

## ONE

*What's the Count?*

The wedding bonfire blazed against the night sky extinguishing the stars above like early dawn. Telemaque looked over his shoulder again into the surrounding darkness.

Stepping closer to his tribe dancing around the flames, his eyes met Koi's.

As shrieks of joy reached a crescendo, singing solos to a chorus, the percussion of the talking drums, resonating hard and deep, could be felt for miles. With the bride and groom long gone, in the midst of making love, everything was about to change forever.

The Dahomey king's army, half armed with guns, including a battalion of Amazons, attacked the celebration like a violent monsoon. Musket flashes cracked like lightning scattering the villagers. The warriors pursued their goal—the capture of Africans from the interior for Europeans at the coast—with precision.

“What's the count, Jamison?” Captain Christopher Warrett asked as he stood within the sliver of shade cast by the mainmast of the *Briel* anchored off West Africa; November, 1775.

“Look there, sir,” First Mate Jean Michelle Jamison said as he leaned into the captain's shade.

He didn't have to be specific. Abra, Telemaque's mother—tall, slim, half naked—attracted the admiration of the officers. Ogles from the crew. She stood out on deck in line with the other captives. Her full breasts and slight distended belly, revealing her to be with child, made her all the more alluring, as did the radiant glow of her smooth skin.

The appearance of the red-tipped, primed, branding iron jolted their lust. To a man they watched Abra. Able seamen preparing to

unfurl sails. The quarter master's mate standing next to the helmsman. And the bosun, now holding Abra, the next slave in line.

"I prefer white sugar," the captain said while following Abra's ordeal.

Abra held her breath at the sizzle and bubble of her flesh against hot iron. Dazed by shock and panic, the intense pain to her shoulder resumed immediately. The pasty viscous salve applied to the burn only added to her perpetual unease. It had no effect on her other, much worse, deeper wound; the gash to her psyche created by separation from loved ones, home, friends, her identity. The torture and constant threats, the confinement, forced each captive into his or her own private hell. As she rubbed her swollen belly Abra concentrated on thoughts of her son and husband, and a show of strength for her daughter, next in line.

After picking at his pants and adjusting his girth on the pitching deck the rotund captain returned to squinting through his spyglass at the *Diane*. A French ship struggling with luffing sails further offshore, among the reefs. He tilted his head and twisted the lens in an attempt to focus and ameliorate the harsh glare of sun on water. Dissatisfied, he collapsed the instrument.

Leering at Abra, Jamison's trance was broken only by the captain's insistence.

"What's the count, Jamison?"

Suspicious of the answer, Captain Warrett had kept his own tally with his spyglass from the bridge of the *Briel*. He'd focused on the skiffs and canoes as they shoved off from the pier of the slave factory at the edge of the African continent.

"One ninety-three altogether, sir."

At the coast, Telemaque was among the last put into a skiff at the fort's pier, along with Koi. A little girl from a sometimes friendly, sometimes rival Ewe clan. A point of confusion for Telemaque. He'd never known Koi's mind amid alternating political feuds and trans-clan marriage

celebrations. Or just why he'd always liked to gaze upon her more than any other. The children arrived aboard the *Briel* just as Telemaque's mother and older, post pubescent sister, Sade, were branded and forced below into the hold.

Bruised and sore—punched in the face by a white man at the fortress door after he'd cried out to his mother—Telemaque dared not call out to her now. Instead, he turned to Koi, squatting next to him. Her commiseration—communicated in a sign language only the two spoke—eased the tightness in his small chest.

The task at hand of loading, branding and confining almost two hundred Africans in chains on a crowded, rocking, sweltering ship required order amid chaos. The forty-two year old captain's confident demeanor reinforced his commands barked from the bridge. His tone induced immediate compliance throughout the crew; despite his peculiar proclivity of picking at his clothes. Pulling and picking to adjust his pants.

Calls of seagulls swirling close by were drowned out by intermittent cracks of a whip and cries of pain onboard amid the clink clank of chains in use. This rhythmic cacophony set to motion continued unabated measured in time by the creaking, sway of the ship on the rolling surf.

So close to shore, the absence of wind aggravated the crew and officers alike. The stench of the hold hovered in place like the smoke of a whaler's fat boiler. Permeating every garment fiber, pore and orifice. The men struggled in the heat to hurry their routine.

Continuing his report to his captain, alluding to suitability, Jamison said, "About fourscore are of a Ewe tribe or two, I believe. Most are Akan of some sort; Asante, no Fanti, perhaps, sir. Some are from further inland, Dagomba, I imagine." Searching for eye contact, he was disappointed again.

Though seething at the suspect veracity of Jamison’s report, the captain masked his emotions by saying only, “Very well, that will be all,” as he returned to his spyglass.

“Aye, Captain.”

For investors in the *Briel*, and her competitors as well, their timing could not have been better. King Kpengla of the Dahomey kingdom, a vassal of the Yoruba Oyo Empire, had strategically positioned his forces within the West African interior. He then ordered his commander to enslave all neighboring tribes in his army’s path to the sea. Telemaque and Koi’s Ewe clans were among those captured en masse as the Dahomey army swept across the landscape. The move enriched the king in his exchange of slaves for trade goods, including guns, while displaying his power to his rival Asante and Dagomba kingdoms—a fortuitous event for the *Briel*’s investors.

After the *Briel*’s surgeon applied salve to their branding wounds, Abra, Sade and the others were sent below into the reeking hull. “Seasoned” through constant use—voyage after voyage—the hold emitted a putrid, foul odor of urine, feces and vomit. It assaulted the senses at first breath. Men were corralled into one berth, women to another. Telemaque, Koi and the other children, ten and younger, were allowed some leeway.

Earlier, Telemaque’s father, Mawusi, as cunning as stout, surveyed the men in line waiting to be branded in search of allies. Men he could count on to fight for their freedom and that of their wives and children. Once the slaves were chained at the ankle to shelve-like platforms stacked three high they were left to swelter lying on their backs in the dark stagnant oven-like temperatures. Telemaque’s father said to the anxious man next him, “Do not fear the *toubabu*, the foreign albinos. They are weak. Remember, we are warriors. We need only wait for the right time to strike them dead to free our women and children.”

The man replied as his eyes adjusted to the dark, “They will violate our women soon. I’ve witnessed their leers already.”

Mawusi fumed at the thought and knew the man spoke of his first wife, Abra.

For the *Briel's* prisoners, a tack across the Atlantic guaranteed a macabre collage of fear, disease, pain, misery and death while traveling for an indeterminate time to an unknown world in a strange and mysterious cavern of wood. But for the captain, officers and crew, a familiar course set from West Africa for St. Thomas in the West Indies meant wages, women and rum.

Once at sea, Captain Warrett again spotted the large French flag trailing the *Diane* as she continued to struggle along the coast. Having purchased human cargo up and down the West African coast, with 281 souls onboard, the *Diane* was overloaded. Unable to find sustaining winds to catapult her out into the orbit of trade winds and currents still farther out at sea, she languished too near the treacherous reefs.

As seen from a distance aboard the *Briel*, after spilling her sails the *Diane* listed, then careened before disappearing from sight. Captain Warrett ordered the *Briel* to come about and return to the coast in search of survivors—the code of the sea.

Maintaining enough shackles in working order throughout the Middle Passage was a constant worry for slavers. Salt air corroded and compromised parts rendering the whole an illusion of restraint and order.

The suffering, desperate slaves aboard the *Diane* had thwarted their restraints and revolted against their French captors. Though her crew had beat to quarters, it was too late.

Back at the coast again the crew of the *Briel* set about fishing the *Diane's* survivors from the sea; three sailors, and an African girl clinging to the *Diane's* flotsam. She was being jostled by foul air and dead bodies bubbling to the surface. Soon to be devoured by sharks lurking nearby. The bubbles included the last breath of a hundred slaves still

chained by the ankle to the *Diane*, resting on her side in a hundred feet of water. Toward the shoreline two French sailors and most of the Africans who'd escaped the *Diane* were hidden from view for moments at a time by high cresting ocean swells. Telemaque, Koi and a half a dozen other slave children allowed topside, watched as Captain Warrett looked through his spyglass. He could see some African's heads bobbing, struggling in the surf like the two sailors as the rest washed ashore.

With her maritime duty fulfilled above the site of the *Diane's* wreckage, blocked from prevailing winds by the jagged shoreline, the *Briel* too, at first, struggled to fill her sails. But soon a swooning gust just strong enough to billow her jib guided her out to sea. At the bridge, Captain Warrett ordered the unfurling of the *Briel's* entire complement and began anew his course set for the West Indies. Below deck, in the hold, Mawusi's plan was already well underway.

“What's the count?”

## TWO

*The Mystic Worker*

Seven weeks later the prisoners of the *Briel*, minus sixty-two, dead, were unloaded like any other cargo from all manner of ships at Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. Though one girl had been lost at sea in a storm, most of the dead Africans had succumbed to an outbreak of smallpox. And while still others perished from maladies of the heart and soul, some had died the death of insurrectionists, including Telemaque's father.

Telemaque's mother, Abra, his sister, Sade, and his friend Koi had cared for the sick and dying, miraculously saving many a sailor and African alike. As they now walked on wobbly legs down the gangplank chained together, and to others, seagulls called out from above the smell of days old fish. The hot sun bore down on them not unlike a day in Africa, through puffed white clouds and blue sky. The thought reminded Abra of the home life and village she missed. As a widow, she mourned her husband. As a mother, she worried about Sade and her boy, left behind aboard the *Briel*, and her unborn child who'd taken to kicking her from within the safety of her womb.

"Stay," Abra said under her breath.

"What?" Sade asked her mother, just in front of her. Only aware that her mother had spoken.

A contingent of sailors approached the captain carrying his sea trunk and those of the *Briel*'s dead sailors, including Jamison's. One sailor carried an emaciated, unconscious boy; Telemaque. He asked, "Where to, Capt'n?"

"Put them in the dray," pointing to a cart on the wharf next to a makeshift pen for the ship's goats. "Have the chests sent to the first hotel you see on Norre Gade, just below the fort, it's the only one."

Pointing to another part of the island; “Take him to the auction house with the others. Have him put in isolation, until his health improves, or doesn’t,” the captain said before disembarking down the *Briel’s* gangplank. He was on his way to his employer’s office with a bandage on his wounded foot and the ship’s logbook tucked into his armpit.

“Aye aye, Captain,” they replied before carrying the chests and Telemaque ashore.

Telemaque was among the fortunate. Not only would he likely survive the pox, but being so young, his nightmares of the voyage aboard the *Briel*, including the death of his father would not ripen for some time.

The dense port town progressed up the steep grade of a dormant volcano. Stairs replaced some inclined streets for residents to climb to homes or businesses. From high upon the mountain slope Fort Christian and two stout towers guarded Charlotte Amalie below. Teaming with life ashore, the bay’s blue water sparkled between a forest of swaying timber.

To capture harbor breezes and avoid the street smells and noise Master William Thomas’s offices were on the second floor. His large windows overlooked his dock and Charlotte Amalie’s waterfront. Captain Warrett’s climb up the flight of stairs and into Master Thomas’s office had posed a challenge to his still raw wound, inflicted by the rebellious slaves. His foot and head throbbed in pain leaving him flush, sweaty.

Captain Warrett was greeted at his employer’s place of business by an arrogant assistant whose nostrils flared as he showed the captain into the slave trading headquarters.

Master Thomas stood behind his large desk, feeding ackee seeds to his late father’s colorfully plumed macaw. The bird was perched atop a stand next to the desk. At the interruption by one of his captains, Master Thomas began to pace behind his desk. His hands clasp behind his back.



The disheveled captain, still shaken from his battle at sea, began, while at attention, by adjusting his pants. Eyes straight ahead he said, “Pleased to see you, sir,” before risking a quick glance at the bird. “It’s my pleasure to report the *Briel’s* safe passage. A cargo of 131 slaves for market, sir.”

New beads of sweat formed on his brow as the rest rolled down his face.

Master Thomas, a short thin reed of a man in his early forties, a Brit, wore a black coat over a white shirt and a pretentious ill-fitting wig atop his little head. He alternated his attention to the floor with glances at the captain as he paced. Master Thomas ignored the view of business out in the bay as Captain Warrett studied it through the large open windows.

“Warrett, how many did you lose?”

Standing taller and straighter, “Thirty-two, sir.”

“You’re a liar!” the bird shrieked, looking at no one.

Master Thomas blanched at the words, gorgonized.

The bird bobbed and craned his head.

Not only surprised by the bird’s power of speech, he was astonished by what the bird said. Words often spoken by his late father—to him or to anyone else his father wished to intimidate whether he’d suspected a lie or not.

Master Thomas pretended he’d not lost his composure though he continued for a moment to stare at the bird’s jerky head movements, its eyes wide, looking at no one.

“Crew?”

Captain Warrett cringed in anticipation of a loud, tongue lashing. Blinking, he said, “Thirteen, sir.”

At first, Master Thomas did not react. He already knew the answers to his questions; a mole onboard the *Briel*—the cook who served the captain and officers each day. But then, he turned and looked straight at the captain.

He put his hands on his desk, leaned forward, and asked, “Are you sure of your count, Captain?” (A woman had jumped to her death

upon the *Briel's* arrival; consumed by schooling sharks beneath the wharf.)

Alarmed at his own omission, a sin he'd had his First Mate Jamison flogged for, "Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir," he winced at his words. "The correct count is 130, sir." After muttering to himself, "Damned sharks," he made another furtive glance at the bird.

The notion that Master Thomas already knew everything the captain had to report before he'd even appeared finally dawned on the tired, injured captain. Coursing through the suffering man's mind between throbs of his aching foot and head were his own words: "What's the count, Jamison?" and "Damn you, Jamison, your only excuse is no excuse. You neglected to amend the ledger...your responsibility—unmet!"

"Growing feeble-minded, are you, Captain? Can't keep the savages in manacles, nor their count!"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir," the captain winced again.

"Well, the one you left out, or rather let jump in, will be deducted from your remuneration."

The captain's arrangement with his employer, assuming a minimum "spoilage," was a bonus of three hand-picked slaves among the cargo once he had completed the voyage.

The captain exhaled; relieved he had not already been dismissed from service; fired. He regretted this occasion would no longer be an opportunity to request new shackles.

Master Thomas made concessions to the truth about the *Briel's* voyage. He overstated her losses in order to decrease his per unit transportation costs. He was determined no mention of the insurrection would be documented. Insurance policies refused claims on losses incurred during a slave rebellion. As such, as a trade-off, rather than disciplining the captain, Master Thomas made the captain complicit; a corroborating account of Master Thomas's official version of events.

"That leaves you with two as your remaining bonus. Have you made your selection? What do you plan to do with them? You could

sell them to me,” Master Thomas said, aware of the captain’s choices. Master Thomas was thinking of the Abra gossip his mole had heard circulate among the men. One crewman had overheard the captain refer to Abra as the “miracle worker,” for her contribution to saving lives amid the scourge of pox. That image among the crew morphed into the “mystic worker.” The captain noted the transformation as it was bantered about his ship.

The mention of, and eagerness to buy his two slaves, aroused Captain Warrett’s antennae.

Master Thomas produced a fraudulent insurance document for the captain to attest to and sign. It read:

Vessel Owner: *Thomas & Company*

Particular outcome of voyage: *Slaves delivered to West Indies*

First region of slave purchase: *Bight of Benin*

Second region of slave purchase: *X*

Total slaves embarked: *199*

Total slaves disembarked: *130*

Crew at voyage outset: *22*

Crew deaths during voyage: *13*

Captain's name: *Warrett, Christopher*

Captain Warrett checked and signed the document. Master Thomas had filled in the “Total slaves embarked:” blank with “199.” He then again asked about buying the two slaves.

Master Thomas had been reared among the island culture. He feared the spirit world of the islands as ardently as he ridiculed it.

Aware of Master Thomas’s propensity to put great stock in all manner of superstitions, especially African mysticism, Captain Warrett referred to the two slaves he’d picked for sale, “Yes, I’ve chosen the wench with child. The one with ‘healing powers.’ And the one I understand is her daughter. She’s a handsome one, the ‘mystic worker’ is, as is the lass.”

The words “healing powers” and “mystic worker” struck their mark. Master Thomas had fantasized about finding a compromised apothecary, a ktenologist, or voodoo practitioner of potions even before his recent engagement. He is engaged to the daughter of his late father’s fiercest rival in life as well as business. She is also heir to a unique, valued island.

Many times Master Thomas has imagined a successful conclusion to his scheme; to hasten the demise of his future mother-in-law, Madame Chevalier; a widow. He has in mind substituting something “exotic” for the medicine an itinerant doctor from St. Kitt, Dr. James Ramsay, prescribes for her.

Like his father before him, Master Thomas covets Madame Chevalier’s Road Town businesses, yes. But even more, Master Thomas is obsessed with plans he has for Madame Chevalier’s island. The island is unnamed on many maps. It was not listed in the Danish West India Company’s mid-seventeenth century private sale of “the Tortola Island territory.” Nor is her island listed among the current British holdings of two dozen other islands along either side of the Sir Francis Drake Channel. As such, the island remains outside the jurisdiction of any sovereign nation.

Indeed, Master Thomas sees his courtship and marriage as a path for the lifelong bachelor to take possession of the island. But each passing month, or year, represents an opportunity cost to him, a delay in profits beyond his father’s wildest imagination.

Captain Warrett’s wink-and-a-nod airs meant to bait Master Thomas into making an attractive offer on his slaves was successful; even masterful. Master Thomas came to believe—through his own powers of persuasion and superstition—that the African woman, Abra, possessed a knowledge of “voodoo potions.” And, as such, Master Thomas felt he’d finally found a means to his end. However, as a

shrewd negotiator, he attempted to remain cavalier as he spoke of the two slaves. He not only did not want to drive up the price he'd pay, he wanted to conceal the sway superstition held on his faculties.

Cautiously, Master Thomas said, "So, what's your price?"

This being among the most rare of occasions—to be on the power side of a trade with Master Thomas—Captain Warrett took a moment to savor the feeling. Not unlike when a beached ship's hull rises with the tide. However, in consideration of future employment he didn't want to seem unreasonable or exploitative. He said, "I'll take three hundred and fifty pounds for the lot. Two each at Thomas & Company's insurance value, seeing your point of view toward the voyage, and as beholdin' good will towards another voyage soon. Twenty-five for the auction house, seeing I've already placed them there. And another seventy-five, on account of the cargo's *special* properties." The last part he added with emphasis to ensure that Master Thomas felt Captain Warrett, too, believed in the slave woman's magic powers.

"Agreed," Master Thomas said as visions of owning a beautiful African conjurer exploited his imagination to arousal.

Later, at the auction house, Captain Warrett withdrew the smallpox healer and her daughter from the auction. After locating the two slaves, dressed in plain coarse cotton, and after paying the minimum commission, the captain asked the proprietors to bring them forward onto the trading floor.

Adam Wolff, a thirty-something bearded Orthodox Ashkenazi Jewish businessman dressed in black with a singular six inch curl of black hair dangling from beneath his hat on either side of his face, stood among the others as he looked for the pox healer from the *Briel*.

A man of some authority, keys dangling from his belt and a swagger of propriety, accompanied by slaves trailing behind him appeared in Adam's sight. Along with the man's two special charges near him he'd brought more slaves to the floor for customers to

examine; soon to be showcased for sale from the platform erected along a wall of the room.

Other buyers approached other slavers and slaves.

Adam approached the man he had singled out, “Are you the man with the pox slave?” The mole’s story of “a mystic worker” and her helpers traveled fast from the *Briel* to the auction house, taverns and brothels.

“Why, yes, as a matter of fact I am,” the man said through blackened teeth as a smile materialized across his wrinkled face; Abra and Sade stood behind him with Koi close at hand.

“They’re mine,” Adam said, nodding toward Abra and her helper, Sade, certain he’d purchase them.

Captain Warrett approached the slaver facing Adam from behind. He put his hand on the man’s shoulder as he whispered into the slaver’s ear, reminding him of the two slaves he was to deliver, not sell!

“Begging your pardon, gov’nour, if you please,” the man said as he walked away from Adam, coaxing the two slaves, Abra and Sade—with a kind tone and an arm on Abra’s shoulder. Adam waited; Koi peered up into his eyes like a child to a stranger.

From across the cavernous room a scream and struggle ensued. The pregnant slave—the very one Adam intended to buy despite her surprising condition—attempted to refuse her new arrangement. Abra fought to get back to Koi, to insist Koi be taken too. The distress in her voice reminded Koi of her mother’s, in Africa. Koi attempted to race to their side, but the handlers did their job. One of the slavers swatted Koi away with the back of his hand, propelling her back to Adam’s feet.

The slaver Adam had originally approached returned to the center of the room, near enough for Adam to confront. However, as Adam questioned him the slaver simply smiled again through his black teeth, insisting with the point of his finger that Adam must voice his concerns to a desk clerk seated across the room.

While paying the amount demanded, Adam’s attempt to adjust the conversation to the proper outcome was met with derision amid the

clerk's words that included the name "Jacob"; summoning a large bald white whale of a man. Soon standing beside the clerk's desk, Jacob's response to Koi's crying and Adam's presence was so swift that Adam and Koi found themselves on the street outside the auction house, squinting through direct sunlight at one another having hardly ever moved their feet.

Forced to leave his dignity and his planned purchase behind, Adam mumbled to himself, *Mann tracht und Gott lacht* (Man plans and God laughs). He took the child by the hand and departed the Danish West India Company as bewildered and almost as upset as Koi.





## THREE

### *Pigs*

While Telemaque languished in isolation within the walls of the Danish West India Company prison, Abra and Sade joined a half-a-dozen young male slaves, three no more than boys, onboard a fifty-seven foot sloop, the *Eclipse*. Abra's belly ached and Sade moaned at the prospect of another confinement at sea, unsure of the duration of the voyage or their fate at their next destination.

They couldn't help but notice the captain of the vessel, Jacob, as he told his crew to prepare to set sail for *Paradis*, a plantation named for the island on which it stood; a distressed property being acquired by Master Thomas.

Before shoving off, the crew loaded livestock and hunting dogs along with barrels of salted herring, flour and rum, sacks of cornmeal, coils of hemp rope; and then a fresh side of beef hung from the rafters in the hold with the slaves.

The journey in the dark, damp, mildewed cargo hold worried Abra. Sade knew. She sensed her mother's anxiety and discomfort as they both eyed the silent young men and boys seated across the hull. Several filthy swine—loaded after three barking dogs were chained by the collar to a rib of the ship—wandered freely. Their stench trailed them as they trotted past, up and down the hold. Every ten minutes or so all eyes turned to their squeals and grunts as one or another fought the others over another rat discovered scurrying for cover in the dim light below deck.

An hour into the voyage, as the seas became rough, Abra's water broke. The eyes of the young male slaves alternately stared or were hidden from view by their arms or each other's bodies as Abra's screams, heard topside, elicited smirks from Jacob's sailors.

After two hours of labor—Sade doing all she could to comfort her mother—a baby boy was born, bloody and shriveled on the uneven wooden plank floor. Everyone marveled at the new life, waiting, willing the baby to move. Before they could pass judgment of the child's fate, he let out a cry that even the sailors thought they'd heard.

The pigs bore down on the scene immediately. Confusion ensued. The tethered dogs barked and yelped. No hysterical scream or blow could deter the swine from consuming the baby's torso in less than a minute. The constant barrage of punches kicks and shouts finally scattered the squealing, snorting beasts to opposite ends of the hold to continue devouring remnants, pieces, of the newborn in relative peace. They left a lone, tiny foot behind.

From deep within her being Abra expelled an unearthly roar of anguished fury so dense it pulsed through the hull's inhabitants silencing the hogs and hounds for two beats. Sade picked up the tiny foot and secreted it away in her coarse cotton dress pocket.

At the sound of all the commotion, and Abra's outburst, two sailors with a lantern whisked below to investigate. They shrugged in the dim light and reported nothing out of the ordinary to Jacob.

Abra stared in shock at the wet afterbirth before her; the umbilical cord still attached to her like a severed lifeline to her past, present and future. She turned to her side, hiding her face and wept. Even Sade could offer no solace.

An hour later an exhausted Abra slept, too deep to hear movement until it ceased; the sound of thuds and sailor's shouting startled her awake as the *Eclipse* tied up to the working dock of *Paradise*.