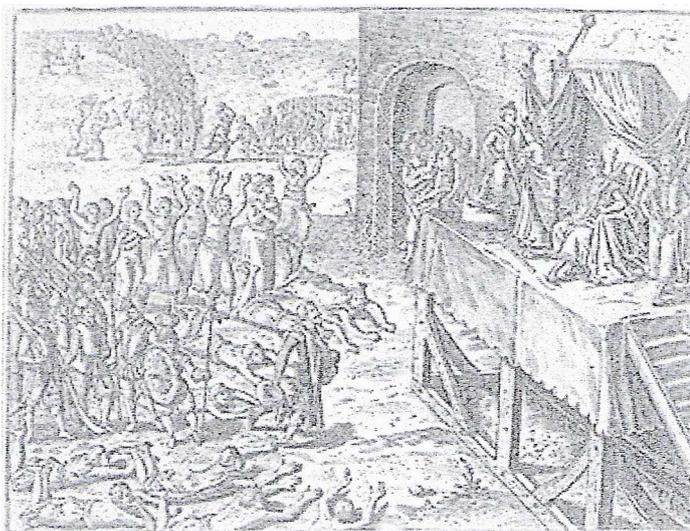


The Story of a Slave



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Prologue

Mother used to tell us stories when we were younger. When I was roughly two or three it was just old wives tales but as I got older they became more like warnings: stay in groups in the forest, don't leave the village at night; and most importantly stay on the forest path. I and Aisha used to follow the last rule to the letter when we were younger; walking down that path with Mother we used to walk right down the centre. As we grew up we walked side by side but never straying from the path.

Every year as we grew older the stories stopped making sense. We still believed in staying on the path though - everyone in the village did. It was clear that we should stay out of the forest as much as possible though after the disappearance of the village boy. He was fifteen when he was taken: he strayed off into the woods looking for fruit for his family. But he never returned, Mother said it was the Capturers and that now they were here they would kidnap all the able people and then leave to go to another village. To do the same to them. The Capturers called it the way of life but really it was just them filling their pockets with gold.

When I and Aisha were in the village together people could only just tell us apart, alone they stood no chance. We had the same thick, black wavy hair that fell just below our waists, the same hazel eyes with flecks of gold, even the same smile. The only difference was that I am a tiny bit taller than her which makes sense considering the fact that I am older than her by two hours.

How It All Began

I was rushing the day they took me. I was working late last night, till near dawn so I slept for too long by accident. Instead of taking the forest path I ran through the dark dingy forest, where the trees seemed to move around you, knowing that there was a quicker way to the watering hole. I didn't notice the leaves that were constantly rustling. Well, I did but I thought it was just the wind and animals. Until I stopped to take a quick break from all the running - that was when I wished for the cool air the wind brought to hit my sweaty face and cool my tired body. But there was no wind. So what was the rustling of the leaves?

They picked me up gently and carried me off, trying their hardest not to hurt me. I screamed at first trying in vain to alert the village but all hope was lost. After that, I screamed in pain, not just from the injury but with the pain of losing my family. Mother and Aisha were all I had left and I had lost them. I wished that I could see them one last time; then I scolded myself for the thought. If they were here too then they would have been in this pain as well. They would also have been carted off to the unknown.

When my throat's pain turned to agony I stopped screaming. I was thirsty. Very thirsty. I tried to speak but I couldn't. They

didn't realise how thirsty I was. And all I thought was "Good. They can't carry on if I am dead. I am going to wait and die". But then they saw a river and stopped. At first, they offered me water but I refused. They didn't like that answer; I could tell that from their expressions. They tried again and got the same answer. Suddenly one wretched open my mouth and the other filled it with water. Although it was warm from the humidity, the water calmed my throbbing mouth so I swallowed, wanting more but they picked me up again - more roughly though - and carried on walking.

I fell asleep after that. For how long I don't know but when I was brutally shaken awake the sky was pink and dark tendrils reached across the sky. They had made camp for the night - next to a river. Once again they offered me water; which this time I took; and some grainy porridge. Straight after I had finished eating they put metal loops around my hands to "stop me running away in the night" they said. The metal scratched and hurt my wrists all night. The capturers took turns watching over me that night, another way to make sure I didn't run away.

The Slave Camp

At dawn, we had started moving again. They had decided that I was strong enough to walk. But I still had to keep on the metal bracelet things. Walking was fine for me - at least that way I could mourn my family in some privacy. At noon we arrived at a giant building made of stone. The Capturers gripped each of my arms and lead me through the door. The hallway was dark beyond the door and the air was hard to breathe. They lead me to a room with lots of others like me. They all looked badly dressed and starved; many looked like they had been there for years.

They left me there: the Capturers. Alone with those starved, hollow-eyed people. I was scared there were so many, and I was more alone than I have ever been to before. I looked at the room around me trying to take in all the details while avoiding eye-contact. The stone walls were scratched and beaten by the occupants. There was a small window at the top of the room - with metal bars - letting in just enough light to see around. The floor was as scared as the walls but much dirtier. This place was nothing like home and I wanted more than anything to be home again.

Three times a day we had meals. But they were a handful of porridge and a small cup of dirty water each; just barely

keeping us alive. I wasn't the youngest there, not by a mile. There was a young girl in the same room as me, she was also captured alone like me. She didn't talk that much, except to an old woman who told her stories to try to take her mind off things. I listened too occasionally and the time we spent in this story world was a haven for us.

We could tell when we looked at her that she was getting ill. So me and Lirael - me and the young girl had become fast friends - told her stories. She used to listen politely but we all knew that they weren't as good as hers. After a few slow painful days, the old woman died, leaving me and Lirael alone. Talking about the present was too pitiful and talking about home was too painful so most of the time we sat in silence, holding each other waiting for this hell to end.

One day though after we were starved for breakfast because they were low on food and had to ration it out, I and Lirael started talking about home, trying to relive old memories.

"Maerad, what was your life like before this? I mean was it a good life? Did you enjoy it?" Lirael whispered quietly to me, as we curled up, waiting for more poor people to arrive.

"At home, it was just me my Mother and my twin sister Aisha. We lived in a hut next to a forest. Our father went missing before we were born, he was captured like us in a place like this. At least that is what Mother told us when we were old enough to find out. But when we were younger Mother always told us that he was in the forest looking out for us. What was your life like before this?"

I whispered back. The people around us were either listening to us or talking between themselves about their past lives.

"I lived in a small hut near the edge of a village. My Mother was a witch, or at least that is what the people said. When I and my siblings went to town they used to throw things at us, calling us unnatural and freaks. Then one day these people came to our house to talk to Mother. She led them to another room while I and my siblings listened to them. They said that they heard she was a witch and that they were here to make her a deal. If she gave up one of her children to them then they would leave the whole village alone. We lived in a big village with lots of people - Mother said that she would agree to their deal but if they went back on it then they would be cursed for taking her child away from her. Later that day she told me that we were going to a special place where I will be happy forever. She led me out of the village and into the surrounding forest, already the people were there and they took me to this place. The old lady was the first person to be kind to me here and you were the second. Maerad how did you get caught? Did your family give you up too?"

"I'm sorry you went through all that. I had no idea. I was caught because I was rushing and I tried to take a short cut through the forest. The night before I was working until near dawn. I slept for too long by accident I tried to save time by getting to the watering hole through the woods. I knew that it was shorter because Mother once said that father used to use it every day and it saved him an hour. So I ran through the woods but didn't notice the Capturers until it was too late. I

injured one and they had to leave him behind but I couldn't hurt the other two. They did some sort of witchery on me and punctured my skin in my left shoulder." I winced as I moved my left shoulder as it still hadn't healed yet.

"Do you mean a bullet? They are shot out of things called guns. I heard the people talking about them, they are tiny pieces of metal that can go through your skin and even kill you. Your lucky that you are alive Maerad." she said gently touching my hurt shoulder. As I moved the injured shoulder I could see a quick flash of light from the bullet inside of me.

They had brought more supplies back so we ate three times a day again but we all still slowly starved. More and more fights broke out because we were cooped up for so long with each other. The air had started to smell mouldy and full of disease-causing many more to die. Some of us did die but it wasn't from a disease. As we were eating one morning a man ran in screaming about how someone in his room had hung himself. Before he died he had said that this place was bad to live in for animals, for humans it is a crime.

No one mourned his death after that day. He like the rest of us were alone there. Life fluctuated after that from bad to even worse. More killed themselves after him some revolted and went after the Capturers trying to kill them but got bullets into their hearts. We were kept on the same diet and I could start seeing my bones through my thin skin. At that point, I had been there for probably about six months but it felt like six years. The only

person I had to talk to was Lirael we talked about how we were going to break free from that hell but it got harder to believe that we ever were.

The First Part of the Voyage

It was ten months after I arrived that I and Lirael left the slave camp. It wasn't just us there were hundreds of others. Nearly all of us left that day; only the sickly and the old stayed. The Capturers came into our room before dawn and woke us all up. They re-chained us and pushed us forward to get us to move. Luckily I and Lirael were next to each other and silently we gripped on the other's hand trying desperately not to lose each other.

They forced us to walk for miles before we got to the seashore. We had been walking on empty stomachs for hours. No one knew what was happening; just that we had left hell, or so we thought at the time. By the time we arrived me and Lirael was almost collapsing from exhaustion. "Maerad. What's happening?"

"I don't know Lirael. Hush now and we might hear what's happening."

But after we stopped talking we were moving again; this time it was towards a giant boat. I remember Lirael asking me what it was and I told her: I had seen drawings of them from the older tribe members who often bragged about their experiences. We were shoved onto the top of the boat where these men started poking and prodding us. They weren't like us these men their skin made ours look dark. As they came closer to us I felt Lirael tug on

my clothes (but were practically rags at this point) but I was stuck in place by fear of these white folk.

It was too soon when they got to me and Lirael. They started poking me, at first it was relatively gentle at first but got harder. Enraged I felt my mouth fill up with saliva and I spat at the man. Almost as quick as a fly he turned around and hit me across the face. I felt red, hot pain leach across my face; but I refused to recognise it in any way. To show this man that he had any power or control over me. The pain grew as he moved on to poke Lirael but I still refused it.

When he had got to the last person he turned around and walked back to talk to the Capturers. I could just hear them converse but they spoke in a foreign tongue, unlike anything I had ever heard.

After a while and the exchange of money and weapons, the Capturers left us on the boat with the strange white men.

We were shoved down under the surface of the boat and slid onto these shelves of wood; each of us having only a little room. Lirael and I were put on the lowest shelf next to each other. We could barely move since we were pressed up next to each other so tightly. It was just children near us but we could see the women if we turned

The air was musty down at the bottom of the boat. We could hardly breathe sometimes. We were fed less on the boat than

when we were in the slave camp. We hardly got a handful of grainy porridge and got little more than a mouthful of water each day. What little food we got we fought over desperately trying to get more.

As time passed we lost track of the days. It soon became hot and musty in the boat. Many died from illness; well if they became ill then they were thrown off the boat. I and Lirael hardly talked at that point, we knew that not even talking would stop the pain and misery. We all noticed that the white men used to take the women away for what seemed like ages but could only have been hours. They always returned but looking tired after and they refused to talk to anyone.

We were starved on the boat and people didn't talk as much as they did in the camp. By then we all knew, even the youngest of the children, that some of us wouldn't see dry land again. And those of us who did would envy those who died.

The Next Part of the Voyage

Too many of our people died on that boat. Too many to count at least. Lirael and I made it at least. There were lots of nights where I found myself telling her stories what would happen when we got off of the boat. They were all lies of course, but it gave me the strength to continue my life when I saw the look of her face throughout the stories. I knew many of the other children listened to the stories as well but I never minded; so long as it gave them bliss.

I saw those people who killed themselves on the boat. We were the closest to the door to the top of the boat so we saw everything going in and out of there. We saw the women being dragged in protest and the sounds of their screaming later, it sometimes lasted for hours. We saw the people who were so ill being dragged up to the top so they could be thrown into the water. And we saw the lifeless bodies of those who refused their food and drink or just refused to breathe being carried up and later heard the inevitable splash of the body hitting the water.

We dreaded to think of what was coming, but thinking of the past was too painful. No one fully knew what was coming or what would happen on the boat. The air always got foggier

and harder to breathe; the heat made us sweat the little water we had. We could hear the screams coming from the people further down in the boat.

After what seemed years later we were all rounded up again like on the day that we were lead onto the boat and taken up to the top of the boat. I could hear gasping all around me as we had our first gulps of fresh air that we had taken for ages. It took a while for my eyes to get used to the bright sun. One of the first thing I noticed though was the coldness of the air. I felt it biting into my almost bare skin; my clothes were little more than rags at that point. Hanging on to my skin because of sweat, blood and I don't know what else.

I looked over a Lirael and saw fully what being on the boat had done to her: her bones stood out through her skin; her bushy dark hair was flattened and filled with knots. I could tell by her expression that I didn't look much different. We were made to stand in a line again and another white devil started to look at us again. As he passed me he glared at me and I knew that it was the one who I spat at.

Our clothes were roughly taken off of us but were not ripped or thrown away. the white men scrubbed us down with hard-bristled brushes until our skin was raw and bloody. Then they put oil onto us until we gleamed in the cold sunlight. There were many others who had injuries like cuts and gashes; the white men filled those with steaming hot black liquid that was as

chunky as the porridge they served us in the slave camp. The people who that was inflicted on screamed in pain as the liquid touched their bare skin. After that, we were allowed to put our ragged clothes back on. they gave us each a huge meal consisting of meat and vegetables that I had never seen before.

We were taken off of the boat and put next to each other on a hard small stoned path. They put these itchy wooden signs around our necks and shoved us into a cage. Soon after other white people started flocking around us, prodding and poking us. A man tried to grab me and yank me through the opening; but I pulled away slipping out of his grasp. I felt Lirael clutch at my hand and I squeezed back weakly.

Lirael and I were separated by the people in the cage. They were pushing each other about trying to find friends and family. My head jerked up though when I heard Lirael Calling me from the other side of the cage. "Maerad. Maerad where are you? I'm scared." I started shoving people out of the way, trying to reach her. When I did find her she was curled up in a corner of the cage sobbing. I tried calming her down but it didn't work.

The white men from the boat started pulling us forwards one at a time and the others started to hand over some coloured paper and taking us away. When I was pulled up I dragged

Lirael with me and some white woman took us away from the other and down the painful path to a big cart with a roof with large animals with four legs attached to the front. On top of the roof sat another white man who started speaking to the white woman in the same tongue as the people on the boat.

I gripped Lirael's hand as the lady steered us towards the strange cart. After we were inside she got in as well. For a few moments she just stared at us and I had to resist the strong urge to hit her. There was a sudden jolt and the cart started moving. I felt the bumps and the strange path as we went over it. I looked outside the window and saw things that looked like huts but they soared in the sky.

There were lots of white people on the street; no one out there looked like me and Lirael. "Maerad I'm scared" I turned around to find Lirael looking up at me. Out of instinct, I pulled her close to me hugging her; I remembered that I was the closest thing to family; I was nearly a Mother to her. I saw the white woman frown at us out of the corner of my eye but I didn't care.

The journey in that cart was long, I refused to sleep though. I had to protect Lirael from these white monsters. She had fallen asleep, leaning on my shoulder. I glared at the white woman the whole time throughout the journey but she either didn't notice or just didn't care. She was looking at a stack of paper bound together. It had what I thought was words on but I couldn't understand them. The outside was plain and boring.

The White Woman's Strange Hut

The cart stopped outside what we thought was the white woman's hut it too soared into the sky like the ones we saw near the boat. It was made entirely out of stone but not like the stone at the camp, this stone was white with little streaks of black in it or it could have been cracks - I never stayed long enough to find out.

She led us through towards grand, towering dark wood doors and into a room which looked like a bigger better kitchen than what we had at home. Once there she snapped her fingers and a fellow African came and placed bowls of broth in front of us shoving a spoon at both me and Lirael. I stared at the man recognising him but not knowing from where it was impossible of course: how could I know someone who has obviously been here for years? When the white woman saw that we were eating she left the room.

Once she had left the man turned to look at me. "Maerad?" he asked staring me in the eyes.

"Kaeba. Is that really you? You've grown up! I was so little when they took you. Your family mourned you for years, they thought you were dead. We all did." I replied, my voice shaking. Kaeba had been through what I had all alone.

"They taught me their language you know. This country is called America, there's lot's like us here. Slaves, they call us." Kaeba stopped waiting for me to reply but no words came to my mouth

"Maerad, who is this?"

"Lirael this is Kaeba, he was one of the first to be taken from my village. I was young when he was taken, only four or five."

"That's right. it's nice to meet you Lirael" Kaeba said turning to Lirael.

At that moment the white woman returned to the room, snapped her fingers and said something to Kaeba. Kaeba then turned and translated what she said to us. "She wants you to follow her to your room so you can rest. Once you are fully rested you have to work at the nearby cotton farm during the day and you will have to stay in the huts there. So once you get strong again we won't see each other again."

When he stopped talking the woman started walking away so Lirael and I had to run to keep up with her. she lead us to a small room with two beds in it. On each bed lay new clothes, Lirael and I slipped into the new clothes that were way too baggy and then scampered into bed. "Goodnight Maerad"
"Goodnight Lirael" my eyes were already closed when my head hit the pillow.

The Cotton Fields

The next morning we were woken up by Kaeba shaking our shoulders. "Maerad you need to wake up. It's time to eat, you love food." when I finally did wake up he told me to wake up Lirael and then we were to go downstairs and eat the porridge that was on the table. Waking Lirael was easy. Together we went downstairs and ate the porridge. this porridge was different from the porridge we were given on the boat. this one was thick whereas the other one was runny and more like water.

Just as we were scraping the last mouthfuls of porridge from the bowls Kaeba walked in the room. "The Mistress says that you are well enough to work here until noon and then you are to work in the cotton fields. at nightfall, you are to come back here. This will go on for a few weeks until we can get you housing closer to the cotton fields, then you will no longer stay here."

When Kaeba had finished talking I turned from my empty bowl of porridge to him. "What is it like working here?" I asked him in a steady voice, though it was more for Lirael's sake than my own.

"You two are not working as such, I am to teach you English." Grateful I asked him another question "Have you ever worked in the cotton fields?"

"No Maerad I haven't so I'm sorry but I can't tell you what it's like out there."

"So then when are we having these lessons? I'm full and ready to be taught." this time it was Lirael who had spoken and Kaeba looked confused but answered her question anyway.

"Right now, the Mistress said as soon as you had finished eating."

The English lesson felt like it went on forever. Kaeba had to keep correcting our pronunciation. It was hard to say the words because they were nothing like our own. Kaeba could pronounce the words almost without trying, to make us feel better about it though he said it was because he had, had years of practice and that was our first time. Just as we had finished Kaeba gave us a bowl of porridge of each and gave us directions of how to get to the fields.

The walk to the fields was long and tiring and when we got there a white man started stomping over to us and screaming at us in English. When he got to us he shoved scythes into our hands. Then he led us to other people like us and they then explained what we had to do. We had to grab it at the base and twist it. Then we had to separate it from the rest of the plant and put it in a bucket. After our buckets were full we had to go through it and take out everything that wasn't cotton.

The walk home after that left us so tired that all we could do was eat our porridge and go straight up to bed. This went on for many weeks, about three months. By the time we were sent to

live in the huts near the cotton fields we spoke English almost as well as Kaeba. The goodbye was sad but tearless all three of us deciding that enough tears had been shed by us, our families and fellow slaves.

Our new hut was cramped and they gave us little food there. Lirael and I had to share a hut that was so small that you could hardly walk a few feet from wall to wall and you could just barely stand up in it. The walls were made from mud like the ones from home; the roof made of straw and hay. It was the second in a row of many side by side and opposite another row exactly the same. We had one tiny window and a door that were covered with rags. In the two corners of the room were beds that were really just old ragged blankets.

As soon as we walked through the door a smell hit us and I nearly vomited. It reminded me too much of the slave boat and what it was like down there. I could tell that Lirael felt the same way but neither of us said it. I walked over and moved the window rags to let some fresh air in. "It's okay Lirael, we can make this a home. It will be like a home away from home, we can pretend our families come and see us when we are not working."

The next day as we were walking back from the cotton fields I saw a sharp stone and before anyone else saw what I was doing I grabbed it. Nobody saw or cared about by getting of the stone so I acted as if I had done nothing wrong. That night

when I was sure that Lirael was asleep I started carving drawings into the walls. I drew patterns and my family members above my bed. I left lots of space though, on Lirael's side of the hut so that she could draw her family if she wanted. By the time I had finished the room was almost unrecognisable and the sun had started to reappear over the horizon. I barely got two hours to sleep as we had to get out of bed not long after dawn so we could eat our porridge and start work.

I was woken by Lirael tapping my shoulder lightly. We had learned to sleep very lightly on the boat; in case something went wrong which happened a lot. I saw my carvings in the sunlight and they looked even better than they did in the light of the moon. "Thank you Maerad. Now we can really call this place home."

"Lirael I left that space so we could draw your family, above your bed. But just remember don't tell anyone about this or we will get in big trouble."

"I promise Maerad."

The rest of the day was boring after that. So boring that I nearly fell asleep until I saw the Warden and his baton; that woke me up instantly. Everyone hated that Warden; because everyone had been beaten by it. The Warden didn't care who he hit as long as he caused pain and misery wherever he went.

It was the Warden who found out about our drawings. We had been working in the cotton fields for almost a year. It was long,

tiresome work but we did it anyway. Most of us sang to pass the time. One of the other slaves used to work for the Warden; everyone hated him but no one knew his name since he only talked to the Warden. While we were all working he used to sometimes sneak into the huts and see if we were doing anything we shouldn't have been doing in there.

The owner of one huts he looked at had set up a shop for the rest of us slaves. She was a nice lady and it hurt all of us when we had to see her publicly flogged because of it. While we were working out at the cotton fields he went into mine and Lirael's hut. So far we had escaped hut inspection because we were both classed as children but when I turned fourteen I was classed as an adult and needed to be treated like one. By that time we had drawn Lirael's family onto her part of the hut and it looked quite homey. We only found out that he had been in our hut the next day. At breakfast, we were stood up and taken in front of everybody while the Warden told everybody what we had done and our punishment.

The Warden's African was as good as my English, so we could all understand him. He said that we had illegally taken a weapon (I guessed that he was talking about the stone) and used it to ruin the hut. Anger filled me as he grabbed Lirael's arm and started pulling out his cane. "Leave her alone she is just a child! It was my idea and I did all the drawings. Punish me instead but just leave her alone!" I yelled in almost perfect English at him. By the look on his face, I could tell that it had

surprised him: he didn't know we could speak English, no one did. Lirael and I had decided to keep it a secret so would be left alone. It had worked too, until that moment at least.

The Warden's face lit up into a grin as he practically threw Lirael away and grabbed me instead. He started mumbling to himself trying to work out what my punishment should be. "Forty lashes for the drawings on the wall, then another twenty lashes for hiding the secret of being able to speak English from me. Can the little one speak it too or is it just you?" all the while he was talking I could feel his spittle splash across my face. I could faintly hear Lirael sobbing somewhere behind me but I chose to ignore her. "It's just me who can speak English, she never learned it." I replied in English, watching the anger on his face with glee. The whole time he was beating me I refused to flinch because that would show him that he won, that I had given in to his power.

For the rest of the day while in the cotton fields, I ached with pain but still refused to cry and show the Warden that he had won. He spent the whole day close to me trying to find even the littlest flaw in my work; much to his anger he found nothing wrong. That day he made me work long into the night and by the time I got back to the huts everyone had already eaten and were asleep. But the Warden still hadn't finished punishing me and instead of letting me sleep he wouldn't even let me sit down until I had layered a new coat of mud over the drawings. Just like the night when I had carved the walls I only got into bed as dawn started reaching over the horizon.

Every day from then on the Warden checked the hut himself to make sure I hadn't done any more drawings. He always looked for ways to punish me but I never gave him any. While working I always sang louder than anyone else. When the Warden's back was turned I used to throw stones at him but he never found out that it was me since everyone around me was scared of getting me into trouble in case I turned on them instead of the Warden. Every day the Warden found some excuse to give me at least ten lashings.

Lirael often begged me to just leave the Warden alone but I never did. If he was to make our lives awful then I would do worse to him. And I did. One night when he was sleeping I sneaked into his room and stole all of his clothes except the ones he was wearing. I then went to the river next to our huts and chucked the clothes into it. We had a day off that day; well we didn't have to work in the fields. Instead, we had to search for his clothes which I knew were long gone but I didn't tell anyone, not even Lirael it was too dangerous for her to know about it. It was only when dusk came that the Warden let us stop and rest. No one had eaten at all that day so we were all starving.

The Years That Followed

Every day after the missing clothes incident I did a little thing to the Warden. Some way or another he found out it was me and I got lashings as a punishment.

One day though the Warden grew ill, very ill. So ill that he didn't even leave his hut. His hut was better than ours it was made completely of stone and he had cotton rugs in it. That day we didn't go to the cotton fields like we were supposed to but stayed in our hut village. We rebuilt falling walls and roofs and talked to each other. Lirael and I were the youngest there so while the others were talking we went back to our hut.

"Maerad was it you that hid the Warden's clothes?"

Shocked that Lirael remembered that when it was near enough a year and a half ago I answered carefully "Yes Lirael I did take his clothes and throw them in the river but how did you remember that it was so long ago. And you can't tell anyone otherwise I will get in big trouble more than I ever have before"

"I promise I won't tell anyone Maerad but can you please stop talking to me like I am still a little girl. I am nearly eleven now and I have been through everything you have. And anyway your sixteen your only five years older than me."

"Okay, it's a deal Lirael. You have been through everything I have and you were younger during the whole time too. Right now you are younger than I was when I was taken by the Capturers and

that was almost four years ago now. Let's go to sleep before we normally do so we can be rested for tomorrow."

But we didn't need to be rested for the next day because the Warden was still gravely ill. A man came in the night for him. This man spoke only English so I had to translate for the other slaves. He said that he was a doctor and that he had been sent a letter from the Warden to come and heal him. The Warden feared that he was on his death bed and that he had little longer to live. The man then asked for directions to the Warden's hut, which I grudgingly gave to him. When the doctor was gone I found Lirael and said to her "I hope the Warden dies. He deserves it because of what he has done to us. No, I hope that all the White People die because they are all the same."

The Warden died the next day. It was as if my wish came true. The doctor found me and said that he had done all he could but he had come too late to save the Warden. Then he said that he would send over a new Warden as soon as he could so that we would not be unsupervised for long; he called us unlucky because the person who had cared for us so long is dead. And that we would be lucky when he found us a new one. After he had left the walls that surrounded us I spat in his direction. "How dare he! How dare he call us unlucky when it was people like him whose fault it was that we were there in the first place. It's not we asked to be kidnapped and taken to this country. And how dare he get to decide who was going to

look after us next like we were some animals whose owner had just died and they needed looking after!" I screamed in my mind; not daring to be the first to speak and break the silence.

It was six days later when the doctor came back. This time he wasn't alone a young man was with him. Once again he sought me out and spoke to me in English "Slave. This is William he will be the new Warden here." then he turned away from me and spoke only to William but I still listened to him anyway "William, this is the only slave here who can speak English. You might want to keep your eye on her though, the old Warden said that she was forever causing him trouble but she looked pain straight on to the face throughout her many punishments. Apparently, she even took his clothes but he had no proof to punish her for it, he didn't want a rebellion from the slaves for unfair punishment. He said that she was the only slave he had ever had the misfortune of meeting that ignored his rules and carved drawings into the mud of her hut anyway. So good luck and farewell William, I need to go now."

The new Warden - William he asked to be called - treated us well, not at all like the old Warden used to. He told us that whoever did the most work in a year would get a pound (which was a lot of money) but there were shorter competitions too. The most in a month would get a shilling and the most in a week would get us a penny. I worked as hard as everyone else there because there was a reason for our working so hard. William had said that if you could give him ten pounds from hard earned money - he wrote

down who earned what so that there would be no stealing - then they could leave the slave business altogether. Apart from that he dreaded having to beat us so instead he gave us longer working hours. Hardly any of us broke the rules now though unless it was an accident.

Lirael and I worked as hard as we could until we had five pounds each. I was twenty then and Lirael was going to turn fifteen the next month. We decided that we were going to ask William if we could use that to pay him to get out and then we would stay in the country earning money until we had another ten pounds we could pay him back with. "That sounds like a good idea Maerad and Lirael but once I let you leave this place how will I know that you will pay me back? Let me sleep on it and come back tomorrow for an answer." deciding that this was the best answer we were going to get today we thanked him and left.

The next day we went back to William's hut, bubbling with excitement. When we entered he told us to sit down on chairs on the other side of his desk. "Well, I have thought it over and decided to let you leave and work at an inn not far from here. The innkeeper is my brother and we spoke about the arrangements last night and we have decided that you two are to work there until you have earned ten pounds. He will then give me the ten pounds and you will then be free to continue working there or you can leave. You will have

accommodation there, it will be a shared room but larger than what you have now. Any questions?"

I instantly knew what to ask "Won't his customers care? I mean everyone in this country hates us because of our skin colour so won't they too?"

"Maerad we talked about this last night because I had the same concerns but he said that they will be too drunk to care. Happy now?"

It was Lirael who asked the question forming on my lips "Yes we are happy. So when are we leaving this place?"

"You are to be leaving tomorrow at dawn so if you have any belongings you need to pack those and have them ready to leave. Also, I know that you have had a history with not following the rules Maerad. I expect any imperfections to the hut gone by tomorrow, please. You will have the day off today to get ready but I suggest that you leave now before all the breakfast porridge is gone."

"Thank you so much you have no idea how grateful we are to you." I said as we left the room.

That night we were so excited to leave that place and all its bad memories behind. But not only that but to see the outside world which we hadn't seen for six and a half years. When morning came we were already out of the hut and waiting at the gate for William's brother to arrive. We waited for around about half an hour for him and when he finally arrived he had to talk to William before we could leave. When William, George - William's brother -, Lirael and I had finished talking George led us out of the gate

and to a small wooden cart. After he had reached the cart he turned around to us and said "Maerad and Lirael I have heard my brother say how hard workers you are and that you won't disappoint me. You already know about living conditions and work hours, don't you?"

"Lirael and I know about living conditions but not about work hours, sir"

"There is no need to call me sir just call me George. I was told that you could speak almost fluent English but had to find out myself. Who taught you and does Lirael know what I'm saying and can she speak English?"

Lirael whispered into my ear and then allowed me to talk to George.

"The Lady who lives at the big stone house ordered her slave Kaeba to teach us English. But it was only ever me who continued to learn it and excel in the language. Lirael can understand what you are saying but has long since forgotten how to speak most of it so she can say a few things but not a lot, also she is very shy and will only talk to anyone once she knows them properly." I replied

"Okay then so I need to earn her trust? How long does it take to do that? Also, you might need to re-teach her English so that both of you can work with the customers and not just you."

"Okay. I'm sorry but I don't know how long it will take for Lirael to trust you and is there another way to serve at the inn like me asking the people what do they want and then Lirael and I serve them?" by the time that I had finished speaking George

"Your right about that. Let's get comfortable we will be spending at least a year here." The next morning I woke up at about nine so I went downstairs to see what kind of place we would be working in. The light from the sun leaked into the inn so I could see everything.

There were rows upon rows of wooden benches and seats and at the back of the room was a giant desk with wooden barrels behind it. Next to the barrels were cups that you could see through. On the wall next to the desk stood a giant stone fireplace overlooking the whole inn. In the corner of the room was a door that I hadn't see the night before. When I went through it I was taken to the inn's back garden. There was a pen full of new animals that were to my waist. After I had finished looking around I went back upstairs to see if Lirael was awake.

As I walked into our room I glanced over at Lirael's bed and saw that she was still asleep. My hands were dirty from petting the animals outside so I walked over to the wash room and filled the small basin with a bucket that stood next to it. Quietly I washed so as not to wake Lirael, who woke up just as I had finished washing. "Did you have a good nights sleep? It's eleven in the morning so you might want to clean yourself up a bit before work." While she was in the wash room I made the beds and closed the cupboards. When twelve came around Lirael and I were just waiting for George to say that we were needed downstairs. He came a few moments later and took us downstairs.

had already hoisted us onto the back of the cart and jumped up onto the front.

"I suppose that could work. Oh, and by the way your working hours are twelve in the morning until twelve at night okay for you?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

We were all quiet after that. With the exception of George shouting out instructions to the animal pulling the cart. So William was right: it was only a short journey from the cotton fields to the town. The inn was a large wooden building that had lots of windows and a single door that stood in the centre of the wall facing us. George told us to stay there and wait for him, so we did. When he came back he led us into the inn and up the stairs, then we were taken down to the end of the hall. There were quite a few doors in that corridor but the end one on the right was ours. Inside were two beds, two small cupboards and a small room in the corner which was blocked by a closed door. George told us that these accommodations were completely free of charge and that work started the next day at twelve. We thanked him and then he left saying that he had work to do. When he left curiosity took over and I looked behind the door; inside was a toilet, a small basin and a large basin.

I walked out of the small room and closed the door behind me.

"So this is our new home. What do you think Lirael?"

"I like it. It's better than the slave camp, much better than the slave boat and the cotton fields."

There were already a few people down there; heads hanging low over food and drinks. George led us behind the giant wooden desk to speak to us " The both of you are going to be carrying trays with drinks on around for the customers to take and put the money on the tray. Maerad you are going to ask the people who walk in what they want. If they say "the usual" ask their names and find me. Happy?"

"Happy" I said at the same time Lirael nodded. We both grabbed a tray each then started walking around. A few people grabbed a drink from my tray but not many - it was too early for that. Some men came in so when they were seated I walked over to them. One of the men saw me and started trying to make fun of me "Oh, I see that Old George can't afford to hire proper women now, only these things. I bet this one can't even say a word in English let alone know what it means."

Infuriated I had to hold back most but not all of my anger before I spoke back "Actually as a matter of fact I can speak almost fluent English on top of that Lirael and I bought our own freedom. We were kidnapped from our villages by people like us who were forced to by slave traders. I have not seen my family for over seven years, which is why I am here working for money to buy passage back to Africa. I did not even want to come here but was kept under deck with hundreds of others because people like you think that you are better than us because your skin is lighter than ours. So are you going to order something or are you going to get out?" I said injecting as much venom I could into my speech. I could tell by his face that he was speechless and knew that he

had been beaten but he said anyway "A beer for all of us please." still glaring at him I took fourteen drinks off of my tray.

"one pound please," I said as flatly as I could, trying to hide my anger at this man. He handed over the money and I walked away from the table back behind the desk. "Well done Maerad. Never in all the time, I've worked here have I seen Big Billy lost for words." I turned around to see George with a huge grin on his face. I returned his grin while filling up my tray again and walking to the opposite of the room as far away from Billy that I could get.

The rest of the day went smoothly after that. Billy's group left at about four, most of them struggling to stand so it was amusing watching them walk a few steps. It was very busy that first day but no one seemed to care about me and Lirael serving them. They treated us like we were one of them and I felt proud of that. At midnight George gave us some food then we went upstairs to sleep. We both slept well that night. I woke at eight and Lirael woke soon after. As we were both ready before nine we decided that we were going to explore the town. On our way out we passed George and he warned us that the locals may seem friendly when they have had a drink or two but they will hate us walking around the town like them. I instantly thought about Big Billy and knew that we wouldn't be bothered by his group.

As we were in town we found out that the Old Tavern Inn was the only inn in the town. There were lots of shops around the town, many of the buildings were shops with the shop owners homes on top. It was very different from Africa, where the huts were on the ground only and you got what you needed from the edge of the forest. Another way it was different was that it was much colder. I shivered in my thin clothes and wished that I had the big thick coat from the shop window. At half-past eleven we went back to the Old Tavern Inn where we were met by George.

"So how much trouble did you two get yourselves in then?"

"None the streets were very empty. Almost like they were avoiding us. They weren't. Were they?"

"No, no. Of course not it's a Sunday so most of them would be in church today."

"So are we open today or not?"

"Not, but if you are desperate to get those ten pounds you can milk the goats outside if you like." I agreed to milk the goats because I was very bored and Lirael came too. George taught us that you needed to lightly squeeze a pink thing beneath the goat called the udder and then you gently pull and then you let go and repeat until there is no more milk left in the goat and you move onto the next goat. When we had finished milking the goats it was two so we went back inside to find George.

When we went inside we found him cleaning out the cups. "Is there anything else you need us to do?"

"You can clean the tables and chairs and then you can polish them. After that, I will give you a farthing each so you can go to town or put it towards the ten pounds." After he had finished speaking we started working. Lirael scrubbed the tables and I dried and polished them. We worked hard and for long. By the time we had finished, it was eight so we retired upstairs.

"Maerad how long will it take for us to get enough money to pay of William and to get out of this country?"

"I don't know Lirael. Will you go back to your family? I know I will go back to mine."

"No, I won't. They abandoned me to this life. You're all the family I have now."

"Then you will come with me. To live with me and my family, you can be like mine and Aisha's little sister."

"That sound nice. I'm tired I'm going to sleep. Goodnight Maerad."

"Goodnight Lirael." That night before I went to sleep I imagined what our family reunion would be like. It was all pleasant until I remembered that I hadn't seen Mother and Aisha for over seven years. They might not recognise me or Mother might be dead and Aisha married to someone in our old village. I fell asleep that night with all of those bad thoughts swirling in my head.

I didn't sleep well at all that night. I woke up from a night terror. It was hard to see the clock but it looked like the time

was half past three. I lay in bed for a while until it became clear that sleep wasn't coming back. So I went into the wash room and cleaned my self up a bit before I went downstairs. I hugged my arms close to my body as I stepped outside to see the goats. The goats were all asleep but by the time that I had gotten close to their pen a couple had woken up and walked over to be petted. I stroked their heads deep in thought. We stayed like that until the sun came up over the horizon. It wasn't until Lirael brought me inside that I realised how cold I was. My thin shoes had stopped most of the cold but not all of it. Lirael dragged me in front of the fireplace and left me there to warm up.

George came down at eleven and gave us both some food. When people started coming in at twelve to eat I was stood up and ready to serve. The day was quiet until Billy came along. When he came so did about half the town. When they entered they all looked at me expectantly as if expecting me to get angry again. But I was determined not to let these people win so when they had all sat down I went from table to table asking them what they wanted to drink. Many asked for beer and ale but there were orders for whiskey and mead and other drinks that I had never heard of. When I left a table I could count on hearing the people on the table whispering to each other about how good my English was; all I could do was smile at the next table. We got good money that day. Those town folk kept coming back with others to show them my English, but I didn't care so long as we got money. When Lirael and I were out on the streets people pointed us out to the others they were with. It was never hard to

find us though we were the only Africans there. Although we attracted so much "good" attention there was bad attention too. A very small amount of people used to spit at us in the streets and call us names - more often than not it was Billy and his friends - but we always ignored them.

We worked at the Old Tavern Inn for about five years. It was easier once all the fuss about me had died down. We had asked people in the town if they knew how much it would be for us to get back to Africa. They said it would cost about fifty pounds for both of us. We earned six pounds a year each working for George. This meant that we only had one pound a year to spend on clothing and shoes. When the five years was finally up we spent one last day working at Old Tavern Inn saying goodbye to the customers we had gotten to know. Lirael had started learning English so she said goodbye to them all which shocked most of them who had never heard her speak before. We were to walk the docks which was a couple of miles away from the town the next day.

The Journey Home

We left at dawn and walked until our feet hurt. When we reached the docks it was roughly eleven in the morning so we sat down and ate the lunch that George had given us. As we ate we watched the boats enter and leave the docks but we said nothing. We both knew that we were going to hate the journey home but it was going to be worth it at the end.

We walked up to the boat that was leaving for Africa and talked to the man who was letting people board. "Hello, my name is Maerad is there any spare tickets? We know this boat docks at the place we are heading and would really appreciate it if you let us travel with you."

"You can speak English? Yes, there is space on my ship tickets are twenty-five pounds each. Have you got that money?"

"Yes, sir we have got that money." I said passing him the pouch full of coins. We watched as he opened up the pouch and checked the money

"You can go on. Your room is 83. There will be information about everything in your room. Go on now." We thanked him and went to find our room. The room was small with two beds stacked up on top of each other. Lirael took the bed on top and I took the one on the bottom. There was a small cupboard at the bottom of the beds. The whole room smelled salty and it was so cramped we could hardly move.

"Let's go look around the rest of the ship, Lirael. It's too cramped in here."

"Yeah, we've seen in here and I can barely breathe. How are we going to live in here for three months?"

"We survived coming here on the slave ship. We'll survive this. Besides this is bigger than what we had on that ship and we have beds now. Come on let's go" While wandering around the boat we met a few people like us: former slaves wanting to get back home, but no one we knew. When walking around the boat we found the dining area, a smoking room, a games room and a few more rooms.

After exploring and trying to memorise our way around the boat we went back to our room exhausted. At exactly six a giant bell was rung(waking us up) to tell everyone that it was time to eat. The meal that day was some vegetables and some sort of meat that I hoped it wasn't goat, remembering the goats at Old Tavern Inn. Thankfully we found out that it wasn't goat but beef.

After dinner Lirael went back to the room while I went to the library. In there there was shelves full of books. I found a book that looked interesting and settled down with it in a comfortable chair. I sat there for hours reading and listening to the gentle slap of the sea against the boat. I thought of America and how it was good as well as bad. I thought of Kaeba and how he probably would be stuck there for the rest of his life. I thought of the brothers William and George and

how they had been good to me and Lirael, even when they didn't have to. I thought of the Warden and how he hated me so, all those years ago. And I thought of Billy and how his face looked when I retaliated to his rude remarks. I decided that if I did marry when we got back home to the village I would tell my children my story. That way it would be passed down in history, if I didn't have children I would write down my life story. I would write a book like William Shakespear did. And I thought that maybe just maybe my story would go down in history too.

I didn't remember falling asleep. I just remember waking up in that library chair with William Shakespear's book open next to me. I looked out of the small library window and saw that it was only just dawn. As silently as I could so as not to wake everyone else I walked down the corridor back to the cabin. I suddenly felt grateful to the White Woman and Kaeba for teaching me to read and write. I thought that I would go to the library every day to pass the time on the voyage back. The rest of the days on that boat back were the same thing just repeated over and over again. What my second most joy was on that boat (underneath reading) was watching the white people's faces when they saw- hat I could speak almost perfect English. Reading and talking to Lirael were my only pastimes on that boat. I told Lirael all the good, happy stories of back home so she had something to look forwards to. Often Lirael and I sat in the library reading together - she had excelled in her English a lot.

We were lucky the captain said when we got off the boat in Africa. We were lucky that we came across no storms on the journey. When I got off of the boat in Africa it felt different. It was the same place where Lirael and I were put on the slave boat. But now this place wasn't home. Not any more. This place was just where we were born and lived for part of our lives. The heat which Aisha and I used to love was too hot for me now. As soon as I stepped off of that boat I felt sweat drip down my back and forehead. Things were different now - I had been away for twelve years. I turned to look at Lirael and knew that she was thinking the same things. Together we walked down the path leading into the forest. Just as we had walked together going to the boat that took us to America. Together we walked past the slave camp, though our pace did quicken at that point.

Together we walked for miles down the same route I had twelve years ago.

When it started to get dark we stopped walking. I went to the edge of the forest to collect wood for a fire. I was taught how to make a fire when I was young so after some difficulty I had a roaring fire for us to sleep by. We were both awake by dawn the next morning, thirst had over taken us and it was the thing that kept us going. I hadn't remembered how long the walk was from the village but when I was being carried down that path I had been shot. Unconsciously I rubbed my fingers over the bullet wound. I could still feel the bullet through my after

all that time. Lirael saw what I was doing and turned to look at me "Are you okay Maerad?"

"Yes I just saw the place where I was shot. It doesn't matter let's keep walking it's not far now. Less than a mile."

We heard the village before we saw it. Just as we were in view of it I could hear myself gasp. It had grown a lot. There were at least a hundred huts, probably more. I turned to Lirael with a grin on my face "Welcome home Lirael. Now lets find my family."

Because the village had grown during the time I was away we had to go back to the village well - which had been dry for decades - for me to find the way back to the hut. As we were walking a boy walked up to me and Lirael saying "Aisha Mother said the dress should be ready in a few days for you." after the boy had gone I looked at Lirael and said "Good to know that I still look like Aisha. Come on not far now." When we finally got to my old hut I reached out to open

the door ,like I had so many times before when I was younger, but I stopped before I did. "Lirael, what if they don't recognise me. Or worse remember me?"

"Maerad, stop worrying this is your family. They won't have forgotten about you. And that boy in the village thought you were Aisha so they can't not recognise you." and before I could stop her she reached out and knocked on the door. From in side the house I heard my Mother ask Aisha if it were for her and

Aisha saying it wasn't. We heard scuffling and then the door opened; revealing my Mother.

She looked at me then back into the house. When she looked at me for the second time her eyes were full of tears. "Maerad. Maerad is that really you. You've grown so much! How did you get back though? They never come back."

"Well I had a very hard time getting back. And I think that Lirael and I are going to be some of the only ones that do. Can we come in now or do we have to stay standing outside getting funny looks from people?"

Mother moved out of the way to allow me and Lirael to get into the house. As we walked in Mother took a look at Lirael and then her eyes went straight back to me just as Aisha came into the room carrying a water jug. As soon as she saw me she dropped the jug, allowing it to smash on the floor. "Aisha! You need to be careful. Don't go breaking all of our water jugs. It took Mother ages to make them."

Without caring about the broken clay Aisha started screaming at me "TWELVE YEARS MAERAD! YOU LEFT US FOR TWELVE YEARS!" she started sobbing so she reduced to speaking "Do you know how worried I was? How we were? Did you even care about what might happen to us, how we might feel if anything happened to you when you went into the forest that day?"

"Aisha. You have no idea the tortures I have been through in the past twelve years. I was shot; kidnapped; kept in a slave camp which seemed inhumane to put animals in let alone humans; I have had to stand by and watch friends die knowing that there was nothing I could do to help ease their pain; I was trapped in the bottom of a slave ship where the air was so bad that people died breathing it where we had next to nothing to eat. I had to sit there and learn English because that is what I was told to do; I had to work in a cotton field for almost seven years two of which were spent with a warden who hated me for no reason; I then had to work at an inn serving people for five years just to get enough money to come back to Africa to see my family again. And while all that was happening I was being tormented and ridiculed because of my skin colour so you have no right to complain about how you felt while I was away." close to the end of my speech I had started shouting but I didn't care . "Oh and by the way Aisha the dress someone is making you should be ready soon a boy came us and told us as we were walking here, I guess he thought I was you." I said my last part in a very calm tone which shocked Mother and Aisha because they were expecting me to shout. Could tell it by their facial expressions. During my speech Lirael had moved over to the broken jug and started picking it up. Mother saw what she was doing and told her to stop saying that she was a guest and that Aisha would do it in a minute.

"Actually Mother about that; Lirael's family made it clear that they didn't want her back. It's alright if she she lives here with us now isn't it?"

"Yes, yes of course it is. We have one of the largest houses in the village. We can fit an extra person in." then she was gone from the room dragging Lirael by the wrist into the bedroom. I started to follow but Aisha grabbed my shoulder " You said they forced you to learn English. Do you still know it?" Without answering her I turned to face her saying "Aisha what do you want? Just leave me alone." in English. Then before she could retaliate I ran to the bedroom. The first thing that I noticed was that my bed was still in the corner where it always had stood. It hadn't changed at all except there was now a thick layer of dust on it. "Mother you kept me bed the same, why? You would have made so much more money if you had sold it." "I kept it in the hope that you might come back to us. And I was right. You did come back to us, just a bit later than expected." The rest of the day was calm after that. That night so Mother and Aisha couldn't understand us we spoke in English. "Lirael are you okay? You've hardly spoken since we got here."

"Yes Maerad I'm okay. It's just been a busy day. Your home is so nice, much better than mine. Are you sure that I can live here with you? And I won't have to go back to my family?"

"Yes Lirael I'm sure. We were always one of the richest families in the village. Go to sleep now, tomorrow is going to be much busier."

I was right too. Somehow rumour had spread that I had come back and so the next day was full of greeting old friends and neighbours. But I refused to talk to anyone else before I saw Kaeba's Mother and family.

"Kaeba is okay don't worry. He is fine and happy in America. He was the one who taught us English. He misses you though, very much. He still regrets what happened. Even though he never said it out loud."

People came and went throughout that following week. The only thing that stayed the same was that I was back with my family and this time it had one more person in it.

The Final Years

I wrote this story as a promise to myself. I never had children. Aisha and Lirael did but not me. I don't regret my life and I know that Lirael didn't regret hers either. All lives have their ups and down but mine, Lirael's and thousands of others had adventure. I never found out what happened to the others who went on the ship with us. I can only hope that they had as good of a life as Lirael and I did. She stayed with us, Lirael. About a year after our return Aisha got married. And two years after that Lirael did too.

Mother died almost ten years after our return; at the nice old age of fifty. I'm older than her now. I'm fifty four. I'm not the one who is writing this, my niece Itha is. I taught her to write, read and speak English like me and her Mother learnt to. Her uncle Kaeba never made it back to Africa so I thought that it was only fair to teach our niece like he taught me and her Mother.

I miss Kaeba now. And William and George. I know what the Warden felt like now; when he was on his death bed. When I was young there was a shipwreck on the beach near where we lived. I was out on a walk - I had gotten angry about Mother's death and ran off. It was the same ship Lirael and I went on to get back home. As soon as I recognised it I went running

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towards it thinking only of the library. I found the book I was looking for - my Shakespear book. It was one of his plays "Richard III". Richard was treated unfairly too. Not as unfairly as us slaves though. I don't think anyone who hasn't been on those ships - lived on them - will be able to know what it was truly like and how much we suffered on them.

I know my end is near. It will be with me soon. I wonder if that is what everyone who died on the slave ships felt, as they took their last breaths. I hope that our stories go down in history. Mine and the other slaves. I was one of the rare few who got away - back home. Not many others did. They had to stay behind like Kaeba; they had to stay with the white people who hated them because of the colour of their skin.

I hope that they found happiness too in their sorrow filled lives. And I hope more than anything else that the slave trade will end and that us Africans will be treated like white people because we are all the same. We just have different clothing.