

# 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 Trãillean 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.

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