



I remember hearing the birds first. They rose up from the marshes over to the East, the wide wings of the cranes flapping as they went overhead. The smaller geese lifted in the air as did the oddly made deep-billed pelicans. It was a beautiful spectacle really. It happened often enough to not cause a curious head to raise. More riders bringing the wagons that would load the cotton, and behind that the men sitting high up on their mounts looking menacingly at the Afrikaan and Negro faces. Menacing and mean; raw hate. Combinations that spelled **TERROR**, so we didn't look up at them. Heads stayed bent as we would work the fields, as if unmindful of their presence.

But today was different.

The long parade came into view with a flag flying. I didn't recognize this flag even though I had seen its colors in other flags. The men sat high on their mounts, but the uniforms they wore I had not seen before either. These men wore uniforms of a precious Blue with gold buttons down the chest. The head man passed and nodded to the bewildered eyes that looked up now from their obligations as whispers and curious gazes moved through the field. I saw them continue on. Some jotting pass hurriedly, flanking the field and forming a fence around us. The same Terror rose up in us, even though we did not know why. The faces were not the faces of what we had seen before but the weapons were the same; big guns and sticks with blades. The men pulled the women and children in and made a circle of false protection around us. Today we would all die here together. The men, women, children and the rest of kin's people would all succumb to the dominance of these men. We believed that Death was Freedom. Some had remembered, others had chosen to forget, and most had never known.

The elder from among us was beckoned. He stood apart from us and stared at the face that looked down at him. The soldier, wearing his blue uniform, came down from his horse. He approached as others along with him dismounted from their horses. Their faces were different; his words were even and strong. "Today you are 'emancipated,' Today you are a 'free' people. The President, Abraham Lincoln, signed his name to a paper making all the Afrikaans and Negros free."

The evening was full of talk, laughter and celebration; the newness of freedom surging like the full birth of new life. We recited this date over and over again. Children's voices rising in unison, the made-up songs unrehearsed. Today is June 19, 1865. A celebration of freedom deferred. A celebration of freedom of life.

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