

Prologue

Stallings Island, 3793 B.P.

They left the island that day for the last time. No one spoke as they packed their belongings and loaded canoes for the journey downriver. The usually energetic waters of the surrounding rapids were equally subdued. After ten generations of reaping the bounty of the middle Savannah River, the People of the Shoals had to find a new way.

As their ancestors had done long ago, they would relocate and start anew. Mobility was in their blood, but the past few decades had witnessed a level of settlement permanence like nothing before. No one tried to explain how they came to be so sedentary, but most knew it was unnatural and detrimental. The shoals continued to supply them with the fish, turtles, and clams for daily fare, but increasingly the social demands of alliance were impinging on people's time and patience. The women had to work harder each year to collect enough food for ritual feasts, too often at the behest of their in-laws. Increasingly away on trading ventures, their husbands and sons were of little help. Some families had trouble finding prospective mates for their daughters. Two of the clans with whom they had traditionally intermarried had abandoned the area years ago. Feuding with one of the two remaining clans had grown intolerable.

Indeed there were plenty of reasons for leaving the island for good. The elders knew better than anyone that the main reason for leaving was the constant bickering among themselves.

When they first came to the middle Savannah region some three centuries before, the ancestors of the People of the Shoals were a tight-knit community. Legend held that they arose from the place where the progenitor, Mother Turtle, first poked her head up from the waters that once covered the earth. Children learned that this place lay to the west of the Great Mountains, though few in recent generations had the chance to travel that far. Like the middle Savannah, the homeland of the Ancients was a bountiful place, rich in fish, mussels, deer, hickory nuts, and acorns. For centuries the people thrived in harmony with nature. Eventually, as their numbers grew and resources dwindled, the balance was disrupted, and it became time to leave. The

People of the Shoals took some solace in knowing that their fate was that of their ancestors.

When the Ancients arrived in the Savannah River valley they encountered another people. These strangers were first seen on the island in the summer, living in small, scattered huts. The island apparently held great spiritual meaning to them, for it was the resting place of their ancestors. Despite its significance, the island was routinely abandoned in late summer as the community dispersed into the adjacent uplands to hunt deer and collect nuts. The People of the Hills, as they came to be known to the interlopers, preferred a mobile existence over life on the river.

Downstream from the island was a vast stretch of unoccupied river and land. A two-day canoe ride delivered them to a place where the river coursed like a snake. Among the winding bends and loops of channels were innumerable ponds and shallow swamps. The Ancients recognized this as a particularly rich environment, teeming with the resources on which they had come to depend, along with some, like the alligator, that were totally unfamiliar. The new land likewise offered abundant stone for making traditional spear-points, knives, and other tools. This rock was different in color and texture from the rock that they were used to working, but it proved amenable to the heat-treating that was their custom. Missing from the area were other types of stone, the sorts used to prepare meals. The Ancients would need to develop alternatives to their stone-boiling method of cooking. The pottery that later became the hallmark of the People of the Shoals had its origins in the resourcefulness that a stone-poor land would encourage.

Another two-day canoe ride downstream delivered the people to the Edge of the World. Few among them had ever seen the ocean, but all had learned about it through story and song. To them the universe was a vast body of water, with the earth suspended over it by four cords, one at each of the four cardinal directions. Legend held that the Edge of the World was a place of mixed blessings. It offered vast supplies of fish, shellfish, and other water creatures; but it was devoid of stone, and any imbalance between people and nature brought a wrath of wind and rain like nothing ever seen in the land of rivers.

When the ancestors of the People of the Shoals arrived at the mouth of the Savannah, they found places where shellfish remains and other refuse had been piled up. They recognized this as human refuse, but not a single person was to be found. It would be days before someone spotted two canoes being

paddled far offshore. No one tried to make contact with these strangers, for those able to venture so far from land might command malevolent power. The ancestors would meet these people in due time; for now, they settled on temporary camps a full day's ride upriver.

It was spring when the ancestors arrived in the lower Savannah. The ensuing months proved peaceful though busy as individuals pursued new resources and opportunities. The lack of oak and hickory trees in the immediate area worried many of the women, for the acorns and nuts they provided each fall were the staples of winter. The men began to comment, too, about the limited supply of deer and turkey. Clearly this stretch of the river had an endless supply of catfish, mud turtles, and water plants, even for the winter; but if they wanted to keep using traditional foods, forays into the hills were necessary. Many among them recalled the dense stands of oak and hickory trees of the middle Savannah, the place they first encountered in this new land, where the People of the Hills lived. They debated the need to confront these strangers, aware that long-term success in the area depended greatly on strong alliances with neighbors. The elders among them had much experience with diplomacy, for their territory in the homeland was surrounded by the territories of five other tribes. They decided to send a small contingent upriver to make friends with the People of the Hills.

Their good intentions proved difficult to realize. No one was seen on two consecutive trips in the early fall, and a small group of people fled from the river's edge when encountered on a third trip the following winter. They would later learn that the People of the Hills typically avoided strangers. The elders decided that further efforts to meet their neighbors would be postponed until the spring, when the island of their ancestors was again occupied. In the meantime they continued to make occasional hunting forays upriver. Anticipating future nut-gathering ventures, the hunters made mental maps of the best stands of oak and hickory.

Four more winters would pass before regular contact was established with the People of the Hills. Interactions at first were awkward, for these long-time residents lacked any sort of formal leaders or diplomats. As the newcomers learned, certain individuals among the People of the Hills were more inclined than others to enter into alliances. The more eager among them introduced their neighbors to some of the local traditions and special knowledge. They showed how a soft rock from nearby outcrops could be carved into flat stones and perforated with a stone drill to make cooking stones. The ancestors of the

People of the Shoals knew about this sort of material from their homeland over the mountains, but they had never seen it used for cooking. Many of them took samples back to their Coastal Plain camps, where they used the stones in earth ovens and with water-filled baskets and hide-lined pits in the traditional stone-boiling technique of cooking. Unlike most types of rock, this soft stone never broke when it was heated and cooled. Everyone marveled at its superior qualities, but some warned of the folly of becoming dependent on a raw material from such a great distance and under another people's control. Still, several households established strong ties with the People of the Hills and were rewarded with a constant supply of cooking stones.

As communication between the two groups improved, the ancestors of the People of the Shoals began to learn some things about their coastal neighbors. Long ago the People of the Hills had maintained regular contact with these far-away people. They traded a few items between them, mostly things of a symbolic or spiritual nature. The People of the Hills offered polished stone objects in exchange for marine shell beads and other ornaments. Occasionally the coastal people would ask for some deer meat and hides, for the local supply was relatively sparse. To entice trade, the coastal dwellers shared their folk knowledge about the healing power of shell beads. On trading trips down to the coast, the People of the Hills had observed small children wearing strings of beads. The spiritual power of the beads, they were told, would ward off the evil forces that often stole children's souls.

Contact between the two groups was irregular. There were periods of many months, sometimes several years, when the coastal people seemed to have vanished. When interactions were reestablished, the coastal folk would tell about great forces that swelled up from the ocean, bringing hard rain and powerful wind. Entire villages were destroyed, and many people drowned. The cause of destruction was uncertain, but they knew that those struck directly by such forces had to abandon their homeland for good. Some blamed the People of the Hills for their problems.

Nearly a full generation had elapsed since the People of the Hills had last been in touch with their coastal partners. The elders among them were not especially eager to seek out their former allies, although they would invite the opportunity to acquire more marine shell. Virtually all of the shell beads obtained in years past now lay buried with the dead on the island. They believed strongly in the healing and protective power of the beads, for on many occasions children stricken with illness survived by wearing strands of beads.

Those who did not survive took beads with them into the spirit world. Other media and practices of healing were used too, but nothing surpassed the beads in potency and effectiveness.

The People of the Hills began to ask their new partners about sources of marine shell. Not having established contact with the phantom coastal people, the ancestors of the People of the Shoals had nothing specific to offer. Still, some saw this as an opportunity to improve their diplomatic relations with the People of the Hills. As newcomers, they would have to establish lasting relations with neighbors for purposes of marriage. Indeed, there were far too few members of the immigrant group to satisfy demands for eligible partners. Competition for mates had already gotten hard, so anything that people could do to make themselves valuable to their neighbors could prove beneficial to brokering marriages. Several individuals invited the opportunity to make contact with the coastal people.

A contingent of three men and one of the elder women set off downriver one summer to find the People of the Coast. At the mouth of the great river they again located the piles of shell and food refuse observed on earlier ventures to the ocean. This time among the refuse they noticed pieces of a hard, earth-colored substance that looked a bit like rock, though not like anything they normally used. They also saw small pieces of the soft rock that they acquired from the People of the Hills.

Stretching out from the mouth of the great river was a vast landscape of marshes, islands, and open water. The explorers decided to paddle southward between the mainland and a series of long islands. The calm waters of this sheltered passage enabled quick travel. After only half a day they arrived at the head of the largest island yet seen, where smoke arose from several places just past a line of low, scrubby trees. Before long they were approached by a small party of men in canoes. Although they were unable to decipher what was being said to them, the explorers understood that they were to follow these men toward the place of the smoke.

Paddling their way along a small inlet amid marsh grasses and mudflats, the group arrived at an open area with an enormous ring of shell. As they left their canoes and climbed to the top of the shell heap, the explorers could see that this was a large village. Along the top of the ring of shell they counted no fewer than two dozen huts. Few people were seen in and among the huts, but from the high vantage point they noticed a large group of women and children collecting food in the marsh below.