

When I am brave, I am free in my heart

By Kathleen A. Hunter

Chapter One: Captured

One afternoon, a very long time ago, a little girl named Tisi played with her dolls by her front door in far off Africa. Her mother and father and their neighbors had left their village to go to a nearby river to catch fish for their families. Tisi's parents told her older brother, Burdo, to watch after her while they were gone. Burdo climbed a tree so he could see over the fence that circled their home. From there he could see if any animals or robbers were coming near their home.

Tisi heard a rustle in the bushes behind her house. Burdo could not see this place from the tree. Tisi became very quiet. She thought she heard some voices. Suddenly two young men leapt over the fence and came running towards her. Tisi called her brother.

"Burdo, Burdo, help!"

But it was too late. One man grabbed Tisi and held her tightly. The other climbed into the tree and dragged Burdo down to the ground.

The men carried the children away from their house and into the forest. They tied their hands together with a rope, and then tied another rope to this rope so they could lead Tisi and Burdo like animals through the forest.

Tisi and her brother walked many days and many nights like this. The men gave them water and a little dried fruit and meat to eat. They slept curled together to keep warm. Every day, Burdo told Tisi, "Be brave, Tisi, be brave. Our parents would want us to be brave. If we are brave, we will be free in our hearts." So Tisi held back her tears, and tried to keep up with her brother as they walked.

Then they came to a village and were taken into a fenced yard. There were many other people with their hands and feet tied, like hers and Burdo's. Some were children such as themselves. Others were young men and women such as their captors. There were also many grown up men and women such as their parents.

In the middle of the yard there was a house. Two men and a woman stood in the door. They did not look like anybody Tisi had ever seen before. Their skin was not a dark rich brown like the people in her village. Their clothes were different too. Tisi could not understand their language. The woman yelled at everyone tied up in the yard. And she yelled at the men with her too. She made everyone move to one side of the yard. Then the men brought out baskets of food and pitchers of water. She let only a few of the captives at a time cross the yard and get food and water.

That night, a young woman who had a young boy with her came and put her arm around Tisi and Burdo. She led them to a corner of the yard where they slept in a huddle for a few hours.

In the morning all of the people in the yard were marched out of the village and along a forest trail. The woman and her boy kept close to Tisi and Burdo, making sure they had food and water and keeping them warm at night. After several days they came to a huge lake--bigger than anything Tisi and Burdo had ever heard of. Far out in the

lake they could see some strange boats with large white sails that looked like birds' wings.

There were many fenced yards along the lake. Men and women were standing at the entrances, pushing and shoving the captives into different yards.

When Tisi and Burdo came to the first yard, a woman pulled out a big knife and cut the rope that held them together. The woman grabbed Tisi and pulled her into the yard. "This is a good one for a Captain's wife," she laughed.

Her brother Burdo was taken off by some men to another yard. The woman and her little boy were taken to yet another yard. Tisi forgot to be brave. She cried loudly for her brother, "Burdo, Burdo, Burdo, don't go. Please don't leave me alone!"

Tisi could hear her brother long after she lost sight of him, "Be brave, Tisi, be brave. Remember, if we are brave we will be free in our hearts." he called.

Tisi was pushed far back into the yard. She cried loudly until two women came forward and held her closely to comfort her. The women made Tisi eat and drink water, and held her every time she started to cry. In the evening, a man who looked like her father brought her a little rag doll to hold. Oh, how Tisi missed her father and mother! Would they find her? Would they take her home again?

But no one came for her. In a few days, some very strange looking men with white skin came into the yard and looked at all of the people captured there. One of the men had yellow hair and fancy clothing. He walked ahead of the others, and he put his hand on the shoulder of some of the captives. Then the woman and her helpers grabbed these captives and pulled them out of the yard.

A long line of captives waited at the lake shore. They were pushed into small boats and taken to the big flying ships far out in the lake. Tisi was lifted up by the man who gave her the doll and carried onto the boat. When they got to the sailing ship, he carried her up the rope ladder to the deck.

The men Tisi had seen in the yard waited for them and pushed them down ladders deep into the ship.

For a long long time, Tisi lived deep down in the sailing ship. The wind blew hard and the ship rocked back and forth, tossing the captives against each other and onto the walls and floors. Each day the guards pushed them up to the deck. The guards made them walk around and dance and drink water. They poured buckets of water over the captives to clean them off, then they sent them back down the ladders into the dark ship.

One day, two young captives refused to go back down the ladder. The guards hit them with a rope, trying to make them go down the ladder. The men ran from the red haired man. They ran to the side of the boat and yelled "We are going home. We are going home." They jumped off the ship, but Tisi was pushed down the ladder before she could see what happened to them.

All this time, the man who gave her the doll and the two women kept Tisi close to them. Many people were too sick or too sad to eat, but the man and women made sure she had food and water. They comforted her when she cried. They played little games with her, like she used to play in her village. They would whisper to her "be brave, be brave," just like her brother Burdo had done. All day and night, the captives sang songs and told stories. She knew some of the songs and stories from her village, but others were strange to her.

One day Tisi could hear the guards laughing and calling and singing on the deck. That day the sailing ship stopped rocking. All of the captives were brought out on deck. It was hot and sunny, just like back home. Tisi and the other captives were pushed off the boat and back into the little boats, and taken to land. They were pushed back into a fenced yard there, just like the one they had left on the other side of the huge lake.

But Tisi and six other young people were put in a separate yard. She was separated from the man and women who had taken such good care of her on the sailing ship. She cried after them, and heard them calling back to her, "be brave, be brave, Tisi."

In this place, Tisi, another girl, and four boys, were fed well and given a place to sleep in the little hut in the yard. But they had no one to comfort them and they cried themselves to sleep. The oldest boy was named Sashka. He gathered the other children around him. "Listen, remember what our parents taught us. We must be brave. If we are brave, we are free in our hearts." So they all tried not to cry.

In a few days, the man with yellow hair came and got Tisi and the others. He took them back out to the sailing ship where guards waited for them. They were pushed back down the ladder into the dark room. But now the huge room that had been filled with the captives was filled with large wooden barrels and boxes. There were cages with chickens and pigs. There were two horses. The guards told Tisi and her mates to stay in a corner of the big room.

The ship left the sunny warm place and rocked hard as the wind blew and the air grew cold. Tisi was sick from the rocking ship. The man with yellow hair gave her a blanket and patted her on the head.

Many days later, she heard the men yelling and laughing above board, and the ship stopped rocking. The guards brought her and her mates on deck. Before her was a very strange place indeed! The skies were cold and gray and the water was dark. In front of her were many big buildings and walkways. Everything was made of wood.

Chapter Two: A Slave Forever

Tisi and the other children were taken from the ship and pushed into an open place among the buildings. The yellow-haired man took Tisi by the hand and said, "no you are coming with me." Tisi watched her mates led one at a time into the open place. Another man with red hair and white skin turned each one around and called out to the crowd, and people in the crowd called back, and then someone would come forward and take one of her mates away. When Sashka was taken away, Tisi called after him. Sashka called back to her as his new master took him away, "Remember, Tisi, be brave!"

The man with yellow hair led Tisi down walkways around the buildings. He came to a big building, walked around to the back of it and brought her through the door.

Tisi entered a big room that seemed to be used for cooking. She could smell food warming and a fire was burning in a small fire pit. An old woman with white skin dressed all in black came into the room

"Ah, here she is, Captain!"

"I think she will do," the man with yellow hair said. "Where is my wife?"

"With your young son, Captain. I will take care of the girl. What shall we call her?"

"Her mates called her Tisi."

"Well, we will have to give her a good Christian name!"

Later that evening, a very pretty young woman came into the kitchen with the Captain. She laughed when she saw Tisi. "She is so tiny! My goodness we will have to fatter her up! Thank you, Captain for bringing me my very own servant girl."

"Every proper lady should have her own slave girl, my dear wife," the Captain said.

"Well," said the lady, "I suppose she is a slave, but I prefer to call her a servant girl."

"As long as she remembers that she is a slave, my property," the Captain said.

The Captain's wife gave Tisi the name of Esther from the Bible, but Tisi never forgot her real name that her mother and father gave her. The Captain was seldom at home. He went away for many many days on sailing trips to buy slaves from Africa and bring supplies to New London where they lived. The Captain's wife usually treated Tisi alright as long as she did everything she was told. The old lady who was the house keeper taught her to work in the kitchen, work in the garden, clean the house, sew clothing and do the laundry.

One day the Captain's wife packed up all of her son's old toys and put them out on the street for the poor children. Tisi found a ragged little stuffed bear in the bundle. She hid it under her apron and took it to her room. At night she would quietly play with it, giving it secret medicine from her homeland to make it well. One night the old lady heard her whispering to the bear. She dragged Tisi out of bed and took her to the Captain's wife's room.

"You must punish her, Madame," the old lady said. "She must learn that she is never never to take anything from that belongs to the family."

The Captain's wife agreed. The old lady took Tisi out to the carriage barn in the dark. She pushed her into one of the horse's stalls. "You are a slave child, and you have no rights in this house! You will own nothing here. You will stay here two days without food. Then you must come to the house and tell the Captain's wife that you are sorry and that you will never take anything again."

While she was still a child, Tisi was not allowed to go anywhere without permission of the houskeeper or Captain's wife. She was not allowed to play with the Captain's children or even be in the rooms where they were. For a long time, she was not allowed to talk with the other slaves she met at the market in New London. Although she was well fed with a place to live, Tisi was terribly terribly lonely. At night she would begin to cry and then remember what her brother Burdo had told her, "Be brave, be brave. If you are brave you will be free in your heart." She wondered what had happened to her brother, to the kind woman with her little boy, to the man who gave her the doll and the two women on the ship, and to her mates who came north with her.

Tisi learned to speak English, and read the Bible, and to say her prayers to the white peoples' God. When the Captain came home, he would bring journals with him from far off places, and he would talk with the men in New London about his trip. Tisi learned from the journals and from the Captain's talk that there were many many many people from her African homeland who had come across the great lake as slaves. The Captain told his men friends that there were farms in other places where there were many more African slaves than there were white people. The Captain read his friends a story from a journal about an island where the African slaves fought their white masters and

ran away into the mountains, hoping to find a way back to their African homelands. The Captain described how these slaves had been punished when they were captured again. It made Tisi cover her ears and run to her room and hide under the blanket.. "Oh, please God of the White People, keep my brother Burdo and my friends away from that place."

When she grew older and learned how to count money, Tisi was allowed to go to the New London market by herself. There was a young African slave man at the market with his master. They were selling chickens and eggs. Tisi thought she recognized him. She bought a chicken for the house. Then she said out loud., "Sashka, be brave, be brave."

The young man's eyes lit up and he laughed. "Is it Tisi? Is it Tisi who went off with the yellow-haired Captain?"

Tisi smiled and shook her head. "They call me Esther now."

The young man laughed, "The call me Saul."

Every week, Tisi came to the market and met Sashka when he and his master came into New London with produce from their farm. One day Sashka said to Tisi.

"My master has bought another farm and he needs more help. He says that if the Captain agrees, he will buy you from him and you can come to the farm. My master said he will let us marry."

When the Captain came home from a sailing trip, the farmer came to see the him, and the Captain agreed to sell Tisi. The Captain's wife argued with him.

"But I have taught her so much! She is almost like a member of our family. I don't want her to go!"

"Hush, wife, she is not family" the Captain said. "I feared you cared too much for her. She is a slave, she is my property. The farmer will pay me a good price for her. I will get you a new girl from Africa on my next trip."

The Captain's home was the only home Tisi had known since she was a little girl in Africa. Even though she was not free there, she would miss it, and she would miss the Captain's wife. But she was also excited to be with Sashka, an African like herself. They would still be slaves, but she would not feel so lonely.

So Tisi went to live with the farmer, and she married Sashka. In a few years, they had a little boy and then a little girl. With their master's permission, they named their boy Jacob. They named their girl Hannah. The farmer treated them well enough as long as they worked hard, but they were never free to do what they wanted to do. Even as grown-ups with their own children, they could go nowhere without their Master's permission.

As Tisi's and Sashka's children grew, they worked on the farm too. At night, when they were together in their little house behind the farmer's home, Tisi taught her children the songs and games she remembered from Africa. Sashka told his son stories of the brave men from his village. Tisi and Sashka also taught their children how to sew, how to do carpentry, how to cook, how to take care of animals, and many other skills their parent taught them when they were children.

"Sashka and I will die as slaves on this farm," Tisi told her children. We will never have our own land, our own home. But someday I pray you will be free persons, able to come and go as you want, and do what you want. You will be able to choose how to earn a living, so you need to know how to do many things."

"But we do not want to leave you, our mother and father," Jacob and Hannah cried.

Sashka put up his finger to his lips. "Hush! You must be brave. If you are brave you will be free in your heart."

Chapter Three: Hold On to Who I Am

For 14 years, Tisi and Sashka and their children Hannah and Jacob worked together for the farmer. By then, the farmer's two sons were old enough to help with the farm. The farmer and his wife no longer needed Hannah's help, so they sold her to a business man in New London., where Hannah worked for his wife in their home. Like her mother had done for the captain years ago, Hannah cooked, sewed, cleaned and gardened. Hannah missed her mother and father and brother terribly. But her mistress allowed her to visit them on New London market days after she had finished her chores. She was only 14 and in many ways she was still a little girl. She would curl up on her mother's lap in the farmers wagon and cry. "Shh, her mother would whisper. Remember to be brave. If you are brave you will be free in your heart." Tisi stroked her daughter's hair and told her the story of her brother, Burdo, how he always told her to be brave. "And you see, here we are. We are still alive. We are a family. And I believe with all my heart, Hannah, that someday you will be free. So be a good girl and learn all you can from your mistress and her husband.

Then Tisi sang quietly to her daughter in her old language from her homeland, and she told Hannah stories from the homeland.

"Do not forget these stories," Tisi said. "My mother used to tell me these stories in our little village long ago and far away. The stories teach us how to take care of ourselves in bad times."

When the farmer was ready to leave New London, Hannah said a sad goodbye to her family and return to her mistress' house.

One day, when Hannah was just 17 years old, she went to the New London Market to meet her family. A handsome young African man was with her father. He was shy and did not talk to Hannah, but he looked at her a lot. When the young man left, Hannah's father, Sashka, took Hannah to the farmer's wagon.

"Hannah, this young man lives here in New London. He has seen you come and go from your mistresses' home. He thinks you are very pretty and very gentle. His master has talked with our master, the farmer. The farmer told me that the young man would like to marry you."

Hannah looked for her mother. She did not want to get married now! What if she were free and could do what she wanted? Would she want to be married then.? Hannah's mother came over to the wagon.

"Mother, please," Hannah cried out, "I do not want to get married now."

"But he seems like a very nice young man, Hannah. His master and your master have agreed you could get married. You could work at your mistress' home during the day and come home to your husband's master in the evenings. You would be very lucky."

"But mother, you said that I would be free one day. I want to be a free person when I marry. I want to marry a person I choose for myself."

"Oh, my dear child," Tisi said, hugging her daughter, "I do believe you will be a free person one day. But I do not know when. At least you can marry this nice man who your master approves of and you will know some happiness, even if you are not free to do what you wish."

"I would rather take a chance, mother. I do not want to marry anyone until I am a free person."

"What will you do, Hannah," her mother asked her, "until that time comes?"

"Mother, you have taught me many songs and many stories about how our people healed our sicknesses. There are old people from Africa here in the market who know many more songs and stories. While I work for my mistress, I want to come here to the market and learn all the healing songs and stories from Africa, so I can help my own people when they are sick."

Tisi shook her head. "I want you to be as happy as you can be, Hannah."

"I want to be a healer, mother. That will make me happy. And when we are free at last, we will need to be able to take care of ourselves."

"I will talk to your father, Hannah. I do not know if he will understand this."

"Tell him I want to be free in my heart, mother, even if I am not free in the world. I think he will understand."

Chapter Four: I Am A Free Man in a Free Nation

Jacob continued to live and work with his parents, Tisi and Saul on their master's farm. Their master continued to purchase more land, and now two young men from the Pequot tribe worked as laborers along with Jacob. They stayed on the farm during the week in his home, and returned to their own families on Saturday when the farmer went to the New London Market.

At the Market, Jacob listened to the farmers and businessmen in discuss the news. He learned that many people in the Colony of Connecticut were unhappy with the English King and his soldiers.

"It is not fair," Jacob's master said. "I am paying too many taxes to the King. I pay taxes on what I buy here in New London. I pay taxes on what I sell. And now they are talking about adding taxes to everything I do! I must even pay taxes on all of my bills and loans. I am poor from paying so many taxes!"

"They treat us like their slaves," another man said. "We work for them for nothing!"

Jacob said to himself, "this man does not know what real slavery is. He is no slave. I am!"

One Saturday at the New London Market he learned that citizens in Massachusetts had begun fighting with the English soldiers. Not long after that he learned that all of the colonies had agreed to declare themselves free of the English King. A man named George Washington was leading an army of colonists who wanted to be free of English rule. They called themselves *Patriots*.

At the New London market, men began to distribute broadsides, encouraging colonists to join the Patriot cause and enlist in the George Washington's Continental Army.

"I cannot join the Army," Jacob's master told his family. "The food we grow here is needed to feed the army. But Jacob, I have learned that African slaves can "buy" their freedom by joining the army. Your salary will be used to pay me for your worth. When the war is over, you will be free."

Jacob's father, Saul said, "but what if the Patriots do not win the war? What if the English win the war? I am not sure the English will grant Jacob his freedom for fighting against them!"

"You are right, Saul," the master said. "Jacob will have to decide if he wants to take the risk. If he wants to go, I will approve it."

Jacob decided to take the risk. Along with many other African slaves in New London, he joined the Continental Army. He learned to shoot a gun. He learned to march. He and his African friends became guards for the long lines of wagons that carried supplies from Connecticut to George Washington's soldiers in New York and New Jersey.

On one trip, as Jacob and other soldiers marched in front of the first wagon along a wooded road, they suddenly heard gun fire beside him. Jacob and the others dropped to the ground and began shooting back into the woods. They saw two English soldiers get on their horses and ride quickly ahead of them. Jacob was frightened. It was the first time he had had to use his gun, and he did not like it. Next to him, his friend did not move. Jacob shook him and turned him over. His friend cried out in pain. He had been hit by a bullet from one of the English soldiers' guns. Jacob and the other soldiers put his friend in one of the supply wagons.

"I wish my sister Hannah was here," Jacob thought. "She would know how to heal my friend." Jacob felt very alone and wondered if he had made the right decision to join the army and buy his freedom. For a minute he thought about running away. "No," said to himself. "I would be a coward. I will be brave. I will be brave." He remembered what his father and mother told him. "If you are brave you will be free in your heart."

Jacob learned to be a brave, good soldier. All of the supplies he guarded arrived safely at the Patriot camp. The White officers who commanded the Africans gave him a medal and an award for his good work. All of Jacob's salary in the Army was sent to his master to buy his freedom.

The Patriots did win the war, and the English left the colonies. When Jacob returned home he was a free man in the new State of Connecticut in the United States.

He went with his parents and the farmer to the New London Market. "We have a surprise to show you," His mother Tisi said.

There in the market was his sister Hannah. She was selling her medicines to White people and Africans. Hannah gave her brother Jacob a big hug.

"My mistress lets me come every Saturday and sell my healing remedies. I have almost saved enough money to buy my freedom, Jacob!"

"But what will you do," Tisi asked Jacob, "now that you are free?"

"Well, our Officer has offered me work in one of the warehouses here in New London. I will work for him until I can save enough money to buy my parents' freedom too."

For five years, Jacob worked long hours in the warehouse. He lived in a small corner of the warehouse, and Hannah brought him a left over food from her mistress' kitchen.

Then, Hannah was able to buy her freedom too. She continued to work for her mistress while she saved more money to start her own business and find her own house.

Together, Jacob and Hannah finally had saved enough money to buy their own house in New London and buy their parents' freedom. Tisi and Saul came and lived with them in New London. Jacob met a nice African woman at the Market one Saturday. He bought her freedom as well and they were married.

Together, the whole family helped Hannah make her healing remedies and prepare them for market. Jacob and his wife traveled each week to Norwich to sell their remedies at the market there.

Then one day, to everyone's surprise, there was a knock at the door. When Hannah opened the door, a handsome African American man stood there. It was the man who had wanted to marry her years ago. He too had enlisted in the army and bought his freedom. After the war he lived in New York. But he was lonely for New London, and he hoped Hannah would still be there. He thought, "if I could buy her freedom, perhaps she would marry me." But here was Hannah, a free business woman.

"Yes," Hannah said. "Now that I am a free woman, I will marry you."

Jacob and his wife had a baby boy. Hannah and her husband had a little girl. Tisi would rock her grandchildren in the kitchen and sing the songs and tell him the stories of their African homeland.