

Chapter 17

The sky was still gray, but the first blush of dawn was showing over the palm-dotted hills of an island. Or maybe it was an entire continent. Akoto wasn't sure what lay off the *Night-Mare's* stern, but it was their next port of call. He'd heard the sailors call it Santo Domingo, and a party was set to row there in the longboat that day to buy provisions. He knew he should stay hidden until they were at sea again, but he was so hungry. It had been a whole day since Tommy had been able to sneak him any food.

The dog watch appeared to be asleep somewhere, and the rest of the crew were still below decks. Akoto didn't expect to encounter the cook, who usually had to be roused by angry sailors demanding their breakfast. He crept, silent as a shadow, to the galley and gently eased open the door. Empty. He looked around, but the cook had done a surprisingly thorough job of tidying up, unless Tommy and the other boy had helped. *Surely there's some biscuit left*, he thought, lifting trays and metal covers. He opened a cupboard but found only tea, salt, and spices, and some powder that was likely flour. But there! A parcel of greasy cloth left on the stove. He hoped it was cooked meat but didn't check it before tucking it into his shirt. He lifted the lid off a barrel and discovered a treasure trove of dried apples. He grabbed four and shoved one into his mouth, whole, while he stuffed the others into the pockets of his breeches.

The light from the door, which he'd left open, was suddenly blocked. "Well, now, what's this, hey? Is it a suckling pig ready for roasting, apple and all?"

Akoto whirled around and tried to run, but there was no other way out. The sailor took a step inside. "Who are ye, boy, and where in all the hells did ye come from? Ye can't have been hiding since Barbados." Akoto shook his head, too scared to speak. "Ah, I know! Ye jumped from that slaver, didn't ye? Didn't fancy the plantation and the whip, so ye took a chance with us

instead?" He grinned, and Akoto shivered. The man looked like an animal showing his teeth.

"Ye may end by wishing ye'd gone to the auction block instead, after the captain's done wi' ye."

The sailor grabbed his arm just below the shoulder. Akoto twisted to escape, but the man used his own movement to wrap an arm around Akoto's chest. Akoto struggled with all his strength to get away, but the sailor's arm crushed his upper body like a python. He went limp and saved his energy for trying to get air into his lungs.

"Lookee what I've found, Captain," the sailor called. "Here's a fine black rat has stowed away and been robbin' our victuals."

Baudric-d'Alarie held up an aristocratic palm, lace falling around his wrist, while he finished conferring with his first mate. That conversation finished to his satisfaction, he turned his head and lifted a single eyebrow. "Who is this boy?"

"He's a stowaway, sir, from that slave ship. Been on board all this time, hiding in some rathole or another. I caught him round the galley, looking for scraps." The sailor squeezed Akoto's chest even tighter, making him gasp.

"Leave hold of the lad, Erasmus, and let him speak." The captain gave Akoto a long, thorough appraisal. "Can you speak?"

"I can speak English, sir—Captain, sir," said Akoto on his first breath. "And I am sorry for being a stowaway. But I did not want to be a slave, and I did not want to die!" Feeling brave and reckless, he looked the captain in the eye. His eyes were blue like the sky, and he was the palest white man Akoto had ever seen. His hair was thick and black and hung loose around his shoulders.

The captain rested a hand against his chin, forefinger tapping his luxurious mustache. Akoto thought he saw the slightest hint of a smile behind the fingers. "Tell me why I should not toss you over the side this instant, boy. You are on my vessel without permission. I invited all the able men from *la Joséphine* to join my crew. I did not see you in that line, so I must think that you are not an able seaman, after all. And I already have *un moussaillon*, a cabin boy, in addition to the young man who came from your ship, this Tommy, so I think we are not in need of another." He tapped the rapier at his side. A crowd of other sailors had appeared on board, including some from the *Josephine*, and they gathered around. Tommy Canran's eyes were wide, but he dared not speak up.

"Well, whelp, what do you say for yourself? What earthly good are you to me?"

"I—" Akoto's throat and his mind were bursting with words, and he couldn't get out a single one. *I can tie knots, I can climb rigging better than anyone on board, I can steward, I can carve wood, I can fetch water, I can take care of hens, I can cook hens, I can teach.* His hand went to the shark tooth hanging from a piece of twine around his neck. He rubbed the hole Chisel had bored into it, as smooth as the inside of a shell.

Murmuring came from the crowd of sailors. Akoto caught "Let the lad stay" and just as often "Toss him to the sharks!" The faces seemed to spin around him, many shades of sunburned white skin and yellow hair next to brown and golden skin, and even a few faces as dark as his own. One belonged to a huge man with his hair in a thick braid and heavy gold rings in his earlobes. None wore chains, and none kept his eyes on the deck. Every man stood proudly and without fear, because he belonged there. He saw Meiklejohn's freckled face break into a hopeful smile a few rows back, and then he knew what he had to do.

Without pausing to think about it, he shrugged free of his captor and opened his mouth wide.

In Amsterdam there dwells a maid,

Mark well what I do say.

In Amsterdam there dwells a maid,

And she is mistress of her trade.

I'll go no more a-roving with thee, fair maid.

A-roving, a-roving, since roving's been my ruin.

I'll go no more a-roving with thee, fair maid.

His bare heel kept time on the planks of the deck, and he held the final note long and strong, eyes fixed on the horizon and the waving palms of the island in the distance.

Applause and a few huzzahs erupted around him. The captain no longer bothered to hide his grin. “*Enfin, c'est fait*. I think we can find a berth for you, providing you can work as well as sing.” Akoto nodded enthusiastically.

“And do you have a name, young man? What do they call you?” the captain asked.

He grinned and squared his shoulders, standing as tall and straight as a mast. “My name is Magpie.”

Magpie was polishing a *cannon*, which was a big gun that looked like a kettle. The *Night-Mare's* sailors put heavy balls of iron into it and some fire and shot the balls at other ships. Magpie's new friend Michel had taught him how to do the polishing, and the *Night-Mare* had six of these cannons, so he knew he would be occupied all morning, at least. He stood up to stretch his legs

and take a rest, and when he looked across the deck, he saw his old friends Mr. Bride and Mr. Bannerman. “Hello!” He waved at the old men, who were moving some crates and barrels down into the hold to make room for the fresh provisions.

“Well, Malcolm, look there! If it ain’t young Magpie!”

“Aye, and he’s a pirate laddie now. ’Tis grand to see ye, boy! We was sore fashed about ye when the storm came up—never dreamed ye were right here with us all along,” said Mr. Bride.

“Yes, I was right here,” replied Magpie. “No need to be sore fashed.” He grinned.

“And how are ye likin’ your new duties so far?” asked Mr. Bannerman.

“I am happy being a pirate! It is better than being a slave.” Magpie thought for a moment. “Well, the hard work is the same, but now I know I can stay here, and I will not be sold. And my friends from the *Josephine* are here. And there is food! So much food!” he added brightly.

“’Tis fine to be a free man,” said Mr. Bannerman, “but ye speak a wise truth there, lad. Work is work.”

“Aye, that it is,” said Mr. Bride. “Work is work, and there’s no lack of it on a ship, law-abidin’ or no. Help me wi’ this cask, John. It’s no budgin’.”

“Well, ye’re goin’ about liftin’ it all wrong, man! It’ll no fit through the hatch if ye take it all crabwise like that.”

Magpie went back to his scrubbing and polishing, content as he listened to the two men conduct a lengthy debate about the proper way to move a barrel. *Yes, work is work, and friends make work lighter.* He felt a dull pain in his chest when he thought about Amadu and Chisel and an odd, stretched-out sensation when he wondered about his brother and Hawa. *Are they alive?*

Would I feel it if they were not? Another sailor, dark like him but from an island, had told him that Captain Baudric-d'Alarie wanted to rob every slave ship that passed by, and then they would all have sacks of gold, Magpie included. *And then, Magpie thought, I will find Mussah and Hawa and set them free, and after that, maybe the slavers will never send any more ships, because of the pirates, and so people can stay home, and everyone can do their own work.*

Never had a hard pallet felt so good under Hawa's aching body. *What a long day this has been!* She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so tired. Every muscle throbbed. She stretched her legs and brushed them gently against Mussah's body, so strong and solid next to hers. She felt a flutter and then a thump in her belly—her baby was stretching too. But why was the sun so bright and hot at the end of the day? It glared red through her eyelids. She tried to open them, but something gritty had crusted her lashes together, refracting the light into blurry rainbows. She blinked hard, but all she could see were the brilliant blue of sky and the pale gold of wet sand. And then she saw arms, beautiful, dark brown arms and hands reaching out to her, touching her, pulling the ropes from her shoulders and brushing the hair and sea grass from her face.

“Mussah?” She tried to speak, but her lips, parched and burned, made no sound, and the name came out as a sigh. Voices swirled around her as she felt the arms lifting her up, cradling her. She caught some words that might have been in the white man's tongue, but these were no white men. Their voices were rich and sweet and sounded like home. She let her eyes close and her head fall back as the strong arms carried her past more voices into cool shade and the scent of green, growing things, and she slipped once more into dreams.