

*Prisoners From
the Front*

Arabella's story

HILARY HARKNESS

In 2018, I was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City copying Winslow Homer's iconic Civil War painting "Prisoners from the Front." I was intrigued that Homer's general looks as though he is hiding an uncomfortable secret. As my painting developed, I changed the race of a Union soldier from white to Black and the look between the two men became more intimate.

I started writing about the soldier "Charles Freeman" and questioned how the painting could have come to exist. Maybe it was commissioned by his older sister, Arabella.

I jotted down ideas and questions on post-it notes that soon overtook my studio walls and easels. My research into the history and progression of racist ideas and laws shaped nearly every aspect of the story, and because they shifted so frequently as time passed, they often negated what I had already written. The burdens put on free Black people were so varied, diabolical and nuanced that it's hard to depict them, especially visually. This series is further complicated by painting from a queer perspective in a vernacular that includes erotic imagery. I've created this zine as an integral part of the exhibition to bring together some of the words and images that make up this story.

While my story focuses on the American Civil War, I was painting between 2018 - 2023, another formative time in American history with shocks reverberating well beyond our shores. With racism and homophobia persisting, it felt right that the Freeman family's experience should unfold on a more global stage. The grand landscapes inhabited by the Freemans are inspired by paintings by the 19th century Russian artists Ivan Shishkin and Isaac Levitan.

Prisoners from the Front was also informed by witnessing the experiences of my wife Ara; to be Black, prosperous and free still comes at an enormous cost. All of the paintings in this series are informed by historical research, current events and the real-time reactions to my paintings by Ara and our extended family. Without them, these paintings of Arabella Freeman and family would not exist. - H.H.

1861, Virginia

On the eve of the Civil War, it's a beautiful day in the country...



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Arabella Freeman

The eldest child of four, Arabella is heir apparent of Freeman Hall, which has a long history of being run by women. Arabella's mother Antoinette Freeman has raised her children to always appear calm, but lately Arabella's been inscrutable.

After years of home schooling, Arabella keeps the books for Mrs. Freeman's medical and midwifery practice.

Arabella's madly in love with her mother's assistant Justine and wants kids with her. She also wants a puppy but can't legally own one.

Today is her 22nd birthday.

Freeman land, near the border of the Beaumont Plantation

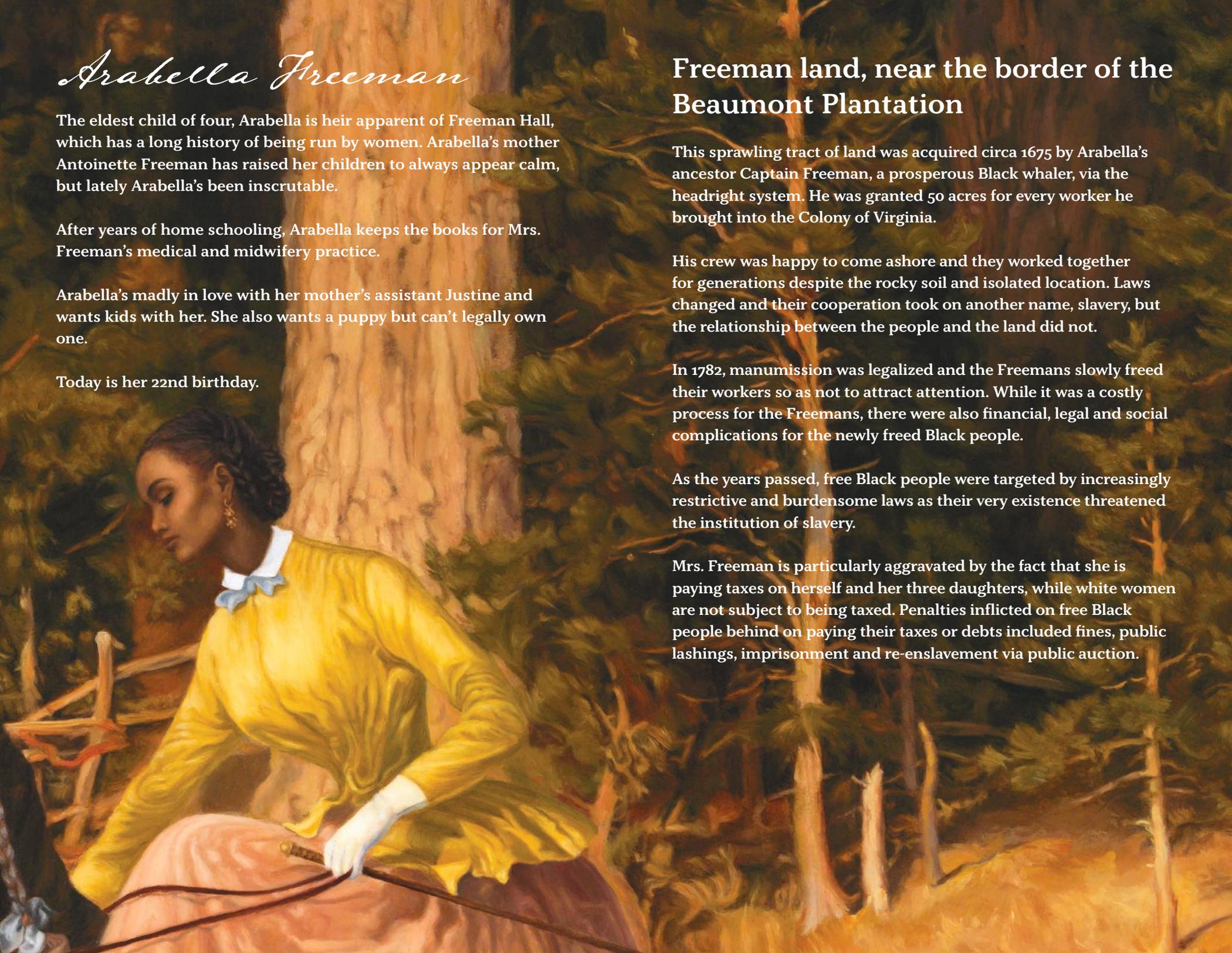
This sprawling tract of land was acquired circa 1675 by Arabella's ancestor Captain Freeman, a prosperous Black whaler, via the headright system. He was granted 50 acres for every worker he brought into the Colony of Virginia.

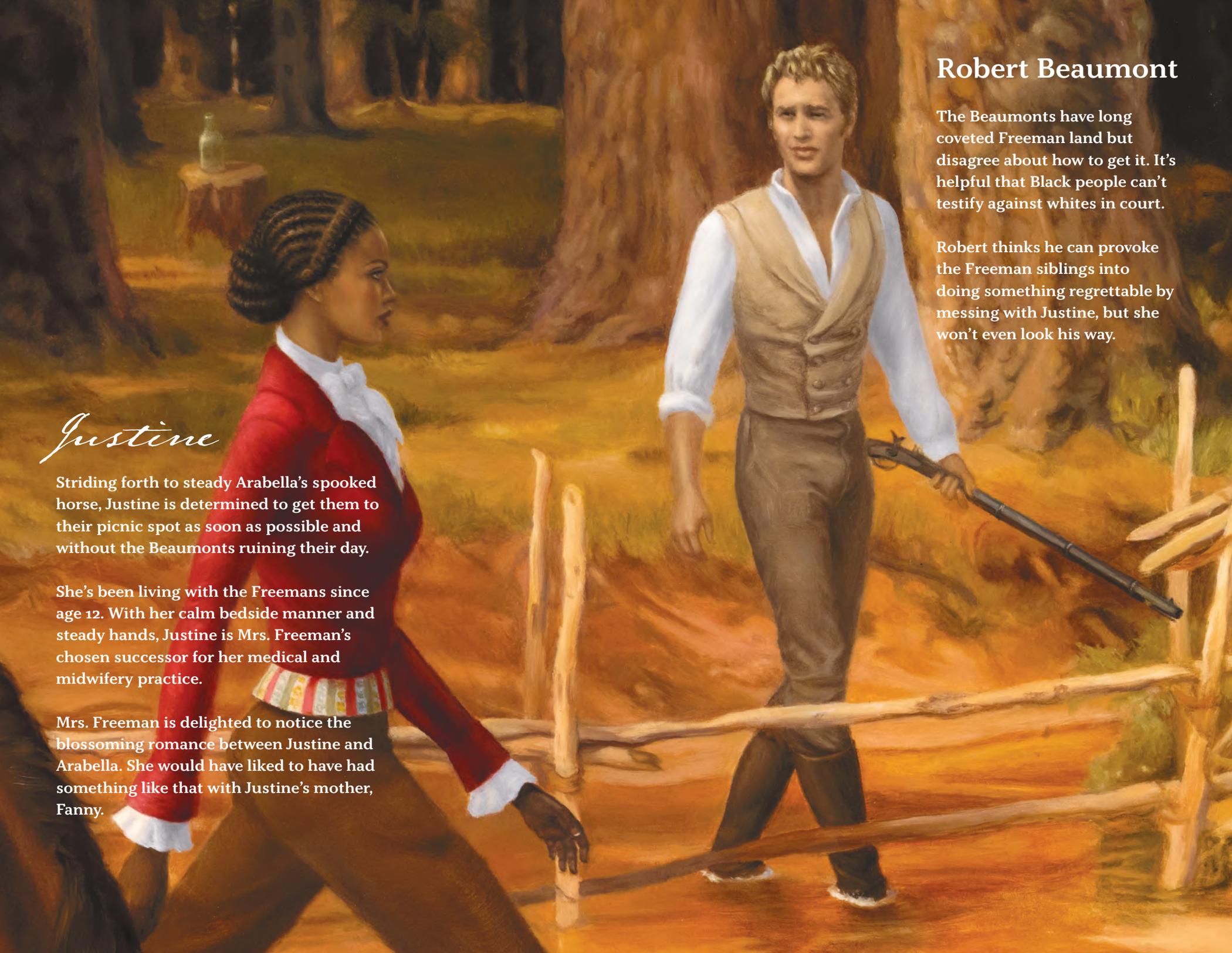
His crew was happy to come ashore and they worked together for generations despite the rocky soil and isolated location. Laws changed and their cooperation took on another name, slavery, but the relationship between the people and the land did not.

In 1782, manumission was legalized and the Freemans slowly freed their workers so as not to attract attention. While it was a costly process for the Freemans, there were also financial, legal and social complications for the newly freed Black people.

As the years passed, free Black people were targeted by increasingly restrictive and burdensome laws as their very existence threatened the institution of slavery.

Mrs. Freeman is particularly aggravated by the fact that she is paying taxes on herself and her three daughters, while white women are not subject to being taxed. Penalties inflicted on free Black people behind on paying their taxes or debts included fines, public lashings, imprisonment and re-enslavement via public auction.





Robert Beaumont

The Beaumonts have long coveted Freeman land but disagree about how to get it. It's helpful that Black people can't testify against whites in court.

Robert thinks he can provoke the Freeman siblings into doing something regrettable by messing with Justine, but she won't even look his way.

Justine

Striding forth to steady Arabella's spooked horse, Justine is determined to get them to their picnic spot as soon as possible and without the Beaumonts ruining their day.

She's been living with the Freemans since age 12. With her calm bedside manner and steady hands, Justine is Mrs. Freeman's chosen successor for her medical and midwifery practice.

Mrs. Freeman is delighted to notice the blossoming romance between Justine and Arabella. She would have liked to have had something like that with Justine's mother, Fanny.

Charles Darwin Freeman

As Antoinette Freeman's only son, Charles's often outnumbered. When he was younger, he'd sneak over and shoot bottles with the Beaumont brothers. Lately, it's safer to keep his distance.

Despite being forbidden by law to own a gun, Charles is an excellent marksman. He's also a romantic who has written a poem and packed a champagne picnic in honor of Arabella's birthday.

When Justine dismounts to help Arabella with her horse, Charles admires how hard Justine is trying to make this a perfect day for Arabella.

They're both dreading telling Arabella that they're joining the Union Army if war breaks out.

A secret spot near the property line

Long ago, Mrs. Freeman played in these woods with her only friend Fanny who was enslaved by the Beaumonts. Antoinette did her best to help Fanny by smuggling bundles of food to their secret spot, and dreamed of one day protectively purchasing Fanny.

This childhood dream was cut short when Antoinette was sent to Philadelphia for medical training. While Antoinette was away, a law was enacted to prevent free Black people from buying anyone other than their own children or spouses out of slavery.

Upon the completion of her medical training, Antoinette returned home and set up a medical and midwifery practice to serve the enslaved women in the district. When Fanny became pregnant and Antoinette detected two heartbeats, the childhood friends made a pact that changed the course of Freeman Family history forever.





Justine and her horse on Freeman land, near Beaumont Plantation

Caught in the cross hairs of history in more ways than one, Justine's entire life has been subject to the ever-changing laws.

When it was Fanny's time to give birth, Mrs. Freeman delivered the first twin as the sun was rising and at Fanny's insistence, rushed home to Freeman Hall with the baby in her arms. He would be named Charles.

The second twin, Justine, came without assistance but Fanny suffered complications and died before Mrs. Freeman could return to save her.

Justine spent her childhood enslaved to the Beaumonts until her grandmother died, leaving her orphaned. Mrs. Freeman, forbidden by law to buy Justine, stepped in and made a deal with Old Man Beaumont that allowed Justine to live and work at Freeman Hall.

Old Man Beaumont recently died, leaving behind a surprise in his will: Justine is to be freed. But, it's 1861 and state law now requires free Black people to leave Virginia within a year and a day of being freed or risk being publicly auctioned back into slavery.

Mrs. Freeman has presented Justine with a newly available legal solution: petition the government for re-enslavement to a white family who would allow Justine to continue living and working at Freeman Hall. The process is lengthy and costly and there are, of course, no guarantees, but many newly freed Black people are pursuing this option to stay near enslaved family members.

Justine won't consider re-enslavement. Not even if it means she can be with Arabella.

Fort Worth, VA autumn 1861

Charles and Justine can't legally enlist as soldiers, but find that even as workers their skills are sorely needed.

Unbeknownst to them, Mrs. Freeman has used her connections to place Charles and Justine in proximity to a rising star in the Union Army.



Francis Barlow

Barlow, Harvard class of 1855 valedictorian, is commander of a regiment of New York City boys who can't shoot. With no prior military experience, neither can he.

As an officer riding into battle on horseback alongside men on foot, he'll be an easy target. It will take more than his brilliance and fearlessness to survive the war; he'll need a loyal bodyguard and a medic dedicated to serving him.

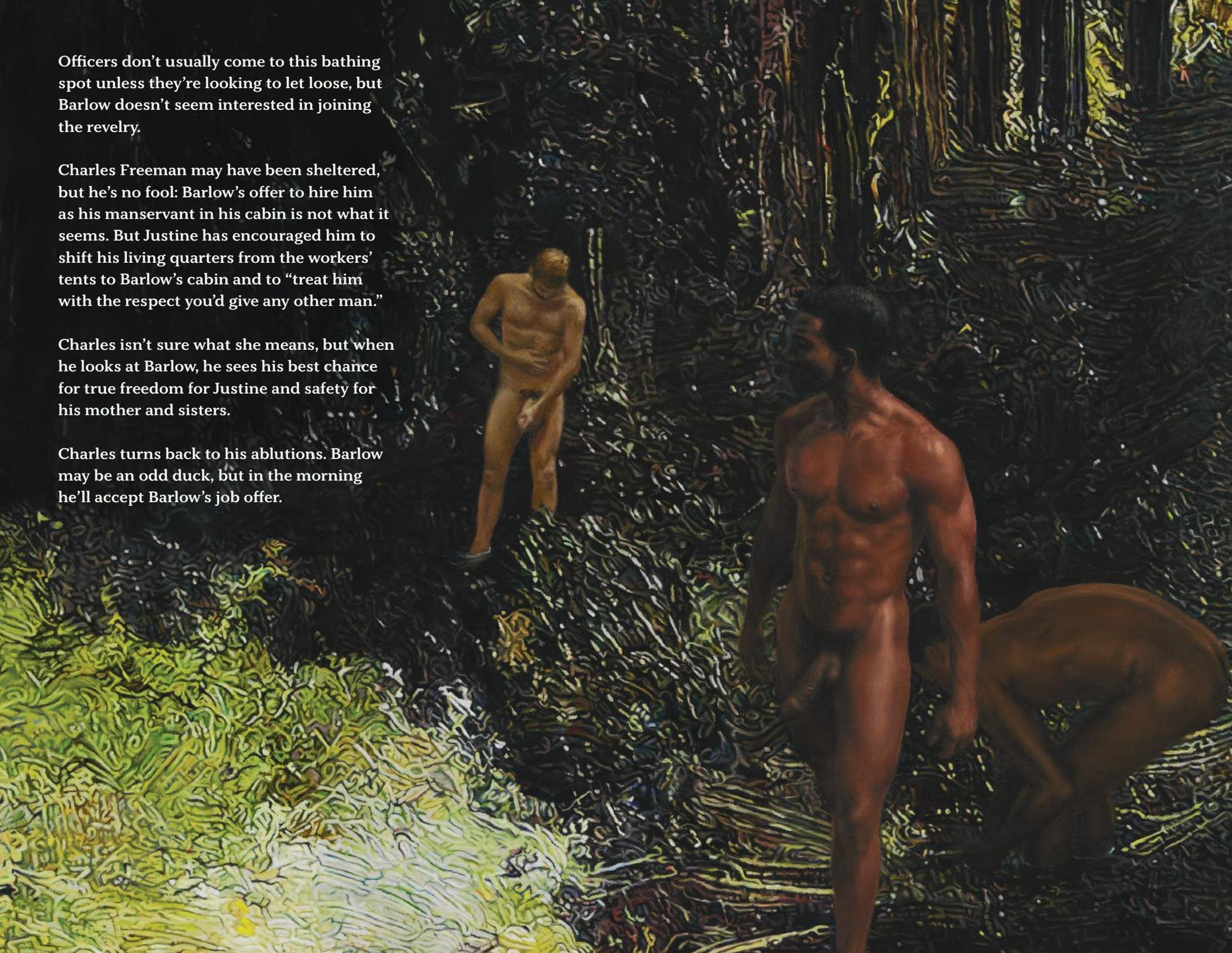
A connection has secured two country boys, Charles and Justin. Charles is building him a cabin for the coming winter and 'Justin,' who isn't fooling Barlow, is tending to his private health matters.

Officers don't usually come to this bathing spot unless they're looking to let loose, but Barlow doesn't seem interested in joining the revelry.

Charles Freeman may have been sheltered, but he's no fool: Barlow's offer to hire him as his manservant in his cabin is not what it seems. But Justine has encouraged him to shift his living quarters from the workers' tents to Barlow's cabin and to "treat him with the respect you'd give any other man."

Charles isn't sure what she means, but when he looks at Barlow, he sees his best chance for true freedom for Justine and safety for his mother and sisters.

Charles turns back to his ablutions. Barlow may be an odd duck, but in the morning he'll accept Barlow's job offer.

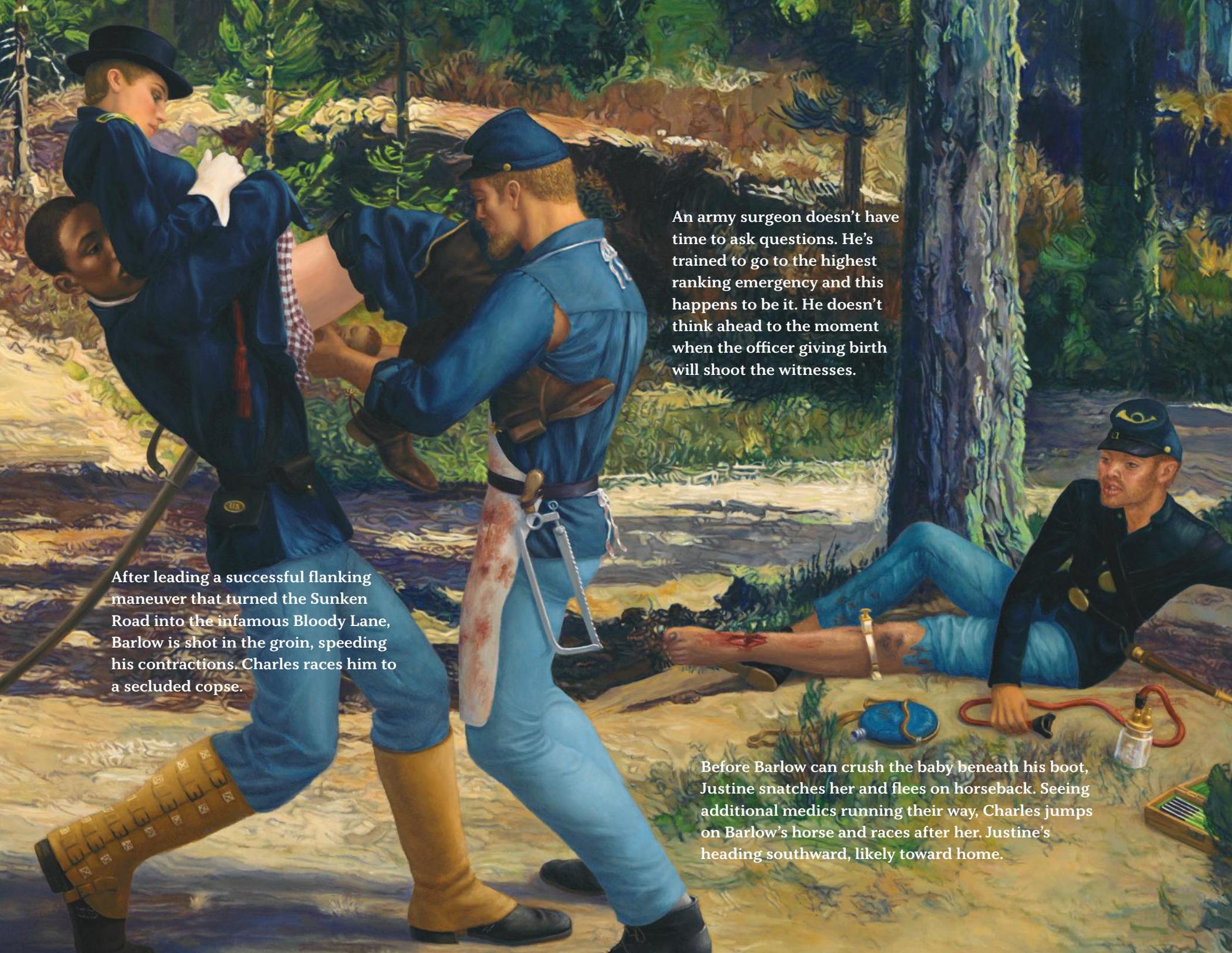


September 17, 1862 The Battle of Antietam

In the chaos of battle, Justine and Charles wear Union uniforms to blend in while covering Barlow. Justine's been treating Barlow's "bad case of bloating and gas" for months. His first contraction came in the early dawn before the battle but he was determined to fight.

Justine's been tracking Barlow's condition from nearby and arrives on a fallen officer's mount just in time to see the delivery.





An army surgeon doesn't have time to ask questions. He's trained to go to the highest ranking emergency and this happens to be it. He doesn't think ahead to the moment when the officer giving birth will shoot the witnesses.

After leading a successful flanking maneuver that turned the Sunken Road into the infamous Bloody Lane, Barlow is shot in the groin, speeding his contractions. Charles races him to a secluded copse.

Before Barlow can crush the baby beneath his boot, Justine snatches her and flees on horseback. Seeing additional medics running their way, Charles jumps on Barlow's horse and races after her. Justine's heading southward, likely toward home.

A detailed oil painting of a Confederate soldier in a forest. The soldier, wearing a blue uniform and cap, is perched on a large tree branch, looking down at a rifle. Below him, a campsite is visible with a fire, cooking pots, and various supplies. The forest is dense with green foliage and large tree trunks. The text 'Two days later' is in the top left corner.

Two days later

It's a little shot up, but this Confederate campsite contains looted items like a broken-stringed banjo still good enough for playing Dixie. A pan of trotters sizzles on the coals.

But let's not get it twisted, slavery was a nationwide business. New York City banks extended lines of credit to plantation owners so they could purchase enslaved people and Northern merchants supplied plantations with everything they needed right down to cotton clothing milled in New England.



A Confederate sharpshooter

Charles neutralizes an enemy.

The shot isn't clean. Justine, now an experienced medic, knows the clock is ticking for her and the newborn. It's too dangerous to stop. She must trust the horse to get them to Freeman Hall safely.



Freeman land, one hour later



Charles can only watch as Justine gives his baby to Arabella and murmurs, "It's the General's baby."

Charles stays silent, keeping Barlow's secret and sliding from father to uncle in a heartbeat.

Justine closes her eyes and drifts on the scent of gardenias. Arabella's arms wrap around her as she loses her balance. She's on her back resting on crinolines. On clouds. The weight of their baby on her chest. Arabella's lips on her forehead. The three of them together as a family feels like heaven.

Justine (1842-1862)

The following day, Mrs. Freeman is exhausted from her overnight vigil caring for the baby and Charles, who wouldn't leave the baby's side. Sensing he was trying to make some sort of decision, Mrs. Freeman held back her own tears waiting for him to speak. When he does, it is to say that they are to christen the baby Grace Barlow Freeman.

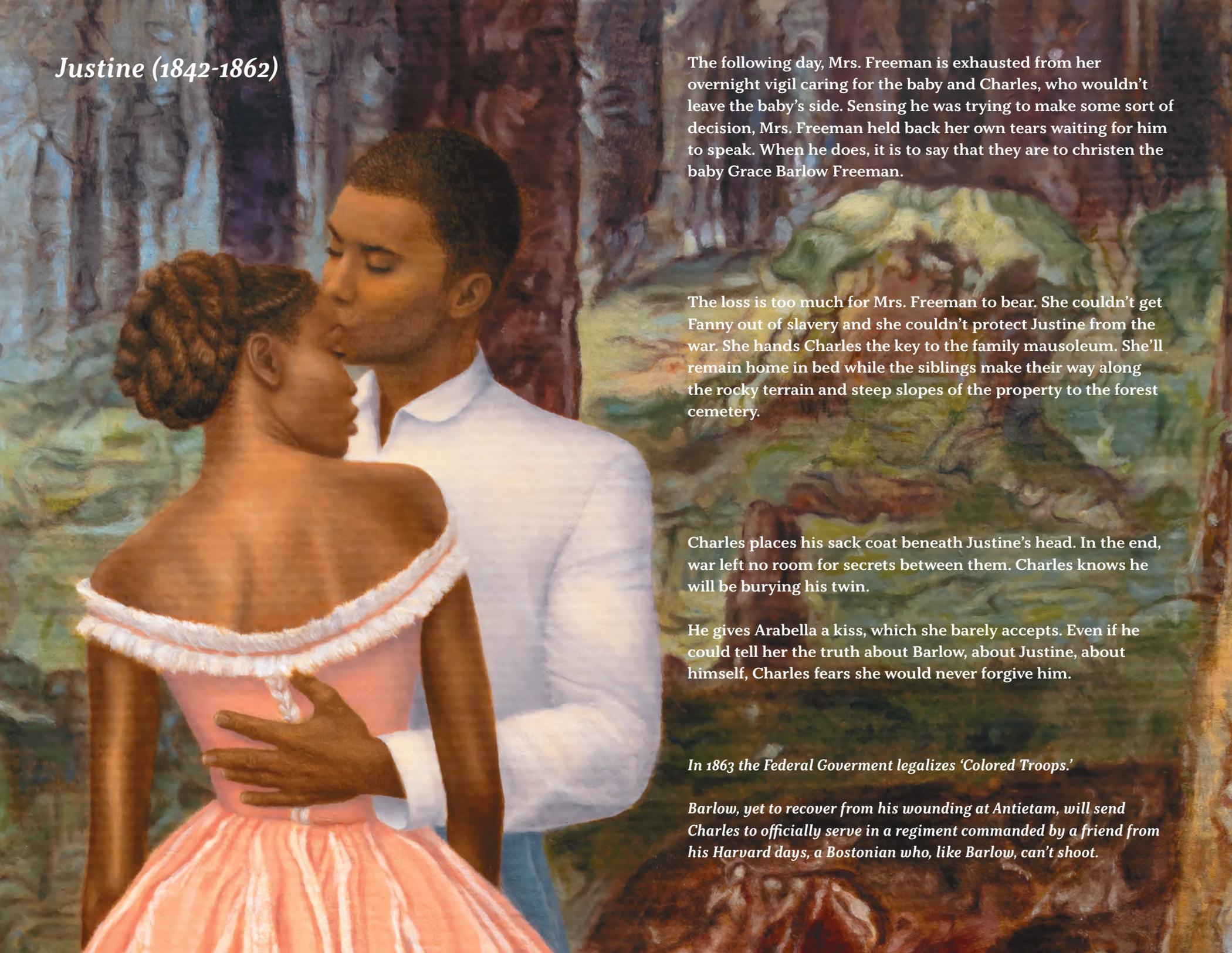
The loss is too much for Mrs. Freeman to bear. She couldn't get Fanny out of slavery and she couldn't protect Justine from the war. She hands Charles the key to the family mausoleum. She'll remain home in bed while the siblings make their way along the rocky terrain and steep slopes of the property to the forest cemetery.

Charles places his sack coat beneath Justine's head. In the end, war left no room for secrets between them. Charles knows he will be burying his twin.

He gives Arabella a kiss, which she barely accepts. Even if he could tell her the truth about Barlow, about Justine, about himself, Charles fears she would never forgive him.

In 1863 the Federal Government legalizes 'Colored Troops.'

Barlow, yet to recover from his wounding at Antietam, will send Charles to officially serve in a regiment commanded by a friend from his Harvard days, a Bostonian who, like Barlow, can't shoot.



Harriet Freeman

As the youngest sibling, Harriet's driven by curiosity and misses nothing. No one needs to tell her Baby Grace is the next best thing to Justine's own baby. If Harriet was older she would have made a great Union spy, except for her belief secrets are best hoarded.

Harriet and Justine had a secret project together. They kept the family mausoleum stocked with jars of jam and silver spoons for fugitives fleeing northward.

While the jam disappears regularly, not a single spoon has ever been taken. Though Harriet hopes they will be taken and sold, it's a good thing they're not, as they're monogrammed with Mrs. Freeman's initials.

One day Harriet will become a doctor like her mother. Until then, she'll be hiding everything except the family silver.



A mermaid

A whaling ship

Two years later Freeman Hall, June 1864

As the nearby battles intensify, it is becoming increasingly dangerous for the Freeman women to remain at home unprotected. General Barlow and Charles arrive with a plan.

On week 7 of dysentery, Barlow is aware his shirttails are stained and stinking. But he's been performing well on the battlefield despite his lingering gut wounds from Gettysburg where he had to make due without Charles, who was off serving in a colored regiment.

When Barlow resumed command this year, he was grateful Charles willingly returned to his side. Fighting in tandem with Charles makes a battlefield feel like a dance floor.

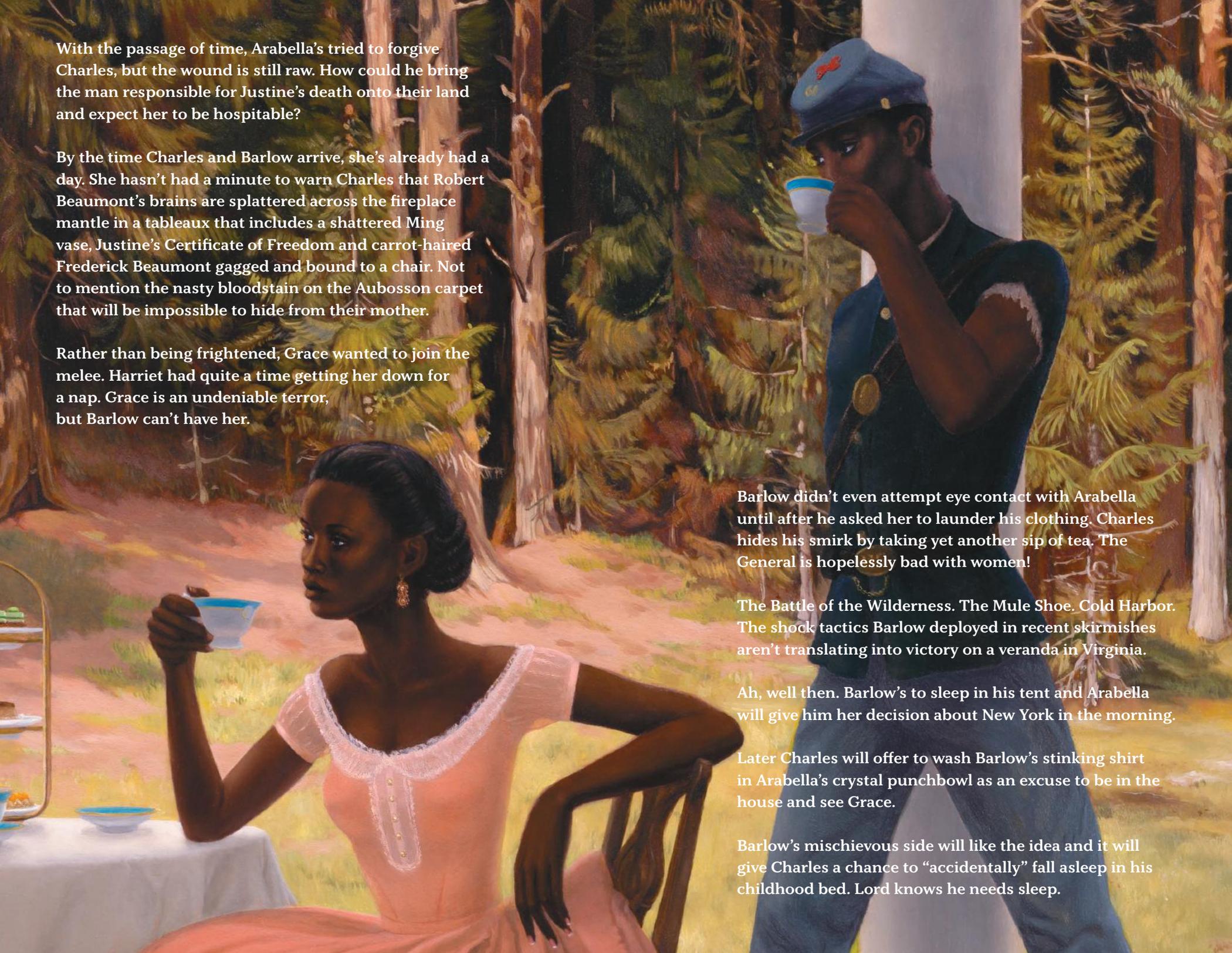
Charles is distracted with worry about his mother and sisters. Barlow has proposed moving them to New York City at his expense. Barlow's offer stems from ambition rather than altruism as he's already planning his post-war political career. He will need Charles to continue as his bodyguard on the battlefield that is New York City politics.

Barlow can't admit he's in love with Charles but he's already learned the hard way he can't live without him. One step at a time. Now, they have to convince Arabella that it's time to go.



A Model 1840 "Old Wristbreaker" Saber, larger and heavier than standard-issue

A concealed Smith & Wesson Model 1 revolver in an ankle holster



With the passage of time, Arabella's tried to forgive Charles, but the wound is still raw. How could he bring the man responsible for Justine's death onto their land and expect her to be hospitable?

By the time Charles and Barlow arrive, she's already had a day. She hasn't had a minute to warn Charles that Robert Beaumont's brains are splattered across the fireplace mantle in a tableaux that includes a shattered Ming vase, Justine's Certificate of Freedom and carrot-haired Frederick Beaumont gagged and bound to a chair. Not to mention the nasty bloodstain on the Aubosson carpet that will be impossible to hide from their mother.

Rather than being frightened, Grace wanted to join the melee. Harriet had quite a time getting her down for a nap. Grace is an undeniable terror, but Barlow can't have her.

Barlow didn't even attempt eye contact with Arabella until after he asked her to launder his clothing. Charles hides his smirk by taking yet another sip of tea. The General is hopelessly bad with women!

The Battle of the Wilderness. The Mule Shoe. Cold Harbor. The shock tactics Barlow deployed in recent skirmishes aren't translating into victory on a veranda in Virginia.

Ah, well then. Barlow's to sleep in his tent and Arabella will give him her decision about New York in the morning.

Later Charles will offer to wash Barlow's stinking shirt in Arabella's crystal punchbowl as an excuse to be in the house and see Grace.

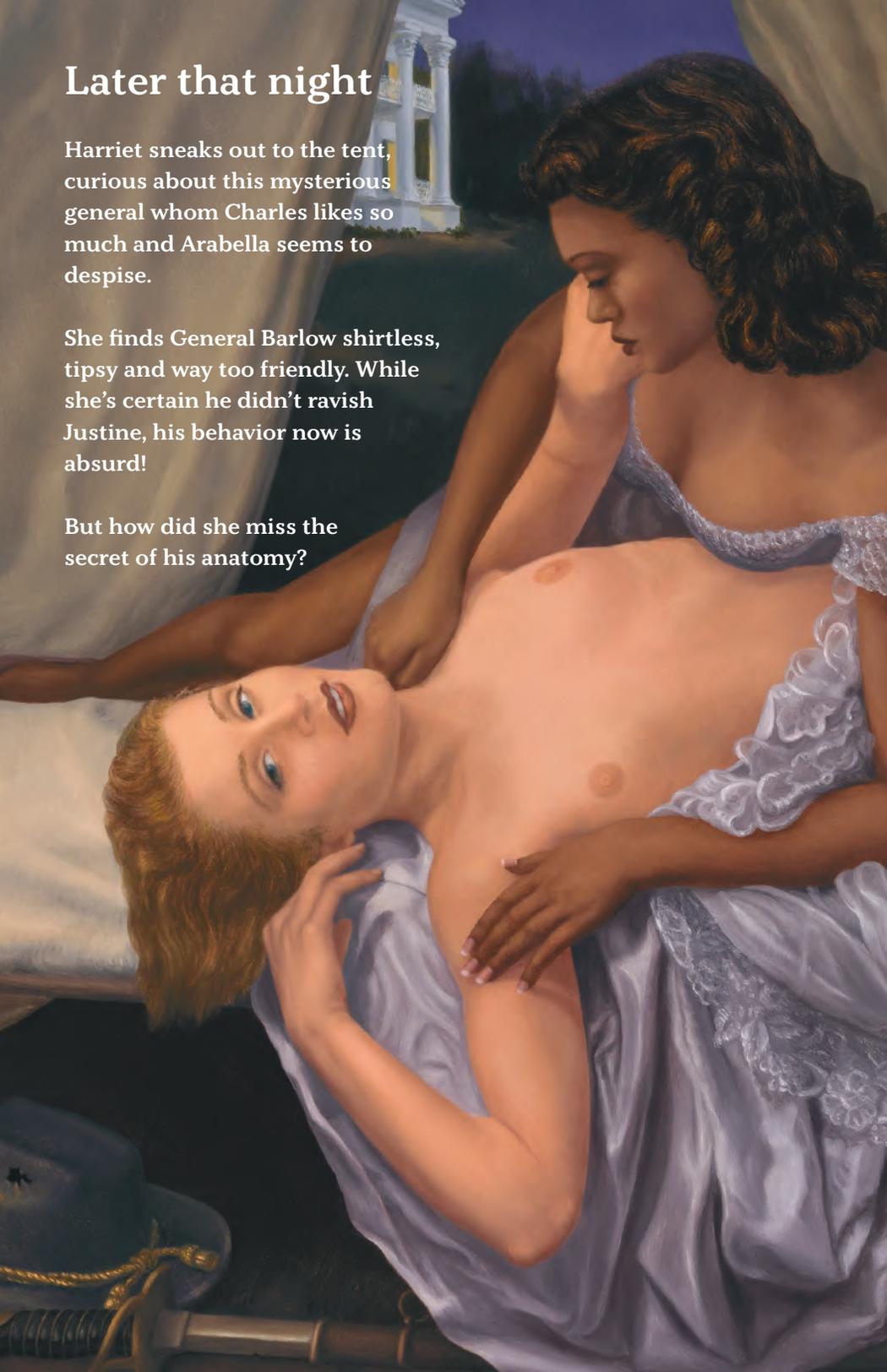
Barlow's mischievous side will like the idea and it will give Charles a chance to "accidentally" fall asleep in his childhood bed. Lord knows he needs sleep.

Later that night

Harriet sneaks out to the tent, curious about this mysterious general whom Charles likes so much and Arabella seems to despise.

She finds General Barlow shirtless, tipsy and way too friendly. While she's certain he didn't ravish Justine, his behavior now is absurd!

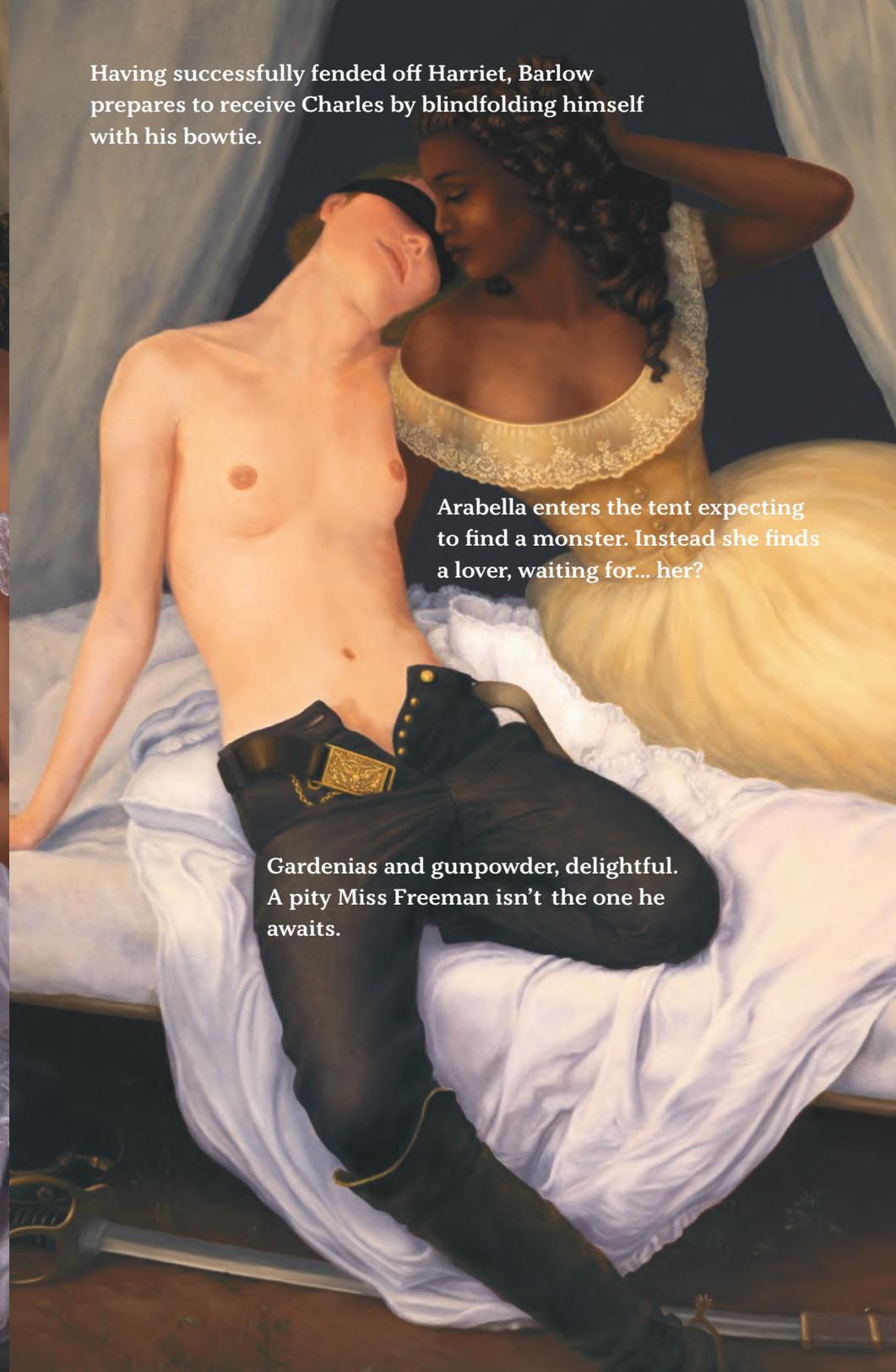
But how did she miss the secret of his anatomy?



Having successfully fended off Harriet, Barlow prepares to receive Charles by blindfolding himself with his bowtie.

Arabella enters the tent expecting to find a monster. Instead she finds a lover, waiting for... her?

Gardenias and gunpowder, delightful. A pity Miss Freeman isn't the one he awaits.



Winslow Homer's studio, NYC Arabella commissions a painting

Winslow Homer was notoriously secretive about his studio methods, which included relying upon a female assistant. But Homer's biggest secret was that he left his heart in Virginia, in the tent of Francis Barlow, when he was an artist covering life in camp for *Harper's Weekly*.

Three years since their last kiss in a forest latrine, Barlow had become a battlefield hero and was continuing to fight despite being shot and left for dead. Twice. Meanwhile, Homer was still struggling to gain renown as a painter of the war.

He told himself his desire to make a masterpiece honoring Barlow was crippling his imagination, but in truth, the sketches of Barlow pinned to his studio wall were spurring hours of romantic daydreams.

It was a welcome surprise when Barlow swaggered into Homer's studio on July 3rd, 1864 accompanied by the Adonis-like manservant from those early war days, though he now wore the tattered uniform of an infantry private. What was his name? Charles Freeman? That was it. A native Virginian with unforgettable musculature and eyes that rarely blinked. While Barlow looked emaciated next to Charles, he still exuded a level of charisma that Homer found intoxicating.

A woman who could only be Charles' sister stepped forward. "I would like to commission a painting in honor of my brother's service that features the General prominently as well."

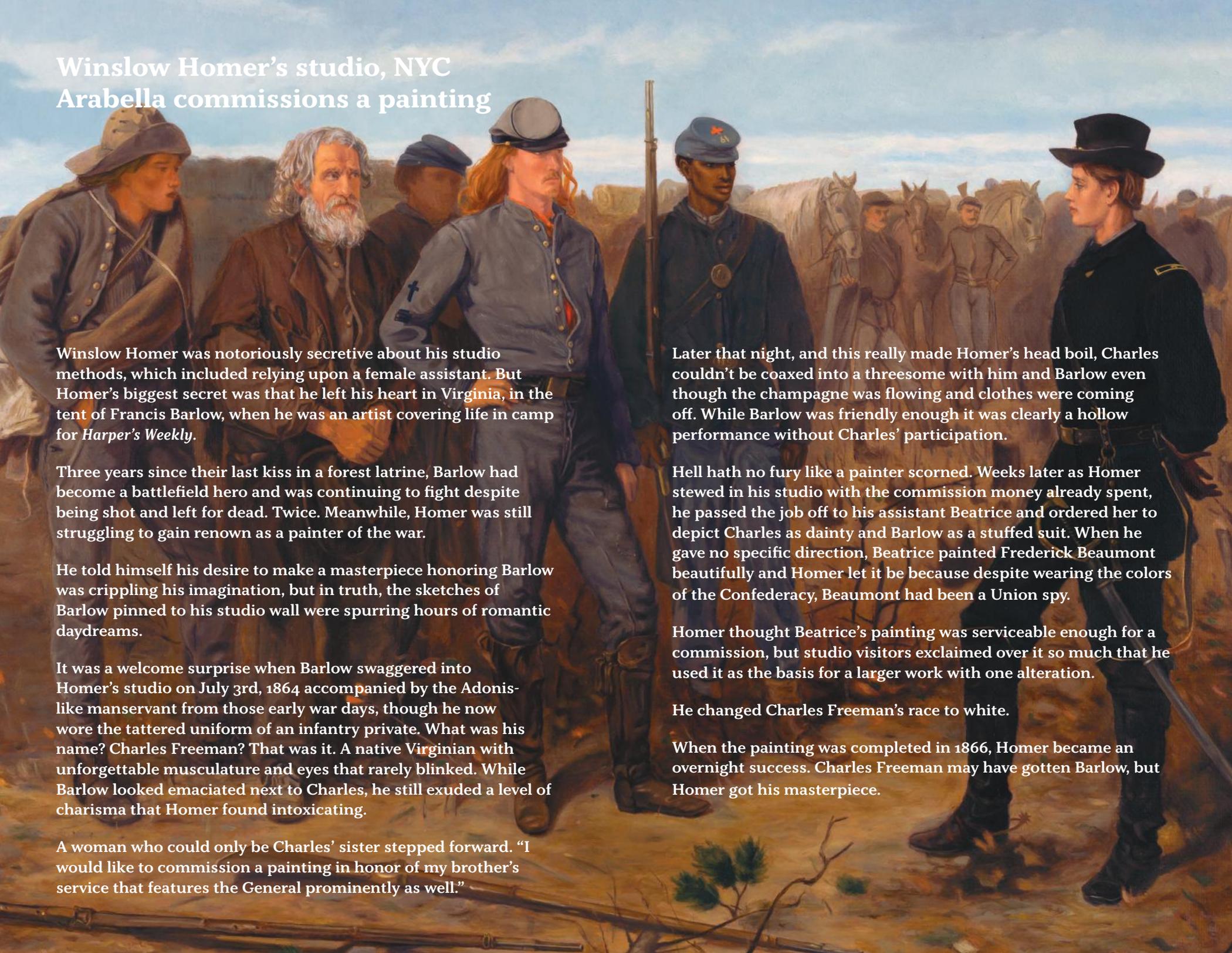
Later that night, and this really made Homer's head boil, Charles couldn't be coaxed into a threesome with him and Barlow even though the champagne was flowing and clothes were coming off. While Barlow was friendly enough it was clearly a hollow performance without Charles' participation.

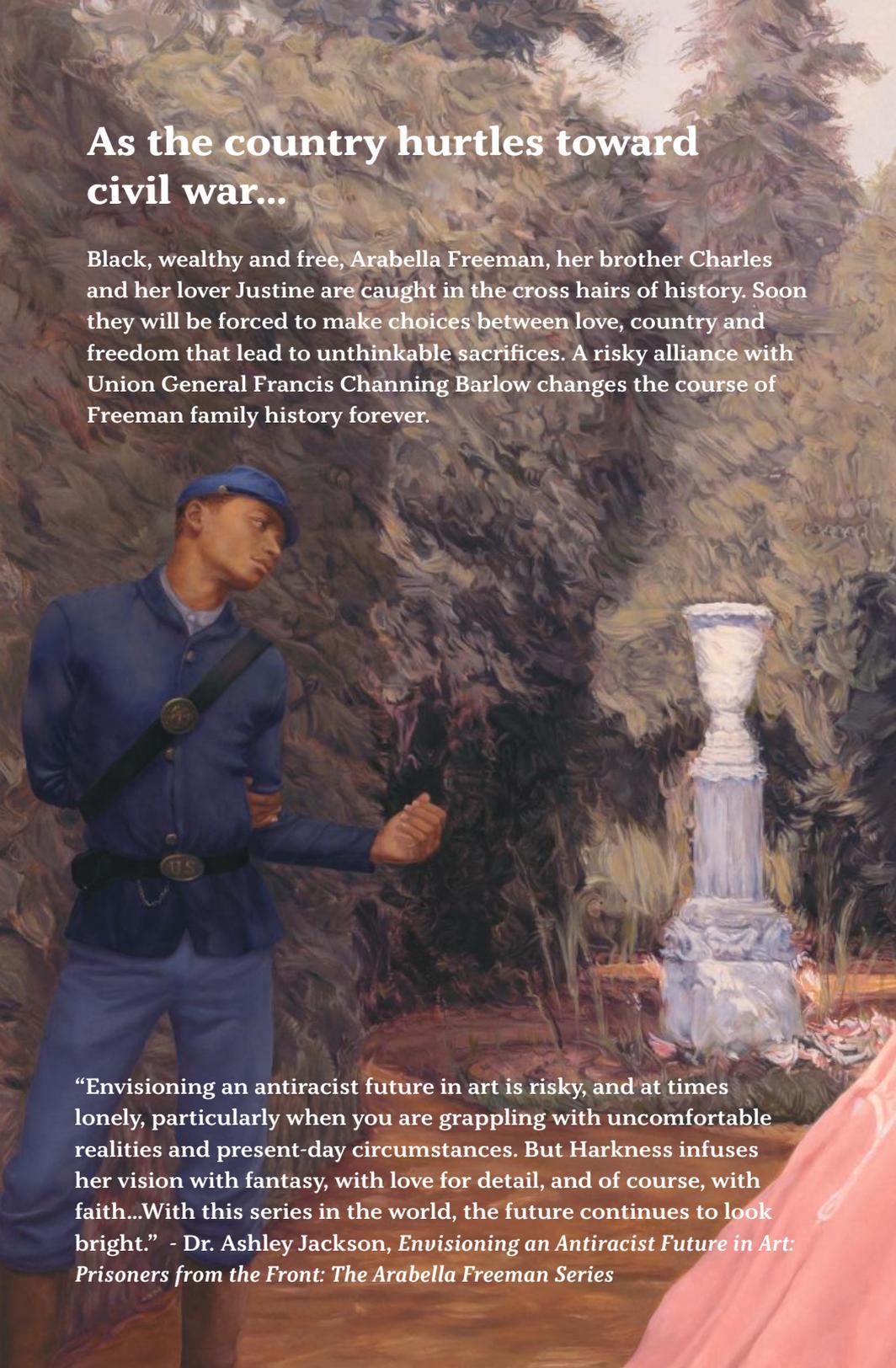
Hell hath no fury like a painter scorned. Weeks later as Homer stewed in his studio with the commission money already spent, he passed the job off to his assistant Beatrice and ordered her to depict Charles as dainty and Barlow as a stuffed suit. When he gave no specific direction, Beatrice painted Frederick Beaumont beautifully and Homer let it be because despite wearing the colors of the Confederacy, Beaumont had been a Union spy.

Homer thought Beatrice's painting was serviceable enough for a commission, but studio visitors exclaimed over it so much that he used it as the basis for a larger work with one alteration.

He changed Charles Freeman's race to white.

When the painting was completed in 1866, Homer became an overnight success. Charles Freeman may have gotten Barlow, but Homer got his masterpiece.



A painting of a man in a blue military uniform standing in a field. He is wearing a blue cap, a blue jacket with a black sash, and blue trousers. He is looking towards the right. In the background, there is a stone monument or pedestal. The background is filled with dense, textured brushstrokes in shades of brown, green, and blue, suggesting a forest or a field of tall grass. The overall style is impressionistic and somewhat somber.

As the country hurtles toward civil war...

Black, wealthy and free, Arabella Freeman, her brother Charles and her lover Justine are caught in the cross hairs of history. Soon they will be forced to make choices between love, country and freedom that lead to unthinkable sacrifices. A risky alliance with Union General Francis Channing Barlow changes the course of Freeman family history forever.

“Envisioning an antiracist future in art is risky, and at times lonely, particularly when you are grappling with uncomfortable realities and present-day circumstances. But Harkness infuses her vision with fantasy, with love for detail, and of course, with faith...With this series in the world, the future continues to look bright.” - Dr. Ashley Jackson, *Envisioning an Antiracist Future in Art: Prisoners from the Front: The Arabella Freeman Series*