

UPRIVER

written by Alexandria LaFaye ~ Illustrated by Peter Catalanotto

Chapter Three: The Capitol

a breakfast serials story

THE STORY SO FAR: Its 1867, and eleven-year-old Iah Thomas just witnessed the kidnapping of a girl his age. He wants to join the search team, but instead must accept a job as a run-about on a steamer that is traveling to its last stop at Fort Union before heading down the Missouri River to his home in St. Louis.

Come dawn, the cabin looked all tucked in, with shadows still lurking in the corners when I hopped into my boots on the way to the table. "Uncle Emmett, can't they send the soldiers from the fort after that girl Vinca?"

"The men up at Fort Union have other things to worry about. And you need to put your mind on seeing after your mother. Let the Good Lord see after Miss Vinca." Uncle Emmett dropped a bowl of cornbread under my nose.

"Yes, sir." I didn't feel like eating. "You think she's safe?"

"Those fellas want access to the water Hemshaw owns, not his daughter. They get what they want and they'll give her back."

"What if he won't give them the water rights?"

"What if the strings holding up the sky break and it comes down on our heads?"

I laughed at the idea.

"Thinking you can help Vinca Hemshaw's just about as silly a notion, son. Now, shush up and eat."

Packing away all my worries at the pier, I said a prayer for Miss Vinca and my good-byes to Uncle Emmett,

then headed up the gangplank. The crew scurried around, loading up the new supplies. Not knowing their routine would make me as useful as a snag about then, so I had myself a look around.

Most folks call steamers floating hotels, but they're more like cities stuffed onto a boat. You've got your stockyard and livery on the stern main deck—horses, mules, hogs, and even stacks of chicken cages wedged in among hale bales, packing crates, trunks, and bed rolls.

Folks who couldn't afford a room shared the main deck with the animals. They crowded the forward

end—playing cards, talking, and trading food. But the place looked almost deserted. The sickness that brought the Capitol to shore must've spread like fire through those passengers. Or they might've gotten off downriver. After all, Fort Union was the end of the line.

On the boiler deck above, the rich folks milled about, acting like they couldn't smell the

manure below. I'd heard tell of the long saloon along the cabins, where they divided the men from the women so the men could gamble, drink, swear, and talk nonsense while the women sipped tea, nibbled on fancy food, and talked nonsense. The way those rich folks acted made me think money must rot your brain.

As I stood there daydreaming, the quiet man walked up with a stack of papers, making him the clerk, the fella in charge of seeing that the cargo got to the right destination in one piece. Nodding, he said, "Morning, Iah."

"Morning."



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"Expect my coffee by 6:00 each morning. Cabin three." He pointed to the hurricane deck up top.

"Yes, sir." I nodded. If the boiler deck is the upper class of the steamboat city, then the hurricane deck is like City Hall. All the folks in charge stayed up there. Above everything stood the pilot house—a place where a good pilot could navigate through snags, sandbars, and changing currents. Being up top like that, keeping folks alive might even give the fella the idea he's a god.

All sweat and worry, a man with a lady's scarf stuffed into his shirt came up to ask, "How are things, Mr. Davis?"

"Your china is as secure as a bankroll in a safe, Mr. Bertrand."

"Are you sure?" The man wiped his brow. "Mother brought that china from the Orient."

"I understand, Mr. Bertrand. Why don't I send Mr. Thomas here down for a check?"

"Good, good." As he left, Mr. Bertrand dropped a coin into my hand. "Come tell me what you find."

"Yes, sir." I beamed. Tip money. A boy could buy a real baseball with tip money.

"Just look for the box marked fragile."

"Yes, sir." I ran for the hold stairs, eager to see what I'd find below.

Even with the light of day up top, the hold looked like a cave. The dripping darkness had me all twitchy. The shadows cast by the crates made the walls look unsteady. The air hung as thick and hot as steam. And the smell could've choked a pig—all rotting wood, dying fish, and urine. Who would use the cargo hold as an outhouse? *Whew!*

A funny kind of rubbing noise in the distance made me think on a rat trying to gnaw its way into a box. Rats being fever bringers, I grabbed a hook from the stairs to have me a rodent hunt.

The echoing howl of the hold door opening nearly sent my heart though the top of my head. Felt like a fool for being so skittish.

"What you doing, boy?" Mike called down.

"Checking the dishes."

"Bertrand?" Mike grabbed the rails, threw his legs up onto them, then slid down. Seeing the hook, he asked, "Planning on cracking a few?"

"No, sir, heard a rat."

He laughed. "Afraid of rats! Some river boy you are." He pointed. "Bertrand's crate's over there."

Hated how Mike made *me* feel like a rat, but I headed over to the crate with more "fragile" signs than the Missouri River has sandbars. Tied down, with the rest of the freight nearly a body's length away, that crate couldn't be safer in a mama's arms. And from the size of it, Mr. Bertrand had enough china to host a dinner for every cavalry man in Montana.

"Looks good," I shouted.

"Fine, now leave that rat to the cats. I got wood to haul, and you need a little toughing up." I didn't like how he slapped the crowbar he held into his palm like he wanted to hit something with it. "And you best keep to your work rather than sniffing after tips, boy."

He kept hitting that crowbar into his glove as he followed me up the stairs. It had me thinking he must be guarding something down there in that hold. But what?

to be continued...

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