He pushed Thelma away. Something in her respected that.

"Weren't your fault, ya know," she said in her affirmative 'Big Mama' voice. "Paris fought here 'cause he wanted to. Woulda died here, or fightin' the Bounty Hunters that collects Free Blacks in one county then sells them as Runaway Slaves in two counties over. Lots of counties between here and Canada."

"Canada," Hector sighed. "Land of open promises, some delivery. Depending on what county you wind up in up there too, I suppose. Cold in all counties up there, so I hear. Snow on the ground for 3 months out of the year, sometimes four"

"I was told that is was only a month," Thelma said. "Ifn ya travel far West enough."

"Yeah," Hector said. "Lots of problems in Canada. Many of them Irish, come over on the boat, hungry as us, hired for jobs we can do better then they can, but they do them cheaper. And their skin matches that of their Masters. Call them bosses up there. Or employers. Yeah, Canada. Long ways off, too. Lots of Colonial Counties in between. This War here is gonna decides who gets to own them, King George or General Washington. Sure as shit, no matter who wins this war, none of them gonna be owned by us. Though our bodies own at least one in five gravestones in King George and General Washington's cemeteries."

While Big Mama Thelma contemplated the 'wheres' for herself and her new family, Hector rose and bowed, in the manner of a gentleman, pulling his shirt quickly around his corset-contained ribs. "Miss Athena, I presume you are inquiring about this corset. Well..." he said to the woman who he joined this whole war for, and who defined it for him in ways that he never would have thought possible.

"No explanation necessary, as you were the first man to put on a dress on my behalf." Athena said, serving him a warmed up version of something that looked familiar, yet strange. "I found these in Major Thomkins' tent. English muffins, with nothing for flavor. A little bit of spice added to make it Scottish. A lot more to make it..."

"...the best scones I ever tasted," Hector said biting into the freshly-filled and rebaked pastry. "Knew you had brains and taste in your hands."

"Other parts of me too," Athena smiled, wiggling her hips in a youthful manner she thought she had lost forever. She sauntered back to the hospital tent, waving goodbye. Hector smiled, wider than he remembered he ever thought he could.

“You be careful now,” Thelma said. “You and her getting to be anything except friends ain’t natural. It be a violation of the laws of God and man.”

“Just like my Mama used to tell me, again and again,” Hector replied, without saying why.

“And just like your Mama promised me to tell you after she died,” she replied.

Before Hector could question Big Mama Thelma about what his real Mama said about ‘the Athena question’, yet again, Mistress Sally walked up to them both. She was proper, poised, and carried herself like everything was fine.

“The Colonel isn’t doing so well?” Hector surmised, and said.

Sally wept on Thelma’s shoulders. “He wants to see you, Mister Freedman,” she sobbed.

Hector wiped away any evidence of his own tears, forced his back into a firm arch, put his buckskin coat over his aching arms and walked to the hospital area, supervised by Doc Hercules .

Upon entering the Colonel’s tent, he was given an order he couldn’t refuse. “Hector, come here, please, “ Johnson coughed with a death rattle wheeze that confirmed the worse as Hercules listened to the rest of his chest with a listening scope made of some of his own parts, and some of the Major’s ‘interrogation’ tools.

“I’m dying, Doctor Johnson, aren’t I?” the Colonel asked Hercules, then Hector.

Both men said nothing with their mouths, or eyes. Colonel Johnson turned to Athena, standing next to him, holding his still intact left hand. “Athena, you always told me the truth, whether I wanted to know it or not,” he said. “Tell me, now, am I dying?”

“We’re all dying, since the day we’re born, we’re dying, Colonel, Sir,” Hercules said before Athena could speak. He stood up, searching through the bottles of medicines preserved from what he brought, salvaged from the Major’s stock of ‘special medicines’ which could kill in the hands of a sadist, save patients in those of a healer and formulated on the run with the plants growing around camp. “I got some medicines in my bag, and Athena can get some medicines from kitchen tent or the wagons that we got left I can...”

“...Ease the pain?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And extend my ‘life’?” he said, his left and right hand shaking, his remaining foot and knee numb to Hercules’s hammer and pins. “A life full of theoreticals that never worked when I put them into practice. In a world that needed theoreticals to work. For a new country that should be about something beyond money and property but which was

always about money, and property, but in the hands of liberated property, may actually become a country where freedom is not a theoretical but a..."

Johnson found his breath leaving him. Hercules instructed Athena to breath into his mouth, Hector to pound on his chest. Doc Hercules quickly sprang into action, drawing up a special mixture of medicinal his brain said would work, in proportions that his gut said would be most effective. "You relax, there Colonel. This new formulary I got for you is gonna work as good as the reversal one I'm giving to Miss Pamela. She knows where she is now, and who she is, and who everyone around her is. Putting her in a melancholia almost as bad as when she was under the Major's 'care', but I got something for that melancholia, too. Will work till she gets back on her feet betwixt her ears. She asked Thelma to cook her up some grits just today, and asked Athena here about where she was ever since she left home. Remembers 1775 alright, but after that, well, she can hear what ya tell her now, and understand it, and..."

Hercules' formulary for Miss Pamela was as much of a miracle as anyone had seen in Camp, and the statement about Pamela's latest progress was music to Horatio Johnson's ears. Unfortunately, it was the last symphony from this world he would ever hear. With his last breath, his face bore a wide smile, his eyes bright, his rigid and finally non-shaking hand pointing to a letter on the table next to his cot.

"To my children, of the utmost urgency" it read in front. "Pamela, Hercules, Athena and Hector," on the back.

"I don't know....I don't think we should open it without,..you know..." Athena stuttered, trying to put Horatio's last wish in front of her own feelings.

"Pamela is a long way off from this," Hector said, reading the contents of the letter, the wax seal giving way, spilling the letter's contents.

Hercules could say nothing, his chest tight with grief, his head buried in the lifeless arms of the man who fed him, taught him, taunted him, respected him and ultimately, respected him.

Hector sat down, reading the first line of Colonel Masser Johnson's final, epitath. "To my four children, those who carry my hopes, dreams and biological seed," he read, unable to decipher what was under it in cryptic print, and not all of it in American or King George's English. He gently pulled Hercules up from the Colonel's lifeless arms, asking if he could translate the scribble which Johnson had written in the last hour, knowing that it would be his last. Hercules could not make sense of the writing either.

Athena grabbed hold of the letter, translating what her bloodshot eyes could read. "First, with regard to the names of Patriots and Patriot sympathizers given to Major Thomkins and the men who escaped capture by you today and are on their way to General Cornwallis. They are in fact neutral parties who have Loyalist allegiances, or allegiances

that have shifted over the last several bloody years of war to serve their own agendas and self interest.”

“General Washington and Mister Jefferson’s Revolution to the end,” Hector snarled. “Both of them still owning slaves while they---”

“---Second, the American Revolution isn’t a perfect one, and it has numerous basic flaws,” Athena read. “Which will plague the New Nation till ‘all men are created’ means every man, and woman, of all races, ethnic origins and religious beliefs, or even those who have no religious beliefs.” Athena looked up at her Hector and Hercules asking if she should continue, her face revealing something she did not want to read, or realize.

“The truth shall set you free,” Hector said. “You remember where that’s from, Herc?”

“Life itself,” Hercules answered, motioning for Athena to read on.

“If the Negro is given the sword prematurely, even in the Cause of Freedom, he’ll turn that sword against his fellow Negro before even being given a chance to beat that sword into plowshears,” Athena read. “Which both of you know by now.”

Athena looked up at Hector and Hercules, each man doing the mental arithmetic as to how many Black lives this war of liberation had cost them. She read on, sensing that they needed to know the rest before the final tally was counted.

“Even one life lost in the Cause of Freedom, as a Man best perceives is, is a tragic loss, but, as God in His wisdom or Nature’s sadism determined it, such losses are necessary,” she read, holding her chin up, her tearing eyes fixed on the page rather than the pain in her heart. “All of you, Hercules, Hector and Athena are the product of my biological seed, conceived from mothers who were sent away by a father who thought he were taking care of me. At a time when I was someone else, possessed by demons. Some summoned by hard rum, others by harder habits I learned to break. I hope that those demons will not reclaim me now that I seek, thou do not deserve, Salvation from a God I tried to serve, but never really saw or felt. Take what you must, and can, and go to where your seeds will flourish, my children.”

Athena put the letter down, then closed the Colonel’s eyes shut forever, kissing him goodbye, praying that whatever was on the other side was kinder and less complicated than what was here.

Hector looked at the sister he had mistakenly loved as a future wife, knowing that it was immoral and illegal to marry her. “Everythin’ Thelma said to me ‘bout it not being natural for you and me to feel about you what I did, and still do, now makes sense,” he said.

“Except why she kept it from us,” Athena replied, gazing out over the Campground, seeing Thelma trying to explain freedom to her ‘Plantation family’ as well as the other prisoners she had helped to liberate from Thomkin’s grip. While Thelma of course was trying to figure out the responsibilities and duties of freedom herself.

“Thelma’s honorable, smart and after she’s through wackin’ yer ass back into line, kind,” Hector said. “There must have been a few reasons between all of that that kept her from tellin’ us, or anyone else.”

“So, who do we tell about our real lineage first?” Hercules brought up, personifying practicality, forcing his diction to be as correct as his grammar.

“His wife Sally,” Athena said. “She’ll know when the best time is to tell Pamela.”

“If we do that, we don’t have much time,” Hector declared. “We have to move. Word’s probably out now. General Greene’s American Army wants us ‘re-assigned’ under their ‘protection’, the British Army wants us hung. Bounty Hunters working for themselves will tie us up, and sell us anyplace they can. We have to move, now.”

“Where?” Athena asked.

Hector contemplated the question which always went unanswered, and ignored, when ‘Freedom’ talk got started in any place amongst Coloreds. He looked out the tent door in the direction that always fascinated and supported him most. “West. To someplace that no White man’s got a name to yet.”

“There be Indians out there,” Hercules replied.

“Who are just another kind of Colored folk, if we treat them as such,” he smiled, finally knowing where ‘home’ was, for the first time in his life. “It’ll be hard, and uncertain, but if we respect each other, the Injuns, and Mistress Mama Nature, we all should do alright.”

The only thing remaining of Thomkins’ camp was ashes, and a gravestone marking the remains of ‘Heros of the Revolution’, Horatio Johnson’s name listed in alphabetical order along with ten others, at his request. The Johnson plantation was burned to the ground by troops of an un-confirmed alliance who accidentally spilt a lantern in the barn after a drunken brawl over who would sleep in ‘the big house’ and who would have to bunk out in the barn. Sally Johnson found a doctor who was very good medicine for her daughter Pamela in Spanish Florida, where they waited out the War, deciding to journey Westward at the invitation of their new extended multi-Colored family.

The proposition that 'all men are created equal' remained unresolved in the American heart and mind for another 80 years, or longer, depending on how you really defined 'equal'. And perhaps still continues today.

As related, as most accurately recorded from truthful and heartfelt talks with my Cree Grandmother and kinked-haired Grandfather:

Socrates Athena Hercules Hector Johnson-Freeman, Esq., Ph.D., M.D., University of Alberta, Canada

