

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-?

Added, 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.

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