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Escaping Slavery and Finding Freedom

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Mr. Reeves' farm, Virginia

"Faster, boys! Cotton won't pick themselves!"

That was one thing Mr. Reeves was right about, I thought bitterly as I plucked a speck of cotton off the plant and stuffed it into a plump bag. The hot sun beat down on my neck, making it hot to the touch. The air reeked of sweat and fear.

Mr. Reeves walked in and out of the cotton aisles, peering at us to make sure none of us "Black folk" were slacking off. The birch rod in his hand made sure of it. As Mr. Reeves walked down my aisle I stopped obediently, waiting to see if he had any command. He walked past me but then, without even a glance he reared the back of his foot and smashed me in the shin. I gave a sort of little gasp and hit the ground hard on my chest, knocking the air out of me but more importantly, causing me to spill my cotton. I struggled to get up, my shin throbbing.

"Pick that cotton up, slave," said Mr. Reeves smugly. I knelt and started picking the fallen cotton, but just when I reached for one he stomped his foot on it, kneading the cotton into the earth. "What do you say?" he demanded. I bowed my head, tingling with fear and fury. "Yes, Mr. Reeves. Sorry, Mr. Reeves." I thought my matter was finished but it wasn't. Mr. Reeves swung his arm back and struck the rod against my back making me fall for the second time in a minute. I could feel the lash burning.

I stayed down.

He walked off, shaking his rod. I sighed and began picking cotton all over again, trying to straighten my back to avoid as much pain as possible. No one helped me. They pretended it



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didn't happen, avoiding my eyes and focusing on their own bags. It was better to pretend nothing was there than to acknowledge the horror in our lives.

When the dinner bell rang we all walked to the side of the old barn where Mr. Reeves' son was waiting with our meal. I met up with my younger sister, Jillian. Call her Jillian, Jilly, Jellybean, whatever. She didn't mind. Jilly worked with other children around her age feeding the animals. I wished I could stay in the shade take care of animals. "Was Mr. Reeks mean to you again, Nicky?" My younger sister asked worriedly. I patted her head. "He's mean to everyone. Don't call him that. If he ever heard you..." I let the threat hang in the air between us. She shook it off quickly. "He'll never hear me." I shook my head, sighing at the same time. "Just you wait, Jellybean." I quickened my pace. "Let's go! We have to get to the front!" She tried keeping up with me but it was no use even for my sore back, the line already dispersed. They'd handed out all the food Mr. Reeves could (or wanted) for today.

Both of us sighed simultaneously. "There's always next time, Jelly."

Someone cuffed me on the side of my head. I turned around. It was our older brother, Glen. He was holding a potato in his hands. "There's also no time if you're slacking all day!" "Glen!" I said, relieved. He'd share food with us. "How'd you get off duty so fast?" Glen's job was training the animals and not feeding them but gearing them, such as getting new saddles from the merchants, attaching new horseshoes, etc. It was pretty dangerous and exhausting.

Compared to Glen my job was picking cotton and enduring heat was for babies. Glen raised the top of his shirt where there was a large red bruise over his ribs. Jilly gasped, hurrying forward to examine it. Glen hugged her, then slapped me on the shoulder. "When I was trying to change horseshoes on Sal, the dumb thing kicked me, and then-" Now he turned around so I could see two large strokes parallel from each other on his back. "-that's from Reeks himself, for damaging Sal's hooves."

I shook my head. "He'll kill you one day."



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I hadn't meant for it to come out so harshly. I'd only meant for it to be a warning. Glen's smile faltered but then he was smiling again. "Don't worry, I'll never let him hurt you" I waited. He coughed. "Too badly. Besides, the Union might save us, you know."

I couldn't resist a small smirk. "I'll wait for that day."

For the past few years the Union states were abolishing slavery and they were willing to fight for that. I was grateful for the Union for doing that. Slavery was wrong. It pitted human over human, not that we were any less than human. We'd heard tales of the Union taking over operations including slaves and we were hoping we might be one of the few rescued.

But this talk was in hushed whispers and hope, what did we have of them coming true?

We sat down together in the shade of one of the trees. Glen let us eat most of his potato but we made him eat some of it. In the center, the potato was slightly stiff but it was better than eating a raw potato by far. Jilly put her head down on Glen's lap and I leaned against Glen's shoulder, letting a moment's rest. We were soon joined by Scratch, another slave working in the same area as Glen. He was a nice person. I waved to him, but I really wanted to rest. I ached. End of story. Every day I got up to pick cotton. I wished for a change.

I slept with the other slaves in the broken barn beside the Reeves' house. I couldn't sleep, but that was normal. I was tangled with other people and I couldn't do anything, much less sleep. I was in this deep stupor of thinking when the shouting started. Many of the other slaves had also woken up, but when I heard gunshots, I immediately huddled down, hands over my head. Scratch, who had been beside me got up and went around the barn to take a look.

I waited for more gunshots, waited for the sound of Scratch's body hitting the floor, the sound of death. I was literally shaking.

I thought we were all going to die until I heard a voice, "It's all right, everyone." Obviously, no one came out just yet, until Scratch yelled, "I'm still alive, you mules!" Only then did we timidly peek out the barn.



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There was Scratch, unharmed and smiling, there was a group of white men in blue uniforms and blue hats that carried rifles, there was Mr. Reeves, lying on the ground, there was a red liquid seeping from his chest...

He was dead.

I looked away, gagging. Even though I'd thought of it, I'd never wanted to see Mr. Reeves shot down in cold blood. I looked for Jilly. I didn't want her to see this. I found her in the sheds behind the animal pens where all the other children were. "Come out" I beckoned. "It's safe. There are Union soldiers out there!" I didn't mention the body.

Soon the entire slave population of Mr. Reeves' was outside in the stark of night looking at the soldiers. One of them came forward, slightly shorter than the rest, a bit skinnier than the rest. "My name is Private Noah Sunderland and we are from West Virginia. We are to take you to our camp, where your occupations are to be decided. Please, come. It is less than an hours' walk."

Glen walked forward. I dashed to his side, Jilly in tow. "Thank you for freeing us" he began, "I was wondering, could the old and the young take the horses? That way we would cut time faster, sirs" I could tell Glen was trying to act brave but I could see through him. The way his jaw clenched and his eyes bugged out. Private Sunderland seemed surprised but he nodded. "Take your horses, your food! All of this is yours now. Tonight and forever on, you are free men!"

We cheered.

"But," he continued, "there is a battle coming along, the battle of Gettysburg. We need men and supplies. Who will assist?" More than half of the slaves including me raised their hands and said "Aye!" We got all the horses and then we all left, assisting or not. Everyone would walk to the camp and then move on to the North, where there would be jobs for Blacks.

I raised my hand and cheered for the Union, for the new life they gave us and most importantly, freedom. A chance to fight for what was right.



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