



KEMOSHA

OF THE CARIBBEAN

ALEX WHEATLE
WINNER OF THE GUARDIAN PRIZE

Kemosha
of the
Caribbean

Also by Alex Wheatle

Cane Warriors

Kemosha
of the
Caribbean

Alex Wheatle



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1

A NEW MASTER

THE CAPTAIN TATE PLANTATION,
ST CATHERINE, JAMAICA, 1668

I was scrubbing the pots in the cookhouse with the split ends of a thick sugar cane when I heard the bell ringing from the front of Captain's big house. The afternoon sun would soon sink behind the northern hills. The high clouds were still today but I awaited a hint of the rising full moon. The small creatures in the fields had come out to quarrel again.

My cookhouse sister, Marta, paused her drying of plates, knives and forks. She was twenty years older than me. It might have been twenty-two – she wasn't sure. The bell rang out again. Marta squeezed her eyes shut. She reopened them and dread crept over her face. 'Asase Ya!' she bawled. 'Mama of de world! Dem about to lash another one. Why cyan't they behave demselves?'

I dried my hands on my frock. I looked at my palms and they were hard, red and blistered. 'It might not be dat, Marta,' I said. 'Sun soon fall. It could be someting else.'

Marta shook her head. Strands of grey collected around her temples. She hadn't secured her black tie-head tightly today and it almost slipped off her forehead. She didn't seem to notice. 'Kemosha! Kemosha!' she repeated. 'Foolish chile. What else could it be? Captain don't bother shake him bell for anything else. Him love to whip somebody in front of everybody before him tek him rest.'

'You never know,' I said. 'Captain might give we our freedom. Mama used to say to never stop believing. He might be going off to de broad blue waters once more to war wid de Spanish. Captain nuh love de Spanish.'

Marta laughed hard. 'Foolish, foolish chile! Don't your fifteen years teach you anything? You dream too plenty. Just like your dead mama. Me used to dream too. But now me don't waste me time.'

'They will never tek me dream from me,' I said.

Marta shook her head. 'Captain sword get tired,' she said. 'Him want to mek plenty money and sit down on him veranda counting sugar cane and cocoa and drinking firewater.'

'De top of de top English soldier might come for him,' I said. 'And mek him fight ah next war.'

'Come, Kemosha.' Marta beckoned to me. 'Don't make we be late. Let we see what madness somebody do.'

'De only madness me sight on this land is Captain lashing anybody who vex him,' I said.

‘Me wonder if it Hakan getting up to him runaway ways,’ Marta replied. ‘Him long foot too itchy.’

‘Me nuh want to see another beating,’ I said. ‘Me seen plenty blood running already.’

Marta side-eyed me and placed her hands on her hips. ‘And you will see and *feel* your very own lashing if you don’t move your skinny toe quick like hungry chicken.’

‘Nuh worry, Marta,’ I said. ‘If it is another whipping, me will turn me face to de moon. When it all over me could get to talk wid Gregory.’

‘You better teach Gregory not to pick up any runabout ways,’ Marta warned. ‘Captain will mash up him back just like him leave him mark ’pon Hakan.’

I didn’t reply.

We made our way along the dried footpath that ran behind the back of Captain Tate’s big house, past the smokehouse and up by the side of the mansion. I sniffed hog-meat, cocoa and the breath of boiled sugar. The hills in the north were wrapped in shadow and there was no breeze to disturb the treetops.

Marta and I were the last to arrive. In total there were twenty-five of us assembled on the front lawn of Captain’s big house. Hakan was there, tall and strong from cutting the sugar cane. So was Iyana, a sister from another mother. The skin on her left cheek still hadn’t grown back.

Four overseers watched over us from each corner, including Misser Lyle Billings. His flesh-scraper was longer than anybody else's and he had customed his whip with small jagged stones.

Three women carried their pickney strapped to their chests. Men leaned on their billhooks and other long tools.

Nobody was tied to the post in the middle of the lawn ready for Captain's lash. Marta and I let out a long breath. Asase Ya smiled on us.

What is this all about?

Gregory was present, his mud-stained pants rolled up just below the knees. There were new mosquito bites on his calves. I hoped I could find time to treat his legs with a bush remedy. He tried to stand tall, but his shoulders slouched forward and his mouth sucked in big air. He was eleven years old. I tried to catch his eye, but he stared ahead at Captain's big house.

'Kemosha!' Marta pulled my arm. 'Kemosha! Look forward and pay attention. Don't get weself inna trouble.'

I gazed ahead.

Two white men stood on the veranda. One of them was Captain Tate. As usual when the afternoon grew old, he was dressed in his uniform: clean white shirt, baggy white slops where I couldn't see the shape of his legs, a dark blue cravat tied around his neck, shoes with shiny

silver buckles and a three-peaked hat. His cheeks were almost as red as my palms. His lips had as many cracks as Hakan's back. He held his flesh-scraper in his left hand.

The other man was a strange sight under the falling sun. I'd never seen anyone like him before. He only had one eye. There was a hole where the other should've been. His skin was reddish-light-brown, as if he had spoken with the sun every morn. His moustache was thick like a scrubbing brush and as long as Captain's boot laces. And his pink cravat was the longest I had ever seen. It was wrapped around his throat two or three times. I could've mistaken his orange shirt for fire, and the buttons on his jacket caught the gaze of the lanterns on the veranda. His boots were black and longer than Captain's.

This burnt white man only had his one eye for me. His glare wouldn't let me go. I glanced to my right and shuffled my feet. Still he stared at me. Heat rose in my cheeks and I felt my heartbeat deep within my throat and behind my ears.

'Nyame save we, Marta,' I whispered. 'You ever see such ah wicked-looking mon? Angry John-Crow must ah peck out him eye.'

'Hush, Kemosha! Nyame won't come down from Him sky and save we if we nuh quiet!'

'This is Quartermaster Mr Antock Powell,' announced Captain Tate.

‘What’s ah quartermaster?’ I whispered to Marta.

‘Me nuh know,’ she replied. ‘Stop asking question and pay attention.’

‘Mr Powell is a brave man who has given his good service to the English Navy,’ Captain Tate went on. ‘Indeed, he helped push the Pope-loving Spanish back to the filthy hole where they come from. And he’s helped protect our waters around this island. You should give him your allegiance.’

‘What is allegiance?’ I wondered.

‘Quiet your mout’, Kemosha!’ hissed Marta.

Someone else muttered in Spanish behind. I dared not look over my shoulder, but I guessed it was Hakan. *Hasn’t he suffered enough of Captain’s whip?* We were forbidden to speak Spanish. I had always warned Gregory not to do so.

‘What Hakan say?’ I whispered again to Marta. ‘Me never catch all of it.’

Marta leaned towards me. She spoke out of the corner of her mouth. ‘Him say why cyan’t de English go back to de dirty hole where *they* come from.’

I bit my bottom lip to stop a grin escaping.

Mr Powell ran his one eye over my fellow slaves. He fixed his gaze on Iyana, who stared at the ground. I side-eyed Hakan and I could read the fury in his eyes.

I didn’t think Mr Powell liked what he saw. I glanced at

Gregory. He looked exhausted. I wanted to put him to bed but he was too old for that.

‘Mr Powell is here to buy an obedient negro to work in his tavern at Port Royal,’ Captain Tate went on.

‘What is ah tavern?’ I asked Marta. ‘Where is Port Royal?’

She shrugged and screwed up her nose. ‘Me nuh sure. It could be ah place where de white mon drink their firewater. Stop ask me question!’

‘If this slave works hard and don’t offer no quarrel’ – Captain Tate paused, and looked hard at Hakan – ‘it could be a very fine life.’

Mr Powell walked down the three steps from the veranda and inspected the male slaves.

‘The tall and broad ones will cost you ten pieces of eight each,’ said Captain Tate.

My heartbeat cannoned when he approached Gregory. He stopped in front of him and studied his frame. Gregory could hardly keep his eyes open. He passed him and my chest returned to normal. I dropped my head and stared at my feet, hoping Mr Powell wouldn’t select me.

I sensed his boots approaching. He had a short stride. Hot sweat dampened my eyebrows. I could feel it on my back, between my breasts and my belly. I closed my eyes and shifted my feet. I felt the ground ripple as he stood in

front of me. His one-eyed gaze bored into me. His breath wasn't fresh. I opened my eyes but didn't dare lift them. I only stared at his dirty boots.

'What's your name?' Mr Powell asked.

I tried to pretend he wasn't talking to me. *Maybe he'd ignore me and move on. Maybe he wouldn't. Marta always told me I was too pretty wid me brown eyes, heart-shaped face, walk-good legs and a behind dat mek any mon look twice. Me glad me hair look wild today. Me never had de time to braid it.*

He slapped me hard on my left cheek. The silver ring he wore on his right hand scored my face. I soothed the stinging pain with my right palm. Pure hatred burned inside of me.

'They call me Kemosha,' I said.

'Kemosha Tate,' added Captain Tate. 'Every slave here has my surname.'

Mr Powell grinned. His teeth were brown like the cocoa field. 'Take off your frock,' he ordered.

I stood very still. It felt like my blood had stopped flowing. I hoped he wouldn't do to me what Captain Tate did to Marta.

I did what I was told. I let my garment slip off my shoulders and it fell about my feet. I wasn't wearing any underclothes. I shut my eyes once again. I sensed all attention on me. My skin breathed but perspiration ran

down the inside of my arms and over my buttocks. The breeze returned and it cooled the corners of my naked flesh.

Mr Powell walked around me. I was glad there wasn't no flesh-scaper in his hand. He paused. I felt his dirty breath upon my neck.

He said to Captain, 'They will enjoy a dark creature. To add a spice of variety.'

'She can cook too,' said Captain. 'She's fifteen and yet to be with child.'

'Good, good,' nodded Mr Powell. 'How much for her?'

'Five pieces of eight,' replied Captain Tate.

'Five pieces of eight,' repeated Mr Powell. 'You barter a hard price.'

'But your pockets are deep and full,' said Captain Tate. 'I know your booty was a generous one following your last voyage to the Spanish Main. You have done well under Captain Morgan. And Kemosha has yet to be spoiled.'

I wondered who Captain Morgan was, and what 'spoiled' meant.

I picked my frock up and squeezed into it. I caught Gregory's anxious stare. He took a step closer to me but then he remembered himself. I felt his rage. *Nyame, me beg you. Don't let dem tek me.* I had to speak. 'Me nuh want to leave,' I said. 'Me want to stay here so wid me liccle brudder.'

Him nuh have no mama or papa to mind him. Not even ah big brudder or sister.’

I glanced at Gregory once more. He was perfectly still but tears dripped from one eye.

‘He’s of age,’ Captain replied. ‘If he keeps growing at this rate of knots, he’ll be worth ten pieces of eight. Maybe more. But until he grows to his size, he has Marta.’

Marta stared at the ground. Then she glanced at me. Sorrow filled her eyes.

‘Me will mind him,’ she said. ‘Nuh worry about Gregory.’

I offered Marta a vicious look. She turned her gaze away from me.

Mr Powell addressed Captain Tate. ‘Can you give her a clean frock to travel in,’ he asked. ‘I don’t want to present her in rags. I want the good drinking and seafaring men of Port Royal to gaze upon her like the shiny coins in a Spanish conquistador’s chest.’

‘Of course.’ Captain Tate nodded, and went inside.

Mr Powell placed his right forefinger under my chin and lifted my head. My nerves stood to attention. It felt like a worm crawling through my spine. He looked at me hard. I tried to look away from the empty hole where his missing eye should’ve been. His glare dropped to my figure. I wished I didn’t have the backside where men looked twice nor the

curves that they enjoyed. ‘You have defiance in you,’ he said. ‘The buckos and mateys who I sail with will like that.’

Moments later, Captain Tate returned with a scarlet-coloured frock. I guessed it had belonged to his dead wife. Toilet sickness claimed her like it did to my mama. Before she passed, Captain’s wife looked whiter than the high midday clouds. I helped soothe her passing with bush tea and warm palms to her cheeks, though she had always run to Captain Tate complaining about me. I couldn’t imagine hating anyone as much as Captain’s dead wife. When I was beaten because of Madam Tate’s cruelty, I used to close my eyes and wish I was somewhere else.

My mama’s last words to me were ‘Vuela a casa, Kemosha, vuela a casa.’ *Fly away home, Kemosha, fly away home.*

Captain tossed the dress over to Mr Powell. Mr Powell grinned and stared at me as if I was still naked. ‘You will look *desirable* in this,’ he said.

I didn’t know what that meant, but Mr Powell’s gaze told me what he wanted. I pulled off my old frock and wriggled into my new one. It was too tight, and I could barely move in it. Captain Tate nodded his appreciation.

‘My horse and cart are by the side of the house,’ Mr Powell said to me. ‘Your legs, your buttocks, your breasts and the rest of your black negro self better be in there before the sun drops anchor beyond the horizon.’

‘Yes, Misser Powell.’

He aimed his one eye on me once more. He spoke slowly. ‘I own you now.’

What fresh cruelty will lash me life now? I glanced to the western skies. *Asase Ya, why you nub come down from your high place and save me?*

Mr Powell turned to Captain Tate. ‘In the meantime, I will barter with Captain Tate for a fairer price over a generous shot of rum. It’s worth a try.’

The two white men strolled back inside the house, their steps echoing off the wooden boards. They closed the door behind them. Fireflies buzzed around the lanterns. The slaves returned to their huts, except Hakan, Marta, Iyana and Gregory. Lyle Billings watched for any signs of disobedience before he walked away.

‘No te vayas!’ Hakan shouted as he marched over to me.

‘*Keep* your tongue quiet before you lose it,’ warned Marta. ‘She *has* to go. Otherwise there will be big trouble for we.’

‘One good day,’ Iyana whispered, ‘*we’ll* be de ones carrying de flesh-scraper and de long blade. We should fight dem now!’

‘Not now, Iyana,’ said Hakan. ‘Our time will come.’

‘And when dat time come,’ said Marta, ‘your foolishness and your itchy toe will bring tribulation to all of we.’

I didn't want to hear Marta, Iyana and Hakan's cuss-cuss. My thoughts were on Gregory. He stood very still under the afternoon sky. His eyes found new energy and fresh anger. His glare was fixed on Captain Tate's double front doors. I went over to him and hugged him. 'Gregory, Marta will mind you and look out for you.'

Gregory didn't respond. His eyes remained locked on Captain Tate's big house as if he was planning a bloody revenge.

'*Listen* to me, Gregory,' I said. 'Me swear, as long as me draw good breath and me two foot cyan carry me, me will do everyting to come back to you.'

Gregory finally turned to face me. 'Mama dead liccle after she give birth to me,' he said. 'They send Papa away before me even born. When you gone, nobody lef' for me.'

His words carved deep notches into my heart. I had to take a moment to steady myself.

'But me here for you, Gregory,' Marta said. 'Me will mek sure your belly never empty and do everyting to keep Captain flesh-scrapers from your back.'

I cradled Gregory's jaws but eye-water drowned his cheeks.

'Don't mek promise if you cyan't keep dem,' Gregory said.

I struggled for a response. ‘Me will try me best,’ I said after a short while.

Hakan shook his head. ‘Si peleamo’, nadie tiene que irse,’ he said. *If we fight them, no one would have to leave.*

‘Hush your runaway mout!’ Marta warned. ‘Talk like dat will get we all killed. Me nuh want to tek me long rest inna de pit just yet. Go back to your hut, Hakan, before me get mad wid you and fling chicken bone after you. Rest your runabout ways.’

‘Him cyan’t rest him runabout ways,’ said Iyana. ‘Dat day will come. So Asase Ya tell me so! Mighty she is.’

Hakan stood his ground for a moment. He offered Marta a fierce glare before he shook his head and made his way to his cabin.

Gregory dropped his head. I met his eyes and gripped his shoulders. ‘Me will *never* forget you, Gregory. As Asase Ya and Nyame see me now, and mek dem hear me words. Me will do me very best and come back for you. Dat me cyan promise.’

Wrapping his arms around my neck, Gregory held me tight. ‘Every morning when de bird sing inna de treetop, me will look for you,’ he said. ‘And when me finish me work inna de field, me will see if you ah come.’

‘And me will t’ink of you when me first open me eye inna de morning and before me close dem at night.’

‘Sun soon fall,’ Marta said. She glanced at the heavens. ‘And moon will soon wake. You better climb up in Misser Powell’s cart.’

Gregory didn’t want to let go of me. ‘You promise you will try to come?’ he asked.

‘Yes, me will try and try ah liddle more,’ I replied.

I didn’t know how I would return. I didn’t know when. But I had to keep it as a whisper in the corner of my head to keep me living.

Gregory offered me a smile. I returned it.

I gazed into Marta’s eyes. I sensed the many years’ hurt and agonies in them. The despair. The loss.

‘Me cyan give you some corn and ham for your journey,’ said Marta. Tears washed over her fleshy cheeks.

She ran to fetch the food, leaving Gregory and I gazing at each other. ‘Me better go back to me hut,’ he said. ‘Captain nuh like we lingering outside when sun about to fall.’

I nodded. ‘Yes, you better. Keep living. Don’t do anything to ketch Captain’s flesh-scraper.’

He wiped his face and turned around. He slowly made his way to the side of the big house and he disappeared behind it. He didn’t glance over his shoulder once. Despite my promise, I didn’t think I’d bless my eyes on him ever again. But I had to offer him hope.

‘Nuh worry, Kemosha,’ Iyana said. ‘One good day, we

will chase de white mon from this land. So Asase Ya tell me so.’ She gripped my shoulders and looked at me hard. ‘Stay strong like your mama before you and your mighty ancestor.’ Then she turned and made her way to her own cabin.

I was alone.

The fireflies kept busy around the lanterns. Other tiny flying things hovered above the pit toilet. *Me swear to all de African gods dat me will come back for me liccle brudder.*

2

PORT ROYAL – THE WICKEDEST PLACE ON EARTH

I climbed into Mr Powell's cart. The horse reared up slightly, but it soon settled itself. The wheels were bruised and bent and had collected plenty mud. I lay myself down on the straw in the cart, my feet resting beside a large barrel. I thought of my Spanish-speaking mama. Almarita, they called her. She had a Spanish surname too, but that was changed to Tate. Her cheeks shone under the fat moon, no line dared to touch her forehead but there was always a deep sadness behind her brown eyes. At night, the last words she would say to me before I caught sleep was, 'Pueden acabar con tu cuerpo, pero no deje' que destruyan tu mente.' *They might break your body, but don't let them break your mind.*

Marta returned with three pieces of corn and a generous portion of ham. I took a bite from the meat then quickly covered it with straw. 'May Nyame keep you until me return,' I said.

Marta didn't say anything in response. Instead she shook her head. Tears fell over her jaws. She reached out and grabbed my hands. Her lips moved. She searched for words, but they never came. I had plenty quarrels and disagreements with her, but parting from her tormented my good heart.

'Me *will* come back,' I said. 'For Gregory and you. Maybe me will return wid ah hundred pieces of eight and buy Captain's big house and set we all free.'

'Foolish chile,' Marta wept. 'Always dreaming. Just like your mama.'

I tried to raise a smile. Marta cried some more. I felt my own tears, but they wouldn't show themselves. Then I heard Mr Powell's boots stepping along the veranda. For a short moment, the fireflies took fright. Marta gave my hands one last squeeze before she turned, hitched up her frock and jogged her way back to her hut. *Me will never feel her waking me up again to lead me to the cookhouse. She always rose to greet the morning before me.*

Mr Powell checked his stride and looked at me before he climbed into the driving seat. He picked up the reins, gave them two mighty shakes and the horse began to trot. I watched the lanterns circling Captain's big house becoming smaller and smaller until they were like fireflies. It was only then that eye-water drenched my lips.

Guided by the late amber sun, the horse picked its way through the trees and bushes. I sat up because my head bounced off the cart whenever we rode over a divot or the wheels fell through a crack in the hard earth. I stared at Mr Powell's back, his shoulders moving whenever we made a turn. I thought of Gregory. *Maybe me shoulda said something to Captain. Me shoulda drop down to me knee and beg to stay. Who else going to help Marta wid big cooking? Gregory need me. Me nuh want to come back and find him dead. Me will never forgive meself if dat happen. If sickness ketch him, me want to help him. If him back get lash by Captain flesh-scaper, me want to be there wid ab blood-cloth.*

Without further thought, I stood on my feet, watched the ground disappearing beneath me – and leaped. My knees wobbled on impact but I just about managed to rescue my footing. Then I pulled up my frock and ran for my good life. Mr Powell restrained his horse and jumped down from the driver's seat.

He came after me. His stride was long. Curses flew from his mouth and petrified whatever flapped over my head. My heart raced quicker than my feet.

I couldn't see where I was going. I pushed my hands in front of me, trying to feel my way through the trees but the tightness of my frock restricted my stride. Pure fear compelled me to keep going. *Kemosha! Kemosha! Foolish chile. You shoulda tek off de frock before you jump.*

Before I knew it, I was struck on the back of my neck. I fell face down onto the ground. I tasted dried mud. Intense pain shot through my right shoulder. A rough hand turned me over. Mr Powell's one eye was only an inch away from my forehead. It was like an ugly, scarred moon. He bared his rotten teeth and I watched the hairs of his nostrils dance as he snorted. He gripped a curved dagger in his left hand. I closed my eyes, expecting my flesh to be split and ripped open. *Foolish chile, Kemosha. Now Gregory have nobody. Asase Ya, will you save me foolish self? Me must have vexed Her.*

Instead of carving me, Mr Powell backhanded my face and stamped on my right leg. His heel left a red mark on my ankle. *Aaaaarrrrrggghhh*. He held the tip of his blade before my left eyeball. There, he threatened me for a long moment. I could hardly breathe. He spoke slowly and his breath stank. 'If you ever decide to flee from me again, I will cut out your eyeballs and sew them onto my slops.'

'Sorry me sorry,' I stuttered. 'It's me first time me ever been outside Captain's place and me get mighty scared.'

'Get up to your feet!'

I slowly stood up. I rubbed my right shoulder and thought I might have broken it. He then hit me on the back of my head with the black handle of his dagger. 'If you want to breathe again, *do* what I command. Never forget, *I* own every last piece of flesh on you.'

I nodded.

‘Get aboard the cart!’

I climbed back onto the wagon and lay down as comfortably as I could. I closed my eyes, wanting death to take me.

‘They will appreciate you in Port Royal,’ Mr Powell said. ‘Oh yes, by the shine of Spanish coins, they will like you.’

I wondered who *they* were.

We rolled on, the horse not in a hurry despite Mr Powell shaking the reins and cursing bad words.

Sometime later, I sniffed salt. I sat up and I could just about make out the dark waters in the distance. Mama once told me ‘Vengo de una tierra al fin del mar’. *Me come from ab land at the end of the sea.*

I couldn’t imagine where that place could be. We neared the coast and the dark waters met a black sky.

‘Ahoy!’ Mr Powell called out. ‘The lights of Port Royal are over yonder. Look beyond Kingston harbour where the land kicks out into the ocean.’

He pulled up the horse and pointed with his dagger. At first, I thought he was gesturing to the curved lights before the sea, but there was this thin strip of land that jutted out into the ocean. If four men walked abreast, one of them would suffer wet boots. It reached out to what looked like

an island. Lights like tiny moons filled it. I could make out the dark shadows of ships and boats around it.

‘Aye,’ Mr Powell said. ‘Port Royal. My heart wants to ride the waves again. Too long have I allowed the weeds to grow around my feet.’

He shook the reins again and the horse trotted on. We neared the coast. For the first time in my life, I heard the breath of the sea. Salt was on my lips. I chanced a bite or two of my corn and ham. It tasted good. I wanted water to wash it down, but I dared not ask.

We reached the narrow strip of land where I watched the waters on both sides. At times the weak waves lapped over the path and filled the wheel ruts. The dark sky seemed so broad here and the breezes made themselves known. The lanterns of Port Royal twinkled in the near-distance.

There was a gate guarding the entrance of the town. It was manned by two men. ‘Who goes there?’ one of them called.

‘Insolence!’ Mr Powell shouted back. He showed the length of his sword and gave it a swish for extra effect. ‘Insolence! You don’t know me? Be careful, guardsman, or you might deny Captain Morgan’s very own quartermaster.’

Again, I wondered who Captain Morgan was. *He must be even wickeder than Captain Tate.*

One of the sentries stepped up to take a closer look.

He held a lantern. ‘Oh, my apologies, Mr Powell. We offer you safe passage and fare you well.’

Mr Powell offered an evil look and snorted like the last hog Marta and I killed. The men opened the gate.

I looked around and there were many buildings, some of them even bigger than Captain Tate’s big house. One of them had a big cross on top of it but there were no lights inside or outside. No one seemed to live there.

I heard the laughter and shouts from loud men. As we climbed uphill, I watched men dressed like Captain Tate and others like Mr Powell. They wore bright feathers in their hats. The gusts fanned their baggy slops and they sang strange songs. Shiny buckles were on their shoes. Only a few of them walked straight. Many reeled and staggered sideways, their swords and daggers dancing by their sides. They reminded me of Lyle Billings and Captain Tate when they had drunk firewater.

I laid flat on the straw, not wanting any of these rum-loving brutes to spot me.

‘This town will be your new home,’ Mr Powell said. ‘If you do what I command, your cheeks and back will be left untouched.’

The dried mud path had changed to cobbled stones. I peered out to the sea: many ships were anchored there. Some tall with broad mainsails, others short and narrow. I

couldn't count them all. *Maybe, Epo, Mama's sea god, cyan save me. Yes! Mama said Epo is kind.*

We passed a strange wooden structure by the road. It was a tall post with a shorter length of timber fixed to the top of it. It looked like a misshapen cross. It was stained with something dark and had cruel hooks and long nails protruding from it. Thick flies and other winged creatures buzzed around it. Mr Powell caught me staring at it. 'You're looking at a gibbet,' he said. His mouth curled into a grin. 'Where we hang thieves and traitors and Spanish men, if we can find them.'

The ham I had ate made a reappearance in my throat. I just about managed to keep it down.

We trotted on for another half mile or so before Mr Powell pulled up his horse outside a two-tier building. I heard roars of laughter, cheers and singing. I sniffed rum once more. There was a man lying face down near the door in his own vomit. There was another on the opposite side of the path. With his one hand, he clutched an empty wooden mug. For a moment I thought of taking the reins and trotting back to Captain Tate's plantation.

'Stay here,' Mr Powell ordered.

I did what I was told.

He came back moments later with a bucket of water for the horse and some vegetables for it to eat. He patted it

on its head. When the horse had finished with the water, Mr Powell brought the bucket over to me.

‘Drink,’ he ordered.

There wasn’t much left, but I drained it to the last drop.

He secured the horse to a post outside the tavern and then narrowed his eyes. ‘Time for you to meet my fellow owner of this enterprise, Indika Brown. She looks after my affairs when I’m away at sea and runs a fair ship of our tavern. She’s worth her weight in Spanish coins but I will not marry her yet. Climb aboard, my dark one.’

3

INDIKA BROWN

I hesitated, not wanting to enter the tavern. Instead, I stared at my feet.

Mr Powell backhanded me again. ‘Move your land-hugging feet!’

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me down onto the ground. I lost my footing and fell onto my damaged shoulder. I wanted to scream but I didn’t want to give Mr Powell the pleasure of my pain.

‘Get up, you black strumpet!’ Mr Powell raged again. ‘My temper is still blowing after you tried to flee. *Insolence!* You will do well to *remember* the gibbet. The hooks will easily hold a slender figure like yours. Death comes slowly hung up there, my dear dark one.’

I knew I would never forget the gibbet or the winged things that circled around it.

I stood up, shook my arm free and followed him to the

door. I sucked in a deep breath before Mr Powell pushed his way into his tavern.

Noise bruised my ears. Alcohol fumes rose from the floor. Rough-chinned men puffed smoke from thumb-long pipes. It stung and watered my eyes. The chanting, if you could call it that, fouled the air. Insults were swapped. Chairs were scraped, thighs slapped, and mugs slammed on bare tables. Men with long ears weighed down by shiny things drank from wooden tankards. Their hair was long, and their scars were deep. Their skinny scarves, slops, breeches and shirts were colourful like the pretty birds who sometimes visited the plantation. *Me wish me could fly.* I thought of Mama. *Vuela a casa. Fly away home. Nyame, god of de sky. Me calling on you.*

Many had missing fingers and dented cheeks. Those who still had their full hands wore bright rings. A few stood on one or one and a half legs. Long curved swords and short daggers dangled from their belts and sheaths. In a corner, men played some sort of game where untold pieces of eight decorated a table. One of these gamblers called Mr Powell over. ‘Have you been avoiding us?’ he said. ‘I cheated the sea last week, so Lady Luck is gracing me once more. Will you not chance your fortune tonight?’

‘If your pockets are heavy, then yes,’ replied Mr Powell.

‘But before I grace you with my presence, I have to finish my errand with my new slave girl.’

For a moment I stood still, looking around at my fresh hell. I wondered what I could do with all those shiny Spanish coins. *Maybe me could buy Gregory’s freeness wid dem? Foolish chile, how you ever going to get even one Spanish coin?*

By now the men had stopped singing, and gazed at me like I was a generous serving of pork.

Mr Powell pulled my arm again. ‘This one will *not* be spoiled tonight,’ he said. ‘She’ll be apprenticed this evening in the ways of my tavern.’

The chanting started up again. Mugs and tankards were raised. The voices were rough like the inside of a corn dumpling pot.

*‘Isabella was taken from the Spanish Main
She wore a red frock and couldn’t be tamed
Her temper was wild
She was little more than a child
But her fiery tongue caused her to be caned
The man who tried to spoil her
Suffered the dagger under her garter
Never did he molest a maiden again
The governor tried her for murder
But no gibbet claimed her*

*And the rope grew impatient to choke her
She escaped into Kingston harbour
No one knew if she was an able swimmer
Maybe the crocodiles had feasted on her
Some claimed she fled to the hills in Jamaica
Sea-riders speak fondly of her quick brain
And her pretty looks still carry her fame
Seven moons later
The governor changed his opinion of her
He cried, injustice was to blame
Send word that she is not to be slain
But she was never to be seen on these warm shores again.
That pretty Isabella from the Spanish Main.'*

'MORE! MORE,' the men hollered as they raised their tankards.

Mr Powell had to barge his way ahead to clear a path. He led me to the counter where behind it stood a sun-scorched white woman with feathers in her ears, shiny rings on her fingers and a silk green headscarf. Brown freckles dotted her nose. Her green-coloured frock wrapped her generous breasts like a tight manacle.

She offered Mr Powell a foul look. 'Two days!' she shouted. 'Two days you have been gone! Can't your one eye find its way back to Port Royal? Left me to barter with the

scum of Jamaica. None who find pleasure in paying for their rum and whiskey.’ She glared harder. ‘I hope you haven’t been gambling away your fortune.’

She spoke the same language as Mr Powell but there was a different flavour to her words. None like I had heard before.

‘But, my sweet Indika, I *have* returned,’ Mr Powell said. ‘And I can assure you I have not visited any dark gambling house. I have brought help for you.’

Indika turned and gazed at me. Her stare was long. It felt like she was undressing me, just like the men. ‘Who do we have here?’ she asked. She leaned in closer to me and grabbed my chin as if she was studying a piece of eight.

‘Me name is Kemosha,’ I managed. ‘Kemosha Tate.’

‘Kemosha Tate,’ she repeated. ‘Do you know what you have to do?’

‘Yes . . . yes,’ I replied. ‘To cook and serve.’

She grinned a dangerous grin. I hoped she wasn’t as evil as Captain Tate’s wife. ‘You’ll soon get to know what is expected of you,’ she said. ‘In the meantime, wash those tankards in the end barrel. I’ll show you to your place of rest when you finish your night’s labour.’

‘Yes, Miss . . .’

I had forgotten her name.

‘Indika Brown.’ She raised her voice. ‘I’m the poor

woman who looks after Mr Powell's affairs when he sails the seven seas, winning his fortune.'

'Are . . . are you soon to be married to Misser Powell?' I asked.

Indika laughed hard like I had never heard before. She held her belly and her breasts nearly spilled out of her frock. 'Married!' she repeated. 'Married! Only Mistress Sea will ever claim Antock Powell's salty hand in marriage. This sea-rider wants me to take care of his business on land.'

'Oh,' I managed.

Mr Powell gave me a brutal stare.

'Let me start on those mugs,' I said, to escape his one-eyed gaze.

'And this tavern needs scrubbing,' Mr Powell added.

I climbed onto the counter, swivelled and dropped down beside Indika. There were five barrels stood against the stone wall and they all reeked of something that churned my stomach. I had to swallow my rising vomit. Through a doorway, I spotted a wooden staircase. I longed to escape to rest my bruised body and my half-broken mind.

Indika looked me over once more. 'I hope you last longer than the one before,' she said.

'What . . . what happened to she?' I asked.

'Diseases,' Indika replied. 'The most dangerous diseases.'

Wasted away, she did. A small barrel of bones. What was left of her was buried at sea.'

This time a cold snake curled around my spine. I hoped that Mama's sea god, Epo, had saved her spirit.

Indika pointed her finger. 'The washing barrel is over there. Dry those tankards well with the rags. Buckos and mateys don't like to taste water in their spirits.'

I did what I was told as the singing and chanting started up yet again.

Once I washed up the mugs, Indika showed me what were the ale, beer, spiced red wine, whiskey and rum barrels and how much I had to pour into a tankard.

'If you give the sea-riders even a spit extra, I'll take it off your food,' she warned.

Before I finished my lesson, there were three men carried out after drinking too plenty, two fist-fights and one slashed neck as men in the corner gambled and fought over their pieces of eight. They hollered and quarrelled and drank and spat. 'Clear up the blood,' Indika ordered. 'It brings in the ants and the cockroaches. And I *bate* them both.'

I rinsed out a rag and nervously went over to a fallen chair that had been spotted with blood. As I wiped it down, someone smacked my behind. It was a fat brute with eight and a half fingers. Before I could protest, Mr Powell

warned, 'She will *not* be spoiled tonight. You know my price for touching any of my strumpets! Be gone with your squiddly tentacles or otherwise lose 'em!'

The ruffian who had molested me backed away as Mr Powell showed him the curve and sharpness of his sword - it glinted under the lantern lights. 'It's only a friendly greeting I was showing your dark strumpet,' the man said. 'My appreciation, if you like.'

'Appreciation costs pieces of eight,' Mr Powell replied. 'She's a fine looker and she will not be cheap.'

I felt safer when I returned behind the counter. My whole body shook when I thought what tomorrow may bring. *They will surely tek me like how Captain Tate tek Marta when me was liccle. Me could sniff de drink from him before he entered our cabin. He kicked me off the bed I shared with her. Marta covered her mouth with her palms as if making any sound was a sin.* Marta never spoke of it, but she knew I had seen it all.

Later, Indika showed me my place of rest out the back. It was beside a hog-pen, a chicken coop and a small cookhouse. The wooden fences were shoulder-high and a pit toilet lay behind these open outhouses. In a corner, there was part of a soiled white sail that was secured to three skinny posts. It could just about cover the length of me. Old clothes, rags and animal hides were beneath it. Indika pointed. 'That's

where you sleep, my black one,' she said. 'There are cabbages, potatoes and carrots in the cookhouse and Mr Powell will be killing another hog when the sun rises tomorrow.'

I glanced into the pen: there were three hogs chomping chicken bones.

'Tomorrow you can scrub the tavern,' she added. 'And, aye, I want it as clean as the calm waters of the sea on a Sunday morn. You cook in the afternoon – your blackness can take the heat at that hour, I can't.'

'Yes, Miss Indika.'

'I don't want you addressing me with all this fancy Miss talk,' she said. 'I'm no English lady and nor do I want to be. I crawled out from a hut in Cardiff and I had to kick two older sisters out of my way to find my fortune. Some fortune! Just call me Indika, and do your work without fuss or complaint. You will be watered and fed well.'

'Yes, Indika.'

'But on *no* account will you venture upstairs to my cabin,' she warned. 'Do you understand?'

I nodded.

'If you do,' she said, 'I will dig out your eyes like I'm scratching for buried treasure. I don't want any foul breathing near to my place of rest. My end will not be a barrel of bones tossed in the sea.'

‘I understand,’ I said.

‘Sleep well,’ she said. ‘There’s plenty work for you to do in the morn.’

I made myself as comfortable as I could under the filthy white sail. The stars above looked so far away. The chickens clucked and the hogs rolled in their own dirt.

My rest was disturbed by men using the pit toilet. One of them took a long look at me before he relieved himself. His three-quarter length jacket had shiny buttons. He wore a blue cravat. His thumb was missing on his right hand and he wore three feathers in his hat. I kept as still as I could, but he still wandered over to me. His feet weren’t steady. His eyes looked hungry, but I didn’t think he craved food. ‘Sit up,’ he ordered.

I thought again of Captain Tate and Marta, and pretended I didn’t hear.

‘*Sit up!* I command you.’

I did what I was told.

The man grinned and bared his crooked teeth. He undressed me with his eyes. ‘Mr Powell doesn’t want you to be spoiled on this warm night,’ he said. ‘But tomorrow I shall request your company.’

I didn’t reply.

He tipped his hat, its three feathers dancing in the

breeze. 'Sleep well, pretty black one. You will need your strength when the moon sails high again.'

I slept little on that night. I even wished that Mr Powell had killed me with his dagger when I tried to flee. I wondered why Asase Ya had kept me alive.

Mama, me ready to join you.