

Foundation of Lies

Long ago, the world broke. The ocean rose, and billion died in its wake. The few who remained were left to rebuild beneath the waves.

In Hekili, humanity survives despite their difficult circumstances. Pryions sustain their human partners in harsh surroundings while luminous reefs keep the ocean's monsters at bay. Guilds provide the rigid social structure needed in a society that's ever on the brink, but three people are about to destroy those rules.

When a disaster wipes out her town, Lanai undertakes a perilous journey to the capital. By bringing the king the story of what killed her home, she hopes to stop the tragedy from happening again.

Kira serves as the heir to the throne while her brother completes his proving journey. When he unexpectedly comes home, not only does his return shatter her but it raises questions about what lies beyond the ocean's surface, a place long lost to myth.

Stuck in a profession he never wanted, Aumol wonders if he'll ever achieve his secret purpose. When his brothers disappear during an expedition into an old-world ruin, he leaves home to find them, but a journey that should only last hours turns into one of days.

These three lives have the lowest odds of converging, but something binds them. When they meet, the foundation of lies on which Hekili rests will crack open.

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From the Lustrous Depths

Prologue

I'm waiting for someone to release me. I've been waiting on this for what seems like days at times and others, years. Alone, time has lost all meaning.

When they put me in the containment chamber 'for my safety', so long ago, they'd insisted my incarceration would last an hour at most, but it didn't. Hours passed before an alarm clanged outside. The head researcher came to assure me that all was well, the alarm just a drill, while her colleagues filed out of the room behind her. She followed them, leaving me in the dark.

Since then, I've waited, clinging to the hope that they haven't abandoned me. I refuse to call for help, not when my voice is what landed me here in the first place. I'm determined to only sit, pace, or pound the walls until someone comes for me.

Eventually, my patience pays off. A light that isn't mine illuminates the room outside of the containment chamber. Its tinge is so reminiscent of sunlight that I drift toward it.

The chamber's single window lies in its locked hatch. I've tried to break down that heavy door so many times, and it hasn't once budged. After the head researcher left me here, I vainly watched for rescue through that window, only rewarded with a view of pitch black. It's been so long since I abandoned that post, but now, hope lifts its head, peering through glass at me.

Two men are hovering parallel to the floor over the equipment outside. A plasma-like bubble has been wrapped, skin-tight, around each of them, emerging from the dense orbs of light floating beside their heads. While I try to understand these oddities, the light orbs near the men deepen in hue from a bright yellow to the orange of a forest fire.

They gesture at one another with their signs flashing to quickly for me to follow. I only catch two words: brother and wealth. Even with the little of it I can read, most of what their hands say is foreign to me.

I gather enough to understand that the two are treasure hunters of some sort, which makes me reluctant to draw their attention. It prompts too many questions.

Did the alarm that stole my helpers come before an actual disaster? If so, are these treasure hunters the type to hurt or help survivors? Most importantly, how much time has passed since the alarm?

That last question decides me. Kera needs me. She can't survive for long without my help. The service I paid to watch her is covered until the end of the month, but after that, she'll be on her own, which once more returns me to that most important of questions.

How long have I been here?

I pound on the hatch, which jerks the treasure hunters toward the containment chamber. Their light orbs flash orange with that movement. The smallest of them drifts my way. He sees me behind the window, and I see the white of his eyes as they widen.

He gestures for his brother, and once they're together, the signs between them blur once more, leaving me lost. I knock again, gaining their attention, before trying some signs of my own. I only use the most basic of them, hoping they won't judge how slow I've gotten with them. It's been a while since I last had to sign.

'Help me,' I say.

This prompts a furious storm of hand waving and finger manipulation between the treasure hunters. As I catch the signs for 'danger' and 'unwise' among the rest, I start worrying that once more, I'll be left here, alone.

Fortunately, one of the brothers seems more amenable toward helping me than the other. His light orb deepens to a bright gold while he puffs up like a threatened cat. He unleashes a flurry of signs, which prompts his brother's orb to change to a sickly green color. As that man hangs his head, I know I've won the argument.

The one who comes to my aid motions me aside, and I'm more than happy to comply with the request. Backing to the chamber's far side, I climb its handholds to get off of the floor. I don't know how the outside world might have changed in the time I've been trapped here.

The hatch creaks as the treasure hunters turn its wheel, but eventually, it bursts open. I'm free!

Or maybe not. A deluge of water floods the chamber, filling it a quarter of the way in seconds. So long ago, the people who promised to help me, putting me in here before abandoning me, said that I shouldn't touch water, that it would be bad for both me and anyone nearby.

They needn't have bothered with the warning. I'm deathly afraid of that awful stuff.

I scramble up handholds while the water level rises, leaving me hanging from the containment chamber's ceiling, and still, it comes. When it touches my dangling toes, something drags bits of me into the water, something that won't be denied. It leaves the surface glittering. Still, I cling to my perch until the water reaches over my head.

I can't breathe! Panicked, I thrash against metal, certain I'll drown, while sips of me disappear into the depths. It takes me several seconds to remember that I don't need oxygen anymore, one of the slight advantages I've gained in this new state. Even that knowledge, however, fails to soothe the building roar in my head. The distraction of it lets a memory slip free from the box containing it.

I'm on a sailboat with Sharon, Kera, and Robert when a storm appears on the horizon. Kera whimpers that she wants to go home, and I tell her not to worry. The harbor isn't far from here, and the storm is hours away.

How wrong I am about that.

As choppy water and wind threaten to tip our boat, I struggle to keep it upright. When I see the shore ahead, I cheer, sharing a grin with my wife. Sharon shakes her head, signing that I need to stay alert.

She and I work the lines while Kera huddles in the middle of the deck with Robert. We'll make it to shore. I know we will. We've sailed through worse than this.

Next time I check on the kids, though, Robert's missing. I know Sharon can handle the lines by herself for a little while, so I rush to Kera, asking about her brother. She only wails louder, pointing toward stern. I follow her finger, and my heart stops upon seeing the boy leaning over the water, clapping with a giggle.

For an instant, my attention slips off of monitoring Sharon's handling of the lines, zoomed onto my son instead. I run to him, scooping him into my arms, and see his beaming grin. We're fine. Everything will be ok.

Then, the sail hits me.

We fly overboard, I lose my grip on Robert, and water closes over my head.

Once the memory has returned to where it belongs, I shoot out of the containment chamber, but even the freedom I've long sought has become another prison. Water is everywhere. *It's everywhere!*

Nearby, the treasure hunters are listlessly floating with their light orbs dimmed and bubbles gone. I won't find any help there. In fact, they look like they could use some help. As soon as I find a patch of solid ground, I'll send someone for them, but for now, I need to *get out!*

I take the stairs two at a time. My new form slips through the water however I please, which feels... strange, and even through my panic, it takes more effort than I'd like to ignore the slow leak of me into the liquid all around. I soon reach the building's lobby, and on seeing the darkened view through its broken glass door, everything in my vicinity starts glittering more brightly than before.

The water never ends. It *never ends!* I'm screaming in my head because even this, my worst nightmare, isn't enough to force me to use my voice, but it... it's TOO MUCH!

A rational part of my brain eventually saves me.

"Kera," it whispers. "What's happened to Kera?"

As I continue looking into the black void, my fear blubbers protestations and objections, but I refuse to listen to it. I can't fail my daughter again.

Jittery steps take me away from Laryngeal Special Studies and into the ocean's depths.

Chapter 1: Disaster Strikes

Lanai

With fury tearing through me, I shot through my home's front door, only stopping once I could no longer see it. I screamed, knowing full well that no one would hear it through the water around me, but then, I took a deep breath, trying to center myself.

After a moment, I shook my head. No, that wasn't working. Perhaps if I took the long way to the market, my intended destination all along, it would help me calm down. Kainoa, the one person who would still deal with my family, didn't deserve to get yelled at, just because my mother couldn't be bothered to pick up our groceries this week.

Remembering the reason why she was... preoccupied, I barely stopped myself from screaming again. Makaio, the man who'd stolen my mother's attention this time, required so much attention and praise, the bastard. It was ridiculous! Sometimes, it made me want to bash my head in.

Beside me, my Pryion, Jainera, strobed in the water. That light helped me with reining in my emotions. Fury, frustration? Those were the enemy.

Closing my eyes, I waited for the red tide in my mind to recede. When I nodded to her in thanks, Jainera glowed a cheery purple.

I launched myself forward, letting the water embrace me. As I slipped through it, Jainera's shell, folded around me, dissipated that liquid's friction, allowing me to flash through the water with ease.

Lomalo's reef, the sanctuary our town surrounded, quickly replaced my neighbor's homes. Here, in rock and coral, life was teeming. Shellfish, or grana, scuttled from one outcropping to another while fish, or lista, idly roamed above, and small slips darted around these larger animals, occasionally braving a close encounter to snip at the murk growing over every surface.

And through it all, upon every centimeter of coral, a brilliant fluorescence resisted the darkness.

I flipped my body to peer at the emptiness above. Other towns insisted that monsters lurked in those shallows, guarding the passage to the surface above. When considering that, I shook with laughter. How could anything live in the water without light to see?

Even still, the idea of reaching the surface slowed me down.

One day, when I was older, I'd try to do that. The surface: a glorious place where you could live without the fear of your Pryion extinguishing. A world where light was abundant and wondrous *air* was freely available.

Never mind that reaching the surface would also mean abandoning the water's comforting embrace.

When pulsing orange surrounded me, I rolled my eyes at Jainera's version of laughter. My Pryion would be perfectly happy staying in this backwater village with my mother and her string of useless lovers...

With a forceful kick, I dove toward the reef, trying to replace those thoughts with another. Seeing the people tending to the coral below, I felt my mouth twisting into a grimace.

If mother wasn't careful, we might be forced into that role. The minders might be venerated above all, but most people, in our village at least, only gave them that awe because of the hardships involved in their profession.

I waved to several of the minders as I flashed through the reef. Most of them answered with smiles or nods before bending to their tasks once more. Some, however, were almost shoulder deep in murk, too focused on cleaning it to return my greeting. When I shuddered at the sight, Jainera flashed red.

'What?' I signed to her. 'Afraid the Traillean will come for disrespectful little me?'

Jainera flashed her light even brighter, and with a duck of my head, I accepted her rebuke. No matter how horrible I thought a minder's job was, I should never show it, and I should *especially* never bring the mythical Traillean into something so menial. Turning to my Pryion, I grimaced with a signed apology, which had her switching to a blue color.

When I reached for her, Jainera feigned nuzzling my finger. Even if we seemed like complete opposites at times, Jainera was my Pryion. Jainera was my closest friend, my only friend. I would die for her if necessary because every day, Jainera risked the same fate for me.

Lomalo proper began sliding below us, and I descended into it, joining the flow of people going about their business. I zoomed past clothing shops featuring the latest styles from the capital, Ki, and between buildings, merchants hawked their wares: the freshest of slips or the most succulent murk. This only made me smirk. I'd already found what those people were claiming they sold, and it wasn't something found in their shops.

When I drifted to a stop in front of Kainoa's door, I sent Jainera inside to announce my presence. Soon, the door opened, and Puna Kainoa, head of Lomalo's Merchants guild, grinned at me. Flinging her arms wide, she hugged me. I endured the embrace, reluctantly patting her back.

'Still alive, I see,' I said once she'd released me.

Kainoa made a face.

'Come now. I'm only thirty-six,' she signed before glancing at the Pryion trailing her. 'He does seem more lethargic than normal, though.'

Even with her fingers hidden, Kainoa's Pryion caught her meaning and sluggishly flashed a dim red.

'See what I mean?' Kainoa asked with a sad smile.

I didn't know what to see. I'd meant my comment to be a harmless joke but...

Beside me, Jainera glowed a deep, melancholic blue, which only made Kainoa grimace again.

'You didn't come here to listen to me complain,' she said. 'Come on inside. Your order's ready.'

Following the older woman, I tried to imagine a life without Kainoa, and the exercise left me a little dizzy. The woman had always been there: at commencement celebrations, at profession assignments, at sending offs.

People leave you sooner than you think, mother whispered in my ear.

Flinching, I drove that thought and its associated knowledge aside. Kainoa, holding an inner door open for me, gave me a concerned look.

'Are you all right?'"

'Fine,' I snapped.

That only made Kainoa's lips curl.

'Whatever you say, kid,' she said, barely holding back a laugh.

'I'm *fine*,' I insisted as I passed her.

Kainoa's shop butted up against the reef. A small indentation in the coral's base provided the perfect storage space for a professed grocer. With the shop blocking the cave's only entrance, no lista or other sea life could get inside.

Swimming past weighted down nets full of gathered murk and scaled slips, Kainoa slowed down, stopping halfway to the back wall. She plucked a bulging net's lead from among its brethren, handing it to me.

Pulling it to me, I turned the package in my hands, inspecting its contents, and after a moment, Jainera's purple light accompanied my head's jerk up.

'Is this...?!'

'Slip meat baked at the Puka Vent,' Kainoa said. 'A special gift for my most favored customer.'

'I... I can't afford-'

Waving a hand, Kainoa signed, 'I said gift, didn't I? Your mother works you too hard, kid. You deserve something nice.'

Dropping the package, I pulled Kainoa close. Our Pryion's shells briefly merged, letting me breathe in the older woman's scent.

How many times had Kainoa given me the comfort that my mother never showed? She'd soothed so many hurts, wiped away so many tears. When I'd run into coral, playing, as a child, Kainoa had been the one to check Jainera's shell for cracks. She'd trusted no one else to do it.

'Thank you,' I said.

Flushing, Kainoa waved me away before waving toward the front of her shop. She was right, of course. I was showing far too much emotion, possibly straining Jainera as a result, so without another word, I followed her back up front.

Before we could reach the front door, both of our Pryions turned yellow, which was odd. Yellow was the color for danger, but what danger could be found here, in a shop sitting in the middle of town?

Exchanging a glance, Kainoa and I swam outside, leaving my packaged groceries behind. All down the street, other people joined us, and just as they were doing, I rose into the open water above town.

Across Lomalo, Pryions were glowing yellow. Seeing this, I fought to keep my heart from racing. I looked to Jainera, flashing my fingers in signs.

'I don't see any danger. Where is it?'

Instead of moving whichever way she'd detected a threat coming from, Jainera began switching between a yellow and black light, and I stopped trying to keep my heartbeat under control. I spun in a circle, scanning my surroundings. Looking out to where darkness claimed dominance over the reef's light.

Everywhere I looked, black and yellow light was blinking, and finally, I let myself fully feel panic, reaching for the knife at my side. Was was so bad that *every Pryion in town* was so afraid of it?

Kainoa swam to a stop beside me, laying a hand on my shoulder. She pointed in the direction I'd come from earlier.

On the other side of the reef, the water was glittering and sparkling. Light tendrils shot into the darkness before fading. In those flashes, I noticed several anomalous lumps floating.

It took me a minute, but I soon realized what they must be: bodies.

Mother!

When I started toward that sparking light, Kainoa grabbed my arm, stopping me. Spinning toward her, I winced. She was hyperventilating with her eyes swimming in white. At her shoulder, her Pryion's color had leached away, muted almost to gray, and its light had faded to near nonexistence. Why was Kainoa stressing her Pryion so badly. She should know better. When attending sending offs, I'd seen other people experiencing terror, but this was my first time seeing it on a loved one.

Kainoa lifted her hands, stiffly contorting her fingers.

'The reef,' she said.

When I spun toward Lomalo's bastion of light and life, my own anxiety deepened. The sparkling water from before was moving through the reef, and wherever its tendrils touched coral, darkness was left in its wake. In one flash, I caught a glimpse of lista and slips twitching before the black ate them up again.

The reef, our only safety from perilous darkness, was dying, and its murderer was advancing on us.

Spinning toward Kainoa, I dragged her close, pressing my lips to the other woman's ear. Meanwhile, Jainera dimmed, already understanding my intentions.

"If you believe me," I whispered, feeling the words scrape through my rarely used throat and mouth, "I can save us."

Something abruptly shoved me backward. Kainoa's hands, I realized as I spun my arms to stop my drift.

The other woman's face had twisted. Her lips moved, and even though I couldn't hear it, I knew the word she was surely spitting.

"Speaker."

That word, said with such conviction, shoved Kainoa backward, subsequently sending a wave of power crashing over me. While I shivered and Jainera dully blinked, mother once more whispered in my head.

They will hate your potential, my child. Never let them see it, let them too quickly thrust you into using your power.

When I could move again, I caught a glimpse of Kainoa, sans her Pryion's shell, drifting toward the street below, and gray light echoed my sorrow.

'Goodbye,' I signed. 'I'm sorry.'

As people frantically swam into the dark and away from flashing light, I didn't try to join them. At the rate the reef was dying, I'd never swim far enough to escape from what was killing it. So, I faced it instead.

The only lights still present were Jainera's glow and sparkling water. It had come close enough for me to see a cluster in its center, flashes flicking across a vaguely humanoid form, but I had no time to consider the light's strange shape. Considering how close it was, I had maybe a minute left to-

Jainera darted in front of her, pulsing a vivid yellow.

'I'm sorry,' I signed with tears dribbling down my face. 'I don't know if I can save us. I'd die for you, but... what's the point of us both-?'

Yellow morphed to soothing purple. Jainera drifted toward me. Sobbing, I smoothed my hand over the Pryion while my mother once again invaded my head.

The time will come when you must reveal what you are. Don't be afraid. When the moment arrives, you'll know what to do.

The sparkling water was almost upon me. In front of me, Jainera was shaking. Her blinking yellow light vied with the sparks coming to end us both.

Glaring at the cluster at the center of the sparkling water, I shouted, "You may kill my body, but you can't kill *me!*"

As the water absorbed my shout, my Pryion's yellow light faded while her dimmed orb floated in front of me. Oh Jainera...

The force behind my words shot me a good ten meters backward, but it didn't prevent a white tendril from the sparkling water from touching me.

Pain seared me with every nerve set ablaze, and despite my twitching body and my failing vision, I saw the cluster at the center *turn* toward me. Was it... sentient?

I shrieked my torment at what had killed me, and the cluster flinched. When my air ran out, I took a breath to sing my body's cry of NO, NO, NO to the depths, but only water rushed into my lungs. Spasming kept me from clutching my neck as I'd like while my stomach and lungs joined my body in twitching. Stomach acid jetted out of my mouth. An inhale dragged it right back inside.

All the while, the scream in my head intensified in volume and pitch. Mother had been wrong! I wasn't special, and now was my sending off. Now was my time to-

My eyes fluttered open. My body was pressed into a soft surface, something I didn't recognize, and dazed, I tried to push off of it, but the force of my push failed to send me floating away.

What...?

As memory slammed into me, my whole body jerked. The reef going dark... Kainoa's rejection... A tendril touching me. Spasming. Drowning.

Out of sight, someone said, "I swear. One of you discovers my safe space, and suddenly, more of you are visiting by the dozen. The first one was expected and somewhat interesting, but with more of you showing up, it's starting to get irritating."

He'd *spoken*.

I flinched, putting more effort into my push away from what I was lying on. This attempt flung my torso upright, not my entire body, and since this was so unexpected, I flopped right back onto my back, heaving at the air.

A man was standing over her with his head cocked. With his blue eyes sparkling, he pulled one corner of his mouth into a grin.

"Which iteration do *you* come from?" he asked.

Leaning over, he grabbed my wrist. For a moment, the fingers of his other hand twitched, but then, he made a face.

"Hekili. It *would* be that one," he muttered before saying. "Here. Let me help you up."

The man hauled me to my feet. When I tried to float away from him, it nearly sent me to the ground again, but he caught me before I could fall.

"No water here, love. Just a log of good, clean air," he said. "Not that you'll need it anymore."

No water? *NO WATER!*

Slowly, the man released me, which wrenched my focus away from the lack of something I'd taken for granted since birth. I was left wobbling in place. Keeping the world from tilting took *concentration*, but once I'd managed to keep it still, I spun my arms, trying to get away from the man.

"That won't work here," he said. "You'll have to use your legs-"

'Would you *please* stop speaking?' I interrupted, making sure to inject my desperate need into my signing.

The man paused for a moment before sighing.

"Right. Hekili, where Truth and Deception claim dominance."

He tilted his head the other way to scrutinize me, and while he did that, I fought against an insistent pull on my body, trying to force me to the ground again. It had been there since I'd woken up, but every second I spent here had increased the insistence of it. I had to shoot one foot back to stop myself from plunging backward.

The man's moving hands caught my focus.

'My apologies if I've disturbed you,' he signed. 'I've stopped ushering essences on unless they come directly through here, and not many from your iteration have done that lately. I'd forgotten how strange your people can be.'

...What the...?

'Who are you?' I asked.

Maybe the answer to that would explain some of the absolute nonsense he kept saying.

'Not important,' the man said, flicking his response. 'May I hold your wrist again? I need to know how bad the disbalance in Hekili is, and using signs to discuss it will take forever.'

I meant to tell him no, that he could take his wandering hands and fuck right off, but before I could, the pull on my body increased again. I took another step back, whirling my arms to stay upright, and maybe hoping to steady me, the man grabbed one of them. Once he'd touched me, I had no polite way to extricate myself so I fumed while his fingers twitched.

With distant eyes, he murmured, "Gods damn it."

Whirling, he strode away from me, releasing a strangled cry. When he faced me once more, a storm cloud had captured his face, making me flinch.

"You Speakers are always *fucking up* your world," he growled. "How many times have I kept your iteration from failing due to your own STUPIDITY! Ships! So many copies lost to Hekili-!"

"SHUT UP!" I screamed, clamping my hands over my ears.

As though struck, the man stepped back, but before I could observe more of my handiwork, the force of my words sent me tumbling to the ground. I landed on my back with my shoulders heaving. It seemed my struggle to stay on my feet had been futile...

But no. That insistent pull was still there, trying to drag me through the ground.

Raucous, crazed noise distracted me from the strange pull. I struggled to rise from the ground enough to see the man.

He was standing where I'd left him, head thrown back and with his body shaking. As if aware of my focus, he snapped his head down, sneering at me.

"Oh, Lanai,' he signed, 'you can't touch me with your words. Truth and Deception know better than to come near me. Your mother never gave you the tools needed to change their minds.'

Trembling, I again signed, 'Who are you?'

Who was this man who'd met me in the aftermath of my death? This man who hadn't responded to my words, spoken with conviction? That had never, *never*, happened before.

'My name is Alouin,' he replied, 'and for the thousandth time, I'll bring balance to your iteration. Now, heed your words, little Speaker. Return to your body, and once you've woken, come find me at the tower. I'll help you save your world.'

Al-Alouin?! From the old world? The Herald of the gods?

Trying to control my shaking, *needing* to know more, I tried to ask my questions, but the pull on my body *jerked*, and I could no longer resist it. I collapsed backward and fell, fell, fell-

Darkness greeted me, leaving me more disoriented than I'd been just moments before.

Had that been real? Had I truly met-?

Addled, I tried to find Jainera. Maybe with her help, I could reason the last few minutes out.

As I reached for the Pryion, I felt something tug on my lips. Waving a hand in front of them, I touched scales before they slithered away, which turned me cold. Panic took hold, and I spun in place. The sudden movement saw dozens of slips dashing away. I was-

No!

A light! I needed a light so I could assess the damage but how could I-?

"Jainera lives."

I heard those words through a fog. I knew I must have spoken them, but I hadn't felt...

Try again.

"Jainera lives."

The lie was weak. I couldn't pretend to believe it, and so, my words held no power.

When I drew in breath to try for a third time, I realized that with Jainera gone, I must be drawing water into my lungs. It could be nothing else with my Pryion's shell vanished, but I couldn't feel that harsh liquid pouring into my lungs. I could feel *nothing*.

I screamed, but the water around me only muffled that violent burst of noise.

"Jainera lives!" I shouted again, sobbing. "Please! Jainera lives!"

Remember, Lanai. You must BELIEVE your lies, mother whispered. Otherwise, you'd better hope you have a truth because if you have neither of those in a perilous situation, you'll be thoroughly fucked, my dear.

With conviction lacking, my powers failed to manifest. I floated in the black waters of the depths, alone.

Chapter 2: An Anticipated Return

Kira

Receiving representatives from Hekili's far-flung towns had never been my favorite job, and that was starting to seep through the front I was trying to maintain. The smile I was wearing had begun to exhaust me, and Umile's once pleasant shade had dipped into a sickening mix of blue and green. As if oblivious to our discomfort, the representative from Nasivu's Merchant Guild continued to jabber at us

'Our distance from the Wala Vent makes export of our grana stock difficult,' he was saying, 'further adding to our economic troubles. Please understand, Your Highness. The guild isn't intentionally defying the crown with our delayed tribute. We simply need more time-'

'Three weeks, master merchant,' I interrupted with one hand while brushing my other hand against my knife's hilt. 'You may have three more weeks, but we expect to see a one percent increase in our next tribute delivery.'

In his gratitude, the representative fumbled with his reply, failing to use the proper form of respect. His Pryion blazed a bright purple as he rhythmically bobbed his head.

'Thank you, most gracious Highness. Your mercy will never be forgotten.'

'Ensure that it is not,' I said. 'In the meantime, sir, should you not be on your way home? We expect Nasivu's tribute once your granted extension expires.'

The representative contorted himself into a mess while trying to leave my presence, but leave, he eventually did. As soon as he was gone, I let the smile drop off of my face while sickly green light enveloped me.

'Hold yourself together, Umile,' I said.

Massaging my aching cheeks, I lowered my elbows to my knees. Soon enough, a set of legs floated into my field of view, and I jerked my head out of my hands.

'Father!'

King Hikialani smiled at me with his Pryion, Corinth, nestled at his shoulder. The chain circled that denoted his station was tangled in his black hair while wrinkle lines around his hazel eyes were creased into a pleasing pattern. His skin-tight kauhoe accented his muscles, which rippled as he signed.

'Nicely done, little slip!'

I made a face, sticking my tongue out.

'Four hours, father! Four hours of hearing people complain. I don't know how you and Alaki do it, but if today taught me anything, it's how grateful I should be for my older brother.'

With a fond smile, my father said, 'Listening to them can be troublesome, yes? Unfortunately, that's our job. It's how we put such extravagant delicacies on our table and pay for a certain little slip's expensive taste in clothing...'

Shooting off of the throne, I aimed a light slap at my father's chest, but he drifted out of my way with his shoulders shaking. Corinth's orange light bathed the room in pulsing light.

'Careful, little slip,' my father said. 'That temper of yours is liable to extinguish Umile before his time.'

The aforementioned Pryion flushed an indignant red before joining Corinth in her purple state. Meanwhile, I settled on the steps to the throne, sinking back onto my elbows.

'When will Alaki be back?' I asked.

My father turned somber with his Pryion going a deep blue.

'Your brother's on his proving journey. We have no way to know how long he'll be gone,' he said. 'My journey lasted three days, and when I returned, my mother's Pryion almost extinguished, so great was her relief. Alaki's been gone for four. We must give him time. And hope.'

I'd known everything my father had said. His proving journey was one of the royal family's greatest tales. As children, Alaki and I used to say that we'd last longer than our father when we went on our proving journeys. That was before I'd learned that as the second in line, I'd never need to brave the shallows while trying to reach the surface.

Before he'd left, my brother had winked at me, saying, "Remember my promise?"

At my blush, Alaki had shaken with laughter, both at my embarrassment at his scandalous behavior of speaking and at Umile's yellow light blazing forth my worry.

Of course I remembered what he'd vowed long ago, a secret held between us. He would use his proving journey not only as a way to display his right to rule Hekili but also so he could be the first to truly reach the surface., something most people in the kingdom never dreamed was possible.

'I miss him,' I signed.

My father sat beside me, laying a hand on my arm. When I looked at him, he squeezed it with his free hand flashing.

'Me too, little slip.'

They held each other's eyes with the yellow light from their Pryion's swelling.

I secretly had another fear about Alaki's proving journey. Of course, I was worried about my big brother's safety, but also, I was scared about what might happen if he never returned, lost in his attempt to reach the surface. If the darkness claimed Alaki, if the waters deemed him unworthy, I was next in line for the throne. That was something I wasn't sure I wanted.

'Ready to fix Ki's problems?' my father asked.

In response, I pushed off of the steps, drifting toward the throne room's door. My father and I swam down glimmering coral warrens, and as we passed, people stopped what they were doing, folding their hands in front of their waists and lowering their eyes. Eventually, the reef's innards expelled us, and we floated onto the terrace beyond.

Ki was spread in front of us with transplanted coral creating mini reefs to light the vast city. From atop the precipice of Kaua, the capital's original reef, the city's homes and shops looked like toys. When I cupped my hands, I could almost imagine I held Ki in them.

Several people were floating just above the terrace's surface: Ki's guild heads.

Iolana of the Merchant's Guild had crossed her legs, hanging belly first over the terrace. Her kauhoe hung loosely on her with its shiny folds dipping in and out of her Pryion's shell. Her cropped hair billowed around her head, giving her plain face a slightly fuzzy aura. As always, her Pryion was glowing a dull yellow.

Pelipo, the head of the Minders Guild, was resting between Kaua's coral and the terrace's smooth surface with his eyes closed. As usual, the reed-thin man slipped under my notice as soon I'd registered him. Something about him had always refused to hold my attention.

Finally, the head of the Adventurers Guild, Makala, was darting back and forth across the space with a brilliant red trailing his every move. I took a moment to enjoy his lithe form, his brown hair flowing behind him, before his green eyes landed on me. His Pryion flickered pink before settling into a neutral blue.

With my chest tightening, I glanced at my father, but his focus was on the city below, which let me breathe a sigh of relief. He hadn't noticed Makala's slip-up with his Pryion.

With those fears suitably soothed, I frowned. One of the guild heads was missing. Four should be here, not three. I wondered how my father would take the insult. Would someone be losing their head today?

Once they'd noticed the king's presence, the guild heads moved into a respectful pose. My father waved for them to relax, allowing the three to gather around us.

'What do you have for me?' he asked.

So, he'd ignore the Kaia Guild's offense for now. Interesting tactic.

Surprisingly, Ilana was the one to begin the proceedings.

'I have nothing new to report for the merchants, sire,' she said. 'Business is good, as usual-'

'If this is so, why do you, *as usual*, seem agitated?' my father interrupted.

lolana shrank on herself, hesitantly signing.

'We've had some trouble with our supply chains sire. Nothing you need concern yourself with.'

As if realizing what she'd just said, the woman curled further in on herself, shoving apologies at my father.

'I didn't mean that the way it sounded! Please, forgive me, sire. I've been a bit stressed this week.'

With an amusedly distracted smile, my father asked, 'Husband giving you trouble?'

lolana blushed.

'Yes, sire. He's still unwell.'

My father's Pryion glowed the muted gray of mourning as his fingers flashed into a subdued signing form.

'My sympathies,' he said.

lolana relaxed from her tense ball with her face burning bright red.

'Thank you, sire, but that's not needed,' she said. "Akamu may not be as strong in body as he once was, but his mind is as quick as ever. As you should know.'

My father half-smiled in response.

'I suppose if you've handled my old friend for as long as you have, you can handle a little supply problem he said.'

Folding her hands in front of her, lolana ducked her head, barely moving her fingers.

'Thank you, sire,' she said.

This same ritual played out every week. My father had once explained it to her while they'd shared a rare meal together.

The Merchants Guild is the weakest in Ki, and so, they must exploit every advantage they have. This is seen in the choice of a guild head: lolana. While normally that nervous wreck would make a disastrous choice for them, she's Akamu's wife and Akamu... well. You know Uncle Aka, don't you, little slip?

So, I pry into the Merchants Guild's business, try to discover what they have planned, and lolana becomes flustered, pleading stress. With such a declaration, manners require me to inquire about Akamu's health and...

I've never been able to continue pressing lolana after she brings him up, little slip. Your father may be fearless when it comes to many things, but any time my old friend comes up, I'm a coward.

The lesson? Be careful who you befriend, Kira.

Unfortunately, the ritual also never failed to raise Makala's ire. He hated any form of manipulation, believing as he did in direct action.

So, when my father let lolana off the hook about her guild's failings, his Pryion immersed the terrace in red light. Somehow, he managed to hold his temper, diverting to another subject instead. Unfortunately, it was one that was no less distressing.

'Is no one going to mention Oke's absence?' he asked. 'Seems strange that the Kaia Guild's head gets a pass for missing a weekly report.'

With a sigh, my father said, 'Calm down, Makala. I took Oke's report earlier this week. She had another engagement today.'

Makala stiffened, in body and signing form.

'What appointment could be more important than attending to the king?' he practically shouted.

My father cocked his head with a bemused smile.

'Her sending off, of course,' he said.

Makala froze with his fingers twitching, and I refused to look at him, to see his shame. This wasn't the Makala I knew, *my* Makala. His quick temper, one to match mine, had gotten him into plenty of scrapes, but they'd never been this bad before.

At least I now knew why the fourth guild head was missing.

The other guild heads had also turned away, although a mourning gray light was glowing from their Pryions.

After a tense moment, my father said, 'Why don't you give me the Adventurers Guild's report since delivering seems so important to you?'

Makala's Pryion shot straight from a fading red to green. With difficulty, he managed to make his fingers sign.

'My people have been hard at work, sire. We've plundered many useful items from nearby ruins and vortexes. Unfortunately, I must also share the loss of several of the guild's teams. The shallow's banes have been getting bolder. One of the teams we lost was sent to scout the Ahi Vent's ruins.'

I, along with the other guild heads, tensed. The Ahi Vent was the vent closest to Ki, a good three hour's travel from the city. That a bane could have attacked there...

The thought chilled me.

My father, on the other hand, absorbed the news with his usual calm.

'Thank you. I'll have the militia look into it,' he said before turning to the final guild head. 'Pelipo?'

The minder shook his head with his hands folded. He never had anything to report, but then, why would he? He was a *minder*.

I made sure Umile was only displaying a respectful shade of blue. Polite society demanded that I give that repugnant man deference, and as a princess, I'd always made sure to do so. Never let disgust for a minder's job influence your interactions with him: a lesson I'd learned years before.

'Thank you, everyone. If you're finished, I won't keep you any longer,' my father said. 'Same time and place next week.'

This meeting had run shorter than they normally did, but I understood why my father had kept it brief. With Alaki gone, worry would distract him from business, no matter how far he relegated it to the back of his mind, but he was fully aware of this. He planned his days with it in mind.

After ducking their heads to their king, Pelipo and lolana darted toward whatever tasks occupied them on a daily basis. Makala lingered until I twirled a finger at him, but then, he rose from the terrace, drifting around the edge of Kaua. Soon enough, he'd emerge from the other side, having circled the royal family's dwelling, but I was hoping I'd be done with my father by then.

'So, what did we learn today, little slip?' he asked.

'When given devastating news, maintain an aura of calm,' I immediately answered.

Turning toward me, my father raised an eyebrow.

'Do you mean what Makala told me about the banes?' he asked. 'I wouldn't worry too much about that. I'm not entirely incompetent yet. His news was old news. I'm already handling it.'

My eyes popped open. Once more, I was reminded of why my father was the greatest king Hekili had seen in generations.

'Anything else?' he asked.

I considered the question, tapping my lips before understanding dawned.

'Trust your minders to handle their shit!' I said.

My father grimaced.

'Language,' he said, 'But I'll let it go since you've finally learned a key lesson for ruling. Let the people who keep us alive have their independence. Trust them to inform you when a problem arises.'

Grabbing my chin, he lifted it until our eyes met. He gazed at me for a moment before shaking his head. Brushing my hair to the side, he kissed my forehead with our Pryion's shells merging to allow that contact.

'I have to speak with the last guild's head,' he said. 'Have fun with Makala. No running off to patrol Ki.'

The last guild, the one never mentioned. I hadn't known of its existence until after Alaki had left for his proving journey. I still didn't know its purpose, which irritated me to no end and...

Wait. Had my father just said *Makala*?

With twinkling eyes, my father smiled before heading toward Kaua's warrens once more. He knew about us! Damn it!

What now?

On second inspection, however, I recognized my father's amusement for what it was. While not tacit approval, he hadn't forbidden the relationship between me and Makala. Thinking about that had Umile blooming a deep purple, shaking in place.

'I know,' I signed. 'I never thought father might approve. He's never liked Makala.'

Speak of the devil. The Adventurers Guild head came hurtling around Kaua's corner, making for me. Never stopping, he snatched me off of the terrace and pushed away from it. We streaked upward, hurtling away from the reef's luminescence until we were hovering in the dim space between light and dark.

Pulling me close, Makala kissed me with his stubble scraping my cheeks and chin. Once his lips had left mine, he twirled me away, and I corrected my spin.

'I've missed you,' Makala said. 'When's Alaki coming home? The big lug's left his duties to you for far too long.'

'Soon,' I replied. 'You know Alaki. He has to do better, *be* better, than everyone else. To that end, he's accomplished his goal with his proving journey, stretching further toward the surface than our father. He's made his mark.'

'That he has,' Makala muttered.

We drifted in place for a moment, each lost in our own thoughts, until Makala shook himself.

'Speaking of the king, have you told him about us yet?'

I flushed with Umile turning green. Our relationship might only be a month or so old, but I already felt bad for how much I'd been hiding it and therefore, him from my father. Another reason why my father's casual mention of it had been so surprising.

'No,' I said, 'but I think he knows anyway.'

'What?! That's fantastic!' Makala said. 'Why do you think he knows?'

'Just something he said,' I said with a grimace. 'He's not acting like he disapproves, so that's good. What do I know, though? My ability to read my father has always been as shaky as the public's belief that the Trailleans are real. In fact, sometimes I think that old, childhood story might be *more* reliable...'

I trailed off when Makala's gaze snapped over my head.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Is that...?'

With his face scrunching up, Makala slowed his signing down so much that I could barely understand it.

'Is that a Pryion?'

Turning, I cocked my head. Sure enough, a light orb hung in the darkness above. It flicked through a gambit of colors—yellow, red, blue, green, yellow again—as it descended. Within seconds, it had drawn level with me and Makala, and as it approached Kaua, the reef's light revealed a shape moving beside the orb. This strange object plunged into Ki with its impact billowing granules from in front of the entrance to Kaua.

What the...? Had that been a human? Something else? It didn't matter because-

'I need to get down there,' I said.

'I should go,' Makala said in protest. 'The danger-'

'Makala!' I snapped. 'Until my brother returns, I'm next in line for the throne. Protecting Ki is my job. I have to be the one down there. It's what Alaki would do, isn't it?'

As if fell silent, Makala's Pryion turned a brilliant pink. Wordlessly, he turned his body toward the city and cupped his hands in front of him. I faced the disturbance, touching my feet to his hands, and as I leaped, Makala pushed me forward.

I shot toward Ki like the nimblest of slips, and the further we sped along, the more Umile's shell became resistant to the friction of the water around us. When we reached the ocean floor, I spun my arms to slow down.

Only the bare minimum of a crowd had gathered around the disturbance. I drifted through them, nudging some out of the way, until I saw the object that had fallen from above.

At the sight of it, my world ended.

Blonde hair was drifting around my brother's face, which was scrunched up in agony. Alaki was clutching at the pole that pinned him to the reef. Red misted in the water around him, and as I watched, my brother coughed, letting blood droplets burst forth to lazily float upward.

His Pryion, Brycen, darted around him, shining a bright yellow. Every few seconds, his movement stuttered, leaving him drifting without purpose, before he resumed his mad dash.

I smashed through the last few people keeping me from him.

'Alaki!' I signed in front of his eyes.

They rolled in their sockets, focusing with difficulty on me.

"Kira," Alaki said.

Already, his hands were drifting away from the metal fixing him to the reef, his strength obviously fading. I hunched closer, leaving my face centimeters from his. My hair formed a swaying curtain between us and the onlookers, and Brycen shot through it, halting beside his partner's face. The Pryion's color and light were quickly fading.

If I ignored what I'd seen, if I pretended Alaki was faking his pained expression, I could almost pretend we were playing Speaker again. We were children, whispering forbidden, spoken words to each other.

"Sorry... little slip," Alaki said.

Even as close as we were, I could barely hear him; his voice had been so badly muted by the water.

"At least you'll get... what you wanted..." he continued with difficulty.

"Shut up, Alaki. It doesn't matter."

A half-smile, so reminiscent of our father's, struggled to form on Alaki's face.

"Kira... the surface-"

He drew a ragged gasp, right before Brycen's light went out. Extinguished.

I tried to rise and scream for help, but with a surge of strength, Alaki held me in place.

"They're coming for us," he said.

Silent without Brycen's shell to carry them, I struggled to read the words on his lips.

"Fight them, little sis... little slip. Love... you..."

With his lungs emptied, Alaki tried to fill them with air and got water instead. He bucked in place, clawing at his neck. A metal pole kept him from flying away.

I held my brother as he spasmed, coughed, and gagged, desperately searching for air, until his twitches lost their strength and he fell still.

Shock must have me in its grip. Alaki dead? No sending off, just... dead? Not possible.

Leaning forward, I pressed my lips to his ear, fervently believing for a single moment that their childhood games had been real. I was a Speaker.

"I love you too," I whispered. "I need you alive. Please. Live."

But when I straightened, my brother only stared at me, blank-eyed and slack-faced. Brycen's dun globe floated beside him.

Something terrible was burbling within me, something for which I had no words. Something hot and uncontrollable. I tried to contain it, but it blasted through my efforts like a vent's steam.

Throwing my head back, I screamed while Umile blazed a blinding white, so bright that those in the crowd turned away from it or outright fled. I remained like this, rooted in place like Alaki, but unlike my brother, grief had immobilized me. I hung in its prevalence, screaming my throat raw, crying out in denial. Eventually, someone braved an interruption to my display, wrapping his arms around me.

Turning to her father, Princess Kira, newly made heir to Hekili's throne, sobbed into King Hikialani's chest.