

## On His Own

Joy is a mighty muscle—sometimes so strong, it confuses expression. For as M'nalo watched the sails of the *Princess Elene* grow smaller, his face showed grim and ugly. His true feeling though, was a delightful zest that powered his oars and pushed him smoothly through the blue-green Caribbean Sea.

Stubbornly unconvinced of safety, his cautious side insisted that nothing yet was assured. Still the mischievous gusto refused to stop distracting, and gradually compelled him to consider its impish idea that, 'Maybe this *was* a good time for easing up.'

M'nalo loosened his grip on the oars as again, exuberance swept through him. Somehow this triggered a snigger that relaxed to a smirk. Which changed into a grin that quickly transformed and burst out as a loud, celebratory cackle. Then unexpectedly, the sound became part shriek, part snarl, and caused his long face to stretch awry, the eyes flooding with a hot mix of triumph and fear and fatigue . . .

. . . and all the massed tensions lifted out of him to be borne away by the fresh sea breeze and dissolve in the brilliant sunshine . . .

The sudden swell of feelings, over almost as soon as begun, left M'nalo exhausted. Chin dripping sweat to his bare chest, he remained slack-muscled and tried thinking a prayer to his protector, Eshu Elegbara, god of Mischief.

Then while his heart worked at returning to a steady beat, he tried to same way unwind his muscles and his mind.

Time later, a thankful *etutu* done, a refreshed M'nalo got back to the sweaty part of escape. He braced his large feet against the flat stern of the coracle, and from legs to forearms the muscles of his strong frame bunched and hardened as he plied the oars into the sparkling sea.

Furrowed brows dripping salty, again he looked across the ocean at the diminishing topsails of the slave ship he had just departed. The force of his strokes was so boosted by the sight that with each surge of his small craft, and as every jaunty wavelet bobbed by, M'nalo grew happier.

Back of his throat, the air reminded of iron smelts of a faraway past and made him pause mid-stroke, pull in the oars and draw breath. He also used the moment to ease his back muscles, massaging them by a deliberate, straining twisting of his torso to one side and then the other. And just so in

this awkward pose, as he blinked sweat from his eyelashes, M'nalo got a first look at his destination.

He beheld a green-covered gem with a billowing skirt of white spray rising high from the blue ocean. Flocks of squalling seabirds, noisy even from the distance, did not distract from the fact that there were no plumes of campsite smoke. No cultivated patches of ground. No signs of human life at all. And for these 'no's,' warm like blood, Satisfaction bubbled through him.

Returned to pulling through the sea, M'nalo approached the island. As the splashy roar of breakers increased, he twisted around again and realized he was getting close enough to decide on landfall. Directly forwards, right and left, waves pounded and splattered white spray against the shoreline. Impressive also was how a fringe of multicolored, flat-topped trees—slanted by inland breezes—emerged directly out of the sea's violence. Then after a fair bit uphill, this border flattened to a plateau of old green forests.

From here on the water, further south of his left seemed quieter. Hoping to find an inlet, M'nalo steered with the oars and let the pull of the tide slowly take him that way. He went past a stretch of choppiness with spiky coral reefs dangerously close to the surface.

During another anxious patch he floated into bubbly, floating yellow kelp so thick and clinging it threatened to enmesh the boat.

Then he was through that and into the peaceful bay of a small cove rimmed by a narrow crescent of pale sand.

He worked the oars again, aiming for the beach. Staring at the bare horizon, feeling like the only human around, he concentrated on his stroking. Then all at once feeling zingy again, he shipped oars and to hear his own voice more than anything else, said, "In truth, M'nalo Fanta Bembo, why are you pushing this hard? There's no one chasing."

Out of him burst a high-pitched laugh. For in his mind, the voice he had tried for was a gruff baritone like that of Wasa Okapur, the outwitted sorcerer captain from whom he had just escaped. With his damaged voice, the sound he had managed was more of a throaty wheeze. More like the hoarse clearance before the hacking cough of a lifelong chest cold.

It reminded of his brother, Izi Onamuli.

Like a dark veil to his good feelings, lurking thoughts of his lost family floated forward, gloomy and menacing. With a sigh, M'nalo shook his head and returned to pulling oars. Back of his mind he reasserted the vow made when he departed the *Princess Elene*—that he would abandon all of that past life he had had no say in forming.

With this new *Fà* here in the Caribbean, he would make all the decisions. Mindful of this personal oath, he commanded himself closer to comfort, even forced a wry smile. For indeed, no one and nothing was chasing. He was free of them all.

He rowed through rippling water so clear he could see the grainy sea-floor gravel in which colorful small fry were nuzzling for food. Coupled with an abrupt need to feel this world underfoot, and it seeming knee-deep shallow, he shipped oars and jumped in.

To his surprise and delight, he sunk to his chin in the warm sea, his soles receiving a ticklish massage from the coarse, crisp, yielding gravel.

Now up to his waist wading in, his heading was a small river mouth at the end of the thin beach. As he tugged the hide-skin coracle through gentle waves, his underwater footing had changed from gravel to sand to the present silt. A cooler current on his submerged thighs clued that he was into the river's mouth—plus the clear water had no taste of salt when he cooled his face with splashed handfuls.

He angled in from the river onto a beach of pale grainy sand where, right away, swarms of buzzing hungriness attacked. The bites and stings drove him to flop down in the sticky brown river-mouth mud and daub himself all over.

Then the flying bellies, confused by his covering of dirt taste, left him alone.

Anchor rope tied around his waist and eyeing medium-tall trees close ahead, M'nalo dragged his boat across the crest of the short beach. Despite the difficult work and his cautious anxiety, the grin within him again began teasing. Like a naughty monkey growing bolder, it flirted and wiggled and danced behind the curtain of his alertness. But he suppressed the tempter, strove to keep his lips tight. True to hunter habits, he carefully studied all that he saw. He sought for threat or the familiar, for fruits or creatures, for signs of habitation, human or animal.

He tramped through a first fringe of low-branched, broad-leafed trees that bore bunches of purple, knuckle-size, hard-shelled fruit. Then he came to a patch of coconut trees that created a hollow of continuous shadows beneath their branches. A suitable camping spot, M'nalo decided, and using the anchor rope, tied the coracle to a smaller bole. From the leather pouch of supplies tucked in the boat's prow, he selected his splendid knife in its sheath and strapped it to his thigh. As precaution against Eshu's mischief, he tied his fire flint with its attached striker into a fold of his bou-bou. Last of

all, he upturned the small craft and camouflaged its presence with fallen coconut branches.

When satisfied with everything, he set off for a look around.

Cool and comfortable with the caked mud on his skin, keeping the river to his left, he started inward. From the boat he had seen a stretch of hillside forests leading to an abrupt plateau. From a distance their fat ashen tree trunks seemed to be encircled by enormous black snakes. Vines, no doubt, but just so, every feature of the luxuriant greenery suggested excess to his imagination. Serious exploration would wait, though. Right now he intended to cross the river as soon as convenient and continue south towards the flats near the sea. His plan was to establish a food supply. For which—in the form of the nestled eggs of those squealing birds—the shoreline seemed to be a best option. There he should also find crabs, crawfish, clams, and other shelled creatures. Savory choices all.

Footsteps slow, ready for surprises, he picked his way through. He stopped frequently, scrutinizing everything—an odd plant, or an insect trail on the ground, or to locate a birdcall. Prolific as it was, much of the plant life of the island was unrecognizable either as food or medicine. Right away that challenged the curious in him to discover what was special about each of them.

Eventually the river broadened to shallows and he crossed over into a dale of spongy grass that caressed his feet, unsubtly suggesting a lie down. ‘Not a bad idea,’ he admitted and stretched out on his back for a restful moment. The thick grass was so seductive that tiredness came over him like a blanket. In an instant he was in deep sleep.

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The sun was halfway down the sky when M’nalo awoke with anxiety that he had overslept. Fully refreshed though, he sat up yawning and stretching, feeling ready for any.

All at once remembering his unencumbered situation, a grin widened his face. Perked with good spirits and lighthearted as a breeze, M’nalo sprang to his feet. Mindful of a growling in his guts, he started back along his own tracks to his camping spot and the concealed coracle.

Everything was exactly where put. “Naturally!” observed a smirk at his caution. “What did you expect?”

M’nalo agreed readily. Marooned though he may be, it was clear that Eshu remained on his side. For what more could he ask?

He pulled out his carry pouch, emptied it onto the ground and assessed his supplies. Two yams. Four slabs of salted codfish. Several half-dried ripe peppers. A short cutlass. Several taro tubers. And a small tightly tied leather pouch personally handed to him by Wasa. No doubt it contained special sorcerer materials.

Like a cold needle to his floating spirits, the little pouch reminded of the new captain of the seized slave ship, *Princess Elene*, the sorcerer he had outsmarted.

The man's face came into his mind—the confident discolored grin, the thick black beard, and the shrewd brown eyes. All by itself, M'nalo's left hand reached up to his hair, fingers probing the unkempt locks for the curl of Wasa's dreadlocks secured deep among his own matted mass. Only after he touched the *lobir* that had ensured his current immunity from the sorcerer's power did the chill within him subside.

He gathered tinder, formed a pyramid with it inside three big stones and using his flint made a brisk, smokeless fire. He cooked and ate a simple meal of roasted yam flavored with pepper. Done with that, he put out the fire and sat content on his haunches in the low-angling sunshine, sucking his teeth clean, contemplating his situation. With supplies left and the splendid knife at his thigh, he felt comfortable about making temporary camp right here. First though, while the light was still enough and before he grew thirsty, he'd climb for some coconuts. They were the one fruit he recognized and with laden trees merely two, three times his height, it would be easy.

This island was a marvel of newness and it took many, many days for him to realize how part of its appeal was a matter of size. Just as in Dahomey, here too, nice weather had balmy starlit nights and daytime skies of brilliant blue with swift white clouds.

This place though, was sized to human proportions.

Here the open space was neatly finite, nothing like his homeland's oppressive expansiveness. Trees here were tall but not as clouds in the sky. Here tree-trunks have many convenient branches. Up close, their leaves gleamed in rainbows of green. Here, when he got to the plateau and climbed to the treetops, the sea both sides of the island was in view.

On this isle his eyes could manage distance. Objects did not disappear in a blur—even the horizon was a distinct line. In the daytime when he stood on the beach or among the lazy breakers and looked inland, he could see a luster in the haze above the blue-green forests. On cloudless days there was glitter everywhere. Leaf and land and sea—even the air itself—had

shimmer. Fruits about were bright yellow, red, or golden brown—many ripe ones ground by bird beaks or bat bites. Most that he had dared to taste were flavorful. The soil was soft—a cut sapling made a fair plow. Pungent and moist, it clumped dark brown and teemed with tiny life. Within days his planted pepper seeds had sprung up robust.

Neither had he ever seen so many birds. From first sight he had noticed that his end of the island was nesting grounds for seabirds. He loved watching them skim the crests of breakers, plucking their needs from the sea, and then flashing homewards to their hungry young. M'nalo ate well on their eggs, and roasts of their tender chicks.

Then as he ventured inland he discovered even more birds—these varying from melodic whistlers to raucous parakeets and lustrous parrots. From brown and grey hawks to swift pure-white hooting owls and dainty, iridescent hummingbirds that stood on the air, probing into scarlet flowers with fluted tubes. Then there were the unnamed multitudes of flitting, feathered creatures that ranged from blood red to saffron yellow, from brilliant black to the flamboyant, delicate pinks of dawn. A ceaseless spectacle of variety and color were all those beautiful birds.

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After five full moons on the island, M'nalo was well adjusted to an easy-going existence that made no demands on him. He had abundant fresh water, fruit, and food. His hunting skills kept his belly full. With leisure time enough, each day he explored a bit more of the island. Nights usually found him mildly tired and curled up under his coracle. Whether or not it rained, he slept the dreamless soundly.

This morning the smiling sun was halfway up its climb when done with a satisfying meal and restless for diversion, M'nalo found himself staring seawards. A rush of conjecture assailed him—his *orishas* of water and rain, Yemoja and her sisters, what must they be thinking of him? How long had it been since he performed *etutu* and appropriate honors for them? He might have forsaken his past, but did that permit him to dishonor his *orishas* or the Lord Eshu?

M'nalo stood up and stretched his arms hard and high over his head. He strained until the joints popped and the ache in the muscles was good. Until his guilty souls were quiet.

‘Maybe today was not the best for such serious matters,’ a lazy mind offered.

A rueful side opined, ‘But surely there are other reasons to investigate the bay. Perhaps the fish are plentiful and careless. Most certainly the boat could use a soaking so that the leather stays supple. Maybe he should be practicing at plying oars. Who knew when he’d need to be on the go again?’

Gradually the hunch that he should take the coracle for a turn became a nag too needling to ignore. So he submitted, cleared the camouflage, righted the boat and tugged it across the brief beach. Then he set forth to check out the water and its possibilities.

A fine decision as it turned out. For the sea was a warm delight, clear to the seabed-dwelling corals, abundant with varieties of fish. He followed one fat silvery sample as it grazed the variegated bottom. Solid and fat as half a calabash and sized big as his head, it nibbled among the corals as M’nalo envisaged many delicious dinners in his future.

Much later on, after enjoying the sea to exhaustion, as he brought in the boat that afternoon, he remembered his prayers and promised himself to be dutiful.

That night before going to sleep, he was.

Middle of another sunny day, M’nalo sat skipping flat stones across the basin of a stream broad as about twice his length—with a running start, he could clear it in one bound. It fed into the river that drained into the sea near to the cove where he first landed. Thus far, he had explored this part of the island by walking upstream through the steady flow of its graveled bed. He was wondering whether to start inward when a shift of the wind startled him by bringing a barrage of thunderous roars. It sounded like lions or other large ferocious beasts from his homeland. Yet in the nearly seven moons since he arrived, not once had he encountered any sign of such creatures. Indeed, he had already concluded there were no sizeable animals on this small island.

But now this!

Lightly touching his splendid knife for reassurance, eyes fixed on his passage, he began towards the remarkable noise. Hands shifting aside the bushes he passed through, he crept forward. Less and less eager, he drew nearer and nearer the terrific roars. These now came in steady furious blasts, causing one plant’s slender leaves to tremble, and M’nalo had to admit, his own heart to flutter.

From the awful din the creatures made, he had no doubt that they were very large, very strong, and probably involved in fierce contest. Too curious

to resist, M'nalo ventured on. Compelled by the harsh noise, he approached with edgy nerves.

He was now among a patch of small-leafed trees laden with bunches of pale green berries the size of hens' eggs. From the racket's increased pitch he was also very close to the animals. Finally daunted, his instincts demanding, M'nalo compromised and climbed one of the laden berry-trees.

"He'd be off their territory," said the warrior in him.

"For better reconnoitering," reasoned his sensible soul.

"For safety," mocked his foolhardy heart.

Then, only when he had achieved the improved height did M'nalo realize his misapprehension. The creatures were not on the ground at all! Several trees away, level with him, some of them were up among the branches.

Yet his strategy turned out okay because the creatures were neither lions, nor dragons, nor elephants.

Nothing more than monkeys, they were; though M'nalo had never imagined such.

Not in the least bothered by him, a troupe of about twelve was feeding and having fun, sounding fiercer than animals many times their size and numbers. Black and brown-haired, squat hyena-sized, they had thick long hairy tails that could hook them onto branches from which they swung and romped, and in sport, roared from wide pink mouths of pointy white teeth. They were a genuine astonishment as monkeys, and open-mouthed fascinated, M'nalo watched them.

After a while it occurred to him that other than their amazing noise and gripping tails, these monkeys didn't behave much different to those of his homeland. This suggested that if the fruit didn't poison them, it shouldn't him. He laid faith in this reasoning and tried a berry. Nibbled at it with front teeth. Tasted with tip of his tongue, and found the firm sour-sweet flesh delicious. Then he confirmed his sampling with another and was sated after three more.

In honor of the noisy monkeys he named the fruit 'lion berries.'

Like narrow streams that burrow through a mountain range, memories gradually found a way through his happy demeanor. Though determined to resist them, recollections seeped in. Begun as tear-shaped dribbles, they grew with the vigor of raindrops that splatter and drip down steep crags; then they gathered swiftly, ganging up into auger-like rills eager to gouge through any barrier.

Harrowing scenes of his African past invaded. Some nights they squeezed his heart until he bawled like a lost cow, or mewled like an abandoned baby. Other nights, other recollections left him awake and aroused; and his oko paid in abuse.

In torment, there were days when he looked blankly at the lush abundance about and longed for the endless scrublands of his youth. For the fat nuts and sweet tubers beneath the parched brown surface, for sustenance other than food. One day he found a shell that reminded of river-snail tops. He tried at making one and did reasonably. Then when he could find no flat smooth surface upon which to test its spin, he lost his temper and crushed the delicate toy.

Eventually M'nalo did admit to his stubborn souls, "Yes, I am lonely!" Yet still he avoided thoughts of his past, his people, his purpose, and his homeland's beliefs. On those he was inflexible. Although regarding Eshu Elegbara, not absolute!

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As were their fathers' instructions, they—Akime, Cichi, and he, Songui—had been following a troupe of howlers. The noisy group had passed by the camp leaving behind scraps of honeycomb and other sticky signs of a delicacy every camp favored. As it happened, the three boys were due to go search the Forest for spirit guides necessary for their upcoming initiation. Other than the honey, their quest also would be for bird, animal, or rare flowering plant that might shelter their souls through a journey to manhood. Agreed to the suggestion of combining the tasks, the men had sent off their eager sons.

Only youngsters with special agility got this particular task of pursuit—although no one but eagles could, in truth, keep up with monkeys. The men back in camp though, would be well satisfied with a general idea of the monkeys' trail. So with merely keeping close being their goal, first day travel had the boys halfway across the forests of the plateaus that homed their camp.

Following through the green sky and on cool ground, they saw sign of armadillo, peccary and paca, agouti and deer, parrots and vultures. They smelled carrion of an abandoned kill and thought of jaguars. And that night, in respect to these rulers of the forests, they plaited make-do hammocks from vines and slept safe high in the first sky.

Next morning, scat as spoor, they followed the howlers down the steep hills of old forests towards the sea. Always when they stopped to rest

or listen, they could hear the monkeys somewhere ahead. Two days now they had been on the trail and had no more results than the troupe's distant roars. Yet this was enough to keep the boys going. Dreams of praise back at camp kept them eager. Up in the first sky, by way of the numerous vines and flexible branches, they swung and leapt along, going to ground mostly to find monkey signs.

When the three companions got within sight of the Great Water, they decided they had gone far enough. Bees never built hives near the swift winds of the Mother sea. They would end their trailing and return to camp with their observations. They would make the trip back on the ground where it was easier to attend to their other due business of becoming men.

Then they came upon the monkey-nut tree!

Outstanding against the second sky was the pale green cloud of abundant leaves on black-barked branches. A tree so laden with ripe fruit its limbs bent and swayed from the weight of the brown, head-sized nuts.

Friends since in their mothers' back-slings, Akime and Chichi enjoyed a special kinship and always acted as with one mind. At birth each other's father had cut the boys' navel strings—although that could not explain everything. At the sight of the bountiful tree, the two of them seemed to forget all serious matters. Songui, conscious as always of his position as son of the camp's shaman, remained dubious. He protested carefully, "We should be seeking after our spirit guides. Maybe we can pick a few, but not tarry long."

Akime, ringleader of rebellion, reacted with typical smugness, "Your father instructed that we work together like the feet of an armadillo. Didn't he? Make our journey easier. No? Well right now we two have common purpose. We'll pick some monkey nuts and take a rest. Are you one with us or not?"

Without awaiting answer he swaggered away to join Cichi, who was already reaching for toe and handholds on the knobby bark of the huge tree trunk.

"This is not right. We promised," Songui complained to Akime's sweat-slicked back.

But Akime had started up the tree . . .