

FADE IN:

EXT. SUCCESS PLANTATION, CANE FIELDS - DUSK

SUPERIMPOSE: Demerara, 1823

Silhouetted against a burning sugar cane field a young boy races towards a distant settlement. Thick smoke stitches the flames to the vivid sunset.

A hundred yards covered at pace. Bare feet scatter embers as they contact the ashen ground.

Breaths heavy from exertion.

Several enslaved men control the burn with birches, slapping the flames as they encroach. They ignore the boy.

EXT. SUCCESS PLANTATION, SHACKS - MOMENTS LATER

KOFI (late teens), born into servitude, but with the attitude of a free man races between the workers, few pay him heed.

Out of breath he enters a crudely-built Coopers shed.

INT. SUCCESS PLANTATION, COOPERS SHED - CONTINUOUS

Kofi stands in the doorway as two sweaty men toil over half-formed wooden sugar barrels.

JACK GLADSTONE (late 20's) tall, skinny and toned. Scarred arms from previous whippings, visible under a soiled vest top. Grime and sweat hides a chiselled jawline.

He whacks a wooden stave into place.

A workbench. QUAMINA GLADSTONE (late 40's) glides a plane over a stave. Experiences beyond his years reflect in his eyes. He looks to his son, who in turn acknowledges Kofi.

They both forge on with their work.

KOFI

Jack, Jack. Boat's come in.

Quamina and Jack exchange a glance. Frustrated, Kofi crosses the shed and fronts up to Quamina.

KOFI (CONT'D)
Quamina, the boat--

QUAMINA
I hear your noise boy, what am I to
be doin' with the news?

He smirks at Jack, they tease Kofi some more.

JACK
Boats come. Boats go. Nuttin'
special 'bout this one?

An isolated bell tolls in the distance. Jack and Quamina lay
their tools on the bench, not waiting for the second toll.
Jack wipes beads of sweat off his brow with a dirty forearm.

KOFI
Jack. The boats' from England. Sent
by the King 'imself.

The ragtag entourage exit the shed.

EXT. GEORGETOWN DOCKS - DUSK

The red ensign flies proudly at the head of a large schooner.
High in the rigging crewmen lower the main sails. The dock
bustles with activity.

Scores unload the 'FAME'. The gangway teems with men and
cargo. Orders shouted over chaos.

A line of shackled enslaved men and women are led through the
crowd.

EXT. SUCCESS PLANTATION, SHACKS - DAY

A line of enslaved workers shuffle home, hunger guides tired
feet. The firelight dances on the promise of stew.

Jack, Quamina and Kofi amble towards their homes.

JACK
I know one thing. King's news will
wait till my belly's full.

QUAMINA
He'll be waiting a mighty while.

Quamina reaches a small cluck of women who fuss over pots. He
kisses his mother's head, TONISEN. A modest woman of some
sixty summers prods her spoon into the steaming pot.

QUAMINA (CONT'D)
Hear me Tonisen...

Amused. Quamina gestures towards Jack.

QUAMINA (CONT'D)
Your grandson needs a full belly so
that he might give the King an
audience.

TONISEN
His belly will stay as empty as the
boats.

Jack squats beside his grandmother and takes her hand.

JACK
Food cooked with love always fills
me. They say this ship brings--

TONISEN
Empty souls to replace the weak and
frail.

Jack surveys the vast cane fields. An eerie fire glow lights
the settlement hutches.

JACK
Talk of emancipation.

TONISEN
(dismissively)
Talk.

QUAMINA
Chatter, chatter. It don't mean a
damn thing.

JACK
But what if it's true?

His question hangs. Tonisen ladles stew into a crude bowl.

EXT. SUCCESS ROAD - DAY

Jack hauls a reluctant mule, who in turn drags a barrel laden
dray cart. Secured loosely with hemp, they wobble
precariously as the cart jolts in and out of pot holes.

Dressed in his church clothes, Jack navigates his nag through
mounds of horse manure, jostles with other carts and wagons.

A sign reads "GEORGETOWN 5 MILES".

EXT. GEORGETOWN, GENERAL STORE - LATER

The empty cart trundles along quicker now. Jack yanks the tired mule to a stop outside the storefront and encourages him to drink from the stagnant trough.

The store owner deliberately steps onto the veranda. Jack splashes 'green' water over his face, takes a hanky from his pocket and pats himself dry.

The store owner snaps a birch switch against his boot. The message clear. Jack wrenches the thirsty mule's head from the water trough and walks the animal away.

The store owner spits and descends the steps to where Jack stood. He takes his switch and erases Jack's footprints.

EXT. GEORGETOWN, TOWN SQUARE - MOMENTS LATER

Jack leans against the post his beast's now tethered to. His tormentor watches him, with another spit, he heads inside.

Behind Jack, the governors whitewashed residence looms large. The front door pushes open.

Freeman DANIEL (mid 20's) bustles out and towards him. A well turned out appearance, a jacket with all the buttons, shoes without holes. He has a quiet defiance about him.

DANIEL

Hey!

Jack cranes his neck, spies Daniel and revolves to face him.

JACK

Daniel, my church brother.

DANIEL

Jack, you know it makes things tricky to be seen with you.

JACK

Is the lot of a free man such a difficult one?

Daniel admonishes him with a look.

DANIEL

My freedom's carved from the whims of dead men. My fortunes can change as easily as yours.

JACK
I hear rumours from England.

DANIEL
Not all rumours ring true. Wha' you heard?

Daniel brings Jack by the arm towards the side of the house.

JACK
Wha' you know.

DANIEL
Newspapers say the King gives freedom to all his colonies.

JACK
Demerara among them? So why do they hold freedom from us?

Daniel checks for prying eyes and attentive ears.

DANIEL
This will get me beat Jack. The master got a temper when he sets his mind on it.

Jack maintains eye contact.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you've learnt it.

Jack's overwhelmed.

JACK
I knew it. Thank you. "All things workin' together for good for those who love God".

DANIEL
I must go before I am missed.

EXT. LE RESOUVENIR PLANTATION, BETHEL CHURCH - DAY

The congregation trickles into the church. The pastor, a cold devout man, oversees their arrival. An air of joy and reverence about his flock.

Wisps of smoke rise from last night's burn. Men tend to the fields and ignore the bell that calls them to worship.

Quamina, Tonisen, Jack and Kofi corral the few who attend from Success Plantation, Kofi skips around Jack.

INT. BETHEL CHURCH - DAY

AMBA, a proud freewoman (late teens) passes Bibles out. She has a fire inside her that's not yet been extinguished. Her eyes meet the pastor's as he prepares to address his flock.

He attempts a flirtatious smile, ignored by Amba. He pulls his wife to his side and she hands him his sermon. He feigns attention to it.

Jack takes a Bible, scans the room for friends. Edges his way along the pews, Quamina behind him. They greet comrades and huddle together, they chatter in unheard hushed voices.

Kofi sidles up to Amba's station. In his eagerness to attract her attention, he knocks a pile of Bibles over. Amba drops to her knees to scoop them up.

A second hesitation before, embarrassed, Kofi helps her.

KOFI

Miss Amba... excuse me.

Kofi hands over the books he's collected, their fingers brush. Kofi recoils and leaps into the nearest vacant pew. Amba 'reserves' the seat behind him with her shawl and Bible.

Jack huddles with the menfolk.

JACK

They say the King's word already
landed in Georgetown.

SCEPTIC

Still we bend our backs...

JACK

That's what I don't get. If it's
true why ain't we free?

He scans the faces. No answers.

INT. BETHEL CHURCH - LATER

The sermon preached to a hot, subdued congregation.

Amba perches behind Kofi, her hands cradle a growing pregnancy, not yet visible under her flowing dress. She ruffles her clothing to cover herself.

The pastor preaches. His indistinct words echo through the hall in a rhythmic cadence, it fills the air.

Kofi desperate to turn to Amba, but sense of place keeps his face forward. She taps him and, amused, he feigns ignorance of her touch and mimes 'brushing off' her hand.

Amba gives him a determined prod.

AMBA
Don't you be ignoring me master
Kofi...

He smirks and half turns.

KOFI
You will see me whooped miss Amba.

The pastor cuts him to the quick with a glare from the pulpit. Kofi snaps his head to face forward.

Amba scowls back at her tormentor and grabs Kofi by the sleeve, pulls him towards the door.

The pastor watches them go, a faint snarl on his lip.

EXT. BETHEL CHURCH - NIGHT

The pair cavort with each other as they leave the service prematurely. Kofi takes her hand and playfully pulls her into the tall cane fields.

Joyful voices of the congregation fill the air with the hymn 'All hail the power of Jesus' name'.

CONGREGATION (O.C.)
*BLESS HIM, EACH POOR OPPRESSED RACE
THAT CHRIST DID UPWARD CALL;
HIS HAND IN EACH ACHIEVEMENT TRACE,
AND CROWN HIM LORD OF ALL!*

The pastor emerges from the hall and scours the fields from his top step vantage point. No sign of Amba. He's irritated.

EXT. CANE FIELDS - MOMENTS LATER

Kofi and Amba gambol through the canes, Amba feigns protest at the liberty Kofi takes with her. She twists to him, arm out stretched to keep him at bay.

He tugs her close, they sink to the ground. A kiss. A protest. Another embrace.

AMBA

You forget yourself Master Kofi.

Kofi feigns shock, drops to his knees and removes his top, illuminated by a sweep of torchlight, he hits the deck. Amba peeks through the canes.

The pastor's face contorts in anger as the flame arcs in front of him. He watches for movement and sees none. He thrusts the flaming torch into a bucket and returns inside. The torchlight fades. Lovers left in moonlit darkness.

EXT. LE RESOUVENIR PLANTATION, THE MIDDLE ROAD - NIGHT

Oil lamps highlight the pastor in the church doorway.

Two mounted guards circle their horses around the worshipers. They don't see the men who gather in the shadows.

Jack ushers them to leave the path and venture into the darkness of the bush. Quamina takes the rear and sweeps the stragglers along.

EXT. THE BUSH - NIGHT

The men gather together.

JACK

I have more news from Georgetown.

SPOKESPERSON

More rumours?

JACK

Confirmation.

Reactions vary, some elated others unsure and sceptical.

SPOKESPERSON

How did you come by such news?

JACK

Freeman Daniel, he speaks openly with the ship's crew and reads the newspapers from England.

SPOKESPERSON

You'd trust the word of a man who eats with Buckra?

QUAMINA

With our lives.

A scrawny-looking man fiddles with his neckerchief. A carved pendant of an eagle's eye clearly visible underneath.

DOUBTER

If your words hold true, we would know. We would hear it sung across the plantations.

JACK

Upon Daniel's life the King's words have been delivered to the Governor. It's only a matter of--

DOUBTER

I hear the Governor's in no mood to see the Kings words free us.

QUAMINA

Then we don't wait. The King's words are ours. We rise, and claim them!

DOUBTER

Who rises? Us? A dozen starved slaves and an old man...

Quamina takes offense at this referral.

JACK

Not just us, everyone. Every slave on every plantation across the land. We--

Hooves clatter against the rocky road.

The clandestine group scatter. Not all make cover. The horses round the bend at a gallop.

The lead rider brandishes his horse whip above his head. A runner takes the whip across his face, he collapses. The next slaves gets a swipe across his back.

The two struck men scramble into the scrub and lie low. Those spared the rod make good their escape through the tall cane.

Horsemen dismount in search of wounded prey.

THE BUSHES BESIDE THE ROAD

Every breath laboured, every movement minimal, as the overseers search. Switches whack the bushes as they advance.

The scrawny man crouches low and looks feverishly about, he fingers the pendant around his neck. Reading their friend the others urge him to stay put with shakes of the head.

Sweat glistens on his brow. A crack of boots on brittle wood resonates across the stillness. Scrawny man spooks.

He runs.

Muffled shouts of glee from the riders, the chase on. They scramble through the undergrowth towards the road. He's tripped, falls into the dirt and set upon.

THE MIDDLE ROAD

The scrawny man barely moves. The riders reunite with their horses, mount and deliberately walk their steeds over him.

SCRAWNY MAN

Please...

One rider dismounts. A job unfinished. He hogties the scrawny man with a length of rope. A vexatious kick to the ribs. He hands the rope end to his companion.

The mounted rider digs his heels into the sides of his horse and it sets off at pace. The last breath smashed out of the scrawny man against the hard ground as he's dragged away.

THE MIDDLE ROAD

The dust still heavy in the air. The group steps cautiously from the bush. Blood stains the gravel.

Something catches Jack's eye. He crouches and from the dirt lifts the man's eagle eye pendant. It swings lightly on a frayed cord.

JACK

They took a man who believed in freedom. They try to drag away our belief.

He wraps the cord around his wrist. Not jewellery, a vow.

JACK (CONT'D)

We will make sure they remember who stood here.

The group stand in solidarity, lit by the full moon.