

An Introduction to Danielle

If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse.

“Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”

Harriet Ann Jacobs, 1861

Danielle

When allowed out of the house, Danielle usually found a way to participate in the perpetual game of Kick with the other kids who lived in the village—kids with whom she’d grown up—happy days. ‘Kick The Beast’ was a soccer-like game. Its goals were made up using a pair of laundry baskets, and the ‘ball’ from leftover bits of hide and scraps of fur.

Her closest friends were other child slaves and the children of the Master in whose house she was born. His village had a number of major households—houses of the warrior class, as well as the numerous families of free people. There was never any danger that the game of Kick would come to an end because of a lack of players. Actually, the game never really ended; it simply continued from one day to the next, with minor pauses for things like sleep and meals and the perpetual chores children were required to do.

Danielle stood out among the village kids—her red hair and eyes set her apart—eyes like emeralds that flashed in the sun when she was angry. Despite this, she’d always had an engaging and calm disposition, but she didn’t tolerate people who lied or were deliberately cruel to others. Lately however, her friends would often find her staring into the distant forest, or she’d forget what she had been saying when talking to them. She no longer felt like a child.

Her birth mother had red hair, too, although Danielle hadn’t seen her mom for many years. She had been traded away to the clan of another village in exchange for a pair of field slaves and a few cattle, and now lived more than ten days travel to the east. She may as well have been on the other side of the world. Slaves, like her

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mom and Danielle—the daughter of a slave—were not allowed to travel outside the village without permission.

Today there were ten kids playing—five on a side, and each team was kicking and punching and scratching to put the misshapen, heavy ball into the other team’s basket. She was almost to the ‘enemy’ goal when she heard a loud bell that made the hair on her neck stand up and then she stopped where she was. A member of the other team took the ball away but she didn’t notice or react.

“Is that for you?” a friend wanted to know. But it was clear from the haunted look in her eyes that it was, and that she had to leave. It was a look her friends hated to see.

“Yeah.” The word came out as a whisper.

Not long after the bell had rung, a woman appeared at the pitch carrying a thin whip-like switch in her right hand. “Danielle, didn’t you hear the bell?”

“Yes.” Her voice trailed off at first, but then returned with strength. “I’m coming, Mother.” The word ‘Mother’ didn’t come easily. It was neither a term of endearment nor of true family.

“Is your room ready? The customers like a clean room.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Well then, come along. It’s time to get ready. But in the future you need to respond to the bell right away.”

The woman paused and looked around at the other children, squinting at the boy who’d taken the ball. This game looks dangerous. I don’t think I like it. I wouldn’t want your face to get marked up playing. Maybe you should think about stopping all this silliness.” Danielle couldn’t decide if this was an order or merely a threat of what would happen if she didn’t come right away next time the bell rang.

She sighed and looked away, toward the rolled up pieces of leather and fur, hiding the forming tears. Her friends pretended not to see.

Danielle had cried a lot that first month, until ‘Mother’ told her that the men didn’t like it; there had been complaints. So she often bit her tongue or the side of her mouth until she could taste blood. Focusing on the pain was a good distraction. Pain helped her ignore the things she was feeling, and distracted her from what was

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being done to her by the men. If she closed her eyes she could pretend she was somewhere else—anywhere—until the men finally went away. Danielle did whatever she could to forget where she was at night. She like to imagine that she was still living in the house where she'd grown up during the first fourteen years of her life, and she'd often pray to the gods that what was happening to her was just a bad dream.

It was her third month at the house now, but unlike older girls, who treated this awful life as though everything was perfectly normal, she still got sick in her stomach every day as the sun moved toward the horizon, and dreaded every night—business hours.

Because she was so young, Danielle didn't have to do much, or pretend that she was enjoying herself the way the others did. Being young and pretty was enough for most men—for now. But if they weren't happy, Mother used the switch. It cut into the bottoms of her feet and the flesh of her lower legs. Other, more severe, punishments had been threatened.

There had been one truly awful night, that time the man *really* hurt her. He liked to hit women and girls when he was drunk. Mother was forced to call in a healer to make sure nothing serious was broken, and it took days to get better. Danielle hadn't been required to give herself to the men for almost a week.

Because of the expense, Mother went to the village Master, complaining to him about the loss of revenue—the Master received a portion of the profits from all village businesses. The man who'd hit her had not been back to the house since that night, although Danielle doubted this was a permanent thing. He still lived here. She'd see Holger watching her —glaring at her—in a way that made her shudder. It wasn't good for a slave girl to have a free man as an enemy, especially a warrior.

Danielle had never been free. Her real mom had been captured by the chief's men while she was pregnant—one of many women taken as slaves from the southern lands. Not long afterwards, Danielle was born.

Warriors used to cross the Great River and raid towns up and down its banks, or they'd capture boats carrying goods along the river. That practice continued until soldiers from the south came up with guns and killed the men. Now,

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as long as they stayed on their own side of the river, the soldiers left them alone. The warriors knew the forests, and fought using guerilla tactics against the better-armed southern soldiers. This negated many of the soldiers' advantages.

The Clans owned the forests and lands north of the river, and south of Vulkan, a massive—still active—shield volcano, as well as the lands east of the Shadow Mountains and all the way to the sea. North and east of fiery Vulkan were the Black Plains—a flat, lifeless place covered in heavy rock that looked like the sea with waves fixed in stone, or so Danielle had been told. The men often told their stories of adventures to the north. Once fall arrived, they said the black plains were covered in thick ice and snow that stayed until late spring. The men did not go north of the burning mountain, especially when the ground shook and heavy smoke was rising from its summit, and then there were people living north of the mountain—refugees from the south whose weapons the men feared.

Tonight, the Mother had planned a celebration and was offering a discount to the warriors. It promised to be a personal hell for Danielle. She heard some of the girls giggling and arguing about the money they would get tonight as gifts, because of the discount. She couldn't think like that, and swore that she'd never would.

The girl knew she had to find a way to escape the village, and the Clans. It was a dangerous thought. She had never been good at hiding what she was thinking, and escaped slaves were brutally punished—the first time. There was no third time.

Even more problematic: there was no place to run. The original twenty Clans, collectively known as 'Northmen' lived in a vast forested area, and along a rocky coast to the east. These were the descendants of warriors—sailors who, for hundreds of years had raided the coastlines of the southern lands. Danielle's only hope would be to somehow make her way south, following the Black River, which flowed from Mirror Lake, and then down and to the Great River.

Danielle's real mother had often told her about their home in the south and the people of her home. She had called their ancestors 'Choosers'—people who lived in the northern reaches of the Land, a nation ruled by the Council of God. Her people lived along the Great River and farmed the lands to its south. Her mother didn't know exactly how far they were from the tributary where the Black River flowed

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into the Great River. She'd guessed that it had taken about a month for the trip north after she'd been captured. Her mom had been pregnant and was in no condition for a quick journey on foot at the time. In addition to the distance Danielle would have to run, and the need to survive in the wild, there was a good chance she would be pursued by the men of her village, or found by hunters from another Clan.

Despite all of this, Danielle was determined to leave, but she had to come up with a plan. She would need food that kept for many days, and a few tools—she could steal these, but stealing and hiding goods would be risky. Plus, she didn't know how long it would take her to reach her goal. All she knew for certain was that if she traveled west she would eventually reach the Black River, which would lead her south to the Great River. After that she'd have to trust to luck, because the Great River could not be crossed without help.

"I don't care," she told herself. "I can't go on like this."