

His Ocean

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After Nyonweh died, there was no reason not to.

The ocean embraced him like a lost child.

She had stopped eating their fourth day on the ship, pushed the bowls of strange, bland mush beyond the reach of her chains.

Until she grew too weak.

He'd watched her die, as the mud of his shock dried and cracked, began to fall off him in pieces, revealing the tender, red-brown skin beneath. He'd watched her wrists grow boney, as the ship sailed over an endless ocean.

If this was the journey, what was the destination?

They'd seen the ocean from their mother's breast, fallen asleep in her lap to the sound of waves. It called to him.

He wasn't brave enough to starve.

He wasn't brave enough to see where the pink men were taking them.

They'd noticed. Come down, two at a time, shoved their short, fat fingers into her beautiful mouth and spooned paste down her throat. She choked, but swallowed.

By then it was too late.

The illness ate her up. After three days, they stopped coming, stopped trying.

His new skin was tight and hot, his blood laced with venom.

The ocean pulled him to her bosom like he was a infant again, feeding from her teat. The ocean closed over his head, an endless world of blue-green blood.

He choked, but swallowed.

When they took her body away, his sister was dead.
He held her empty eyes before his own, ignored the slight twitches of her bird-thin legs.

Once he had seen them opened, the shackles weren't hard to understand. His wrists had grown small with grief. His skin, unwashed and slick.

He opened his eyes to see his mother, to look upon a world—not home, but homely—as he died.

For one airless breath, he thought Nyonweh had found him.

There'd been talk of fighting, among those that spoke his language. He thought the other men and women—children—had discussed the same. Their faces had held the same rage, fear, animal desperation.

Then the disease had come.

Tehpoe had died, his white beard stained yellow.

Then she had stopped eating.

Her hair was the wrong color and moved oddly, like snakes over sand.

Her skin was darker than his sister's.

His ocean, smiling with an impossible joy.

He had waited until the pink men were deep in the hold, stooping under the low ceilings, moving among the bodies behind him.

He hadn't known their language.

He'd never seen their faces.

He hoped they were dead.

His ocean embraced him, and he felt the cold slide of her fishtail against his legs. Ignored it. Held her crocodile eyes before his own.

Nyonweh had almost escaped into the jungle. His little sister had made it.

He never saw his father.

He'd flown out of the ship on wings made of fear, toes barely touching the rungs of the ladder.

The pink men had shouted behind him, loud and unintelligible.

His ocean's hands, strong as his father's, soft as his mother's. She ran her fingers over his bare jaw.

He clung to her tenderness, carried it with him into the dark.

Why hadn't he gotten away? If he could run like that.

Nyonweh had watched him eat, odd textures inside a mouth raw with screaming. She hadn't said anything.

The deck had slipped beneath his feet, the world bucking like an antelope thrashing in the jaws of a snake.

Real flight was his feet, landing on a ship that wasn't there.

Hot pain had turned cold, an enveloping nothing, like night on his skin.

Underneath he was a raw wound, poisoned by her empty eyes.

The ocean would wash him clean—a burn of salt.

More sounds like language. Daylight, on his skin.

He'd been in the dark for so long. For a second lifetime, longer than his first.

His mother's blood, red on the sand. Blue-green under the pink men's ship.

Black, white and endless on his tongue. In his chest.

The wind felt like a father's speaking breath.

After Nyonweh died, there was no reason not to.

After he died, there was an island, like a pepper flower floating on the blue-green ocean.

His ocean swam up to the beach and unclenched his stiff hands. His head and chest were white with dried salt. Her hair clung in ringlets to her head, coiled tighter than his arms around her shoulders, his legs around her scaly waist.

She cooed at him, a language like birds.

His mother's warm eyes—dimming. He had pulled up handfuls of sand, an animal digging its own grave.

Nyonweh, yelling for him.

He dug his hand into the wet sand, embraced the earth one finger at a time.

His spindly fist closed around a spiral shell.

The pink men on the deck—he hadn't expected them. But his small body had slipped between them like a fish in the river, their short, fat fingers closing on salty air.

He pulled himself onto the beach. His ocean trilled, a voice like the first pattering of rain.

He'd looked back from the sky, suspended above the water.

No Nyonweh, stretched out like a fallen tree under the blazing sun. No brown bodies, given over to an unimaginable disease.

Maybe his sister was in the ocean.

Stay, he called, but Mother! stuck in his throat like tears, like a strange, grainy mush.

She drifted in the retreating tide, slid slowly away from him.

His lips cracked, salt stinging in the wounds. His mouth tasted like her gentle breath. The wetness on his face—he'd thought he'd forgotten.

Her smile was filled with impossible joy.

Nyonweh, embracing the ocean like a lost mother.

She slipped beneath the blue-green water, her fishtail glittering black in the low, red sun.

He looked back, at the trees that were not his, the sand that was too white, the birds speaking in languages he could not understand.

He stood on sore, swollen knees, and walked towards the jungle. There was no reason not to.