

PROLOGUE

Setting down his small wood chisel, the boy lit the oil lamp and adjusted the wick until a yellow-orange glow draped over his work area. Dusk was coming quickly and he wanted to finish the piece before he was ordered inside by his grandmother. Gnawing on his thumb, he tried to pull the most painful of the splinters from his hand but finally gave up. There would be time for that later. If he could add the final lines to the horse's mane tonight, he'd be able to sand it tomorrow, but he had to work quickly. Getting caught would mean losing everything he'd worked on so far as well as the possibility of punishment—not only his own, but his family's.

He finished the piece as nightfall overtook the island. Blowing the wood filings off the horse, he held it to the lamp, pleased by its outcome. Carefully hiding everything, he put out the lamp just as he was beckoned inside.

In public, the boy went by the name Henri. Just twelve years old, he lived with his mother and grandmother in a crude shack made from scrap wood and tin near the coast outside Port au Prince. His French name bore the mark of his ancestors' oppressors, but he was true Creole. He adhered to the rules by answering to Henri and openly practicing Catholicism, while furtively worshipping his own spirits. With the legal prohibition of the native religion strictly and brutally enforced, he and the other villagers had little choice.

Poverty and oppression defined Henri's existence. There had been great talk of social change when the United States Marine Corps first occupied Haiti two years earlier in 1915, but things remained much the same—became perhaps even worse. Henri and

his mother were forced to work without pay on the government “public improvement” projects that in truth never seemed to improve their own lives at all.

The unskilled labor went to waste on Henri, who even at a young age was the finest of craftsmen. Henri’s grandmother said that he could evoke the true spirit of the wood with his gift. And the woman had a gift of her own. A talented storyteller, she had for Henri recounted her grandfather’s struggle to flee the brutal French slave plantations, hiding in the mountains and joining the great high priest Francois Macandal to fight the rebellion. She would close her eyes and tell of her great-great-grandmother being ripped from Dahomey in West Africa by the slave traders and brought to Saint Dominique to work the coffee and indigo. He had come from a long line of brave souls who lived under oppression.

Like so many of Henri’s activities, crafting the chess set was done secretly. He used stolen wood from the hallowed gommier tree that had been cut down by the government during the latest anti-superstition campaign. The tree would have made the finest of boats had it been permitted to grow another few years. If Henri had not been making the set for an American corporal he had recently befriended, its completion wouldn’t have been possible. Corporal John Nicholls had come to the island the previous year to help supervise public projects. And although his presence there was driven by the push to eliminate their culture, the corporal was a gentle man who had helped Henri’s mother after she had sliced her arm working on the road project.

Corporal Nicholls liked Henri and they talked often. After learning of Henri’s skills, the corporal requested a hand-carved chess set. Henri took great care fashioning the set. He carved each piece to match the pictures the corporal drew, for Henri had never seen a chess set. The corporal had all the rough cuts made—there was no machinery in the village—and even managed at great risk to get Henri new woodworking tools. The tools became Henri’s most

prized possessions. When he was finished working on the board each evening, he would wrap it, along with his tools, in an old piece of hide and bury the bundle behind the family shack.

Weeks later, when Henri completed the board, he carved palm trees into each corner square. Just as the native spirits in Haiti were disguised as Catholic saints, the palms on the board in fact represented Danbala, the powerful snake spirit from the old land.

The pieces were carved of the same wood. Finally, they were drilled and filled with lead for weight. The final touches, of which the corporal would never know, required his grandmother's guidance. Henri washed the board in a luck bath she had prepared. The concoction, made of sweet hibiscus blossoms, scented water, and goat milk, would make the set even more powerful. Once dried, the board was thoroughly rubbed with the white rum kleren and then blessed.

Henri would never again see the board or its new owner after the corporal left the island that spring for a place called Miami. Nor would he hear of the board being confiscated and later sold. But throughout his life, Henri often gazed out toward the sea, remembering his friend and the masterpiece he had helped create.