

The room was balmy, the kind of heat that hung in the air and clung like wet clothing after a rainstorm, the hallmark of a Louisiana summer. A hot breeze passed through the window as if trying not to be noticed, giving no relief from the summer's oppression. It stirred up dust motes on the windowsill, making them flit around the room in the bright moonlight. The floorboards cast the faint glow from the drapes into mottled shadows on the ceiling and white-washed walls.

Muffled voices drifted in from the porch below, the stifled sounds of people too hot to sleep. The only other sound in the room, labored yet rhythmic breathing, was from a small walnut bed nestled between two nightstands. A young girl, only a few years before reaching womanhood, lay in the bed, her auburn hair sticking to the sides of her sweaty face and fanning out on her damp pillow. Her sleeping features showed signs of pain and exhaustion; her closed eyes were dark and sunken in a sure sign of disease. Her thin, pale skin stretched over her cheekbones, and her dry, cracked lips begged for water. The young adolescent's frail frame beneath the rumpled sheets barely held up her sweat-soaked linen nightgown as her small chest rose and fell in short gasps.

A small insect flew lazily through the open window, flickering with green light and drawing ever closer to the bed. Without a sound, it landed on the white pillow, moved down toward the young girl's neck and sank its proboscis through the pale skin, drinking deeply. From the gloom of the hallway, two dark eyes peered in, the whites shining with the dappled moonlight, before sinking back into the darkness just as quickly.



A small frame moved quietly around the corner of a crude clapboard house, casting long shadows in the dim predawn light. Small hands removed a halved gourd, the color of pale milk, from the doorstep and put it to her nose to smell the herbal mixture. Over the course of the night, the rendered pork fat had solidified around the aromatic leaves, suspending them in a sea of unmoving tallow like a savory candle. The mixture would be added to today's breakfast; something so sacred would not go to waste. The young girl brought the gourd inside to an old washing pot which was heating over a wood fire. Scooping it out with her fingers, she added the contents to the mixture of simmering lard and cornmeal in the pot. As she stirred with a wooden spoon, worn with age and use, the hardened mixture lost cohesion and melted into the thick, bubbling porridge.

The fire cast dancing shadows throughout the small shack, coaxing life out of the darkness of the single room. From behind her, the labored creaking of the bunks indicated that she was not the only conscious being in the room any longer. A large shadow swung sinewy legs out of the lower bunk and onto the dirt floor, causing the wood of the bed to creak even louder with the effort of containing him. Mayer let out a loud yawn and rubbed his face before clambering to his feet and slowly lumbering towards the cooking pot, lured in by the savory smell. Two handfuls of others in the cabin joined him in his journey from the bunks scattered around the edges of the room.

"Smells délisé," Mayer commented, mouth practically dripping saliva to the dirt. "Can't wait to get a bowl for myself. I'm so hungry." He reached forward as if to dip his fingers into the hot mixture.

The girl's gaze shot to his, rebuking him. "You are not an animal, Mayer!" she scolded, handing him the spoon and passing around several earthen bowls. "Just make sure there is enough left for everyone." She knew he would take a careful share but wanted to show no favoritism to him.

Mayer ladled the mixture into his bowl and passed the spoon to an older man on his right. Using the first two fingers of his right hand, Mayer proceeded to shovel the food into his mouth. He opened his mouth with the hot cornmeal under his tongue and breathed out, as if he was trying to expel a fire that had suddenly started on the roof of his mouth. "Is shill preha hot!" he exclaimed around his burden, watching as the girl accepted the spoon and served herself a small portion.

"Of course it is. It is right off the fire!" she replied matter-of-factly, a small tilt of her lip indicating amusement before she blew on the mush herself.

The room began to fill with noise as the occupants filled their bellies, many preparing to start their day before someone came to start it for them.

The girl finished her meal and headed out into the gathering dawn, Mayer following not too far behind.

She walked a few feet before instantly turning quickly around the corner of the house, into a small garden eked out of the rough soil on the east side of the house. The garden took up almost the entire wall of the building, overrun with herbs and strange plants. To anyone else, it was a disorganized mess, more a weed patch than a garden, but its owner seemed to know it well enough that getting lost was impossible. She stooped over and began to pick some of the herbs, placing them into her upturned apron.

Mayer leaned his shoulder against the edge of the house and watched the girl with interest, crossing his arms in a nonchalant manner. "What are those ones for?" he asked curiously, jutting his chin at the white roots in her hand.

She shrugged. "Lotsa things," she replied, not looking up from her work.

Still looking to make idle conversation and not wanting to start preparing for his own day, he asked, "Freedom, you still at the Big House today?"

The mention of her name made her jump. "When we here, you call me Mary, ya hear?" she shot at him, a hushed quality to her voice indicating she didn't want the scolding to carry. She did not relish the thought of the type of punishment she would receive if her master heard her called by such a name.

Mayer gave her a contrite look; it was a true slip. "Well, Mary, are you? Working at the Big House?"

Freedom stopped what she was doing and straightened up, looking at Mayer as if seeing right beneath his skin. At only about eight years old, she stood only a hair over four feet tall. Her body was spindly and seemed to grow from her dress like thin, nobby roots. Her eyes were almost the same rich brown as Mayer's but were weighed down with a wisdom much deeper than her age belied. Her skin was a deep bronze, the color of coffee with just the barest hint of milk in it. She was darker than Mayer, whose skin was more akin to a well-oiled leather, both in shade and texture from his time working under the oppressive sun.

The latter withered under her intense gaze. "Just askin'," he mumbled in a whisper, turning on his heel and heading off onto the massive property. He mused on how small he felt around Freedom

when they talked, though she was so very young. Despite her age, he always felt like he was talking to an old woman rather than a child. As he walked, he melded in with more of his folk as they shuffled out onto the fields.

As he walked away, Freedom returned to her task. She was not mad at him, but she feared that he may feel that she was. She was frequently misunderstood as emotions did not always register on her face, especially when she was thinking. She was concerned about that gourd... why had it been left untouched? She shook her head, continuing her chore.



It was the beginning of planting season, and Mayer found himself in the sugarcane fields, under a late July sun so intense that even the flies did not bother those under it. The young man looked up from his work and looked out, across the plantation. He often stole small breaks like this when he thought that the overseer might not be looking; they stole his liberty, so he might as well take time from them when he could. His gaze drifted across the fields: an ocean of exhausted, glistening backs, bent to both the work and the unrelenting gaze of their taskmasters.

He saw something new today however, which made him watch a little longer than he normally would: a chestnut quarter horse with a stocking on its right front leg, a matching one on its back left leg, ferrying its rider down the path to the Big House. The man atop the beast was a strange sight to be sure, dressed like he was unaware that it was summer below the Mason Dixon. His pale face, the color of gypsum which had had an affair with a peach, did not betray a single bead of sweat despite the weight and color of his garments. The tailcoat was black, and underneath he wore a vest of lavender brocade which almost deafened all who saw it. The slacks dangling around the sides of the horse were clothed in the same heavy black material as the coat, and they clashed with the very light brown of his knee-high leather boots, which brazenly concealed a boot knife with a bone handle. The countryman hat on his head was adorned with garish feathers, which were much too long to be fashionable on a human. The entire look made him reminiscent of a peacock attending a funeral.

Around his neck, the middle-aged man wore beads of bone, clay, and wood, as well as a tarnished silver crucifix. A leather Bible was tucked into the pocket on the right side of his coat, the pages yellowed and worn, nestled right above a polished and engraved Colt Model 1849. The gun's ivory grip stuck ostentatiously out of a plain black holster which was engraved with silver worked into the leather.

Mayer heard rustling behind him and jumped, trying to pretend he hadn't taken his eyes off of his task, before looking behind him to see that it was simply one of his folk walking forward to begin on the patch near him. He looked up at the overseer perched on the path parallel to the peacock man and was pleased with his luck; the man was such a strange sight that even the man whose job it was to beat him had stopped to gawk.



The Big House was alive with activity today. A visit with the strange man was no accident. Extra help in the Big House was called for and needed for such an occasion to make the entire place spotless. The comings and goings of such workers left the mansion in a state of organized chaos as they readied for the expected guest.

A stately gentleman in a white suit descended the central staircase that winged out in the center of the room. He was an older man, likely in his late fifties, with a clean-shaven face and salt-and-pepper hair that fell just below his ears, though he kept it carefully combed back beneath a light wide-brimmed hat. His blue eyes were set in sockets not unlike a bloodhound's, surrounded by sagging skin the color of spoiled milk with blood mixed in. The rest of his body followed suit, seeming to hang on only by the skin being attached and bulging with the excess that comes of wealth. John Batiste Moreau was the master of the plantation and moved as such, as if only he and the other man with him existed in the room though he was surrounded by at least five other people who were busy giving everything a last polish.

He was followed by a man in fine gray trousers and a white linen shirt, starched crisply—though the humidity was making it wrinkle at the joints. He was a fine-boned man of about thirty years, thin with the light muscling of someone who took care of their body and what went into it. His bespectacled face was lightly tanned from the sun, and short brown hair fought to be held back by the combing it was given this morning. As he entered the room, the workers in it hushed. Everyone in the house had heard the two arguing before they had seen them; a cacophony of quiet tones broken by the staccato of a point too salient to whisper, reverberating throughout the finely wrought walls. The pair's body language did nothing to hide the anger they had towards each other; their eyes looked ready to jump out of their sockets, itching to start the fight that their hands wouldn't.

Suddenly, the master of the house spun to face the doctor as he reached the final step of the staircase. "I wouldn't have to send for such help if you could do your job, *doctor!*" he half-shouted, emphasizing the last word as if there was major doubt behind it. "Besides, this is my house, and I will do as I wish in *my house!*"

"Medicine is an art!" the doctor shot back, pushing past John Baptiste in frustration. "I ain't Jesus! I can't just spread my hands and say, '*be healed!*'" He suddenly jerked forward as the back of his shirt was grabbed by his adversary. He turned to find the plantation master's finger in his face, shoved there with such velocity and violence that those sneaking glances had thought that the master had actually made contact with the doctor's face.

"Don't you *dare* walk away from me, you quack!" he screamed. He paused, taking a few breaths, and said slowly, enunciating each word with frustration, "How. Much. Time?"

He sighed, seeming to deflate slightly from his tirade. "Doc, I already lost one, and you have been on this case for a month. If something don't change soon, I'll have to bury a second child. So how long does she have, doc?" He paused again, his voice containing even more emotion. "How many? How many more of my children have to be buried under the ground before you can do your job?" He breathed deeply, the anger boiling over again. "I sure as hell ain't gonna just wait to find out!"

The physician fell silent, stunned and shamed into silence at the other man's grief-stricken monologue.

When he did not come back with anything, John Baptiste stormed out of the front door and into the yard, screaming that someone should bring him something cool to drink before he dropped dead of the heat.

Wide eyes flitted back and forth, trying to both look at their work and watch the scene unfold. No one dared to be caught invading the privacy of the very public spectacle, no matter the men's poor

behavior. The doctor walked through the front door, apparently intent on pursuing the plantation owner.

Freedom took the opportunity to hurry up the same staircase. Though she was mildly interested in what further drama the two men might invoke outside, she knew there were more pressing matters behind the door they had been arguing behind before they descended.



Out in the yard, the quarter horse had managed to ease its rider up to the main door of the Big House. The strange man's amble through the property had drawn much attention by this time, and, in return, the staff was more than prepared to lavish him with even more of it. The main door swung swiftly open, and a white suit emerged, blinding all who had been unfortunate enough to be looking when the master stepped into the sunlight.

“Mr. Beniot! It is a pleasure to have you here! I am pleased to see that you have arrived safely and seemingly in good health!”

“Monsieur Moreau, no? Please, call me Calixte,” the rider said as he slid off of the quarter horse. He said that name in the French manner, making the ending sound like a nasally “ah” so that it sounded more like “Cal-leaks-tah.” He was forced to squint to see the man's face as it was framed by the reflection of sunlight glaring off of the other man's white suit.

“Well then!” the master said jovially, no hint of his earlier anger with the doctor in his affectation. “You may call me John Baptiste! It is a pleasure to finally meet you in person!”

As decorum dictated, the master extended his hand to Calixte in a showy, hospitable manner. “Please join us for a drink in my library,” he invited, swinging his arm in an exaggerated arc towards the Big House. Hiding his earlier emotions had made his voice too loud, his gestures too wild, and his servants gave him a wide berth as he led his guest into his abode.

“The ride was a thirsty one,” Calixte commented as he followed, as if he needed to think about it. “I think I will take you up on that.” He smiled with satisfaction; another man's liquor was his favorite kind of liquor, after all.



Earlier that day, Freedom had heard all about this strange man from the woman who washed the linens and clothing of the white people. She was a deeply religious woman who always seemed to smell of starch, wood fire, and lye. Freedom loved watching her pull and push against the cloth, her arms bunching like thick bundles of rope before smoothing again into the wrinkles of old leather stretched over her frame. She always chose this woman to gossip with, and the crone never tired of sharing her news with willing ears.

She had told Freedom that Calixte was some sort of exorcist or holy man, though she didn't know what line of religion he practiced. It was clear, to this experienced informant at least, that this was a last-ditch effort to save the master's middle child, who had suffered for so long now.

Although the washerwoman believed this man to be holy, Freedom was cynical. Of course, she did not share this disagreement, as she did not share much with anyone, finding listening to be more effective to her needs. It was not worth the argument anyway; the woman wouldn't listen to her simply because she was young and because her views therefore had no merit.

Bringing herself back to the present, her brown eyes scanned the room again; the whitewashed room always looked so different in the daylight. The creeping shadows of night had been chased away by the sun. Any hint of a breeze had long since gone, leaving no trace of its previous presence. Unfortunately, the stifling heat of midday had done nothing to decrease the moisture that permeated the air. The humidity lent the room an almost misty quality which made the entire chamber seem a bit like a painting. The walnut bed frame and nightstands looked far more handsome bathed in the afternoon light; the rich brown stood out starkly against the whitewashed walls.

On one of the nightstands sat a basin of water with a rag half-draped out of it. From the masses of blankets on the bed came the pitiful sound of the child suffering; the day had brought no relief to her pain. With the doctor downstairs, Freedom would be able to look around the room—if only for a few precious minutes—without being questioned or discovered.

Satisfied that she was alone, Freedom traversed the room, so swiftly and silently that, if anyone had been aware, she would have seemed to appear suddenly next to the bed. She examined the girl's neck, running her fingers down its damp length; the frail girl could only muster a whimper in response, not opening her eyes. Freedom half-smiled with self-satisfaction: her suspicion had been correct. She did not need to act. There was nothing she could do for the girl (save killing the creature which afflicted her), but at least her people would be safe from this danger. Freedom let relief wash over her for a moment, thinking of the anxiety she no longer needed to keep at bay.

A sound from outside left her silently cursing herself as footsteps on the stairs indicated she was about to be discovered. Thinking quickly, she flew across the room in a flash, grabbing the water basin which had been left near the bed by the doctor.

The master and the stranger walked down the hallway toward her, deep in conversation. The sight of Calixte was a paradox Freedom had not expected. He was a cheap cut of meat which had been spiced to taste with all of the trinkets he had sprinkled on himself. He appeared just as he needed to in order to convince the unaware that he was a cure. Beyond his made aspect, his skin was nearly white it was so pale, a slightly jarring juxtaposition against the tan skin of the master, whose face had been tanned by his time in the sun. Calixte's face held eyes that were a dingy shade of gray, cold and devoid of any real emotion, adding to the feeling that all of his personality was surface deep. His nose sat rudely in the center of his face, above a chin which was strong but just as much a stranger to a razor as style was to his wardrobe. He clutched a clear glass with a brown liquor inside, carefully balanced to not lose a drop as he walked. His care for the liquid was the only true humanity that Freedom noted about him.

Suddenly, to her surprise, Calixte's eyes snapped to hers, making her flinch reflexively; white people didn't ever notice her. She wasn't even sure the master had ever even looked at her. This man,

however, kept his gaze upon her as they passed, making Freedom's legs begin to go a little weak, as if the gravity in the hallway had suddenly increased.

She was relieved, when he finally passed and brought his heavy gaze back to his path and the glass in his hand. She hurried down the stairs and out the front door, the basin in her hand giving her an excuse to visit the well even if she had no intention of returning to that room herself.



Wrapping around the outside of the house was a long porch decorated with various chairs on which white visitors could lounge and try to escape the stifling heat indoors through moving into the oppressive heat outdoors. This was where Freedom found the mistress, Mrs. Odette Moreau, sitting with the doctor. The recent developments of the house had given the lady of the house leave to have loud outbursts and she was relishing in the attention the doctor was giving her, whether it was willing or not. The aging Southern belle loved flashy, melodramatic shows of emotion even if they were fake, feeling as though it were the only time she had full command over a situation. Though she often talked about the honor of keeping up appearances and waxed poetically about the tableau of propriety that a woman of her status was required to keep, in the end that was only smoke, and everyone in the Big House and the fields knew it.

Of course, Freedom knew better than to think that woman was as perfect as she liked to tell guests. She had seen the mistress visiting the bunkhouses of her property more than once, often choosing a “buck” she thought capable of “handling” her and demanding he go to her bed in the main house. Her husband was also fond of the habit, though he didn't appear to care so much if it was in a bed or the side of a bunkhouse. The two often sought comfort in the arms of the slaves they owned; it was a shame that they couldn't seek humanity there too. They claimed that they thought of her people as animals, but Freedom figured that was a lie as Odette never used the dogs for such comfort.

Mrs. Moreau was dressed this afternoon in her usual uncomfortable finery. This was not because they were entertaining a guest but as it was what she usually wore when outside of her bedchambers. Fashion was not to be ignored when the chance that someone of even minor whiteness could lay eyes on her. Even as she sat on one of the chairs on the porch meant to keep someone comfortable, her stiff posture was masked by the clouds of crinoline that made it seem she was floating in place. Her shoulders were squared toward the doctor so as to cut a fashionable, youthful silhouette, and even the tremors of her intermittent sobs did nothing to change the attractive curve of her body. Despite the heat, the neckline of her dress was high with a wide collar and made of the gaudiest fabric money could buy. Every piece of her attire was an advertisement of the wealth of her husband and the height of her station. Unlike Calixte, who looked earlier like he stepped from an icebox, the heat showed very clearly on the matron's face, though one might think it was more from her efforts than her poor choice of clothing. The ruffles, puffs, and lace on her dress made her look like an entitled cloud, sent down to Earth to have attention showered upon itself rather than being the one producing fat tears.

By contrast, the doctor was dressed plainly in well-made trousers and shirt, cut simply for working. His arms were free past the elbow, as his sleeves were cuffed neatly above them, and the pants allowed him comfort in a variety of positions, though this seemed superfluous in his current predicament.

"I just know you are the only doctor who can save my baby!" the whimpering, wispy woman wailed, her shoulders heaving up every ounce of emotion they could stand.

"Well now, that may be true, my dear, but your husband is heading into town tonight to get a new physician," her listener said with resignation. "He told me I had until tomorrow morning to be gone." The doctor seemed to hope that this explanation was enough to satisfy her and be done with the drama, and he leaned forward as if to leave his seat.

"Don't go!" The aging belle reached out her hand weakly, as if she were steps away from her funeral pyre. "I just can't bear to lose another, ya hear?"

He sighed with what sounded like deep regret. "I intend to do as requested," he replied flatly. "There are plenty more people in need of a decent doctor in this county." He looked around, as if the walls or birds held the key to his salvation, an exit to this play.

Fortunately for him, at this comment, the spectacle reached its climax, and its heroine burst forth from her chair and ran into the house, sounding for all the world like a banshee on the waters of the bayou. Freedom managed to just scramble out of the woman's way as she fled through the doors the girl had been watching from.

"Girl, come here," said the man softly, his gaze falling over Freedom.

Freedom stopped, going a little pale. She didn't think she had been that loud in her attempt to not be run over.

He gestured to the basin she had almost forgotten she still held. "Just leave that here."



Mayer hated the summer.

The days were too long, his patience too thin, and the heat too much. His shirt was soaked with sweat from the attention of the sun, and his joints cried out for mercy from the day's labors. The work was hard, backbreaking drudgery, and the heat had done nothing to soften the disposition of the overseer; if anything, it had hard-boiled him like an egg. It was his hope that evening would bring a break to the heat, though the last week had repeatedly dashed his hopes each evening. A cool night after a long day's hard work was the only joy he felt he was allowed when things got this bad. Some of the old folks were saying rain was on the way, but that didn't always mean cool air followed with or that humidity would find some other shoulders to stick to. It often just meant he would have a hard time telling the rainwater from his own sweat with no real relief from either. Of course, his work wasn't done until the sun was down and during harvest, which was still some months away, even the evening brought no rest.

He was looking forward to his dinner most of all and to the constant amusement that was Freedom. He had no idea what Freedom would cook, but he knew he was going to enjoy it; she was so good at making this white man's food taste like home that he almost felt like he was given, along with



the vittles, what her name signified. He was also interested to hear what she had made of the strange man who visited the Big House today, as he doubted she had missed him. She missed nothing.

Despite the cruelty of the plantation and the evening's apparent wish to stay away longer, it arrived as reluctantly as summer evenings do. The only difference the night brought was darkness. In every other way, it felt just like the day. The shacks stood in a semicircle around a small well, near which each night his people would meet and socialize. His thoughts drifted here and there as he walked back to his shanty. Freedom was outside the door, putting down half a gourd filled with what looked like bits of leaves and lard.

"Why you always do that?" Mayer asked, tilting his head to the side curiously.

"Wards off evil," she stated, like that explained everything, and she turned back to supper preparations.

"What kinda evil?" Mayer pressed. He was tired, but that rarely stopped his questions.

Freedom looked at the gourd for a while before answering. "Adze," she whispered softly, almost as if she did not want him to hear, like she was cussing.

"What's an Adze?" he asked softly, in a business-like manner. "Is it something we need to kill?" Although Mayer wasn't really in the mood for a hunt tonight, he knew it was often an unavoidable thing.

She shook her head. "As long as I keep putting this out, it should leave us alone," she replied, gesturing to the gourd.

"That work?" Mayer sounded like he was losing interest and trying to get a whiff of what was for dinner rather than getting more information. It wasn't that he didn't care, but he had spent the day doing back breaking labor, and now he needed to replenish his energy.

She shrugged. "I think so," she replied. "I don't have the proper palm oil or coconuts to be sure." Freedom looked at her work again, contemplative, before turning her attention back to her audience, who had obviously been lost to her in favor of the smells coming from the cooking pot.

Mayer craned around her, as if he might be able to smell better if she was not in the way of what simmered under the lid.

"Greens and pork," she sighed, rolling her eyes slightly at the surprised look he shot her; he was always half-convinced she could read his mind. She paused for a moment, letting him decide she was just a really good guesser even though his intentions were plain to anyone, before mentioning, "Best to make yourself scarce tonight, if you can," she said softly. "Don't be surprised if the mistress comes down tonight looking for a bit of companionship. Her husband is headed to town tonight, and she's been getting worked up all day."

Mayer shuddered visibly; he hoped he could remain out of sight if she came around like a predator in the darkness. She often liked to reward herself for a long day of carrying on with a young buck or two, hauled from their only safe area to her guest bedroom to play out her fantasies. He was not very fond of her attentions and even less fond of the idea of her husband coming home early or finding

out later who gave her such attentions. He made a mental note to find one of the sneakier boys to watch the Big House for anyone looking to leave in the night.



When dinner was finished, Mayer found himself filled with questions as well, but Freedom had wandered away. He walked out into the common area, where his people sang and socialized, looking for her. Freedom rarely joined in. She tended to keep to herself. In fact, Mayer was the only person she seemed to talk to at all, and even then, it was only in snippets—only what was important—before she became a recluse again. As he looked at the tired faces of his people trying to eke out a small ounce of happiness in this world, he stopped a small boy, gripping his shoulder, and whispered into his ear. The boy nodded and took a piece of sugar cane from Mayer before running off.

Freedom was sitting on the ground, just outside of the light of the fire, the songs of the people drifting around her. She might not be singing, but she looked to be enjoying the songs, almost absorbing them from the air. A look of nostalgia was painted lightly across her face, though she was making some effort to hide it.

When Mayer approached, she wiped it entirely off of her face and showed him nothing. “Come,” he said simply, and she rose to follow him to the garden; he wanted to talk to her and not be interrupted.

When they got there, he rounded on her, almost sounding angry with his harsh whisper. “I’m confused, Free. Shouldn’t we kill this- this... ass-thing anyway? Dangerous or no?” Mayer was truly confused; usually it was Freedom who wanted to kill any monsters she got whiff of and now she seemed to be content to let it be. He wasn’t even sure Adze was a monster, she had given him so little information, even less than usual.

“Adze,” she corrected absentmindedly, “and probably not. I’ve been thinking about it the past few days and I don’t think it’s dangerous to us. It seems happy to just kill the white children.” Freedom let her gaze slowly swing toward the Big House.

“When it’s done up there, won’t it come here?” he whispered, moving in closer to Freedom to make sure he wasn’t overheard.

“It already comes here,” she said calmly as she watched him step back in surprise.

She shrugged. “Usually it eats what I leave it and leaves us alone,” she explained matter-of-factly, so as not to worry Mayer. Freedom said nothing more. She just walked away, leaving Mayer in stunned silence to weigh out the risks himself.

As she headed back to the bunkhouse, her thought trailed back to Mayer’s concerned eyes, and the untouched pork fat. She resolved to make a few more offerings with the remaining gourds and pork fat they had. Mayer wasn’t wrong to worry; this could become a problem for them. It wouldn’t hurt to be a little prepared.



The cart bumped along the uneven road, jostling its angry passenger as it meandered through the cypress swamp. John Baptiste stewed quietly in the ambient glow of his wagon's lanterns, the earlier encounter with the doctor still fresh in his mind. The rhythmic clack of the horse's hooves on the occasional stone and the grinding of the wagon wheels on packed earth echoed off of the trees and moss, ever present at his sides. Strangely, these were only sounds in the swamp, though the distracted man did not notice immediately. He was too preoccupied with the fact that he was apparently lost on a route he knew very well after being questioned in his own home like a child!

He looked up, staring at the surrounding dark as if he was trying to penetrate it, to little avail.

He was not alone.

John Baptiste reached first for the cross around his neck and then, with his other hand, the shotgun behind his seat. A sudden sound in the swamp to their left spooked his horse, and she took off running into the dark, the wagon and rider in tow, the lantern swinging violently on its perch. Practiced hands tried desperately at the reins but to little effect, further hampered by the shotgun in his grasp. He felt true helplessness for the first time in a long while as he simply ended up grasping the wagon seat as he hurtled through the darkness.

A loud crack preceded the wagon pitching to the right, tossing its contents into the murky waste and dousing the cart's lantern. John Baptiste burst from the swampy sludge, a slimy plant draped across his face, and raised the shotgun, pointing wildly around him in the silent bayou.

"Who's there?" he demanded, the quiver not quite hidden from his voice. "Show yourself!"

The only other noise he could hear was the sound of the horse struggling to free herself of the harness and his own labored breathing. Where were the peepers? Most nights you couldn't sleep unless they were properly deafening enough.

He eventually let sympathy drive him to the poor beast that had driven him here. Unfortunately, the horse was slowly being dragged under by the weight of the cart it was still attached to, and, with the mud, undoing the straps would prove to be an impossible task. To free his hands, he had tucked the shotgun under his arms, and in his haste to help the animal, he'd loosened his grip, and the gun had fallen into the muddy mire. He cursed himself a fool; normally in this situation he would simply have shot the animal, not played with the straps, but he had been foolishly hoping to free it so he could use its speed to free himself of this silent swamp. Alas, after another few minutes, the last of the horse's nostrils sank below the water, and it was done. He checked his gun, afraid that it would not work when the time came, as it was wet and clogged with mud.

Alone, yet not alone, with only the moonlight, this once-powerful man found his god again and began to pray. The world seemed to close in, and he became aware of a new sound filling the silence: a slow, shuffling gait which seemed to come from everywhere at once. A shot rang out in the humid summer night, and, after another ten slow seconds of silence, the peepers found their voices again, one slow chirp at a time.



Later that night, long after the last song had been sung to the night beside the fire, Mayer was woken by someone whispering softly in his ear.

With the fog of sleep over him, he could not tell what the person was saying but they were shaking him gently. Too much experience stopped him from waking up violently; if it was the mistress, only death would result from harming her. He groaned internally and said a small prayer to himself; he was tired from a long day and just wanted to sleep, not to be a plaything for however long she would decide to find entertainment in him this time. He opened his eyes slowly and just enough to see in the darkened bunkhouse, hoping that maybe if she thought him deeply asleep, she would find someone more awake and willing and move off. He was surprised to find Freedom, obviously trying to wake him without disturbing the others in the surrounding beds.

“Witch,” she mouthed, the word coming only as a slight wisp in the humid air, and then she turned, exiting from the only door. Mayer wondered how she knew he was awake; he thought he’d done a good job of hiding it. He slid a hand under his bunk and brought out his hatchet, a weapon he was careful not to brandish about except in times like this, lest an overseer see it as the weapon it was rather than a tool for cutting wood and branches. He also took out the fabric sling that would allow him to hang it from his waist and attached it to his rope belt. He slid out of his bed and crept outside, following the moonlight that had swallowed up his small companion.

The gourds that Freedom had laid out had been smashed, and their contents ground into the earth. Mayer looked to Freedom to see that she was deep in thought, staring at the destruction while she came to a conclusion.

“Tonight,” she said with finality.

Mayer looked at the crushed vegetables and tainted animal fat again, trying to puzzle out what she saw that he did not. He didn't think it was that odd for food that was left out to be consumed and destroyed by wild animals in the night. Perhaps even one of the men in their bunkhouse did it when he got up to take a piss.

“Maybe an animal?” he suggested halfheartedly, knowing that she would not be so concerned about a normal animal.

“No,” Freedom replied. “The Adze has a witch under its control.” She could not have known this from just the gourds, and he assumed she must have been doing some reconnaissance on her own.

“Who?” he asked, looking around at the darkness suspiciously as if the witch would show itself just from being mentioned.

She shrugged. “Dunno,” she admitted, frustrated. “Not the child. She is food. Maybe that strange man from today...?”

“Yeah,” Mayer agreed. “He did look strange to me. He got powers?”

Freedom shook her head. “Not that I can see, no,” she explained, her desire to be having this conversation wearing thin. “Not if he works for the Adze. He is its slave, little more.” She walked off into the shadows of the predawn light, a dismissal plain to the man that was used to such behavior from her.

Feeling beleaguered, he went back into the bunkhouse and carefully returned the hatchet to its hiding place. He laid back down, knowing that he needed to find sleep while he still could, even if only for another hour or so. Today was going to be even longer than the last.



As the day passed in work, Mayer's mind was busy with the events of the night before. That morning, Freedom had gone missing, and his bunk was left to eat cold tallow and greens before heading out for the day. He did not ask where she had gone, and no one else did either, preferring to eat their subpar meal in quiet gossip before leaving for the day. Apparently, a young boy in another bunkhouse had fallen seriously ill, and the others were worrying about a plague of sickness washing through the hovels, as they so often did. He had heard the howling of the boy's mother that morning as he washed up, but only now knew what the mourning cries were about.

The talk of his bunkmates soon turned to their cook however, and they worried over Freedom's sudden absence. She was generally pretty consistent with mealtimes, and though not a chatty and often strange girl, she was at the very least prompt. Mayer knew better however, being her partner; she had work to do, and come to think of it, so did he. He finished his cold, unsatisfying mess before heading off in the line of young black men and women trudging off to the fields hidden by the morning mists.

He hated that he had to be in the field right now, hated that he could not hunt the monster he was starting to feel, just on the edges of his senses, as it so often started. Mayer's days were always long and miserable, but this day promised to be more so than any he could remember simply because he knew soon he would face a fight and he hated the wait. Once the sun finally went down and everyone headed back to their beds, he would start the real work.

Mayer wished he could have brought his hatchet with him. It would have made the waiting much easier, but it was not worth the risk of getting it taken away nor getting beaten for having a tool he would not need in the fields. Still, he wished he could have taken it for he knew he would not be able to return for it; he planned to head straight for the Big House after the sunset. Though a field slave had no business being in the Big House, the master had not returned from his trip into town so he hoped he could use that to his advantage. After all, many were accustomed to Mayer being called upon to warm the mistress's bed.

Like the shadow of a hulking beast, Mayer used the umbral silhouette of the Big House to his advantage and crept along, looking for his small accomplice. The moon was not yet full, but to his supernatural senses, it was bright enough to see clearly, which caused some minor nervousness that he might be caught. The heat had been particularly harsh today, and the bugs sang their displeasure loudly, which helped to hide any errant sounds his feet made as he slid through the heavy darkness. He slowed when he noticed a light wink on at the side of the Big House, and a small figure stood, bathed in that light.

Freedom.

Shoulders tightening at the prospect of being seen, he looked around to see if anyone else had noticed the light but he saw no one. He looked back at Freedom, and her face seemed to project, *It is time*. He knew that now the real work had begun and Freedom trusted him to do what needed to be done at this point. He nodded to her and slipped in through the open door as quickly and quietly as a

snake. It was a slaves' entrance—a black man walking through the main door would have gotten unwanted attention, even at night—which entered into a small storage room with another door at its far side. It was cluttered with sacks and old furniture, as well as tools for indoor work. There was a path through all the debris that led straight to the other exit. The room had no source of light at all, and Freedom had already doused her small light, for he didn't need it; his unnatural eyes could see as if it were midday. He wasn't sure why, but when monsters were near he found his senses far beyond that of a normal man.

Mayer remembered something that Freedom had told him once: *Trust your senses, Mayer. They will let you know when evil is near.* Her voice trailed through his mind like a wisp of smoke. Mayer pressed his shoulder against the molding of the door like that would somehow stop any errant creaks when he went to open it. Slowly, so slowly, he pushed the unlatched door open, praying for silence and emptiness beyond.

His eyes seemed to draw in the dim light from every corner of the empty main hall, looking for enemies. The columns looked like tall white guards, dutifully standing at attention, looking over him as if they could alert all to his position. The furniture was ornate and carved with great care, doilies and other fabrics adorned their tops, and lamps set a warm glow across the room. He could see the grand staircase turning as it meandered upward, gently beckoning him over to its foreboding darkness above.

By tapping into the senses bestowed to him as a slayer, he could hear clearly almost every person in the entire manor, though often the supernatural could elude that sense with speed or preternatural stealth. Apparently, the mistress had brought some other poor soul to her bed, which made Mayer wince with pity as he heard their play. He stood in the shadow of the open door like a hunting cat, listening hard, trying to ascertain that he wasn't going to walk himself into the wrong kind of trouble. Too many entryways, too many dim lamps, increasing the chances of him—a large, black slave—being caught in the Big House with no reason to be there.

He looked again to the top of the grand staircase and spied Freedom, bathed in blinding moonlight, like a wraith sent to bring about a final ending. He exhaled quietly in relief, moving silently into the main hall and up the stairs, feeling more confident under her gaze. By the time he made it to the last stair, she was gone, as he knew she would be. He could hear the white child down the hall losing her fight with her illness, all labored breaths and moans. With a cat's grace, he padded to her room.

A green light drifted lazily about the ceiling of the room, as if a firefly had gotten into the room, only this one was... wrong. Its light radiated constantly instead of blinking and felt like it was warning whomever looked at it to look away. Mayer fought the urge and started to feel sick for his troubles. An uncomfortable feeling at the back of his eyes spread forward into his sinuses, and yet he felt compelled to reach for the light, even after trying to resist it.

Closing the door quietly behind him, he stole into the room, gathered his legs beneath him, and leapt for the light, moving impossibly fast for a mere human. He clasped his hands around the thing and rolled onto his back, cushioning his fall to keep from his body betraying his presence with noise.

Unfortunately, he rolled a little too far and slammed into the side of the bed that held the poor girl. The frame moved against the wood floors and produced a horrible scraping noise, eliciting a faint moan from the bed's occupant before the sick child quieted again into sleep.

The light in his hands, escaping slightly from the cracks, suddenly dimmed, and he could feel little legs scratching at his fingers, trying to get out. A tiny, sharp mouth attempted to chew through his calloused hands, but it would take a knife to get through the skin on his palms. He felt it pause for a moment, which just made his heart race a little faster. Did the thing just get...heavier? It grew in his fingers until it started to press against them, growing too large to hold in simple hands any longer.

Instinctively in his horror, Mayer pitched it against the wall like a stone, forgetting he was indoors and trying to remain hidden, generating a loud thud that he knew would attract attention. Cursing himself a fool, he looked around him for the creature as he heard footsteps and voices in the hall. He would need to deal with the creature and then figure out how to escape the white men.

The creature unfolded itself in front of him, underneath the spot where it had collided with the wall. Though it was not tall, it was menacing, in a dark flowing robe that ended just below its knees, the edges trailing off like smoke in an imagined wind. Gold trim wound around the cuffs and neckline in symbols which were unreadable to him. Though it appeared to be human in body, its head retained an insect-like quality that he could not quite define. Its face was too angular, too alien to be considered perfectly human. The mouth was unnaturally large and had sharp canine teeth protruding from it. The vague shapes of an exoskeleton could be seen underneath its dark, chalky skin, reminding Mayer of a corpse.

The shape of the creature was not natural; it held its arms and hands outstretched in front of it, fingers gnarled like the knobs of an old willow and tipped in long needle-like claws. The eyes trained on him, glowing the same green as the floating creature it had been seconds before, and Mayer could feel its mind reach out to his, poking at the edges of his awareness, trying—and failing—to gain control.

It moved forward with an awkward gait, obviously frustrated that the mental attack was ineffective, moving more akin to the movement of a bug than that of any human man. Responding to the rush, Mayer was up in an instant, flying at the beast with explosive energy, connecting his right fist to the creature's pointed jaw and sending it crashing to the wooden floor.

At the same moment, the door burst open, spilling candlelight into the room. In the doorway stood Calixte, wearing only his linen underpants, holding a candlestick in one hand and an ornate pistol in the other.

Calixte took in the scene, looking at both Mayer and the creature, and didn't hesitate; he leveled the pistol at the beast and pulled the trigger. Just before the pistol fired, Calixte's eyes squeezed shut in pain, and as his shot went wild, he pulled the hand with the gun back to cradle his head, hissing in agony. While already stunningly loud to his senses the stunning effect of the pistol was overwhelming.

Though Mayer noticed a moment before Calixte did, he was too stunned to react properly when another white man dressed in simple but well-made clothing suddenly burst into the room, diving into Calixte and knocking him to the ground, wrestling for the pistol.

Mayer tried to narrow his focus, shaking his head forcibly several times to clear it. He had never seen this new white man before, but the real danger was still loose in the room.

The creature seemed to agree with his assessment of the situation, deeming the struggling men to be inconsequential, and turning to bare its teeth at Mayer. He braced himself as the creature leaped at

him, leaning his shoulder into the beast to lessen the impact. The two met with a sound like someone striking the side of a steer carcass with a hammer, but Mayer did not slow down a step, his powerful legs pumping past the initial force and straining against the strange insectoid.

The sharp claws tearing into the thick flesh on Mayer's back barely registered in his mind—just a few more scars to add to his large collection. Mayer drove the creature forward into the wall and attempted to repeatedly slam it into the plaster, hoping to dislodge its hold in his back. Though it howled in pain, it only clenched tighter into his skin. Mayer was beginning to be blinded by the pain and, in one last attempt, turned and body-slammed it into the ground, making the walls shake with the force.

He heard the cocking of the gun before he saw it and reacted by instantly standing, assessing his surroundings for what was likely a more human threat. For some reason, the unknown white man was aiming the pistol at him, the human, and not the monster splayed out on the floor behind him, finally removed from his back. Calixte lay on the floor near the door, unmoving, having clearly been relieved of his pistol and his senses.

Mayer was confused but felt compelled to correct the obviously stupid white man. “Adze,” was all he could gasp out, pointing to the creature as it rose to its feet once more.

“I know,” the man said, looking at the creature with an odd expression which Mayer struggled to fit words. It stood up and walked over to him, cautiously giving Mayer a wide berth. “I have known for years, ever since he visited my farm,” the man explained, smiling, and Mayer realized that was love in his expression. The man seemed almost as unnatural as the Adze.

The man looked at Mayer again, realizing that taking his eyes off of the large black man was not a wise decision as he had already advanced two steps closer to relieving the gun from the white man's hand. The man smiled again, this time all love gone from his expression, and commented gleefully to Mayer, “I'm sorry, you simple thing. You seem confused. Let me help.”

And he squeezed the trigger.

Mayer's eyes had instinctively squeezed shut even as his ears heard the metal clack that signaled a pistol without a round in the chamber. The man looked at the gun in confusion, his brain seemingly unable to comprehend why the gun was not already loaded for him. A pain-filled laugh lifted up from the floor.

“Guns use bullets, you crétin of a doctor! Little cylinders you have to actually load!” Calixte quipped, quickly launching himself forward and wrapping his arms around the man's ankles. He pushed his shoulders against the doctor's shins and held the tops of his feet down with his hands as he pushed.

The thrall fell to the floor like a tree taken to with an axe. The doctor was stunned for only a moment before he began to grapple with Calixte on the floor, trying to hit him with the butt of the pistol.

That was all the opportunity Mayer needed. In a flash, he was at the creature's throat. The Adze lashed out across his face with its long, blackened talons, dragging at the skin across his nose. Strangely, it did not catch, but slid harmlessly over his face as a mother's caress might.



He didn't give this too much consideration as it would only be a matter of time before the creature could pry an eye from its socket. Quickly, he brought his knee up as hard as he could into the crotch of the Adze, sending the creature upward a foot off the ground.

Unfortunately, after it returned to the ground, it simply grinned and slammed its face into Mayer's own, causing the room to brighten for a moment as he reeled from the impact, smelling pepper. He shook his head slightly before returning his focus to the smirking face and instantly returning the headbutt. He released his grip on the Adze and delivered a flurry of punches to any available piece of flesh that the monster offered, causing the creature to release its grip on his face. Though he was sure of the damage he was dealing, he knew this would not be enough to kill the thing any time soon.

While keeping his momentum up, Mayer started glancing desperately around the room, looking for anything that would work better as a weapon. A glint near the window caught his eye, and he found Freedom crouched on the windowsill like a cat, dangling his hatchet loosely from one of her small hands. Returning his attention to the demon bug, he slammed it forcibly to the ground, hopefully stunning it, and then dragged it by its neck to the window.

Sensing the change, the Adze tried for escape, scraping its claws all along Mayer's bulging forearm, kicking its legs for purchase on the wooden planks of the floor and finding none.

Freedom turned the hatchet so she was clutching it loosely with her hand on its head and flipped it the foot or so to Mayer. He caught it easily as he might have a cooled sweet potato being tossed to him, carefully but firmly, so it would not be dropped. Feeling the familiar handle rest in his hand, he released the grip he had on the beast's throat and raised the hatchet above his head in a practiced swing.

Mayer heard the doctor scream and disengage suddenly from his fight with Calixte to run hurriedly to the monster. Unfortunately for him, it was too late; before he was able to cover half a foot, Mayer had buried the hatchet so deeply between the creature's eyes that a sliver of it protruded from the back of its skull. Even as the man made it another half foot, the glow of its eyes faded as viscous dark liquid oozed from the gap the blade sliced into its skull.

"No!" the doctor howled like a wounded animal, rushing over to the Adze's bleeding corpse. He made it to its side, carefully clutching one of the claw-tipped hands.

"What have you done?!" the doctor screamed, looking up and then standing to face Mayer. "You will *die* for this!" he promised, turning to head for the door, presumably to find his master.

He stopped in the door frame, another thought coming to him, and turned back, pointing at him. "Mr. Benoit, shoot that nigger!" he said, conveniently forgetting that he had been fighting with that same white man mere seconds before. "I happen to know that he killed Mr. Moreau on his way to town! That is why I am back here, you see."

Calixte stared at the doctor, mouth agape, and then looked at Mayer, almost equally suspicious. He asked, his voice faltering, "Then why, doctor, were you trying to help that...that...mon-monster? Maybe it was the thing that made that poor child sick?" The strange man looked like he never actually expected to find anything supernatural here, even though that had been his reason for being there in the first place. "And now," he continued, still sounding deeply unsure, "you wish me to believe that the

slave that foiled your plans is, conveniently, the murderer of a man that we did not even know was dead yet?"

The doctor started to look even more confident. "You were the one having a brush with Mrs. Moreau..." he said, letting his words hang in the air a moment. "Who's to say, mon cher, that you didn't have this nigger do your dirty work?" He left the door to press his finger into Calixte's chest, getting close to his face before whispering, "Or even hers?"

As he let that last word slip from his lips, the doctor suddenly felt massive arms wrap around his chest like iron bars and felt his feet come up from the floor as Mayer took him into a brutal hug.

"Put me down this instant!" he managed to squeak out weakly, fear bleeding into his voice and causing the last word to crack.

The veins on Mayer's arms bulged out, and his muscles visibly strained. The doctor let out a loud shout of pain and then made a strange gurgling noise. There was a series of audible pops as both of the doctor's shoulders left their sockets, followed by the wet muffled snapping of ribs. His contorted face looked as if he was trying to scream, but no sound came out as there was no air in his lungs to release. He kicked frantically and attempted to connect his own head forcibly to the stone-faced Mayer's with little success. The veins in the forehead of the doctor bulged as his eyes attempted to mimic the action. Blood trickled down his nose, and the room filled with the smell of the dying man soiling himself. His flailing became less and less frantic until, finally, he stopped moving altogether. Cautiously, Mayer held him for a few long minutes more before releasing the doctor's mangled body to fall limply to the floor.

When he looked up from the gruesome scene, he found Freedom standing by the girl's bed, looking for something in her apron pockets. Mrs. Moreau slid into the doorway, wearing only an untied shift. Taking in the scene before her, she began to scream.

Calixte ran to her, taking her intimately into his arms, and tried calming her. He began to attempt to explain what happened but did so poorly.

Freedom's voice cut through the sobbing of the mistress of the house. "That thing—" she gestured to the bug-like demon bleeding on the floor "—is an Adze. It was making your baby sick and killed your other child." She rubbed some leaves between her fingers, sniffed the product carefully, then pushed them into the mouth of the child. The girl stirred in her bed and, for the first time, did more than moan and breathe uncomfortably. Despite her tendencies towards the melodramatic, the mistress suddenly showed genuine relief. The mother hurried over to her child and embraced her, sobbing quietly into the frail girl's hair as she slid her hands over her to check for wounds that she knew were not present.

"Calixte," she said between hiccups but with surprising authority to her voice, "take the large buck and the girl, and bring them to the shed. Lock them in there until I can decide what to do with them." She did not even look at the two as she made the command in a voice that might have also ordered supper with the same tone.

Calixte looked puzzled. He stepped forward, raising his hand and opening his mouth to seemingly defend the two of them.

"In my house, *I will be obeyed!*" Mrs. Moreau shouted suddenly, standing and looking at Calixte with a wild command in her eyes.

"But... but they saved..." Calixte finally managed to stammer out bravely.

"And killed a white man in the process," she said almost calmly. "How long before that is myself or my children broken on the floor? What if they start a revolt? No. I will not stand for it." All traces of doubt or sympathy had left her face, leaving it a stone mask of certainty.

Calixte examined her, obviously trying to find a way out of this that would not simply end in more bloodshed. "Then... then I'll buy them?" The statement made in bravery was still a question asking permission more than a rescue. Thinking on it, he cleared his throat and warmed to the idea, saying, "I could use them in my line of work anyway."

Mrs. Moreau gave an ugly laugh that was a mix of incredulity and delight. "Do you think that a change in ownership changes the crime?" She paused, letting him think about it. "Any animal that attacks a human must be destroyed! It is the law," she said, walking towards Calixte, her face twisted in an ugly rage.

"Fine," Calixte relented, giving her a lustful look and eyeing her in her shift. "I'll do your dirty work. Just go fetch my clothes, woman." The faded belle eyed him with a smirk and left the room with more promises than compromises, satisfied her work would be done and she would get more satisfaction when it was through.

Calixte turned to Mayer, who returned the look with a shocked expression. Mayer wasn't sure what he should do. He could run, sure, try to escape, but could little Freedom keep up with him? Or would running only secure both of their deaths?

"Calixte... uh... sir," Mayer managed. "Can- can you just take me? Just leave the little one be. No one needs to know if she just... uh... left."

"Odette is right," Calixte explained with a sorrowful tone. "You have committed a crime that in the eyes of the white man cannot be ignored and must be answered for. Believe me, I would love to buy you. You would make me a rich man. But if I do, I risk looking like I committed murder here too, and I can't have that."

Freedom walked up to her champion and calmly placed her hand on his bloodied bicep, instantly putting his mind at ease. If she was not upset, then there was nothing to be upset about.

Once Calixte was dressed, the two followed him out to the shed and allowed the man to lock them in. After Calixte left without another word of regret, Mayer sat with his back to the wall and put his head in his hands, only giving cursory attention to the pain in his back and all over his arms. The shed was so dark, which shouldn't have bothered him but did. Freedom did not speak, and he could not see her. It was as if he was alone in the darkness, waiting for his death to find him at the hands of a group of angry white men. At one time, he had allowed himself to wish for a death at the claws of something supernatural instead of something that was so normal and constant a fear for a black man. Now it would end in the normal nightmare instead of something much greater.

A few silent hours later, there was the sound of something walking through the grass and then working at the lock at the door. Mayer rose quickly, having not found sleep in his anxiety of what would come for himself and his tiny mentor.

The light of the bright lantern set on the grass blinded them for a moment before the silhouette settled into the image of the young white girl who had seemed so close to death only hours before. She had Mayer's hatchet in her hand, and though she hesitated, she threw it onto the ground before her, closer to herself than to Mayer.

"Take this," she said quietly, her face attempting to show cold politeness but really betraying a young girl trying to decide if she was making the right choice. "I'm letting you go because you saved my life. I think that means I owe you, slave or no. You have a few hours to get as far as you can. If you are caught, I cannot help you. I'm sorry. I don't think anybody will listen to me, but if you do get caught, do not mention this plantation."

Mayer did not need to be asked again; he had been ready to leave when the girl opened the door. Freedom and Mayer moved as quickly as they could back to their shack, and though it was the last time they would see it, they would not miss it. Freedom pulled a small sack from under her bunk and slung it over her shoulder as Mayer grabbed an empty cornmeal sack and began to fill it with what foods would last as well as his extra set of clothes. With everything they owned in two small sacks, they hurried off into the darkness of the surrounding bayou, quickly swallowed up by the sounds and smells of their new marshy home.