

LIBERTY OR DEATH

"My name is Imamu Shaka. I am twelve years old, in a refugee camp, running from the guerrillas, and in dire need of true refuge. We are about to embark on our journey from Congo to America. If I don't make it, I want people to remember me this way. I am Imamu Shaka." I slowly closed the brown leather journal my mother had once treasured. Had we lived a different life, my mother would be here, now: peering over my shoulder with her keen, beautiful hazelnut eyes. My sister would enlighten our spirits in the worst situations with her contagious smile and optimism. My friends would come over to play football in the middle of the deserted dirt field with the sun tickling our skins. But things were different. My mother was slowly choked to death, as if *they* took pleasure in her suffering. My sister: murdered by the disease that plagued her tiny, frail body. All of my friends were kidnapped and recruited as soldiers, as if they were merely being turned into pawns in a game of chess. But this was no game. This was my life... And now we must leave this war zone we call home in search of a better life. My father is the only one I trust and love. All the others are dead.

It seemed impossible to leave the Congo for a life in America, but somehow my father managed to make it work. We were finally freed from the shackles that bound us to this land; we finally had our visas. When I walked out of that plane, a wave of liberation emanated through my veins. "*I'm finally free,*" I thought to myself "*I'm free.*" I strutted the way over to the massive airport. My head was high and my chest was up. I was free.

A week later we were settled into a small apartment in the city of Charlottesville, Virginia. I could wander out and upon the foreign city for days. But I didn't have time for distractions, for it was my first day of school and we were already running late. I quickly tossed my pencil and notebook into my bag and bolted my way over to the school. The bell rang just as I stepped foot on campus. I looked around. It was as if I was a crow in a sea of doves. My head hung low as I walked towards the class. I took my seat in the far corner of the class. I could tell that people were already talking about me, but I pretended not to notice. The class soon started with everyone telling each other their names. Wyatt, Emma, Jack, Abigail... The list went on and soon it was my turn.

"My name is Imamu Shaka," I said softly. I heard whispers among the class. I just slouched in my seat. I had the strangest name, I had the strangest accent, I had the strangest face. I was the only one whose lip was deformed. Back in the Congo, it wasn't abnormal for one to display such a formation, but things were different here. I prayed not to be called on for the rest of the day, but my prayers weren't answered.

"I just wanted to specifically introduce our school's newest student, Imamu. He is from the Congo and doesn't know much English so be sure to give him a warm welcome to our school," Mrs. Anne said as she turned to write on the board. I felt something bounce off my neck. At first I thought it was all in my head until it hit me again, and again. Everytime I turned around I didn't see anything, but someone was throwing something at me. I sat in that class for what felt like hours waiting for break. When the bell finally rang, I swiftly stood up from my chair and went outside. I stood near the fence by myself. People were giving me looks as if I were an alien. Oh how I yearned for my mother's affection. I was fortunate enough to meet a young boy named Jack during that break, who would forever change my life. He stood up for me. He helped me. He was a brother to me.

Before I knew it, school ended and it wasn't so bad at all. I walked home and began my homework. I spent hours on the one page that we had. It was all too confusing. I didn't understand any of it. I spent hour after frustrating hour on it until I was finally finished. When I had completed my homework, I routinely wrote about my day in my journal. I was in the middle of entry number ten when I heard the front door open. I looked up and saw my father with a grin on his face. "Let's go," he said excitedly.

"Go where? When? For what?" I asked.

"I'll answer all your questions later," He said briskly as he opened the door. I cluelessly followed him to the bus stop. We hopped on the bus and rode to a hospital. We entered the waiting room and sat for a few minutes until we were in a strange room with many unknown devices. "This organization saved us from our past life in the Congo, so don't fear. Be brave my boy," my father whispered in the silence. I slowly scanned the room and everything in it. There were medical

tools, gloves, antibiotics. I paused for a moment and tilted my head. "*The walls*," I thought. The walls were covered with pictures of people like me, with the same lip deformation. I stopped. I could hardly breathe. My heart raced. I swallowed heavily trying to hold back the tears. I finally knew why I was here.

The surgery went well. When I first looked at myself in the mirror I was almost unrecognizable. I was overcome with such joy. And that's when it hit me. Like a slap in the face. I wanted to help others. I wanted to be a doctor.

"Journal entry number ten... Living in America has given me a whole new perspective on life. There aren't wars when you step out of your house. The school roofs don't look like they're about to crumble down on you. Everyone is given a fair chance at life. I have come to realize how incredibly lucky I am to be living in such a country, a place I now call home. And even though there might be obstacles in the way, crows can fly over them. I hope the next time I read this journal I will be helping others, like those doctors helped me. And if I ever forget how grateful I should be living in such a country, I can look back at the memories housed inside of these rough leather covers. I am Imamu Shaka, and this is my story."

Bibliography

“Medical Aid Where It Is Needed Most. Independent. Neutral. Impartial.” *MSF USA*, www.doctorswithoutborders.org/.

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “Democratic Republic of the Congo.” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/en-us/democratic-republic-of-the-congo.html.

York, Reuters in New. “US Accepts More Refugees from DRC than Syria amid Warnings over Militants.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media. 3 Oct. 2016.

www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/03/refugees-drc-congo-us-syria.

- Nash, Katy. “Congolese.” *Community Refugee & Immigration Services*, www.crisohio.org/congolesel.