

DELVIN HOWELL · HANS STEINBACH

OFFSET

BOOK 1



THE MASK OF BIMSHIRE

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THE MAN WHO TRAVELS WITH A PIECE OF CANE

As always, it claimed the night. Slithering through the black with purpose and control in search of those who would listen. Teetering on the edge of sound, beyond which one couldn't clearly hear but couldn't ignore either. Kyle heard it every night for the past ten years. Haunting him. Taunting him. Reminding him that he was not safe. Kyle had just finished his shift at work (late as usual) and was homeward bound. Darkness washed the area, smothering the golden hue of the last street light. And even though Kyle made this trek so often, he still developed an intimate fear for a dark street. Clutching the sugarcane holstered on his shoulder, Kyle strode towards the bus stop.

"It's Kyle. Damien ain causing you any trouble, nuh?" He asked the cell phone on his ear.

"Okay ... He sleeping? I should be coming home soon; I doubt I missed the bus."

The bus stop was three hops away; a pole about nine feet tall, with a flat red-and-white circle posted at the top reading OUT OF CITY on its face. It was one of those new models that had a bench enclosed, with a roof and a billboard at the back advertising a telephone company. An attractive brown-skinned

lady was beaming from ear to ear as she engaged in some unknown conversation. And for that moment, Kyle deeply coveted her bliss.

Despite its charming design, Kyle always thought the bus stop was peculiar; its face casting a violet flicker upon his approach. Kyle never got accustomed to this, no matter how often it happened.

“All right. I’ll see you when I get home.” Kyle finished his conversation.

As soon as he pocketed his phone, the distant sound of flute music grew louder. It didn’t startle him. Not anymore. Instead he waited for the other phenomena this melody often heralded, like the rhythmic tapping upon nearby rooftops whenever he ventured to school, or the sudden scraping of the ground whenever he ventured outside his house. Or, worse yet, that typical feeling that he was being observed from some secluded place.

On this occasion he saw a figure on the roof of the bus-stop bench, looking at him. It was all decked out in rags, from head to toe, and it wore this wooden mask with spikes on the edges and a smooth, flat face. The darkness made it a wraith of some kind, but what really shone through were its glowing eyes. They pierced through the shadows as its gaze fixated on Kyle who, showing some semblance of fear, could not take his eyes off it. Two enthralling yellow lights which stamped in his heart, not only danger, but a grave sadness.

The bus approached, and the sound of its engine broke the rendition so that he barely put out his hand in time to board it. Quickly Kyle took his seat, making sure he got close to a window, and peered through the glass one last time to ascertain that what he saw was real. It was already gone. And with that, Kyle clasped the sugarcane in his hands, as the vehicle moved off.

What would normally be an hour-long commute was cut in half, and for a moment Kyle wondered whether the driver had seen the figure as well. The vehicle reached the bus stop not far away from his home, and Kyle shuffled down the hill of Molasses Drive. Pot holes and gravel were scattered along the path like acne on an adolescent’s face.

The Harding household was surprisingly big and a struggle to maintain from day to day. It was a wall house—painted in white and peach—with a mahogany-varnished wooden gallery and a roof full of cherry-clay shingles. Not extravagant by any means, even with a backyard that was often used for training sessions, but Kyle never thought his mother could afford a house like that. Not with her meager wages. And the house felt empty, too, especially after she died.

As soon as Kyle stepped through the front door his pocket gave a sudden jolt.

Hey, you missed class again. If you continue like this you gine have trouble catching up. Ah well, I took some notes down for you, just call when you get school 2morrow. Nite, Kyle. ☺

Lianne 7:02 PM

After reading the text, Kyle put down his groceries and went to check on Damien, who was already hiding away in his dreams. Mr. Beckles (Kyle's guardian) had already left for the night, but he placed tonight's dinner in a neat container on the table. It was "one, two, three"—boiled macaroni and potatoes mixed with corned beef and some canned vegetables for color. He ate a forkful, travelling back to the wraith in the dark. Those glowing eyes full of murder and solitude would surely plague his mind for the rest of the week.

They were arbiters of fear and loathing.

After wolfing down supper Kyle took a shower, went to bed, and just gazed at the ceiling like he usually did on nights. The room was still and lonely, much like the house—well, at least when Damien or Mr. Beckles wasn't around. With only a queen-sized divan and a mahogany closet it really didn't have much personality. Still it was comfortable, and with the fading hum of crickets serenading Molasses Drive, Kyle began drifting into slumber.

Just what the hell is going on nowadays?

At daybreak, Kyle awoke to the usual rumblings between Damien and his master. That child loved his bed, so it was always troublesome trying to separate the two. Kyle walked

into the bathroom to wash his face, shower, and get dressed for the long day ahead. He then greeted the rest when the chaos had finally simmered down.

“Hey, you’re finally up, nuh?” Mr. Beckles said while sipping his bay-leaf tea.

“Who could sleep in all this racket ‘pon a morning?”

“Well, your brother should make a better effort to get up. It’s almost like de boy dread gine to school.”

“It’s school. He’s not *supposed* to like it.” Kyle grunted, pouring milk in his cereal. “Plus it don’t change the fact that he has to go.”

“Has school days really fallen so low that a boy his age can’t enjoy it? “Mr. Beckles sighed.

Now Kyle’s master wasn’t necessarily a senile old man, far from it, but ever so often he acted like he was a couple generations ahead of his time. He always bemoaned the youth and their mistakes, which were frequently highlighted all over the news. Nevertheless, Mr. Beckles was only in his early fifties, his hair was all grey but his face looked youthful—tolerating just a few wrinkles. His body was deceiving, too. At first glance one would see a boney stature, but it was in very good shape—fitter than most adolescents. Kyle was sure of this as he often sparred with him in the past, though school and work prevented him from doing so now.

“Looks like he finally ready,” Mr. Beckles chuckled, as a boy dressed in a khaki school uniform stepped into the room.

“*Stupse!* And he need a haircut, too.” Kyle sucked his teeth and patted Damien’s ambitious afro.

“Nah, I hate barbers! Dem does only cut out yuh hair.” Damien retorted.

“Why you talking like you got a choice? Come long, boy.”

Kyle guided his brother out the door while waving goodbye to his guardian. They were already late for the morning bus to town, so Kyle made haste in his steps and practically dragged the boy up the steep hill.

Upon reaching the top of Molasses Drive, the Harding boys waited at the bus stop (which flickered violet once more).

Almost like clockwork, an old lady popped into her verandah and greeted the boys. “Morning, youngsters.”

“Morning, Granny,” Kyle knew her from the days when his mother walked him to school. “Granny”, he always called her, because he never could remember her name. “How you doing?”

“Oh I just here resting muh old bones, soul, but I got lots to do today. Gotta keep busy, yuh know? Just like your mummy always say.” Granny laughed. She and Ms. Harding got along well, often trading gossip, vegetables, and other items whenever they had extra to spare.

“Yeah.” Kyle saw in her wrinkled face a time when his mother was alive. The warmth he felt; the liveliness in the house, especially when Damien was younger and breaking ornaments. But with this bliss came the cold fact that she was gone, and sadness renewed itself in his soul. “She did, didn’t she? Hey, you say Good Morning?”

Damien, on the other hand, didn’t really care for the old lady and just motioned a “hello” to her with his hands. Kyle was aghast, but Granny just smiled and looked at the child with an entertained mirth.

“That okay, soul. He more interested in wha happening in the road. Leave he.”

“But—”

The sound of a rolling engine caught Damien’s ears, and soon a blue-and-yellow bus had appeared. Following the darting boy, Kyle waved goodbye to the old woman and sprinted toward the ride. It was minutes to eight, and (as expected) the bus resembled a slave ship rather than a public service vehicle: hot, congested and stifling. After paying the fare, Damien wriggled to the nearest standing seat—a narrow section of the bus closest to the doorway where he wasn’t supposed to stand, but under the circumstances the driver allowed it. Kyle didn’t have it so lucky. Arched over the handrail, and squeezing between a Lodge School boy with a large haversack and a plump woman whose perfume fogged the top section of the bus, he counted the bus stops until they arrived in town.

And worse yet, Kyle was *tall*, so he had to lean over the rails

to avoid touching the ceiling. With his neck arched sideways in obvious discomfort, Kyle at least felt grateful for his lanky frame. Fifteen minutes later, the bus reached the outskirts of town while doubling the number of passengers inside. The four towering pillars of the Central Bank could be seen in the distance; standing out from the surrounding structures like a giant among midgets.

The two brothers disembarked at the Fairchild Street terminal and went on their separate ways. Kyle offered to escort Damien to the minivan, but the boy declined and dashed off to school before he could insist. It was a twenty-minute walk from the terminal to the other side of town. Kyle (late as he was) drifted through the deserted marble pathways of Swan Street, passing the vendors who had already set up shop and had some early business with school children and employees on their way to work. Through the various windows were sales clerks setting up the next display, or cashiers activating their registers for the day. Bridgetown before she applied her makeup.

After ten minutes he finally found a minivan. It was much smaller than the bus, capable of seating ten even though the conductor insisted on twenty, and inside this moving red-and-white box a popular reggae track blasted from the speakers. Kyle peered outside while the heavy bass massaged his back, but his face showed no discomfort. As always, Kyle endured without complaint. Maybe his mother sewed it into him when she lived, or perhaps he wore that material after she died.

Green lights.

Yellow lights.

Red lights.

Kyle's escaping eyes eventually met the University grounds. A lavish cricket pavilion greeted him when he disembarked, yet as beautiful as it was, Kyle never took the time to admire it. And this morning wasn't any different, receiving another text from Lianne saying his lecture had already started, Kyle hurried to the top of the slope overlooking that cricket field. Most of the campus could be seen from there; the four faculties which governed the school, the admissions office, the halls of

residence for foreign students, and even the various liming grounds where people loitered in between classes.

“The big white house ‘pon top of the hill,” that was where his lecture took place. Kyle entered during Professor Higgins’s tirade on the Qualities of Trade Finance, sending a wave of snickers throughout the theatre. Not surprising. Tardiness aside, Kyle always garnered ridicule from the sugarcane on his waist. But like the minivan, he endured it. As scores of eyes followed him from the door towards the side of the hall, Kyle eventually saw Lianne signaling an empty seat.

“Hey... you actually letting he sit next to you fuh truth?” The question came from a girl sitting on the opposite side with pursed lips.

“Why not?” Lianne replied indignantly. “You act like he’s contagious or something.”

“He weird enough to walk around wid *that*, you never know what else he might have.”

Lianne didn’t respond. She simply turned away and moved the handbag. Kyle brushed three people before finally settling in.

“Thanks.”

“You really need to get some sleep on a night, Kyle.” Lianne advised, though she really didn’t mind holding a seat for him every morning.

“Sorry, traffic’s been a real pain and—”

“*Ahem!*” Professor Higgins cleared his throat, while more giggles erupted in the theatre.

“Now if anyone else doesn’t mind, we’ll be moving onto Fundamentals of Trade Theory.”

The snickers continued throughout the class, then was joined by pointing on their way to the canteen, and finally jeering was added as they approached the library. Kyle assumed that after a year they would’ve grown accustomed to his habit, but clearly this wasn’t the case.

“Doesn’t that ever bother you?” Lianne asked Kyle, whose eyes seemed lost in wonder.

“Nah, I’m used to it,” Kyle smiled and continued on their walk down the corridor, towards the drink machine, and opposite

the large cream building that housed the science labs. Before them, a gaggle of girls had flocked around a young Rasta.

He was the standard pretty boy: caramel skin, hazel eyes, pearly white teeth and tidy dreadlocks. Perfect bait for the girls nearby. However, the Rasta lost interest in his present company upon spotting Kyle Harding, and the sugarcane on his waist.

The hours passed until afternoon. Then Lianne went to her class, leaving Kyle with some personal time which he decided would be well-spent doing some drills. There was a particular spot he liked: a courtyard in the centre of the faculty offices, where no one ventured as it was meant to be a display area. Students hoping to fool around or do more respectable things (like study) would gather there, but until then Kyle thought this was the best place to practice his art.

Kyle was unraveling the canvas around his sugarcane when he felt unseen eyes upon him. *Glowing eyes?* No. There wasn't any flute music. Craning towards the mahogany tree by the stairwell, then to the benches by the walls, Kyle couldn't find his audience. That is, until he heard the clapping of slippers. It was the same Rasta.

"Hey! Wha gine on? Did I interrupt something?" He asked while ambling forward.

"Nah. Not really. I was just about to leave." Kyle had already put away his sugarcane, but the Rasta still saw it.

"Cool. That's an interesting item you have there."

"Oh this? It's just a lil fashion trend I'm trying to start."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Was trying something different, but it hasn't caught on as yet."

"Cha. I know how you mean, though. Comfort before style, fuh real." The Rasta pointed to the rubber slippers on his feet.

There was an awkward silence, Kyle's cue to leave.

"I heard a story once...Want to hear it?" The Rasta asked.

"I can't stop you from talking." Kyle replied.

"Okay. Here it goes. Centuries ago, there was a group of individuals living in Bimshire. They were supposedly transported here from the Dark Continent during the days of slavery, but

managed to escape and form their own way of life secluded from the watchful eye of the plantocracy.” The Rasta’s arms swayed to illustrate each point he made, as if haranguing a large group of listeners.

“The thing about this collective is that they practiced a martial art utilizing weapons ... very much like that stick you have on your waist. Ever heard of it?”

“Can’t say I have.” Kyle said.

“The art is said to be a lost fighting style because, as each generation pass, the numbers dwindle with it, until they had totally disappeared from the minds of the general public.” For a moment, the Rasta seemed sorely disappointed by this, but then he gazed back at Kyle with an intense grin. “Crazy, nuh? Hell, only a select few have even heard of these people and that particular martial art. Man ... If I was to find one right now, those warriors I mean, I’d challenge one to a duel on the spot.”

“Okay. I think you been watching too many Kung fu movies.” Kyle said, his grip on the sugarcane couldn’t have been tighter.

“Yeah, I guess you right.” The Rasta laughed. “I moving off now, though. Sorry for bothering you.”

“No problem, man. Later.”

Kyle took two steps; the tension was so high that the air seemed to press against his back. On the third step, he heard the sound of metal scraping leather—a blade had been unsheathed. And before the fourth step, the sword sang as it tore at Kyle’s neck.

Clang!

Somehow, Kyle’s cane was there to block the strike, with a piercing clamor that wanted to join in the blade’s chorus. The Rasta’s face ignited with glee, while Kyle accepted the challenge with a frigid calm.



THE MAN WHO TRAVELS WITH A CUTLASS IN HAND

A rooster perched on a nearby light pole crowed at the dawn sky. Collins had a love-hate relationship with the bird. On one hand, he detested its call which jolted him from his sleep, but on the other hand, Collins had depended on it every morning. Those fifteen minutes after his eyes opened were a mad scramble to bathe, dress, toss up some sort of breakfast, and wolf it down while scurrying to the bus stop. Amidst all of this hustle, Collins took a minute to pay his respects to the picture opposite his bed. It was a portrait of him and his parents, capturing the last day they spent together.

His father was tall, well-built, almost like his physique symbolized his protective nature. His mother had a gentle expression on her face, and her hands were tender yet secure on little Collins's head. Collins had dreadlocks back then, too, but they weren't nearly as long as the woman standing behind him.

The family was at the beach behind their home; since Mom and Dad were often busy at work, they decided to spend some quality time together. It was one of the best days in the Collins's family history. Father and son skylarking in the shimmering sea water while Mom relaxed on the pearl white sand. Unfortunately her husband was the more mischievous of the two, and soon

she tasted more saltwater than she bargained for, thanks to a bucketful that was poured on her head. After the game of cat and mouse that followed this prank, Dad convinced her to pose for a family photo. “—to capture the moment, honey.” Dad said. That picture was the result.

Collins caressed the image like it would crumble at his touch. He’d always felt like they were watching over him. Through the picture, his mother still had her hand tenderly enveloping his head, and his father still shaded him from the blistering sunlight.

After paying his respects, he reached under his bed and pulled out a cutlass. It was a thoroughly sharpened blade, which shone brighter than the average ones in the field. He placed the weapon in a leather holster which he wore underneath his clothes: a white T-shirt and khaki three-quarter pants.

The last thing on the morning list was to get his bag and lock up the house. When that was done, he trotted to the bus stop on the main road. But before he could clear the gap, an individual had appeared.

He was conspicuous enough; Collins did not recognize him from the neighborhood. He was resting against a nearby palm tree, his hair long, black and smooth, like the night’s reflection on the ocean’s skin. His face looked foreign, too (akin to East-Indian descent), as if he came from one of the islands that neighbored Bimshire, and upon it a friendly smile which disturbed Collins as he passed.

“Good morning.” the foreigner said.

“Morning.” Collins grunted.

“In case yuh looking for a van, there had an accident further down so the road block off.” The foreigner pointed his arm towards the end of the gap. Collins was reluctant to take his advice, not because of the foreigner’s impish grin, but mostly his overall bearing. He didn’t look like someone who would use public transport, though he did dress the part; garbed in an elaborate T-shirt with cascading dominoes and a pair of faded-out jeans.

“Cha...” Collins replied.

“I don’t understand wha wrong wid drivers these days. Men

does barely do bare shite ‘pon the road.”

Collins shook his head, this conversation seemed unavoidable.

“We used to do things different back in the day. But I ain know wha gine on now.”

“You worked on a van?” Collins asked.

“Yeah, man. I used to be a conductor. Not nuh more, though, get something more profitable now. Tired of the hustling, to be honest.” The foreigner said.

“Oh. Safe. Anyway, I gine head down the road and see if I get sort out with a drop.”

“Why you in such a hurry, *Mr. Collins?*” The phrase pierced his ears and made him stop midstride.

“...How do you know my name?” Collins asked calmly, his fingers rubbing the hilt under his shirt.

“Just cool it, buddy. I ain here to fight or anything .” the foreigner laughed, “I just have an interest in you, dah’s all.”

Collins said nothing.

“You’s a lost child, Damian Collins. Living alone since your parents passed away. Wondering if the stories you heard about them were true. Confused. Kerfuffle. Especially after that car accident. I know you mussy got nuff questions about that.”

“...What’s your point?” Collins asked, refusing to show any turmoil on his face. He wouldn’t give this bastard the satisfaction.

“No point—just an observation.”

“I guess you’re the sort to malicious in people’s business, nuh?”

“Yeah, people tell me I too gypsy for my own good.”

He smiled at Collins before walking away from the tree where he stood. His work was done. He had seen the person he was waiting to see, and he had spoken the words he needed to speak. There was only one last sentence he had for Damian Collins,

“Oh. If you happen to see a man who walks around with a piece of sugar cane, it might do you good to confront him.”

Collins was baffled by the words, and in the time it took to process the information and return his gaze to the tree, the foreigner had already disappeared.



The University of the West Indies became a battleground several hours later. Surrounded by faded concrete walls, the ring had mahogany trees in each corner—their leaves gliding over the young warriors' heads as if to get a closer glimpse of the impending duel. They didn't have to wait long as the sword clashes were in full symphony, attracting every creature and person in the area. From the doves perched on the overhanging gutters, to the cautious couple treading secluded corridors in hopes of fondling one another, everyone's attention was diverted to the battle at hand.

"Whoa, is that seriously a fight?" said the male spectator, reaching for his cell to snag a quick video.

"Oh my god! Does that guy have a collins?" The girl buttoned her blouse while gripping her boyfriend's arm.

Their awe was justified as the duel below had looked almost choreographed. Every strike was parried, every stance coordinated, every attempt at confiscating the other's life thwarted—an even match, so to speak, one which was drenched in peril.

This is a surprise, Kyle thought, I've never seen a cutlass used like this before. His movements are sensible and precise. ...Just who is he?

Kyle's observations weighed heavy as the conflict waged on.

Collins, on the other hand, was even more enthralled by his opponent. To him, Kyle Harding had walked right out of a story book. *This guy is something else. The man guiding away every strike with just a sugarcane. Is this what they call Stick-licking?*

Collins paused to catch his breath. *His stance too: one arm free, back foot planted firmly on the ground—like an axis for stability and power when using his dominant arm to strike. It's almost like European Fencing—sharp and tidy—yet still flashy enough to throw the opponent off balance. Impressive as hell, lemme tell yuh...*

Collins planted his arm on the ground and swayed his foot

to kick, in an attempt to make the opponent lose ground. But Kyle maneuvered out of the way, the leather slipper merely brushing his face as he dodged.

Decoy!

The plan worked. Collins secured his body while Kyle was still in motion and thrust the blade squarely on him, as if it were a guillotine delivering judgment.

Clang!

The chime shattered the tempo of the battle. Was it the end? Kyle Harding wouldn't allow it, shielding the blow much to Collins's alarm. Then the sugarcane lashed out with a strike of its own, leaving blistering agony on the Rasta's calf.

What the hell gine on? That cane just block my attack and ain break? Collins recalled the sensation of the stalk after every parry and riposte. *It don't even feel like wood either. Too hard. Almost like metal...*

Collins was bemused by this discovery, but he wouldn't have long to consider it. With the intent of concluding the duel, Kyle Harding went on the offensive. His attacks bled with newborn ferocity and the stalemate instantly evolved into a hunt. Still, in the midst of this onslaught, Collins evaded the licks that showered upon him. The sugarcane descended like lightning, its lethal vigor screaming as it approached. *Dodge. By any means, do not let that cane touch my body.* Collins felt the command invade his mind, and when he escaped the cane's advent he saw a fracture on the cobblestone below. Fragments of white were afloat by his face.

What the rangate!?! The man just brek through concrete!

It wasn't normal; that sugarcane or Kyle Harding. Collins looked up and regretted ever troubling this person whose shadow cast over his body and penetrated the gates of his spirit.

...Who is this guy?

Collins felt the pressure from the canewielder's glare, tightening the grip around his cutlass. But he was not afraid. No. A wave of courage washed over him in a way that he never experienced before.

So this is a real duel... Collins rose from the ground, excited

yet cautious of his opponent.

He would conquer that sugarcane—no matter how strong it was. Kyle rushed forward. His footsteps: an anthem for oblivion. The climax: pending. The anticipation: real. Cane and cutlass collided in an orchestral flurry of clashes—an expression of each warrior's intent for victory. Collins's movements were late but punctual in defending each strike, as if he was searching for an opening—a place where that cane may slip up.

He was denied.

Kyle had honed his focus to the absolute pinnacle. The clamorous clashes, the golden sparks, the biting air, the sour sweat, everything was caught by his senses. You see, a switch had flipped in Kyle's head; one which Mr. Beckles had drilled into him for the past ten years. It was no longer a simple sparring session sparked by an indulgent Rasta. No, Kyle was fighting for his life. The booms, the lights, the flute music (?) clangored in his head so that he brought down his sugarcane with deadly force. He would claim Damian Collins's life. He would claim it, and return home to his family...

Collins's heart had stopped as the stalk halted above his head. It was a normal sugarcane, on closer inspection there was nothing strange about it, not a notch on its olive skin, and as it hovered, Collins noticed that the weapon was quivering in Kyle Harding's grip.

"Um. Sorry." Kyle became human again, his eyes rueful when he relaxed his stance. Collins's heart was still pounding.

"Guess I got my wish, then." Collins sheathed his sword, dusted himself off, and walked away like the battle never happened.

Wait... just so? Kyle thought, with the sweat still beaded on his forehead. His fingers strangled the sugarcane as he gawked at the Rasta whom he just fought.

On the above corridors the two spectators had tripled. Half of them were dumbfounded at what they just witnessed, while the others were ecstatic that they recorded the fight, and made plans to put it online for the entire world to see. Kyle wasn't bothered though, distracted by the events which just unraveled

before him.

He didn't even give me his name...

Collins's chest throbbed as he limped away to a secluded spot; his confident stride crumbling to a hobble when he cleared his opponent's line of sight. He took out a scarf, and bandaged his aching calf where the cane had struck him. The twinge, a steady reminder of that skirmish, would stay with him for the remainder of the day. Collins did not mind, though. His eyes just traversed his cutlass, and noted the etches from the fearsome weapon he faced.

"The man who travels with a cane, nuh?" The phrase bounced off the abandoned hallways of the faculty building.



The rest of the day progressed like normal. Lianne rendezvoused with Kyle once class had finished; The Intricacies of Dispute Resolution sucked the life out of her it seemed. Kyle didn't tell her about the encounter.

It was better she didn't know.

The thought resided in his head, as he listened to Lianne rant about her incompetent professor and the course she hated, yet was compelled to do. Kyle masked his concern under a smile, wearing it for the remainder of the conversation, while escorting her to her car. Still, the unease was persistent. It bothered him throughout work in the evening, on his journey to the decorated bus stop, and even when he arrived home at that ridiculously late hour. But despite everything, Kyle wanted to meet the Rasta again.

Kyle didn't sleep that night. He was awake bright and early the following morning to peel Damien out of bed and get him off to school. Granny was absent today too, just as well, he

would not have made good conversation. The six o'clock bus was empty so there was no need to find that coveted standing seat. Kyle found one which had room for him and Damien, who was still upset and refused to sit next to his idiot brother who woke him up so early.

Alone and rejected, Kyle gazed outside the window, the chilly breeze slapping his face as the vehicle cruised down the road.

I almost killed that guy. Kyle looked at the cane pinned between his leg and the side of the bus. It was the first duel he ever had outside his backyard. And part of him almost enjoyed it. *Stupid. I hope he's all right...*

Seconds—minutes—hours had passed and the Rasta hadn't emerged. He wasn't at that drink machine where Kyle first noticed him, or the courtyard where the battle took place.

Was he hiding? Nah. That's not it. He isn't a coward.

Kyle accepted the futility of his search and went to the library. *A waste of time and effort.* The thought crossed his mind and assassinated any attempts he made to study. The desks became more and more deserted, until even the most dedicated students had bound for home, leaving only the security guards as Kyle's company. The one day in the week that he had free time and he had nothing fruitful to show. So homeward he went, following the footsteps of the scholars before him.

With two books in hand, Kyle slipped through the abandoned aisles lined with dark oak shelves that dwarfed him. Pulling his bag over his shoulder, he gestured "good night" to the over-worked guards. The last shuttle had already left, forcing Kyle to rush to the bus stop in hopes that a van was still running at that time of night.

Then he heard it.

From a distance, the sound of a flute traveled towards him. A whisper, an echo, a melody—the music gained authority as it crept and finally dominated Kyle's ears.

"...What is that?"

The question skipped off the lips of those on the compound, including Damian Collins, who was arrested by the music in the air. Kyle brandished his cane in front of the moonlit water

fountain, gazing blindly at the sky above.

A figure appeared: the same masked wraith who visited Kyle at the bus stop. Those same fluorescent eyes that invaded his soul when staring into them. That same wonder and terror that strangled his body.

It had returned.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Kyle squeezed his cane until his hand ached, but the being did not answer. It just glared at him and squatted, as though it was passing time.

The flute melody changed unexpectedly. It became quicker, louder, *fiercer*, and with this modified pace the creature dashed towards Kyle. Shattering his daze, the cane rose to greet the attack, and soon he was thrust into the surge of battle once again.

Whack!

However this wasn't the same situation as yesterday; Kyle had no advantage at all. Each effort to retaliate was decisively avoided, and answered with a blow to Kyle's body. The music's tempo had quickened, and with it, the enemy became more ferocious. That was when the answer visited Kyle's mind,

There's a link between this guy and the music. I can't explain it but somehow, as the melody plays, his actions seem to react with it. Almost like he's dancing!

It was ridiculous, but true. Every movement it made perfectly correlated with the rhythm of the song. Every tumble, every sway, every kick, every punch—all of them were in harmony. It was a menacing performance. Carmine streams trickled down Kyle's face as he observed his foe—the situation dire. His cane was desperate to lash the enemy, but to no avail; each strike, stab and swing was rejected by *the dance*.

I can't beat this guy ... at least not alone.

His sights circumvented the enemy, and locked onto a shadow sitting on the sidewalk beyond the courtyard. It was Collins.

“How long you planning to sit and watch?” Kyle shouted at the Rasta, who simply stood up and began walking towards them.

“When you notice I was watching, boah?” Collins asked.

“A little while now. You were distracting me so I shout you—either join or leave.” Kyle's voice was stable; his breaths steady.

“Heh! You sure it ain a cry for help?” The light from an above streetlamp adorned his cutlass when he drew it.

When Collins arrived, the air became dangerous and the music simmered down. The wraith didn’t acknowledge him, its gaze transfixed on the canewielder. Dreadlocks hopping, sandals clapping, the Rasta ventured towards the foe. Caution sheltering the steps he made; determination: the scabbard of his blade. Collins understood the ordeal they were in.

Any guy who could damage the canewielder that much is no joke...

The calm was decimated as the flute crashed in, and the enemy resumed his routine—this time for an audience of two. Collins recognized that it’s one thing to watch the performance and another to experience it firsthand. He thrust his blade forward only to hit the night air; it was too fast. And soon a heel was planted in his face, knocking Collins backward before Kyle rejoined the fray.

Cane and cutlass united in their assault becoming a coat of arms for victory, no, survival. Those jucks and stabs were fast and furious, each corresponding for offense and defense—whenever Kyle defended, Collins attacked and vice versa—as if the two replied with a dance of their own. The force from avoided hits and the marriage of blade and sugarcane rang throughout the area, conflicting with the music that met it.

The recital had reached its pivotal point, when the foe’s attack missed its mark and the cane crashed into its wooden mask. *Brax!* The blow silenced the flute, and like a procession, the cutlass followed suit and tore through its torso.

Sensing danger, the wraith leapt away. It was hurt but it showed no pain. The creature squatted with the lack of harmony, and considered the two with luminescent eyes like headlights in the night. The battle was far from over, but something had sewn terror into their hearts.

What spilled from the wound was not blood ... but dust.

What the fuck?! ... This guy isn’t human.

Cold and heartless, the fact entered their mind as they looked upon the wound five inches deep in its waist. A mound of dirt formed at its feet. And amidst the stillness, beads of sweat crept

against their skin.

The melody resumed, jolting their hearts as the being moved. But both seemed different somehow. The tempo wasn't as aggressive as before. In fact, it was soothing and peaceful; a signal for withdrawal. With two flips and a somersault, the enemy vanished into the darkness. Its gaze never leaving the canewielder until the lights dissolved in the black.

"B ... What I just witness fuh real?" Collins dropped his cutlass in relief; the noise breaking the calm as the blade tickled the ground. Kyle just stood there staring into space, his fingers still squeezing the sugarcane.

"That wasn't a thief, was it?"

"Big man... I don't even feel that was human." Collins said.

Kyle collapsed on the sidewalk beside him. "Safe. Safe... Um. What are you doing here again?"

"Oh. Well I was just in the area, you know." Collins sounded insulted.

"Nah. I mean, you just keep popping up and I don't even know your name."

"Oh yeah, nuh lie. The name's Damian Collins, but you could call me Collins. That's what my friends do." The Rasta reached out his arm and Kyle shook it.



THE MAN WITH A CASE OF BOTTLES ON HIS BACK

Desperate gasps fondled the leaves that whipped his face. His march: weary and frenzied, was the only thing he could rely on. It was the agent of his sanctuary and the only means of escape.

A ballad of crushed greenery serenaded Mother Nature as the fugitive trampled through. Mongooses, field mice, centipedes, all were evicted because of him—only the mosquitoes exacted vengeance by biting his limbs. Each sting was a testament to their satisfaction. “Dah fuh lick yuh!” they must have said. But the fugitive did not care, for refuge was his sole obsession.

I can't believe the men send a Pel-Ting after me, fuh truth?! The thought mixed in his mind as if by mortar and pestle.

Just because I late 'pon some payments. Stupse. As I see that case 'pon he back, I tek off, boy. Not taking any chances, 'cause nobody ain killing me today!

The fugitive shifted course and meandered through the foliage. *Stay close to the trees. Gotta stay close to the trees. He can't hit me if I stay close to the trees!* These directions were recited over and over as his feet trampled the ground. How far had he gotten from his pursuer? Meters, miles, maybe? There was no sign of anyone trailing him, and soon the fugitive's panic receded.

However, this fool's paradise was desolate.

On the horizon a burly figure stood, admiring the breathtaking scenery while taking a swig of beer. He savored every draught of the brew, appraising the label plastered on the amber-stained glass bottle.

"Cheese on bread. All gone ... Oh well, guess it's time to put it to good use."

He swung the bottle in between his forefinger and thumb.

"I don't really care 'bout the payment thing, right? But the fact you cuss me and run and expect to get *away*? That just got me vex." The swinging grew more rigorous as he spoke with that drunken slur. "I can't let things done so. Tough luck for you, nuh?"

The bottle abruptly ceased its sway, and his muscular arm veered away from his body. His limb, like a cat-o-nine eager to discipline an unruly slave, lay ready for its duty. CRACK! The whisk of his arm released the bottle from his grip. Its flight, blessed with minor turbulence, seamed through the air with one destination in mind: the head of that fleeing fugitive.

The fugitive embraced hope with open arms. *I get way, dread! You thought you had me, huh, Pel-Ting?! A smile traced on his face. Escape seemed real, tangible and, most importantly, right within his grasp....*

Conk!

The sound: a hymn for his demise. With crumbs of glass skipping down his neck, his body lost balance and merged with the earth he once treaded. This was the end of the fugitive's journey.

"So close, yet so far," the phrase often quoted, but seldom out of place.

"You wasn't getting way, buddy. They don't call me *Sniper fuh sport*." Sniper retrieved the case of bottles that lay beside him, strapping it across his shoulders like a haversack.

His business was done.



A week had passed since the moonlit battle, and it was a typical Saturday afternoon in the Harding household. Damien nestled with his bed sheets and wore a tranquil smirk on his face. Mr. Beckles was away since dawn to take care of his weekend errands, leaving Kyle alone in the house with his concerns.

What the hell was that thing? And why was it after me? His mind revisited the instant when Collins slashed the fiend, the sand hemorrhaging from the wound, and the hush that followed.

Sprawled out on the living-room couch, Kyle gazed at the broken fan that hung from the ceiling. The draft nudged the plastic propeller, along with the lace curtains draping the side window. His only company was a green lizard, which prowled the sill in hopes of catching an unsuspecting grasshopper.

Kyle turned on his side and glanced at the sugarcane propped against the wall. *Is this why she told me to never let it leave my side?* Before the thought could settle a blaring honk came from outside.

“Yo! Anybody home?! Kyle?!” It was Collins.

He honked the horn two more times, and would have gone for a third if Kyle hadn’t eased open the front door. Collins peeped over the tinted windows of his car: a blue Toyota Runnux. It was a modest yet stylish ride; the paintjob reflected the sunlight, the skirt licked the dirt beneath it, and the rims fit in place like black-eyed peas did with rice. He stepped out and approached the verandah; the applause of his slippers ruining the green lizard’s hunt.

“Why you got the house shut up so tight?” Collins pulled back the curtains, pouring sunbeams into the front house. “I mean, it’s *Saturday*, B. You shouldn’t even be home!” Collins shook his head.

“Um. Is there something you wanted?” Kyle asked, ignoring the remarks.

“Nah. Nothing really. Just giving you a shout—you know

how things is.” Collins shrugged off the question.

“Okay... You want something to drink?” Kyle yanked open the refrigerator door, reached inside, and pulled out a pep bottle. After pouring the golden, fizzy beverage in a glass, he handed it to Collins who took two sips.

“So about what happened on campus last week—”

“What about it?”

“Right... You sure it aint bothering you? I mean, you been hiding away at home ever since. Didn’t even see you at school.”

Collins took a couple more sips and surveyed Kyle’s living room. Noting the varnished furniture with the numerous nicks Damien made, the crisp vinyl that covered the floor, and the pictures which were suspiciously angled so that half of the frame remained hidden.

“I good.” Kyle replied, recapturing the Rasta’s attention.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, man. Don’t worry about me, I’m good,” Kyle gave a reassuring smile.

Glowing eyes. Pouring sand. Flute music.

Collins downed his drink while gauging the answer. He was about to reply when the sound of dragging feet caught his ears. “Well, what do we have here?”

A drowsy Damien revealed himself from behind the corridor wall, his arm rubbing his eye as he walked into the front house and towards the fridge. The boy didn’t notice Collins until his afternoon rummage was interrupted by his big brother.

“Boy! What I tell you about waking up and going in the cold fridge?”

Damien groaned as he retrieved a Plus and a chocolate bar. He then headed for the television set opposite the dining table, but stumbled upon the Rasta standing in his way.

“Oops. Sorry there, kid.” Collins said, as the Plus spilled out of the glass.

Damien didn’t mind, though, his attention was captured by the house guest. Those dreadlocks, which hung just above Collins’s shoulder and often tickled his neck, (Damien thought they were the same color as the chocolate in his hand). The

athletic body that was reminiscent of those brave warriors Mr. Beckles told him about during training. And finally, Damien noticed the chain with a metal trident hanging from the Rasta's neck. He had never spoken to anyone Kyle's age before, but it was clear Collins was cooler than his brother.

"So, what's your name?" Collins asked.

"That's Damien," Kyle said on behalf of the boy, who concurred with a short nod.

"Real ting? Wow. My name's Damian, too—Damian Collins—but my friends just call me Collins for short." He grinned and offered his hand to shake, which Damien took eagerly. Kyle had never seen him this keen around strangers before.

"Yeah though, B, I got an idea." Collins returned to the matter at hand. "The perfect thing to cheer you up."

"Hmm?" Kyle was clueless.

"We gine clubbing tonight! I hear there is this fete up Climax and I feel like hitting um." Collins beamed at this piece of information.

"Sighted. Well, have fun."

"Have fun? You like you deaf, yuh. You coming with me." Collins was obstinate on this.

"I don't do the whole club thing..."

"Wha you mean, B? You can't call yourself an 'Island Yute' and don't enjoy the country's nightlifel?" Collins had the front door halfway open, just as Kyle was about to retort. "Oh, try and wear something nice. You can't enter the club dressed any old way."

"But I—" Kyle's protest was interrupted by Mr. Beckles, who greeted the dreadlocked guest.

"Oh hello, sir." Collins said.

"Who is your friend, Kyle?" Mr. Beckles took off his grey, fuzzed-out flat cap, placing it on a hook that hid behind the door.

"I'm Damian, sir." (He felt "Collins" wasn't appropriate when addressing his elders).

"Ah, I see."

Mr. Beckles did as most seniors do; he examined the company

that his ward had kept. Making a mental checklist for the signs of a delinquent: earrings—no sign, tattoo—no sign, gold teeth or grill—no sign, and blood-shot eyes from smoking—no sign. Mr. Beckles was almost done when something caught his scan. The impression of that cutlass, although carefully concealed under Collins's black shirt, was still noticed by the old man's vigilant eyes.

"Yuh know, boys your age shouldn't be walking around with dangerous objects like that."

Collins was jolted by the observation and brought his arm to cover the blade. "...Excuse me?"

"No use trying to hide it. Don't worry, I ain gine call the police or anything." Mr. Beckles laughed, making Collins even more uneasy.

"Young people these days, hear? Whatever your reason, I trust you know how to use it." With that, Mr. Beckles went inside of the house, patting Damien's afro as he walked past.

Yes, sir. I do. Collins wanted to say, but he was too baffled to speak.

"Yeah... I doubt I going to this club thing, though." Kyle seized this opportunity to debate the issue.

"Aww come on, Kyle. All the cool kids go to parties," Damien said, seeking to gain Collins's favor, and succeeding.

"Yeah, B. Listen to the lil' man, he got sense." Collins winked and opened up the Runnex. Upon swinging the ignition, a blast of reggae music roared from his speakers.

To divide and rule is their own plan...

Jah Cure's lyrics subdued the humming engine as the car dragged across the curb.

"It's decided. I gine get dreadlocks." Damien smiled at the new goal he set.

"Not fuh hell!"

Kyle was baffled at the abrupt relationship between him and Collins. This was the same guy that assaulted him last week, and now he had the nerve to demand an outing? Kyle contemplated not showing up, but he knew how much Damien would tease him for the following month.

I guess I have no choice, then. The decision was made. He'll give the party scene a chance, although Kyle was sure he wouldn't like it. With the other night fresh on his mind, Kyle reflected on the aftermath of that battle....



It was quiet, so quiet that nothing escaped Kyle's ears. The trembling leaves of a nearby shak-shak tree mirrored his nerves, and the fountain's flow made him even more uneasy. Adrenaline had settled in his stomach, and he tasted bile at the back of his throat. Blood and sweat gave his shirt a musty smell, which caught the nose of the Rasta limping next to him.

"You really should get that patched up," pointing to the cut above Kyle's brow. It wasn't very deep; but it would leave a scar on his face if left untreated. "Some cayenne would clear that right up. Stings like hell, but it works." Collins recommended.

"Cayenne ... as in the pepper?" Kyle was skeptical at first, but he remembered that Mr. Beckles always kept a gil of the red powder on his bed head. Kyle appreciated the memory though, anything to take him away from the shock restraining his body—if only for a few seconds. He smiled.

Collins watched him for a long time, feeling a wave of relief when he approached his car.

"Well, there it is." Collins pointed at the Runnex, the beeping from its alarm echoed throughout the empty parking lot.

"This is your car? It's nice..." Kyle said, in as much of an impressed tone as he could muster. The ride was remarkable, with a black-and-gold interior, and a cinnamon scent that tickled his nose upon entering.

"Thanks, man. It ain mine though, belongs to my girl." Collins handed Kyle a scarf for the wound. "Best to not get blood on it, she'd kill me later on." Collins laughed nervously, as if the prospect was more fearsome than what they just experienced.

The Runnex gave a sultry bellow and soon they were leaving this loathsome battleground. Collins relaxed a little as his heel planted the gas pedal. Kyle, on the other hand, couldn't shake the unease, his eyes lost in the shifting landscape. A reggae song seeped from the stereo but in spite of this the vehicle seemed muted. No one said a word. Not since they left campus and entered the highway—five miles north. The lights aligned the road like knights granting a hero's welcome, each peach glow a sword-high salute. They didn't feel like heroes though, not at all. The horrors of the fray still haunted them. *Glowing lights. Pouring Sand. Flute music.* Collins grunted in pain when he braked at the stoplights.

"Sorry I dragged you into this." Kyle gave a guilty glance at the Rasta's left calf.

"Nah, don't worry about it. I was there at the right time, that's all." Collins mused for a moment, and then released what was on his mind. "...though, I did get this injury from fighting you. That weapon of yours ain easy, boy."

Kyle noticed Collins's eyes on the sugarcane and moved it from their line of sight. "Well. You're the one who attacked me in the first place—serves you right."

"Yeah. Guess you got a point, nuh?" Collins turned left at the roundabout, and they were now on the main road of Jackson District. Not a glimmer could be seen as they passed the blurring buildings in the black. Few had stirred at this ungodly hour except maybe the drunkard, the adulterer, the rapist or the thief.

"Why did you pick a fight with me?" Kyle asked.

"Truth is, I honestly don't know. Just curious, I guess." Kyle believed him. Perhaps it was the embarrassment in his face, or the way his eyes never faltered, but Collins was telling the truth. "Besides, you can't blame me for trying. A guy who walks about with a sugarcane and practices Stick-licking? Who *wouldn't* want to fight you?"

Someone with common sense, maybe? Kyle secretly thought but never said aloud. "About that... How do you know about Stick-licking?"

Collins frowned; the headlights of a passing vehicle draped his face. “It was a story my Dad used to tell me as a kid. Always thought it was a myth though, ‘cause I never see anybody fighting with a stick down here yet.”

“Well I never see anyone fight with a machete like you do, either.” Kyle replied.

“True. My Dad teach me how to fight, too.”

“He sounds like an interesting man, and Stick-licking’s supposed to be rare, so my master says. The fact your Dad knows about it is something to shout about. He mussy at home waiting for you now, nuh?”

“He’s dead.”

Collins turned the Runnex through another gap, where the houses became sparser, and the bush more widespread. The blackness of the road spilled into the car, forming shadows around the passengers. The break in the radio’s music, so prompt that it seemed like the very phrase itself had brought it. Kyle felt awkward. He couldn’t explain why; after all he, too, had lost a parent. Maybe it was the way he raised the subject, or the way discomfort swelled in the Rasta’s eyes. Collin’s continued,

“Yeah. Both him and my Mom. It was an accident. They were at a corner standing up, when a car come along, skid out and hit them. The driver was on a cell phone. The car get write-off and they were killed instantly. I was twelve at the time, had to find out in the afternoon when I came home from school.”

Collins turned the steering wheel to the right; Kyle’s house was still ten minutes away and already the story had distracted him. No physical wound could compare to the pain of losing a loved one. Kyle knew this all too well.

“Sorry.”

“Nah, it’s good. At least it was quick, right?” Collins gave a carefree smile which Kyle couldn’t return.

“...I lost my mother as well. She passed away when I was eight.” Kyle had no idea why he admitted this. *To empathize? No, that wasn’t it...*

“Cha. Sorry to hear, man.” Silence followed, and then Collins added, “At least you still got your Dad, right?”

“Nope. He disappeared like a year earlier. I didn’t really mind though, never knew him that sorta way.”

“I see...” There was a bond in their tragic circumstances, noticing it, Collins felt the need to blurt out, “Guess we like the orphan bunch, nuh?”

Kyle didn’t laugh at the joke. Nevertheless, something came across his mind.

“Wait, your parents died when you were still a kid. I guess you had to stay by relatives, right?”

“Nah, actually I lived by myself.” Collins had the same unwavering eyes—truth again. “Wha ‘bout you?”

“I had a guardian. He kinda raised me and my brother, and taught us everything we know.” The surroundings grew familiar. Landmarks which he passed for years: a struggling pea ground, a dilapidated church building, an intersection which lead to a dead end, all were revealed by the headlights glare.

“*Everything?*” Collins hinted at the martial art which Kyle practiced, but the canewielder diverted the question.

“Though my brother was a real trouble tree, fuh real.”

Storm winds are blowing everywhere...

Anthony B sang as the Runnex approached Molasses Drive. Kyle spotted Granny’s house, settling on the main road with a bus stop mounted just in front of it. The path was bathed in black and not a gleam came from the homes nearby, but her house appeared to be the blackest of the lot. Kyle never ventured inside the abode; he wasn’t that close to her, hell, he didn’t even know her real name. The building was not the most inviting either. Structurally, it could be called quaint; the peach-painted board walls were infested with wood ants, and the green paint was peeling off the concrete gallery. White curtains covered the windows and doors, shielding the interior from watchful eyes (like Kyle’s). Though it was aged, ugly could not be used to describe it. However, the aura from Granny’s house certainly said one thing, “Keep out. You’re not welcome.”

“*Molasses Drive*, nuh?” Collins read the black-and-white sign protruding from a light pole they passed.

“Yeah. This is my gap right here—the house at the end, that

white one.” Kyle directed the driver while gathering his things. The wound on his brow wasn’t bleeding anymore and had lost some of its sting. “Well, thanks again, man. For the drop. And for, yuh know ... earlier at school.” Kyle unhitched his seatbelt and removed the bandana from his forehead.

“Nah, man, is cool. I did still hyper from yesterday so the fight was good for me.” Collins refused the bloodstained cloth that was handed to him. Kyle simply smiled; he found the Rasta’s repose infectious, despite this being their first conversation.

With cane in hand Kyle exited the car, closing the door behind him. “Later.” He clenched his fist and extended it through the window. Collins accepted the gesture and knocked the fist with his own in reply.

“Yeah, man. Stay safe.” Exhaust fumed from the muffler, and gravel churned as the tires dragged off. The Runnex sped towards the gap, its lights steadily drowning in the shadows.

It was quiet, so quiet that the clicking from an unlocked door could rouse even the weariest of dreamers.



Eight-thirty-five on that Saturday evening and Kyle grew impatient. After succumbing to his brother’s taunts and the Rasta’s persistence—Kyle was going partying. The household was alive with excitement. Mr. Beckles sat at the dining table with the TV in attentive view, while Damien watched the window for any sign of headlights. He had never seen Kyle dressed in current style before. Kyle wore some Chuck Taylors (which he had since last Christmas), some denim jeans, and a black-and-white striped polo shirt with a coat of arms right below the collar. He looked so snazzy that for a moment Damien forgot that it was his idiot brother.

“I see yuh finally giving dem clothes some air.” Mr. Beckles teased.

“I figure is time I get them out the closet.” Kyle rolled his eyes and checked the clock nestled on the wall. *It’s supposed to start at nine. He late. Stupse.*

Another hour passed. Mr. Beckles had fallen asleep in front of the TV; a sitcom about barbers was on. Damien was still sitting by the window, ever eager for the Rasta’s arrival. Irritating ticks from the clock’s second-hand advanced through the room, each one testing the boy’s patience. Even Kyle was about to snap—punctuality was a must for him—although it was just a fete.

He mussy forget me. At least he could’ve said something so I could get some sleep. The shoes just came off his feet, when the soothing hum of reggae music entered. Smooth and distant. *Just like the flute.*

“He’s here!” Damien was beside himself; as if a television or radio celebrity was coming to their house. He frantically opened the door and saw a dapper Collins stepping out of the car.

“Yo, man, wha gine on?” Kyle gave the Rasta a crabby glare. “Don’t worry, man, we ain late. The jam start at nine PM—in island time that’s eleven o’clock.”

Damien was captivated by Collins’s attire; a white T-shirt with a lion wearing a crown printed in the centre. He also had on a pair of coffee-colored three-quarters and some tanned hiking boots. (The first Kyle ever saw him without slippers on.) The usual silver trident was around his neck, which went with the watch on his wrist. More form than function, Kyle thought.

“Damiaaan, you ain ready yet?” A female voice whined from behind the tinted car window. Damien jolted; he didn’t expect to hear his name being called with such charm. However it was Collins who answered,

“Yeah, gal. We coming now. Just as soon as this man cutout that screw face.”

Kyle put his phone away, and made sure he had the essentials: wallet, keys and sugarcane. “Damien, lock the doors. Shut the windows. And—”

“—make sure I’m in bed by eleven. Okay, okay. Geez...” Damien had plotted to stay up till sunrise—that is, unless sleep beckoned him.

“Yuh look sharp, man. I could see you stopping the club as we land.” Collins laughed as he sat in the driver’s seat. When Kyle closed the door that cinnamon scent tickled his nose again. Two ladies were inside: one in the front seat next to Collins, the other in the back seat next to him.

“Goodnight.” Kyle greeted them; his mother tried to instill manners in him as a child and her efforts were showing. The girls answered and Collins introduced the parties.

“Yeah, this here is my boy, Kyle.”

Kyle gave a small nod.

“The girl next to you is Charlene, and this fretful one here is my girl Nadia,” Nadia slapped Collins. Though she knew he was making sport, his girlfriend could never tolerate rudeness. The passengers in the back snickered, while the car pulled away from Kyle’s front yard.

Kyle’s first fete. The notion was so alien to him since he never experienced the basic freedoms of adolescence. As they got further away from home, jitters rapidly formed within his stomach. The others were pumped though, calypso blared over the radio, making the women move their seated waists. Yellow streaks passed outside in the opposite direction, and Kyle couldn’t help but think,

Just as we should be heading home, we going out instead...

The crew was closing in on the venue and soon they were caught up in a stream of headlights, all looking for the party. St. Lawrence Gap or “De Gap”, as it was affectionately called, was the polar opposite to the countryside they left minutes ago. A hive of activity where all of the nightspots: bars, clubs, restaurants and pool halls, were lit and jam-packed with contented patrons. Those—either out for a lime with friends, hungry for some good food, or aching to mash-up the dance floor—came out in their numbers on that chilly Saturday night. Those in the Runnex were in the latter category, for by the fifth soca track Kyle could recite every lyric thanks to their chanting. Admittedly, he was getting in the mood for bacchanal, and Charlene noticed the smile on his face.

“I never see you out yet?” She caught Kyle off-guard with

the question.

“Yeah. Well. I don’t get out that often. Kinda have stuff to do.” He was embarrassed by the reply, despite its authenticity.

“Oh okay, then.” Charlene said, intrigued. She examined him and his sugarcane, and when she was about to ask more, Collins had interrupted.

“Fuh truth! He don’t go anywhere. I had to drag this man outta de house this morning.”

Kyle wanted to smack the driver alongside the head, but Nadia did it for him.

“Why you don’t leave the boy alone?” She gave Collins such a spiteful look that it even made the back-seat passengers uneasy. Kyle immediately dropped all offense for being called a “boy”.

“Heh! Why you gotta be so abusive?” Collins chuckled as he pulled up next to the nightclub. Distracted by the lovers’ quarrel, Kyle didn’t notice the flashing green-and-blue sign marked CLUB CLIMAX next to his window. They were an hour late, yet they saw a queue of restless patrons stretching from the guarded entrance up to the other side of the building. From the outside, it resembled an old warehouse rather than the fancy nightclub Collins said it would be. They parked the Runnex five minutes away from the venue, since everywhere else was loaded with vehicles. Then the gang started the trek back to the lines; Collins and Nadia entangling arms, while Charlene and Kyle trailed loosely behind.

“So, are you usually this quiet?” Charlene turned her interest back to him.

“Yeah, I guess ... sorry about that.” for some reason, words strained to come off his tongue.

“That’s fine. Most guys usually talk my ear off as soon as we get alone, but you’re different. I like that.” She smiled at Kyle, noting the features which the shadows hid in the car. His built chest printed through the polo shirt he wore. His broad shoulders and lean arms; callous from the daily toils he undertook. The little ripples in his ink-like hair which was trimmed in a crisp low-cut. His sable eyes which arrested the girl as he listened to her words, and those flush, inviting lips just waiting to reply

whenever she left enough room to.

All of these led Charlene to one conclusion: *This ain a bad-looking fella atall.*

Kyle shared the sentiment as he regarded Charlene's freshly exposed beauty. Her frame was small but not lacking in shape. Two sprightly breasts pouted from the cream halter-top she wore. Delicate brown hands wavered as she spoke of the advances of eager men. Men like the ones who whistled at her as they passed the lot of a sporting bar.

"*Psst!* My sexy friend, you walkin wid de wrong fella! He too tall fuh you!"

Their beckoning fell on deaf ears as Charlene was in the presence of an ideal man. Kyle was attentive (he didn't want to seem unmannerly), focusing on the cornrow plaits designing her head, while two large, golden hoops dangled from her ears and brushed her bare shoulders. Though she was short, her legs rose from size-six leather slippers right up to the tiny, white pants hugging her behind. Amidst this onslaught of allure, Kyle still managed to keep his eyes devoted.

"So you're telling me that you used to this sort of thing?"

"Well yeah. Although it's annoying at times—and rude." Charlene gripped Kyle's cane-wielding arm, and the two sped up to catch the straying couple in front.

The beats from the dance tracks were heavier now, mixing with the banter of those in queue. As the group passed, more drunken howls were thrown at the ladies—commenting on their various assets. Collins replied by increasing the hold on Nadia's hips, his swagger ever more confident. Kyle, on the other hand, felt somewhat intimidated by the spotlight, but Charlene reassured him by resting on his shoulders. They were certainly getting comfortable, that was, until Nadia beckoned her to talk about something (most likely gossip). The moment Charlene left his side and walked ahead, Kyle took note of the tattoo on her lower back. A domino with four dots on one side and three dots on the other, resting neatly above her apple-sculpted bottom, a location that was only meant for intimate eyes.

"B, you don't know it's rude to stare?" He was startled by

Collins's remark, quickly adjusting his eyes to suit.

"I-I wasn't staring."

"Heh! Man, don't watch nuttin, you see how sexy she is? I would be more worried if you *weren't* staring."

"Don't you already have a girlfriend?" Kyle wondered if Charlene was part of the flock that often hung around Collins.

"Nah nothing so, she's just a close friend. Actually, it was *she* who introduced me to Nadia in the first place." He said to Kyle's relief.

"Well, well, well, look who it is, doah nuh." An unfamiliar voice shot from behind his back. "A man like King of de Crop, den. *Cheee!*" Kyle whipped around to match the face to the voice, but that was also unfamiliar. The newcomer knocked fists with Collins.

"King of the Crop...?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah, man. You know; 'cause you always walking around with a piece of sugarcane. Like um is Crop Over." He cackled. Kyle didn't find it amusing, but it wasn't a surprise that he had a nickname considering his odd habit.

"Don't mind that. People does call he 'Mangoes', but he wun tell you why." The fellow sucked his teeth.

Mangoes? ...Safe. Kyle couldn't figure out the reason behind the name, but seeing how friendly the character was, he decided to ignore it. Mangoes was small in stature, even when compared to Collins. His dark skin wrapped around twig-like arms which projected from the oversized red shirt he wore.

"So when the men heading inside? In dey bursting wid girls, boy." The chuckle tossed the long gold chain around his scrawny neck.

"Soon, B. I just here waiting 'pon mine." Collins reached for his phone, but before he could dial the numbers a delicate tugging came across his shirt. "Oh, there you are. Wunna done gossiping yet?"

"Stupse!" Nadia slapped him on the shoulder while sucking her teeth.

"Guess we all set to head in." The Rasta then glanced at Kyle, alluding to the fact that he could not enter the club with

that sugarcane. Come to think of it, Collins never saw Kyle without it and he was beginning to wonder why.

“You might got to leave that in de car. I doubt you’ll get pass security.”

“Yeah, fuh real—weapons and all.” Mangoes laughed, if only he knew.

“Don’t sweat it, man. Your boy Mangoes always got things covered.” And with that, he led the crew towards the entrance. Kyle tucked the sugarcane deeper into his pants until it bulged out of the leg. It was three feet in length and not very broad, so he still managed to keep it hidden from ignorant eyes.

The guards were in plain sight now, both dwarfing even Kyle and they were twice as wide as Mangoes. Regardless, Mangoes continued past them like a diplomat coming through customs. The group quickly followed suit, all of them both shocked and impressed.

“Wait, just so the man come in like a boss?” the ladies giggled.

“Of course. Boss man could only do boss acts. Besides, VAT office running this fete, so yuh know since I am a VAT officer ... *he-he-he.*” Mangoes pulled out his identification card and mockingly waved it in Collins’s face.

“Yeah, yeah... I’ll give you props.” Collins grumbled. Kyle didn’t quite understand what just happened, but was happy that he wasn’t forty dollars poorer. Charlene took his hand and smiled—Kyle returned it.

They were in a narrow hallway now, with barely enough room to hold the embracing couple. Black lights, which were fastened on the smooth grey walls, exacerbated the darkness of the passage—their luster stimulating the whites on Kyle’s polo shirt, Charlene’s tight pants and Nadia’s bra strap. Ten steps from the entrance, Kyle noticed a room with five people inside. One hunched over a long pool table aiming at scattered balls, two leaning on the walls watching the play with sticks in hand, and the others on an adjoining sofa—girl in boy’s lap, tongues intertwined, ignoring the match altogether. Twenty more steps and the group passed another room: a private lounge for Bimshire’s elite. Kyle peeked inside but could only see the

intoxicated shadows straying through the fogged window pane.

Thirty steps later, they reached the hive of the venue: a massive dance floor fully packed with frolicking partygoers. Blinded by flashing blue and yellow lights, Kyle struggled to keep his footing as he urged forward through the crowd. Charlene held on tight so she wouldn't lose him, but Kyle couldn't find Collins and the others at all. Scoping around the room he saw a bar with aggravated patrons, overworked bartenders, and an impressive collection of alcoholic beverages stacked behind them. Passoa, Hynotiq, Smirnoff, Mount Gay, Red bull, Baba Roots, Magnums and of course, bottles of Bimshire's very own Banks beer assembled on the shelves.

The surrounding speakers blurted out familiar reggae "rid-dims", and the sea of people started to get rough. Not everyone was feeling the new selection though, as dozens limed on the walls and higher platforms, sipping drinks, styling overpriced attire, or just watching those on the dance floor with disdain. Those who indulged in the music got their very own place in the centre, where a pit-like section was reserved for them to get on as badly as they wished. Kyle thought his heart was going to pop out of his back, when the bass steadily pounded from imposing speakers. He wanted to leave, but then Charlene pulled him closer and shouted,

"Oooo, this is my song!"

Her legs then began to twist with the overwhelming beat. Arms arched above her head, her body's sway so engaging that the surrounding men diverted their attention to it. Everyone's eyes (including Kyle's) were locked on the prize packaged in those tight, white pants. He had forgotten about the pain tormenting his ears just a moment ago, and Charlene made sure he wouldn't remember either.

"Come on, I don't like hanging around wallflowers." Charlene eased up on Kyle, and leaned her back towards him—marrying their waists. Kyle felt awkward, even though he was an "Island Yute", he didn't know much about the indigenous dance.

Don't panic. He coaxed himself, catching the glare of jealous men. Escorting his hands along her hips, Charlene gyrated

quicker as the tempo picked up. Kyle was confused at first, but he got the hang of things by the time the DJ switched selections.

“HOLD ON ‘PON DIS ONE HERE! THIS TUNE HEY NAAAAASSSTY!”

The song was mellow and smooth, providing a perfect setting for Charlene to work her magic—as if Kyle wasn’t wooed already. She gazed into his eyes, as the strokes became deeper and deeper. Airs of pineapple tickling his nose, beads of sweat massaging their bodies, all accompanied by the ecstasy filling their spirit.

Then a cold, hard slap landed on his back.

“Ah! That’s what you two run off to do, nuh?” Collins nudged Kyle, who immediately backed away from his dance partner.

“Heh, she mussy did want some of that King Sugar.” Mangoes snorted while taking a swig of his rum and coke. If Kyle wasn’t dark-skinned his face would’ve been like a ripe cherry. Charlene wasn’t fazed, though. She just stood there, annoyed that they were interrupted.

“AIGHT, GUYS! IS TIME TO HYPEN THINGS UP NOW!”

The DJ roared into the microphone while switching selections—the new song being all too familiar. Flute music drowned out the restless voices in the room. The tune was solemn and daunting, much like the hymn of that masked wraith, sending Kyle into a cold sweat. Collins noticed it, too; his facial expression matched Kyle’s. Segmented clips of the past battle looped inside their minds. The connection between the wraith and the music, the crippling speed and agility it had, that haunting gaze; so bright it shadowed the moon, and last and most chilling, the stream of sand that trickled from the gash on his torso. *Glowing eyes. Pouring sand. Flute music.* Although the crowd was in a frenzy (apparently the song was popular), Kyle only heard the stillness from that battle.

He had to get out, get some air, get away from that music...

“Kyle... is something wrong?” Charlene tried to calm him—she got a desperate shrug in reply.

“Wow, hope I ain give the man too much heat.” Mangoes

felt guilty. However Collins knew that this had nothing to do with silly remarks.

Lack of light was not helpful for those passing through the club, especially the ones looking to go out outside. Kyle mashed toes, separated couples, and eventually spilled the drink of one passerby.

“My man! Are you a *kant*?! This shirt ain cheap, yuh know?!”

The guy pointed at the damp, golden stain on his white shirt which resembled a military uniform. Lines of blue driving down the sleeves, matched perfectly with the black vest he wore inside and the black scarf tied around his forehead. He would’ve fit in with the stylish group who posed on the sidelines if it weren’t for his harsh mouth.

“You better pass off some money now, yuh! Or get wash off!” He screamed in Kyle’s face, the alcoholic stench made his eyes water.

Patrons nearby ignored the new track and became spectators to the quarrel. Was a fight going to start? The question brewed in their mind. The cutlass hilt peeking out of Collins’s pants was already in anxious grip.

A room once filled with carnival had now brimmed with animosity. Even the most wuffless dancers had to stop their torsos and turn their heads to the argument. Everyone was worried. The guy did seem pretty angry, the bottle in his hand itching to meet someone’s head. But Kyle remained calm. His face forward as he apologized and walked away.

Collins was not surprised; Kyle had more pressing issues than the threats of idle drunkards. He parted the small congregation and was near the exit, but the man was livid. He wouldn’t allow it to end so easily.

“You feel you getting away, nuh?!” His hand made a motion so swift that it would even escape the eyes of the most skilled fighter.

From his fingers the bottle flew, like a bullet from a rifle, yet quiet like a blade of grass in the wind. The missile seemed to navigate the crowd, sharply dodging their faces. They didn’t even notice that a glass bottle just passed their way. It was as if

the bottle *knew* what its target was and wouldn't allow itself to hit anything besides the canewielder's head.

After three more spins it embarked on Kyle's person, the drunkard smiling for he knew it was the end.

But was it the end?

Kyle's cane answered, "No", as it plucked the glass bottle out of the air. The thrower couldn't believe it. There was no way someone could parry that attack from that position. The thought itself was enough to sober him, if only for a moment.

Collins was shocked, too. *How could someone throw with such precision?* There were over twenty people in that area, all bunched up, and the bottle circumvented all to hit Kyle—the intended target. The Rasta knew that, *That was no fluke. This drunkard has some crazy skills!*

Collins glared at the stranger, who now took another lazy gulp from the other beer bottle in hand. His rage abated, the man disregarded the previous incident and went back to the drinks. But Collins didn't forget, as his blade dissected the bottle still attached to the man's mouth.

"Don't get too comfortable. I'm not as forgiving as my friend." Collins uttered while moving towards the exit.

With the golden brew leaking out of the bottomless container, and disbelief screaming from his eyes, the man thought, *Men does be real brave nowadays, yuh.*

"Just who the hell are these people?" All interested onlookers whispered to themselves. The DJ quickly resumed the music in an attempt to quell the disturbance, which worked since bumpers were once again in full swing.

Kyle exited the club; passing latecomers who either now decided to go to the fete or just managed to get past security. Outside, the alley reeked of urine and the culprits were still there when Kyle arrived. Its lull was a welcomed change from the mayhem in the venue. He needed space. He knew coming to the club tonight was a bad idea. It was far too soon after the incident, for all he knew the enemy was still lurking nearby! Watching. Waiting. *Pouring sand...*

"Why did I let him talk me into this, nuh?"

“—Because you knew he was right in saying you need to get out.” Collins answered his question. The pissers had already zipped up their pants, but the odor they left behind was unbearably potent.

“Look, man, I ain gine lie, that was messed up what happened the other night. But you have to let it go and move on, B.”

Kyle wasn't heeding his words and gazed blankly at the wall. What would Collins know of his world? He was merely a visitor, a tourist taking in the haunting sights.

“This wasn't the first time.” Kyle said after a long silence. “This isn't the first time I saw that thing or heard that music.”

“...Seriously?”

“Yeah, been hearing it in the past. First it was months apart, then weeks, then days.... Then recently when it played that *thing* appeared before me, just for a moment, and then disappeared. And you know the rest...”

“Safe. Guess you have a reason to be freaked out, then.” Collins began to understand why he was guided to the cane-wielder. But before he could continue, Kyle heard the banter of someone nearby.

“So wanna men decide to come out here and hide, nuh? Well I can't let things done so...” The drunkard had returned. His white shirt discarded and muscles showing, he stood by the entrance with a bottle twirling between forefinger and thumb.

“Look, guy, we ain really in the mood right now. So why don't you just run along before you get yourself hurt, nuh?” Collins drew his cutlass, the cold blade fashioned to match the wielder's intent.

“Heh! Wanna men sound confident, yuh. And I realize you got a piece uh skill, too. I gine enjoy this, boy.”

He marched towards them with glass bottle spinning furiously. Kyle and Collins took their attacking stances and braced for battle, but before it could begin, a loud voice boomed from afar.

“Finally found you, yuh stinking *Pel-Ting!*” The drunkard looked behind and saw a group of bloodthirsty men waiting for him. They were armed with weapons of all shapes and sizes: crowbars, chains, bricks and the traditional fists.

“Wow. I fairly popular tonight.” He forgot about Collins and Kyle, turning instead on his new targets. Fresh prey. “Looks like I gine have to crack wunna heads another time.” With a hop, skip and jump, he landed on the rooftop of an adjacent building.

“The name’s Sniper, by the way. And next time we meet, I’ll kick your ass.”

Collins smiled in anticipation. Kyle couldn’t care less. They watched as he disappeared leaving his livid assailants in the process.

“Don’t let he get way!” The leader ordered his troops, who gave chase in the same direction as Sniper. The alley was deserted again, and oddly enough the distraction calmed Kyle’s spirit.

The music in the club was dying down too, with queues of tired, aching patrons exiting the venue and stumbling towards their cars. The drunk, the high and the weary, all crawled around the alleyway and into the parking lot. Nadia and Charlene sandwiched a smiling Mangoes (who was pleased to have two beautiful ladies to himself, no doubt.)

“Wunna so rude! How you could just run off like that without saying nothing?” Nadia gave her boyfriend another hard slap.

“He-he, *oww!* Why you gotta get on so, girl?” Collins reverted to his jovial self, cutlass sheathed and placid. Charlene approached Kyle, she knew something was wrong but didn’t think it appropriate to ask.

“Hey, sorry about earlier—you know—shrugging you off like that.” Kyle gave her a faint smile which she returned warmly.

“Why couldn’t I have met you earlier?” Charlene asked while twiddling her thumbs.

“...How do you mean?”

“As I leaving the island I meet a cool guy, some luck, nuh?” The two walked ahead, leaving the others as the conversation grew more intimate.

“You’re leaving?” Even though Kyle just met her, the notion of her departure saddened him.

“Yeah...my family lives overseas, so I spend time back and forth between islands. I used to love it so. But now...” As Charlene spoke, Kyle noted the foreign accent seasoning her

words—it might have been San Lucian. Then she gave into the urges that blossomed in the club and embraced him. Kyle was stunned by the softness of her.

Collins beckoned to them that it was time to leave. Mangoes was out like a light and the fragrance of alcohol was fresh on his person. Nadia slept peacefully in the front seat. And Collins drove patiently, while listening to the silky lyrics oozing from the car's radio set. On the way home, Kyle and Charlene were in deep conversation, enjoying the final moments of their company.



Sniper stood in a narrow walkway, cornered by the dozen foes in his sight. Past wrongs fueled their vengeance, and they demanded a pound of flesh as compensation. Yet, in the face of all this, Sniper was not worried. He merely took the black scarf from around his forehead and tied it around his mouth. With crisp cornrows revealed on his scalp, the bandit-like appearance signified that he was not holding back.

“I guess I got no choice but to punish you guys now, nuh?” The drunken slur disappeared from his voice. Murderous intent flowed from his eyes which peeked over the cloth around his nose.

“Ha! You think we frighten fuh a Pel-Ting!? Yuh outnumbered and you ain getting awa—”

Brax!

Before he could finish the sentence, a bottle shattered in his face. The rest began to retaliate, but it was too late, they were already inside Sniper's all-encompassing range and there was no escape. Rocks replaced the numerous bottles on his being. Every one of them destined for their targets. The average eye could not hope to track his arm's movement; it was too quick, too sharp, too precise.

This was the power of a Pel-Ting.

In the aftermath those bodies were scattered across in the narrow passageway, they didn't stand a chance. Sniper removed the scarf, and again wrapped it around his forehead, ending both the battle and the excitement.

“*Stupse!* Cocky bastards ain even put up nuh effort.” He walked over to his bottle case with the bag straps attached. It lay in the shadows, patiently waiting for its owner to retrieve it, which he did. Then Sniper strode away, case strapped across his sturdy back, muscles glistening in the moonlight.



GLOSSARY

Thank you for reading *Offset: The Mask of Bimshire*. I hope you enjoyed the journey so far. I tried to make the book as authentic to Barbadian (Bajan) and Caribbean culture as possible without alienating international readers. However, to make things easier for those unfamiliar with the dialect of Bimshire, I decided to include this short glossary of terms and phrases in the story.

As Bimshire is a fictional version of the real-world Caribbean island, Barbados, the characters in the story speak Bajan dialect or Barbadian Creole. Bajan is primarily a spoken language, while standard English is used in print, media and formal situations. As such, Bajan is an English-based form of creole with some terms that are shortened or broken forms of their English counterparts.

Please note, since Bajan dialect has no standardized spelling, the spelling of a number of the words are rough approximations.

- **A de**—means *Of the*.
- **Aight**—short for *All right, Okay*.
- **Ain/ D'ain**—can be used in the following contexts: *Isn't/ Is not/ Am not/ Did not/ Do not/ Does not/ Will not/ Won't*.
- **Ain easy**—to be formidable.
- **Alla**—truncated form of *All of, Entire*.
- **Atall/ At-all**—means *No-how* or *No-Way*.
- **B**—this is a noun, short for *Big man* or *Boss*.
- **Baku**—a wooden doll that grants wishes in exchange for a fee. Be careful not to skimp on payments.
- **Bare**—this means raw/ pure, often use as an over exaggeration, too.
- **Big man**—this is a term of endearment/ salutation which usually refers to a person of good standing/ good status. This can also refer to a large male.
- **Big-up**—a person of high status, wealth and popularity.
- **Bimshire**—a Caribbean Island located in the most eastern part of the Caribbean Sea. It is two-hundred-and-sixty-six square miles and is touted as being the Gem of the Caribbean. This is where *Offset* takes place.
- **Boah/ bo**—this can be used as an adverb, similar to *Nuh* or *Doah*.
- **Bredren**—*Brethren/ Brother*, generally a salutation.
- **Brek-up**—to fall, to feel exhausted, ill or injured.
- **Bruddah**—truncated form of *Brother*.
- **Bruggadown**—the sound of something falling, or hitting something very hard. Linseed Beckles is called 'Bruggadown' because of the sound his sticks make when he hits an opponent.
- **Bus-stop**—a place where public transport buses stop to pick up or release passengers. The bus-stops in Bimshire are a bit special though.
- **Butt**—to meet or run into someone, to bounce off or knock into something.
- **Cakey**—easy, required little effort.
- **Canecutter**—a bladesman who specializes in using machetes or cutlasses as weapons. They existed since the days of slavery. Damian Collins is such a Canecutter.
- **Cawblen/Caw Blen**—means *Wow!* This is an exclamation,

usually vulgar.

•**Cawblemma!**—means *Oh my goodness! / God blind me if it isn't true!*

•**Cawdee**—*Wow!* This is an exclamation.

•**Cess**—to take, steal or appropriate.

•**Cha/ Cha!**—*Wow!* This is an exclamation. It can also be used to express sympathy.

•**Cheese on Bread!**—an expression or an exclamation. Usually used when frustrated or surprised.

•**Chillax**—to chill and/or relax.

•**Collins**—see *Cutlass*. (Fun fact: Damian Collins was named after his weapon when *Offset* was first created. It was supposed to be a joke.)

•**Come 'long**— means *Come along/ Come with me*.

•**Coulda**—truncated form of *Could have / Could've*.

Crop Over— this is a traditional harvest festival which began in Bimshire, having its beginnings on sugarcane plantations during slavery. Nowadays, it is a great party which tourists should try to attend at least once.

•**Cuh Dear**—to express sympathy or pity, *What a shame*.

•**Cunny**—this is a noun. A vulgar one.

•**Cutlass**—a machete or similar blade. See *Collins*.

•**Dah/ Dah's**—shortened/ truncated form of *That* or *That is*.

•**Dark Continent**—the original motherland where most Caribbean natives originated prior to slavery. More on this later.

•**Dat**—truncated form of *That*.

•**De**—means *The*, but Bajan accent usually makes it sound like *De*.

•**Dem**—truncated form of *Them*, can also be used in the context of *There*.

•**Den**—truncated form of *Then*.

•**Dey**—truncated form of *There*.

•**Diablesse/ La Diablesse**—this is a devil woman from Caribbean folklore. She typically hides cloven feet under her dress and seduces men to their demise. To beat a Diablesse, one must turn their clothes inside out and walk home backwards. Of course, there has been no proven accounts of La Diablesse in Bimshire.

- Dis**—truncated form of *This*.
- Doah, nuh**—this is often used as an adverb similar to *Though*. For example, *Look at this fool, though!* would be *Look at this fool, doah!* Sometimes, we add *nuh* for emphasis, like *Look at this fool, doah nuh!*
- Doan**—truncated form of *Don't*.
- Don't watch nuttin**—this means *It's okay*. or *Don't worry about it*.
- Does do/ Does (insert verb)**—some Bajans uses this participle in front of some verbs.
- Don'cha**—truncated form of *Don't you*.
- Done know**—this is an affirmation; usually means *I agree with you* or *I/You already know*.
- Dread**—to be crazy or insane. See *Tear-Head*. Can also be used as an adverb.
- Dress-up**—wearing your best clothes.
- Drop**—this means a ride, as in a car ride.
- Dunno**—truncated form of *Don't know*.
- Dunce**—a type of sour fruit, goes great with salt.
- Duncy**—to be stupid, slow learner.
- Duppy**— a ghost, spirit or zombie.
- Ease off!**—this means *Back off!/ Give me some space!/Relax!*
- Fagged Out**— *tired, exhausted*.
- Fella**—truncated form of *Fellow*.
- Fete**—a party.
- Fits**—this refers to epilepsy, can also refer to mental illness.
- Fix he/she goat**—this means to get revenge or to make sure someone gets their comeuppance.
- Flam**—a girl/ boy that one flirts with; to flirt.
- Fowl-cock**—a chicken.
- Friggin**—adverb (vulgar).
- Fuh**—truncated form of *For*.
- Fuh Sport**—this means for joke or for fun.
- Fuh True? / Fuh Truth?**—this means *For truth / For real*. Can be used in the context of a question where someone is incredulous eg. *Are you serious?*
- Fuh truth/ Fuh real/ Fah real**—It can also be used as an affirmation, to agree with something said, *Indeed*.

- Fussy**—very particular, proud, boastful.
- Gallist**—this means a ladies' man or a womanizer in Caribbean slang.
- Gap**—a street or road.
- Get de belly**—to have an upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea.
- Get through/ sort out**—this means to succeed or accomplish your goal or task.
- Get 'Way/ Get Way**—to escape, run away.
- Gine**—short for *going/ to be going / going to*.
- Gimme/ Giwwe**—this means *Give me/ Give us*.
- Gotta**—short for *Got to, Have to*.
- 'Gree**—to speak on friendly terms.
- Guh 'long**—Go along, leave.
- Gypsy / Malicious**—to be overly inquisitive, mischievous. The need to know other person's affairs usually for ill-intent or gossip.
- Hard-ears**—to be stubborn.
- Hear?**—this can be used as an adverb. Similar to how people use *See?* as an adverb at times.
- Heself/ Sheself**—this means *himself/ herself*.
- Hey**—truncated form of *Here*.
- Horn**—to cheat on a lover or be unfaithful.
- How you keeping?**—this means *How are you doing? Are you well?*
- Hungh!**—means *Here! / Take this!*
- Is cool/ is time**—this means *It is cool/ It is time*.
- Island Yute**—this means an Island Youth, the archetypical adolescent from the Caribbean.
- Johnny**—this is what Bajans call an idiot or a fool.
- Juck**—to poke, stab or push.
- Just so**—this means *Just like that*.
- Kixxing**—to joke/kid around/ to take a situation lightly.
- Lawd**—truncated form of *Lord*.
- Leff**—truncated form of *Leave*.
- Leggo**—truncated form of *Let go*.
- Leh**—truncated form of *Let*.
- Lemme**—truncated form of *Let Me*.
- Less Noise**—to *Keep quiet/ Shut up/Be Silent*.

- Lick Down**—to get hit by a car, ran over.
- Lil**—short for *little*.
- Lime / liming**—to hang-out, chill, or relax somewhere with others.
- Looka**—truncated form of *Look at*.
- Mekkin Sport/ Mek Sport**—to joke/kid around/ to take a situation lightly. Example (*you*) *mekin' sport*.
- Mighta**—truncated form of *Might have*.
- Muddah/ Faddah**—truncated form of *Mother/ Father*.
- Muh**—means *My*. Bajan accent truncates the pronunciation.
- Mussy/Mussie**—means *Must be, Maybe, Perhaps* or *Probably*.
- Nah**—means *No*.
- Nain**—means *Nothing*.
- Never-see, come-see**—this is an over-exaggeration.
- New Guiana**—a country on the northern region of South Ameris which is considered part of the Caribbean diaspora.
- Nuff /Nough**—usually means *A lot of*, but is the shortened form of *Enough*.
- Nuh**—can be used for *No* or a negative. However, Bajans often use *Nuh* in the context of *Huh* as well. For example, *The sun is pretty hot today, nuh?* It can even be used as a superlative like, *Will you?* For example; *Move, Nuh?! means Move, will you?!*
- Nuhmore**—means *No more/ Anymore*.
- Nuttin**—means *Nothing*.
- Obeah**—Witchcraft/Black Magic/sorcery of West African origin similar to Voodoo. The primary service which the Dark Arcs was built upon.
- Ole**—means *Old*.
- Ol man**—means *Old man*, can also be a term of endearment to mean wise person or respected person.
- Onna**—truncated form of *One of*.
- Papa Bois**—translates to *Father of the Wood*, legend tells of a being that abducted travelers unfortunate enough to wander into the forest. However, that being is Papa Bois and that forest is Bewitched Gully.
- Parro/ Parrow**—a crack-head, someone so addicted to drugs, a homeless person.
- Part**—means *Where*, used to indicate location. For eg. *Part*

you gine? means *Where are you going?*

- Pel-Ting Family of the East**—a mercenary group that specializes in assassination, reconnaissance and debt collection using the art of throwing objects with superhuman precision.
- Pelt**—to throw.
- Peltin-waist**—to dance, to gyrate.
- Pon** /'pon—short for *upon* or *on*.
- Rangate**—vulgar; a cuss word.
- Rass**—short for *Rasta* (see definition), can also be an exclamation; vulgar.
- Rasta**—a Rastafarian. Relating to the Rastafarian movement. However, people with dreadlocks are often referred to as Rastas like Damian Collins.
- Real Ting**—this means *Real Thing* which is used as an affirmation or to agree with someone much like *Indeed* or *Fuh Real*.
- Red-skin**—someone of light-brown or caramel complexion, usually perceived to be attractive in the Caribbean.
- Rolling**—to travel with, to associate with.
- Scrunt**—to scrape by financially, to struggle.
- Shaggy Bear**—a costumed acrobatic dancer usually dressed in rags. In Bimshire, these are threatening inhuman spectres associated with the Dark Arcs.
- Shite/ Shit**—this means excrement or defecation.
- Shoulda**—truncated form of *Should have*.
- Sighted/Seen/Safe**—this is usually an affirmation to agree with something said. Like *Okay*.
- Skylark\Skylarking**—this means to play the fool, or to mess around.
- Somma**—truncated form of *Some of*.
- Spot me**—means *Lend me*.
- Steel Donkey**—this is a fabled creature which appears as a donkey made of steel wrapped in chains, and wreaks havoc upon Bimshire villages. Collins often heard of them in bedtime stories.
- Stick-licking**—a lost martial art involving the use of sticks in a pseudo-form of fencing. It was preserved during the slavery days by being taught in secret to a handful of people. Current Stick-lickers are Linseed Beckles, Kyle Harding and Damian

Harding.

- Stupse**—the sound of sucking teeth.
- Suh**—truncated form of *So*.
- Tear-head**—insane, crazy, mental, one who takes risks.
- Tek off**—*Tek* is a truncated pronunciation of *Take*, so to *Tek Off* means to *Take Off* much like a plane or to move away very quickly.
- Testy**—means dangerous, difficult, uncertain.
- Tie-up**—means to entangle, confuse or engross.
- Ting**—truncated form of *Thing*. Can also be used in a list to indicate further items much like *Et Cetera*.
- Top Man**—term of endearment, see *Big Man*.
- Trouble**—to interfere, bother, harass, pickup, take, disturb.
- Trouble tree**—one who causes trouble, usually refers to bad-behaved children.
- Tuh**—truncated form of *To*.
- Uh**—truncated form of *Of*.
- Um**—means *It*.
- Unstaan**—truncated form of *Understand*.
- Used to**—means accustomed, or to do something in the past.
- Wuh/ Wha**—truncated form of *What*.
- Whagine on**—this translates to *What's going on with you?/ What's new?*
- Whe-hey!**—an exclamation, similar to *Well, would you look at that!*
- Wid**—truncated form of *With*.
- Woi**—an exclamation like *Wow!* Or *Woo!*
- Wotless/Wutless**—worthless, misbehaved, can also be used to describe someone who is partying too much.
- Wuhloss**—an exclamation, often used to express disappointment or surprise.
- Wun**—truncated form of *Wouldn't*, also can be used as a bad pronunciation of *One*.
- Wunna/Wunnuh**—means *You all* or *You people*.
- Youngsta**—truncated form of *Youngster*.
- Yuh**—truncated form of *You*. It can also be used as an adverb, similar to *Nuh*.
- Yuh Know**—truncated form of *You know*.
- Yute**—a youth/ child/ offspring.

•**ZR**—pronounced *Zed-R*, a private-owned route taxi (So named because of the license plates beginning with ZR).

I hope this short glossary helps to navigate the nuances of Bajan dialect expressed in *Offset: The Mask of Bimshire*. However, if you are eager to learn more about the Bajan creole feel free to do your own research online. I highly recommend *#Bajanisms: A Culture. A Language* by Mahalia Cummins.

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Thanks to Barbados and the Caribbean region for being such a badass place to live.

Offset is for you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Delvin Howell was born in Bridgetown, Barbados, in 1987. He attended Queen's College and the University of the West Indies, where the idea for *Offset* brewed in his mind. Shortly after, he completed the manuscript for *Mask of Bimshire* and won the John Wickham Award for the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment in 2010. *Offset* made its debut as a one-shot comic for Wunnuh Publishing's *Mass Anthology*, and then started an official series under Beyond Publishing Caribbean where it won a Gold Addy for publishing and design from the Caribbean Advertising Federation. *Offset: Mask of Bimshire* is his debut novel and he hopes to capture the Caribbean spirit with it.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Hans Steinbach is a freelance illustrator & character designer, having worked for game studios such as Capcom (*Street Fighter 4* — costume designs), Platinum Games (*Nier Automata* and *Scalebound* — concept art) and Emerald City Games. He's had manga published by Tokyo Pop and is currently working with Udon Entertainment. With over seven years in the game industry, and experiences travelling the world (including Barbados), he was the perfect fit for the *Offset* series.

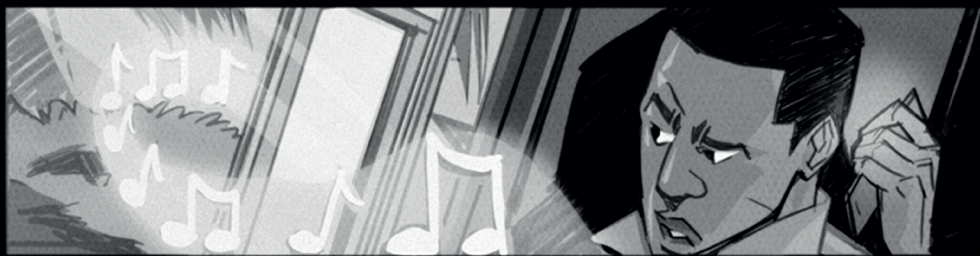
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MAGIC IS EXPENSIVE

An underground Obeah trade lies within the Caribbean island of Bimshire, where miracles are sold everyday. The problem is, each one comes with a burdensome debt.

As a child, Kyle Harding thought Bimshire a frightening place.

Bus stops glow. Flute music haunts the air. And the shadows themselves stalk him. With his mother dead, and a baby brother—Damien—to raise, Kyle had to endure much growing up. But when a serial killer attacks his home, Kyle is forced down a bloody path where he discovers the history surrounding his family and the massive debts his mother left behind.



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