

CAPTION: 1854 - BEFORE THE EMANCIPATION OF SLAVES

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - EARLY MORNING

BLURRED tree copses becoming clear. Leaves on a single bough shaken by a gentle wind --

FEET HITTING GROUND. FLASHING IMAGE of MOVING LEGS --

African-American, **ELIJAH JOHNSON (40, a branding "C" on his neck)**, lumbers ahead. In his arms, his **SON, (3)**, dangling and unconscious -- a bloody GASH on the child's forehead --

A SWARM OF RAVENS take flight above the treetops. WHITE BIRCH TREES populate an area, leading to DINAH'S COTTAGE.

INT. DINAH FOSSIL'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Natural light shines inside the one-room structure -- a CAMERA PANS the interior of the structure to find a wooden table, a stove, and numerous shelves cluttered with shaman paraphernalia: animal bones, bundles of herbs, vials of medicine, big and small cork-screw jars filled with insects, animal parts, tiny plants, and a human mandible.

A black sorcerer, **DINAH FOSSIL (45, pretty but worn features)** pins up her hair while looking in a mirror. Soon, she hears the WHISTLING WIND -- telepathically sensing something, she lets her hair fall to her nape as she turns to the door --

INT./EXT. DINAH FOSSIL'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

The door opens -- Elijah, holding his lifeless son, lethargically approaches.

ELIJAH

Dinah?

INT. DINAH FOSSIL'S COTTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Dinah looks at the wounded child laying on a mattress pad on the floor -- she unscrews a bottle of oil while Elijah paces back and forth.

ELIJAH (O.C.)

Master Connolly... he was punishing us... drunk and going crazy like he does... harmed my boy... I just...

DINAH
Elijah, *please*, be still.

Elijah ceases. Dinah pours the oil in the child's mouth --

ELIJAH
Is he going to make it?

DINAH
His spirit is strong. Move back.

Elijah backtracks as Dinah leans toward the boy's ear.

DINAH (CONT'D)
(in Latin; in his ear)
Spiritus mortuorum reple me.

Upon Dinah's last pronouncement, the WIND BREAKS through the front door -- a mini tempest RATTLING glass bottles --

The boy starts to WILDLY THRASH back and forth, his body uncontrollably convulsing --

Dinah stands up, moving over to Elijah, the two watching as a **SPIRIT VERSION** of the child -- a clear figure identical in appearance levitates above the inactive body. The spirit looks into Dinah's eyes and SINKS back into the body below.

The child rouses from deep unconsciousness, now heavily GASPING and MOANING from pain --

Dinah stands by the door, watching Elijah kneel next to his enlivened son. Still, the presence of the wind moves the tails of her dress and her hair.

DINAH (CONT'D)
Brother, where's Joshua?

Elijah guiltily looks over at Dinah. A clairvoyant knowing registers on Dinah's face as FRAME WIDENS to reveal the **SPIRIT FORM** of her husband **JOSHUA FOSSIL (45)** standing behind her. She turns around but the spirit is gone.

EXT. CONNOLLY'S PLANTATION - SAME

CLOSE ON callous **CONRAD CONNOLLY (60, white), visibly drunk**. He stands to the end of a line of badly-beaten BLACK FIELD SLAVES, patrolled by two white plantations overseers (**GRIFFIN WILEY** and **THADDEUS MCCOMB, 40s**), holding rifles.

CONNOLLY (O.C.)
What's this I hear about you
Niggers wanting freedom?

Connolly, a flask in hand, walks toward the other end of the human chattel line, striding pass two dead BLACKS with gunshot wounds in the chest and stomach, respectively.

CONNOLLY (CONT'D)

Setting an example is the only way
you slaves understand your place.

EXT. FOREST - CONTINUOUS

Dinah, terror on her face, quickly moves pass the birches, following the FLEETING APPARITION --

A fleet of RAVENS jet through the trees. In the midst of the birds, Dinah runs with all her might, her coat tails flying in the wind. Her body seemingly GLIDING --

EXT. CONNOLLY'S PLANTATION - SAME

Connolly stops to the end of the line where **JOSHUA FOSSIL, in the flesh**, stands with whipping lacerations on his chest and stomach. Connolly looks Joshua in the eye.

JOSHUA

(pleading)

Master Connolly. Served you for you
many years. Sir? Please --

Connolly coolly takes a swig from a flask. Joshua averts his eyes to Wiley, who loads his rifle --

EXT. FOREST - CONTINUOUS

Dinah and the mass of flying ravens suddenly stop at the SOUND OF A GUNSHOT. CAMERA PANS to reveal Joshua's SPIRIT FORM amidst the disarray of scattering birds. Stunned, Dinah collapses forward, kneeling to the ground. Hoarse and seemingly with her last ounce of life:

DINAH

No. Joshua! NO!!!!

FADE TO BLACK

CAPTION: 1867 - ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST - MORNING - RIVER

RAVENS caw as they soar above treetops. CAMERA MOVES along the river bank. Still waters separate the forest. Dried, colorful leaves carpet the ground.

EXT. RIVER - SAME - BOTTLENECK

STREAMING WATER flows over smooth stones -- The river's BOTTLENECK -- Water rush into a broader stream.

EXT. FOREST - SAME

Camera FOLLOWS the SAUNTERING LEGS of two African American boys, **SAMUEL JOHNSON (14)** and **JEREMY WILKES (14)**, who each carry two water-filled buckets, slung with ropes on their shoulders. The two are dressed in tattered, ruddy clothes --

SAMUEL

One, two, three, four, five...

JEREMY

Six, seven, nine --

The pair walk pass RAVENS, perched on a fallen trunk.

SAMUEL

You missed eight?

JEREMY

What's the difference?

SAMUEL

Numbers go in order, Jeremy. If you're one number off, then everything's wrong --

JEREMY

(in jest)

I only need to know the difference Mary and Bridgette. You know what I'm talking about!

SAMUEL

(smiling)

No, I don't.

EXT. RIVER - CONTINUOUS - BOTTLENECK

Samuel and Jeremy, on their stomachs, lie at the river bank, looking at the other side -- the two boys take their own unique route crossing the creek over the other side -- Jeremy lands one foot on a mossy flat stone, quickly grounding his other foot for balance -- rapid water streams over a few submerged, boulder-sized rocks -- the water washes over part of a fallen tree -- Samuel hops on the trunk, his hands partly flailing to maintain balance -- the rushing stream **KNOCKS** Jeremy off balance -- he lands on his hip -- Jeremy has no where to go --

SAMUEL (O.C.)

This way, Jeremy...

Jeremy watches as Samuel, a distance away, hops over to the other side --

JEREMY

You always beat me across!

EXT. WINSHIER ACADEMY - SAME - CONNOLLY'S OFFICE

CLOSE ON the SHARP EYES on an older **CONNOLLY (77)**. He looks out a window, viewing a cluster of trees, lining the distant river. CAMERA ZOOMS out to reveal his full face. A **SCAR** above his right eye. He takes a glass of whisky and slowly drinks.

A raven perches on the window sill, looking at him. He hits the window with his hand, scaring off the bird. His blow leaves a **CRACK** in the glass.

EXT. ROSE'S SHACK - LATE AFTERNOON

A modest ex-slave shack. Nearby, a small, stone-pit fire and a hand-drawn, wooden wagon.

Samuel and Jeremy rest their buckets near the fire pit.

ROSE JOHNSON (35, African-American, beautiful) hangs a dress on a make-shift clothing line, running between two trees. Samuel approaches Rose while Jeremy sits on a tree stump.

Sensing a **LIGHT WIND**, Samuel looks up to see three **RAVENS** SWOOPING across the sky.

SAMUEL

Ma, the ravens are back.

Rose holds up a tattered shirt and clips it onto the line.

ROSE
I can see that, son.

JEREMY
It's the spirit of the dead
conjurer, Miss Johnson?

Rose looks over at Samuel and then Jeremy.

ROSE
Don't believe everything you hear,
Jeremy. Besides, you best be
heading home.

Jeremy stands up, dusting off his hands.

JEREMY
Yes, Ma'am.

ROSE
What took you two so long?

The boys exchange a quick smirk before Jeremy walks off. Rose looks at Samuel with suspicion.

JEREMY
Ask Samuel Miss Johnson.

While Jeremy begins his trek home, Samuel looks in the basket of clothes and picks up a pair of pants, handing it to his mother, who shoots him a look of a silent indignation.

ROSE
Did you fetch water by the river's
fork?

SAMUEL
(with guilt)
Yes, Ma'am.

ROSE
And what have I said about that?

SAMUEL
Not to go there.

ROSE
Not to ever go there. Why? WHY?

SAMUEL
Because it's dangerous.

ROSE

There are whites on the other side
of that river that would do
anything to destroy folks like us.
Always remember that.

Shrinking under his mother's glare, Samuel nods his head.

INT. ROSE'S SHACK - EVENING

Small room illuminated by a LANTERN. The CAMERA PANS across
the bare space -- a wooden case, a few metal spoons,
trinkets, and a FEW BOOKS. A padded bed in one corner and in
another, an open doorway leading to AN ADJOINING ROOM --

Samuel and Rose sit at a round, wooden table. He reads the
Bible to her while she does needle work on an old shirt.

SAMUEL

"The Lord is my light and my
salvation; whom shall I fear? The
Lord is the strength of my life; of
whom shall I be afraid?"

ROSE

You're so handsome when you read.

SAMUEL

Only when I read, Ma?

ROSE

Smarts can make anyone look good.

Rose and Samuel exchange a smile.

SAMUEL

Pastor Clyde says the Unionist are
starting schools for Negroes. You
think I'll be able to go.

ROSE

Pastor Clyde says a lot of things,
don't mean they're gospel.

Samuel looks somewhat disappointed.

ROSE (CONT'D)

Look, better days are coming for
the Negro. But white men aren't
just going to change our lives.
It's up to us to make it better for
ourselves.

Samuel continues to read:

SAMUEL (O.C.)
 "When the wicked..."

ADJOINING BEDROOM

Samuel sleeps on his cot. Rose tenderly rests a cover on him.

SAMUEL (V.O.)
 "...even mine enemies and my foes,
 came upon me to eat up my flesh,
 they stumbled and fell."

EXT. FOREST - SAME

CAMERA FOLLOWS an unknown FIGURE running through the trees. We see the bruised face of **TIMOTHY (40, African American, battered)** looking back. He unexpectedly stumbles, rolling on the ground.

SAMUEL (V.O.)
 "... though war should rise against
 me, in this will I be confident."

He kneels, whimpering as a SHADOW of a man approaches--

EXT. FOREST - DAWN

TATTERED SHOES move across the forest ground. CAMERA ON WALKING FEET of Samuel and Rose. PANS UP to reveal the two, holding their BURLAP SACKS while advancing through the trees--

SUNLIGHT STREAMS through tall canopies -- Groups of BLACK COTTON PICKERS trek up the forest incline --

A vast open CLEARING leading to the cotton plantation (same from the beginning). Among them are Rose, Samuel, Jeremy, and Jeremy's mother, **SHEILA (55, African-American with a limp)**, who Jeremy helps to pull up the trail.

EXT. CARPENTER'S COTTON PLANTATION - MORNING

CLOSE ON WHITE COTTON PODS. BLACK PICKERS, wearing the cotton sacks, pluck and bag cotton.

Samuel picks with agility, soon noticing the scars on an ELDERLY BLACK MAN, whose back is streaked with old ridges from the whiplash. Jeremy, Rose, and Sheila pick nearby.

Samuel turns around to face Jeremy, who closes the gap between them still picking pods --

Jeremy nods over at **THADDEUS** McComb (45, from earlier), who holds a long, wooden rod while surveying the pickers.

JEREMY

(laughing)

Look, Mr. Thaddeus got himself a new rifle. It sure is pretty.

SAMUEL

Don't let him catch you looking?

JEREMY

I'm going to own me a rifle one day, Sammy. You watch and see.

SAMUEL

Negroes don't own guns, Jeremy. They get shot by them.

Samuel resumes his work, turning to face Thaddeus. Sternly:

THADDUES

Get back to work!

EXT. SOLOMON'S TOWN - LATE AFTERNOON

A UNION SOLDIER stands on a lift and pulls down a CONFEDERATE FLAG while **HEMMINGS (50)**, a burly white man spits on the ground, a sign of detestation.

SERGEANT MILLER (25, white) rides through the town on a brown mare. It's a BUSTLING atmosphere as WHITE MEN traverse the small, urban landscape --

Miller rides his horse pass a brick building where a UNION FLAG is hoisted above TWO WHITE UNION SOLDIERS stand patrol while holding rifles. Miller steers his horse toward the bordering forest in the distance.

EXT. FOREST - CHECK POINT - SAME

Miller, dismounted, walks over to **TIMOTHY HIGGINS (55, white, Union General)**, who stands with two 'checkpoint' SOLDIERS looking at a drawn-out MAP of SOLOMON'S TOWN -- Miller approaches, soon holding out his hand to Higgins. Shaking:

SERGEANT MILLER
 General Higgins, Sergeant Miller
 reporting to the Freedman's Bureau.
 At your service, Sir.

HIGGINS
 Sergeant. Welcome to Solomon's
 Town. How about we get you started?

Miller and Higgins look at the map: graphing of the Town with a river running through it, a plantation settlement "Carpenter's Plantation" on one side of the river and "Winshier Settlement" on the other side. Pointing to the ex-slave region on the map:

HIGGINS (CONT'D)
 The Bureau needs a census of the
 Freedmen in this settlement here.

SERGEANT MILLER
 (pointing to Winshier)
 What about here?

HIGGINS
 Townsfolk say it's a restricted
 area. Hasn't been crossed on either
 side in years.

SERGEANT MILLER
 I can cross it, Sir, to get an
 accurate count with your
 permission, of course.

Higgins folds the map and hands it to Sergeant Miller.

HIGGINS
 I forbid any crossing, Sergeant
 Miller. Just focus on what's at
 hand and that's an order.

SERGEANT MILLER
 Yes, Sir.

EXT. FOREST - SAME - COMMUNITY CLEARING

An open area in the forest. A tall, wooden cross in the center, surrounded by rocks. A few former slave cabins nearby, one of which is Pastor Clyde's cabin.

A rotund African American WOMAN (50) sits on a log with a few OTHERS. A BURLY BLACK MAN (55) sits next to her.