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THE SAVAGE

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“Know thyself!” Delphic maxim.

“And then you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

John 8:32

PROLOGUE

—217 BC, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

The two-masted junk rocked up and down, tossed by the waves like a child's toy. It floated helplessly in the pitch-black night, lashed by the stormy winds and whipped by the stinging rain. The nine surviving sailors were all on deck, trying in vain to regain control of the ship.

“Fai Che, keep her steady as she goes! Ease her to windward! Bear east!” shouted Cho Li over the roaring gale. Fai Che, a young man with no experience in steering, pulled hard on the helm in response.

“Chang, Chao! What are you doing? Move your asses, you fools! Furl the jib!”

Both rushed toward the bow just as Cho Li bellowed, “Watch out!”

An enormous mass of water surged onto the deck, sweeping away everything in its path. Cho Li was flung backward and hit his head on the foremast as Chang and Chao landed on top of him, smashing into his stomach and legs. A second later, they sprang up and lunged forward again. Cho Li rose slowly, doubled over in pain. He staggered and grabbed a rope dangling from the mast.

“Dragon's egg,” he spat through clenched teeth, “I've had enough of this journey!”

Desperate and dizzy, he rubbed his head and went down to the mess deck, where he collapsed on the long table. It was pitch dark inside. The ship heaved and plunged, creaking and shuddering as if she would burst apart at any moment. Cho Li's head was spinning. He moaned, grabbed his temples with both hands, anchored his elbows firmly against the table, and closed his eyes.

It had been about three moons since they had lost the rest of the flotilla, and their situation was worsening with each passing day. His thoughts drifted back to the past...

Dragon's Wing consisted of eighty sailors and about two hundred boys and girls. The ship was part of the Xu Fu fleet that had set sail two years before for the legendary Seven Islands in search of the Elixir of Life. The expedition comprised about sixty ships, manned by thousands of sailors and carrying teenage virgins, both boys and girls. Their mission was to find the so-called *Immortal Mountain*, full of everlasting creatures, and gather herbs that only grew there. Afterward, they were to take the plants to the emperor's magicians, who would mix them and cast the incantations to create the elixir of immortality or the so-called Elixir of Life.

The start of the journey had been fantastic, with several weeks of blue skies, calm sea, and a festive mood. The hold was full of food and livestock—mainly fowl, goats, and pigs, so they had nothing to worry about. There was even a cage with live snakes, which the priest used when he performed his religious rituals. Occasionally, they stopped at some remote island to resupply with fresh water and fruits, or simply to stretch their legs a bit.

But even then, far before the peaceful voyage had come to an abrupt end, and all hell broke loose, Cho Li knew that something was wrong.

First, nobody knew for sure the location of the Seven Islands, so the sailors had only a vague idea where they were going, relying on myths, rumors, and legends about the place.

Second, all those youngsters got on Cho Li's nerves with their noisy capriciousness. He agreed, of course, with the concept that the plants for the elixir had to be gathered only by virgins, as they were supposed to be the purest of human beings. The problem was, he strongly doubted that most of the passengers were as pure as they claimed to be.

“Maidens, my eye,” he muttered, and spat at the floor. He knew at least three girls who were not virgins at all; he had personally seen to that himself in the hold’s darkness, and, considering the rumors and hints overheard here and there, he suspected that half of the sailors had done the same. There were so many skirts onboard and so eager at that. Now, he couldn’t help but ask himself if this fornication had not been the reason for all their misfortunes. After all, it had all started when he was doing his third victim, that pussy with big, pouty lips and raven black hair. He remembered the girl below him, lying on her back on sacks of rice, her dress above her legs, her white thighs gleaming in the gloom. She moaned, his hand on her mouth to muffle the sounds, and he passionately kissed her sweaty, childish face while his little prick wiggled inside her, thrusting in and out faster and faster, when a mighty quake rolled them both over.

Shouts and footsteps pounded on the deck above, and the big gong started sounding. Cho Li hastily pulled on his pants and ran up, tightening his belt as he went. On deck, everyone was on the port side, staring at the water below. Cho Li squeezed his way through, reached the bulwarks, looked down, and the blood froze in his veins. The sea was foaming, churning, and gurgling. Amid the whirlpool stirred a gigantic, octopus-shaped creature. It was whitish and slimy, with hundreds of tentacles around a sucking mouth and an ugly head in the midst of a shapeless, jellylike body. A thick fog crawled up from the sea, wrapping the ship in its bony white hands. Suddenly, the monster hit the junk so hard that several people fell down, screaming. The *Dragon’s Wing* slid through the water with incredible speed, hauled away by the disgusting thing.

Cho Li cocked his head and listened. The rocking had diminished, and the ship’s creaking wasn’t so noisy.

“The wind abates,” he muttered with a sigh of relief and sank into his thoughts again.

The weather was misty and stormy back then, and the monster had towed them further and further away into uncharted waters. They did everything to gain control over the bloody junk, but all was in vain. Finally, after many days, the ship halted abruptly, and everybody rushed to see what was happening. As they craned their necks over the bulwarks, *Dragon's Wing* suddenly rocked and rose almost vertically on her bow. With terrifying screams, a third of the crew and nearly all the passengers disappeared into the churning water, straight into the monster's maw. The whirlpool turned red, and limbs floated everywhere. Cho Li shuddered. It had been a terrible sight. The ship fell back to her usual position, but the dread continued. The tentacles of the awful creature swiftly darted in and out with a swishing sound, grabbing the sailors and dragging them into the sea. This time, however, the men fought back, brandishing their swords and slashing at the thick, slimy tentacles until the monster let go. Eventually, it vanished the same way it had come, without a trace, sinking into the depths of the ocean.

Now they were free, but the aftermath of the attack was disastrous. All the passengers were gone, and of eighty crew members, only twenty-five had survived, all of them seamen before the mast except Cho Li who, as a boatswain, had to take charge of the ship.

With the captain and all officers dead and with no information about the course, they floated for weeks, surrounded only by the blue immensity of the sea. On top of that, the sky was cloudy all the time, so they could not use the stars to navigate. Cho Li, however, had an intuition to keep heading east, and he listened to it. Besides, there was nothing better to do.

Cho Li was a short, sullen man in his forties, and the crew did not like him much. Several youngsters had started snapping at him, openly challenging his authority, but while a mutiny was brewing, an unknown disease mowed down half of the remaining crew. Nobody could have understood what had hit them so hard,

and by the time they discovered that the monster's slimy secretions had contaminated one of the water barrels, only fourteen men remained alive.

"As if some ominous curse follows us everywhere," Cho Li muttered. The death claimed his mates' lives by all sorts of unfortunate events. Dong and Daquan fell overboard in stormy weather. Jian hanged himself on the yardarm during his watch, and Ji and Gen, both excellent sailors, threw themselves into the sea (on the same day, though not simultaneously). They both swore to have heard enchanting songs and seen beautiful mermaids swimming alongside the ship and waving at them. Cho Li suspected that the water shortage had severely addled their brains.

"I should've known better," he sighed in the darkness. "If I'd tied them to the mast, I could have saved them from imaginary mermaids."

He slammed his fist against the wooden table. So many mistakes and no chance to rectify them. If he could have turned back time...

"Bugger that," he grunted. "There's no going back. One thing I know for sure—if we don't find land within five days, we're all dead men. At least the rain gives us a little fresh water, but for how long? And after all the ordeals and misery, when we eventually had a glimmer of hope, this bloody storm started up! Such shitty luck!" He hit the table again, his face distorted with rage.

Two days before, they had spotted land at last. Oh, what a joy it was, and such a relief when the lookout had cried, "Land ho!"

It was a small group of islands resembling a gigantic turtle from afar. In the late afternoon sun, each isle outlined distinct parts of the animal—the smaller ones formed the head and the neck, the shell was a big chunk of land with a high hill in the center, and three little atolls shaped the tail.

The crew was elated, and the hope returned to their eyes as they finally envisioned the end of their troubles.

"Straight ahead to the shell, mateys!" Cho Li cried out joyfully. "Hands aloft

to hoist the topsails! Keep her steady, Fai!”

It was not meant to be. Cho Li had sensed it from the start, this nasty feeling of impending doom. A sudden, strong headwind drove them far away from their desired destination. The gale raged and within an hour, the poor seamen were forced to change course, losing sight of the land they so coveted.

“Hey Cho Li, where are you?” He turned his head, listening. Chang shouted from above, “Did the wind blow you overboard, old man? Where are you, by thunder?”

Cho Li sighed, hauled himself up, and headed for the main deck.

In the morning, the storm died away and the dawn bathed the sea in light. Dead tired, the sailors lay scattered on the deck, snoring soundly. Cho Li remained behind the helm, the only man awake aside from Kang, the lookout. His gaze lingered on the horizon, the wind fondled his face, and the shimmering water reflected a golden glare from the rising sun. The view aroused in him a sad longing for bygone days.

He should have been tired after being up all night fighting the storm, but strangely enough, his head was clear, and he was in excellent shape. Not exactly young and strong as he once was, but almost...

“Land ho!” cried Kang from above, and Cho Li jumped, startled. He shaded his eyes and looked ahead at the dark little spot, visible despite the distance.

“At last,” he grunted and dashed toward the bronze gong. The giant disk shone like red gold in the morning sun, and the silver snakes decorating the center looked like they were alive. Cho Li grabbed the heavy club dangling beneath the gong and started hitting it, mad with joy.

A while later, all the seamen leaned against the bulwarks and watched the looming island with excitement. It appeared enchantingly beautiful from afar—a crescent of green land with three steep hills rising in the middle stood out amid the

azure sea. The bay, enclosed by the two ends of the sickle, was large enough to shelter a fleet. As the ship approached, they could discern a broad sandy beach and scattered palm trees, friendly waving their green fronds. It seemed to be a calm, uninhabited place, with no sign of human activity.

“Take down the sails and drop anchor!” cried Cho Li, his voice muffled by the whipping of the canvas. “Do you see the reef? We can’t get any closer.”

The waves broke into white foam about a hundred yards from the shore, clearly outlining the stretch of the shoals.

“You must be blind not to notice it,” grunted Feng, a tall, gaunt sailor who hated Cho Li’s guts more than anyone else did.

“Up to the crow’s nest, Feng, and fast! Let’s see if your eyes are as sharp as your tongue. Tell us what you can perceive aloft!” commanded Cho Li. Feng shot him a nasty look and slouched toward the mainmast, emphasizing his lack of enthusiasm with every step.

“Come, mateys, cheer the slug up!” Cho Li shouted. Feng started slowly climbing the mast among the chuckles and whistling of the others. Halfway up, he stopped and made an obscene gesture at them, which lightened their mood even more. Once he got to the top, he observed the land for a while, then cried, “There’s a flock of birds circling above the center of the jungle. And a wide green patch at the foot of the hills, probably a clearing. Not sure, though. I see something that looks like thin smoke rising over there, but it could be a play of the light... Maybe one of you scoundrels with better eyes should climb up here and look?”

“All right, get down. We’ve heard enough!” Cho Li shouted back. He waited until Feng had descended, then commanded, “We need to see how the land lies. Chang, Chao, and Feng are coming with me ashore, and the other of you wait here. If we don’t come back by the time the big hourglass is turned over twice, it means that something’s gone wrong, right? If you don’t spot a fire or any sign of us by

nightfall, you double your vigilance, and if there is still no trace of us tomorrow, don't go ashore to look for us, but hoist the sails and leave. Now, get the sampan ready.”

They lowered the boat and the four sailors got in. As it glided over the water, nobody uttered a word. Cho Li inhaled the salty smell of the ocean while he listened to the gentle oars splash, the swishing of the wind, and the piercing cries of the seagulls. He felt happy as a child, surrounded by the colors of the day, as lively as they had been in his youth. And just like in his teenage years, the roar of the surf brought him the excitement of starting an incredible new adventure. They passed the reef in silence, admiring the pinkish coral formations jutting out here and there above the sea. Once ashore, they jumped out of the boat, splashing the water around them. They dragged the sampan inland, making sure that the tide could not reach it. Then, still panting from the effort, they wiped their faces and looked around.

The beach was about 20 yards wide, studded with palms and some crooked, unfamiliar trees with small leaves. Beyond the sandy strip was the dense, tangled wall of foliage where the tropical jungle began. Cho Li and his company crossed the beach and stopped beneath the first of the tall trees.

“All right, first we need to find fresh water and fruit,” Cho Li said. “We can manage without more meat for now—we still have three hogs and two goats alive on the ship. So, let's focus on searching for a river or some other freshwater source. And stick together, right! Nobody wanders off! Let's go!”

He drew his jian—a short, bronze, double-edged straight sword inherited from his great-grandfather—and walked into the jungle, followed by his comrades.

Creepers, shrubs, intertwined vines, and fallen trunks were tangled in such an incredible mess that it was almost impossible to advance. Drenched with sweat, they hewed their way, cutting left and right. The branches whipped and scratched their faces, and the scorching heat melted their brains. The damp air, the birds' screeches,

the shrieks of unknown animals, and the buzzing of insects, which thrust themselves in their mouths and nostrils, only added to their frustrated desperation. Now and then, Cho Li turned sharply, scanning nervously through the trees around.

“Pretty jumpy, Cap’n?” Chang called mockingly.

“Honestly, I don’t like this place,” Cho Li replied. “I sense some ominous presence, as though somebody’s watching. Do you feel it?”

“I rather feel like taking a shit,” said Chang, and all but Cho Li burst into laughter.

“Hey, look, there’s a path over there!” Chao cried out.

The thick foliage thinned out on their left, outlining a narrow trail. They followed it, penetrating deeper into the jungle, and gradually the track grew wider until it led them to a vast clearing.

“Turtle’s egg,” Cho Li whispered and stopped dead.

In the middle of the clearing rose a gigantic ancient tree. Its trunk was dark green and so large that a score of men holding hands could scarcely have encircled it. Just below the branches, its upper part was studded with spears, axes, knives, daggers, and maces of different sizes and shapes.

The massive boughs, every one of them as big as a tree in its own right, spread horizontally in all directions. In addition to the dense, broad green leaves, the branches were festooned with impaled skulls and putrid parts of human bodies, which dangled here and there, swinging slowly in the faint breeze. Hundreds of black birds, resembling crows but considerably bigger, flocked above the crown, letting out sharp cries and occasionally swooping at the corpses.

Before the grisly tree, a flat, rectangular stone had been set atop a rocky outcropping. It was carved all over with notches, grooves, and strange symbols. Sun-bleached bones and skulls were heaped around it.

The seamen stood thunderstruck, unable to believe their eyes. Confused and

completely lacking any sense of time, they stared for a prolonged period, until a gust of wind brought to them a terrible stench of carrion. Cho Li stepped away and bent double to throw up. When the last convulsion passed and he lifted his eyes again, he jumped backward, and a thin trickle ran along his left leg. Scores of swarthy men came noiselessly out of the forest, each clutching a spear in his hand.

Cho Li pivoted quickly. They were everywhere, blending in with the shadows of the trees and staring ominously at the sailors. They were all naked, except for loincloths, with mighty impressive physiques. Each man stood a head taller than the sailors, slender and brawny, with shaved skulls and bodies covered with tattoos depicting the same gigantic tree, crania, or battle scenes. Small human bones dangled from their noses and ears, their faces emanating the cruelty and strength of feral animals.

“*Sheer savages,*” whispered Cho Li.

He met the stare of a broad-shouldered man with a missing ear, and froze with horror, for he read his own death in the man’s dreadful black eyes, connected with the deepest darkness.

At this moment, his stomach churned and he shit himself. With a wet arse and a banging heart, red in the face with shame, he slowly raised his hands in the air and dropped his sword from a height, then slumped to his knees and said in a trembling voice, “We come to you in peace, to look for water and food. If you’d be so kind to allow us to replenish our supplies a little, we will generously acknowledge our gratitude. We’ll give you anything you want. Just let us go, please.”

He touched the earth with his forehead in a sign of profound humility, followed by Chang, Chao, and Feng, who mimicked him to the slightest details.

The locals understood nothing of what Cho Li said. His body language, however, was eloquent enough. A tall, fierce-looking man stepped forward and shouted in the tribe’s native tongue: “*Tie them up! They alone found their path to*

sacrifice. The Great Kepolo led them to the Sacred Tree, which means only one thing: he is claiming their lives. As to the others in the big boat, they will be our slaves. I want them alive, well-fed, and pampered all the time. They should lack nothing because these strangers will teach us how to build such big boats, and we will become the most powerful people in the Turtle Archipelago!”

The seamen, who were not able to discern even a single word, focused intently on the dark man’s intonation. There was nothing peaceful in it. As he spoke, the savage progressively raised his voice and finished in a high-pitched crescendo, lifting his spear. The others responded with similar cries and hoisted their spears as one. Then, several men lunged at the poor sailors, tied them up, and dragged them toward the enormous tree. As they stretched Cho Li on the flat stone and fastened his limbs, the last thought that passed through his mind was:

There it goes, bloody Elixir of Life.

PART ONE

MANIHA KOMO

CHAPTER I

AKAMUI

—1677 AD, Maniha Komo (“Half-Moon Island”)

“You performed a great feat at the last battle, young Akamui,” said Hamaki. “If not for you, they would have overturned us! But you fought like five men! Not to mention that you saved my life, and that is something I’ll never forget.”

The inside of Hamaki’s bamboo hut was dim and dusty. The only light seeped through cracks in the straw curtain that covered the entrance. Besides two shelves with wooden and clay bowls along the wall, and a bucket with fresh water in the corner, there was nothing in the room. The two men sat face-to-face, cross-legged on shark pelts stretched over the earthen floor. Hamaki leaned on the central column that supported the thatch roof. At Hamaki’s words, Akamui’s face flushed with pleasure.

“Anyone would do the same in my place,” said Akamui.

“No, no, don’t underestimate yourself,” Hamaki objected. “Every brave deed deserves a reward and you shall have yours. I’ve decided to recommend you as a candidate for the Council in the next elections.”

Akamui’s eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. He tried to say something, but Hamaki stopped him with an imperial gesture.

“I know you think you’re too young, that you don’t have enough experience. Well, all that is nonsense. Take Ahaki, for instance. He is a little older than you, but he has been on the Council for years. The elders can choose any man, no matter the age, in virtue of his special merit among the tribe. Ah, stick with me, lad, and you’ll never lose; I’ve been on the Council for a long time and, believe me, my word carries weight there.”

“I don’t have the words to express my gratitude, wise Hamaki.” Akamui rose and bowed. “It is such a great honor for me.” He kneeled and kissed Hamaki’s foot.

“Sit down, sit down, don’t be ridiculous.” Hamaki patted him on the cheek. “You are a respectful boy. It’s the least I can do for you. Lima!” he shouted.

A graceful young woman, naked save for a loincloth, parted one of the straw curtains that separated the room from the rest of the hut. Hamaki had one of the biggest dwellings in the village, large enough to house his three wives and five children. By the tribe’s standards, he was one of the richest men in Maniha Komo, obviously a result of his long tenure on the Council.

“Do you know Lima, my third wife?” asked Hamaki and tapped her behind.

“Of course, I do,” muttered Akamui, smiling uneasily. “She is good friends with Kalia, my wife.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that.”

“You certainly did; you even met her once here, remember?” said Lima.

“Yeah, maybe,” Hamaki scratched his head. “At my age and with all the responsibilities of the Council, I may forget things.” He tapped her again. “Bring us some *tuka*, sweetheart. We have a lot to celebrate!”

Lima nodded and glided lithely out of the room, flashing a smile at Akamui.

“I have the best palm wine on Maniha Komo, you’ll see,” said Hamaki.

Somebody called from outside the entrance. “May I have a word with you, wise Hamaki?”

“That must be Arataki,” muttered Hamaki, standing. “Stay here; I’ll be back in a moment.”

He hurriedly stepped out. Akamui gazed at the gently swinging straw-mat and strained his ears in a vain attempt to catch some of the muffled conversation. Something rustled behind him, and Lima returned from one of the other rooms, bringing two wooden cups full of transparent liquid. She scanned the room,

approached Akamui, and pressed her bare leg to his shoulder.

“Where is he?” she whispered.

“Just went outside to speak with the chieftain.”

She bent over to lay the cups on the floor, her naked breast swinging close to Akamui’s face. She lingered for a while in this position, then swiftly kissed him on the lips and stood upright, her eyes shining.

“Are you crazy?!” he hissed.

“I missed you so much, my heart! I kneeled before Rakapi and prayed day and night to our god for you. ‘Please Almighty Kepolo,’ I said, ‘bring my beloved Akamui safe and sound back home because he is the sun and air to me.’”

“This is insanity, Lima. We must stop it once and for all! What if he finds out? Didn’t you hear that he wants to make me a member of the Council?”

“Well, I also heard that you saved his life. He certainly wouldn’t mind sharing his third wife with you as a sign of his gratitude,” Lima giggled, her perfect white teeth flashing in the dusk.

“Yeah, he’ll certainly kill both of us,” Akamui grunted.

“Oh, I see. My hero is afraid of some old limp-dick,” Lima giggled again. “Listen, tomorrow morning he said he would be in the Hive; the Council is gathering. I will be waiting for you at our place when the sun reaches its highest point...”

Hamaki rushed in. He was a big, stout man, but the age had slackened his muscles and his short hair had already turned gray.

“Sorry about that, my young friend,” he said, resuming his seat. “Tribe’s duties all the time. Ah, the wine is here, wonderful!”

“Yes. I just asked our guest how Kalia was doing,” Lima chirruped. “She is expecting a baby, you know... It’s a special time for women.”

“Good for you!” Hamaki tapped Akamui on the shoulder. “I wish for you to have a healthy boy who will become a great warrior, just like you!” He turned to

Lima. “You can leave us now, my sweet butterfly. We have something important to discuss.”

It was almost dark when Akamui got home. When he saw her, Kalia’s face brightened. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him fondly.

“I’m so happy you’re back, my love,” she whispered. “I’ve been waiting the whole day for your return. Where have you been? You must be hungry. Come, sit! I’ve cooked you something delicious!”

Akamui grunted and slumped on the straw mat that covered the floor of his hut. He was dead tired. After returning from the raid yesterday, he’d had to go out early the following morning, so they hadn’t seen each other much. In the flickering soft firelight of the torch that cast playful shadows around the room, he watched her absentmindedly while she bustled around. The tiny place was hot and stuffy, with a large hammock in the middle that took up almost the entire space.

So small, compared with Hamaki’s hut, Akamui thought. You could die from suffocation in here. Well, that will change, once they accept me in the Council.

Kalia brought the meal on a wooden tray, kneeled, and laid it before her husband. She was beautiful and young, still slender despite her protruding abdomen. As Akamui eyed her sullenly, she smiled at him, flicked a lock from her face, and shook her long black hair, which reached to the small of her back. Her full, sensitive lips and shining black eyes could inflame every man on the island. Everyone but Akamui. Her deep love toward him, her willingness to be a devoted and submissive spouse, filled him with disgust, and her readiness to satisfy his slightest whims irritated him a great deal. She had been very young when he took her as a wife, and he did it only to please his father, who was in debt to Tanuli, one of the Council’s members.

One day, one that Akamui would never forget, his father called him. When

Akamui entered the hut, he found Tanuli sitting there. He was a tall man in his late forties, with short white hair and a long necklace made of the phalanges of his foes.

“I have six girls, and I have to find a match for each one of them,” he began, after the usual exchange of pleasantries. “It’s an enormous burden for every father to find even a single good guy to protect his daughter, let alone for six. But you are a good boy, Akamui, and I understand why your father is so proud of you. I have been observing you for a long time, and I think you will be a perfect fit for my youngest daughter, Kalia.”

Tanuli looked up at his father. The latter looked pleased. He smiled and said, “I am sure that my son will take good care of your Kalia. She will be happy with him.”

Akamui hadn’t been sure that he wanted the deal—at least not until he met his father’s stern stare, which eloquently spoke in favor of the proposition. He had bowed his head and said that he gladly accepted and would be honored to marry Tanuli’s daughter. What else could he have done, anyway? However, when he saw Kalia for the first time, his first thought was, *What I’m supposed to do with this child? Should I fuck her or feed her first?*

Kalia was a virgin and was soon crazy about him. In the beginning, he enjoyed her vehement love, her wild sexual passion, and her almost slavish attitude. She had never raised her voice to him and had never contradicted him. Year after year, she was growing up and her body blossomed into curvy, womanly shapes. His friends’ mockery gradually died away, and one day Akamui realized that all of them envied him for his beautiful wife. He was glad back then to have married her and had considered himself a lucky man.

Then Lima emerged and turned his world upside-down. She was Kalia’s best friend, two years older than she was, and her attitude hinted toward a rich experience with men. Lima was playful and flirted jokingly with him now and then, but he had

never taken her seriously. Not until the day she set up a meeting with Kalia by Butterfly Waterfall and went straight to Akamui's hut instead, playing innocent and looking for her friend. Akamui had a hard time catching her drift; taking hints was not his strong suit. Finally, Lima lost patience, grabbed his cock, and put it in her mouth. What happened then between them was so intense, so superb and incredible, that it forever changed Akamui's perception of sex.

From that day on, he stopped being interested in Kalia. Sex with her was so boring, so conventional. Lima knew how to make him feel like a real man. Fulfilled. Gratified. Satiated. As he was too poor to afford more than one wife, he seriously leaned toward the decision of dumping Kalia and replacing her with Lima.

Destiny, however, had decided otherwise. About eight full moons ago, the news that Lima would become Hamaki's third wife broke simultaneously with the announcement of Kalia's pregnancy. When Akamui learned he would be a father, his heart softened toward his spouse. Kalia was so radiant, so beautiful the day she announced the news to him. He had taken her scarlet, tear-stained face between his hands, had looked straight into her shining eyes, from which emanated all the happiness in the world, and had kissed her on the lips.

"I'm so lucky to have you, my love," he had whispered. "You will bear me a son, a great warrior, the pride of the entire Tipihao tribe..."

"Are you listening to me at all, or you're drifting off?" Kalia touched Akamui's hand, and he looked up, startled out of his reverie. "Eat! What are you waiting for?"

The meal still lay untasted before him. Akamui attacked it vigorously, noisily sipping the hot fish-broth and devouring the large swordfish steak.

"So, as I was saying," said Kalia, "you told me this morning that you'd be back before noon. I was waiting all day for you. Where have you been, my heart?"

"I met Hamaki, and he invited me to his hut. It was just for a quick chat, but

then he took out his famous *tuka* and the time flew.”

“Oh, it’s nice of him to welcome you to his home,” said Kalia. “Did you see Lima over there?”

“I did. She sent you her regards,” said Akamui, and added quickly, “Can you believe that Tanuli wants to propose me for membership on the Council at the next election?”

“Really?” Kalia looked impressed. “This is wonderful news, my love! How come he’s suddenly so kind to you?”

“He owes me something,” snorted Akamui and lapsed into silence. Kalia peered at him lovingly. To her, he was the most handsome man on the island. To the rest of her acquaintances, her husband was a pretty dreadful creature.

Akamui was in his early twenties, brawny and tall (almost a head taller than the average Tipihao man), with impressive bulging muscles and taut sinews. A tattoo of a man dangling upside down from a tree, his body being pecked by a large bird with spread wings, covered the left part of his torso, beginning from the shoulder and creeping to his chest and abdomen. As was true of most of Maniha Komo’s warriors, he had shaved his head down to the skin and it shone in the torchlight like a gigantic oily egg. A low forehead, full lips, and a flat nose, with a small white bone-ring through the left nostril, and similar rings hanging on both of his ears, gave him a fierce look. However, the most terrifying thing about him was his cold, murderous stare. His black eyes flashed with insane flame when he got furious, and nobody dared to confront him when he was in this state of mind.

Akamui finished his meal, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, burped, and stretched in the corner. Kalia cleared the wooden bowl and plate and snuggled up to him.

“Did you miss me, my love?” she whispered, eagerly pressing her naked body to his.

“Of course, I did,” Akamui answered sleepily.

“Both of us? Do you want to feel him kicking?” She took his hand and gently lay his palm on her stomach. Akamui was not in the mood. He snorted and pushed her lightly.

“He is asleep like I am,” he grunted.

After a brief silence, Kalia asked in a hurt voice, “So, how was the raid? The moon waxed and waned and became full again since you left. I heard you performed impressive feats there. It seems that everybody knows about them, but me! Tell me about Hamaki. What does he owe you?”

“Let’s leave that for tomorrow, shall we?” Akamui muttered. “I want to sleep now, but I’ll be all yours in the morning, fresh for a chat.”

He pushed her again, hauled himself up, extinguished the torch, and climbed into the hammock. A while later, she heard him snoring. She stared at the darkness for a long time, tears rolling down her cheeks.

The next morning Akamui got up late. He had not slept well. He’d dreamed of having sex with Lima and woke up in the middle of the night with a hard-on. Kalia lay beside him, her bottom turned to him, but he did not touch her. The image of Lima, just coming out from the lake under Butterfly Waterfall, wet, gorgeous, and naked, with shiny hair and a luring smile, was burning his heart. He realized he must end all this. It was too dangerous to continue seeing her, especially now that he was in Hamaki’s good grace.

My chances would be ruined in a twinkling if he found out, he brooded. Still, he could not restrain his lust. It took him a long time to fall asleep again, and when he woke up in the morning, the desire to see Lima was unbearable.

“Just this one last time, and then I’ll end it,” he muttered, not convinced at all. The hut was quiet and empty. Kalia was nowhere to be seen.

Perfect, Akamui thought and jumped from the hammock. He put on a small

waistband of foliage that hardly covered his sex, slung a leather strap with a stone knife stuck into a wooden sheath over his shoulder, and fastened his bamboo sandals with their fiber laces. He glanced at the corner where three boiled seagull's eggs, a slice of dry meat, and a bunch of bananas waited for him enticingly, hesitated for a while, shook his head, and then ran outside. The sun was high in the sky, and he was sure that Lima was already awaiting him.

Akamui's hut was at the end of the village and he rushed straight into the jungle. The moment he reached the first trees, Kalia emerged on her way toward the hut, coming from the heart of the village, bringing a basket full of fruit. She saw her husband disappearing hurriedly into the forest, and her jaw dropped.

But where he's going? She wondered as she rushed into the hut to leave her load and stopped short, stupefied: for the first time since they were together, Akamui had not touched his breakfast.

She quickly assessed the situation.

Yesterday he said we would talk in the morning. He overslept, so obviously there was not anything pressing... What's the rush, then? He seemed scared, worried about something...

Grim anxiety hit her in the stomach, and piercing pain stabbed her heart. She got out and dashed toward the jungle, following Akamui's path.

Her father had taught her to read the trail, and Kalia followed the almost-invisible path of bent and crushed blades of grass that wound through the lush greenery, where branches made a compact, low tunnel. The thick canopy blocked the sun, letting through occasional flashes of bouncing light. It was dusky and grim, and the hot, damp air made her breathing difficult.

Kalia faltered, often tripping against snags and roots, her sharp eyes scanning for crumpled grass or snapped twigs. She stopped now and then, panting, drenched in sweat, pressing her belly with both hands. The heavy load in her womb exhausted

her. The baby fidgeted and kicked, agitated, and her heart thumped wildly. Every single step became a burden, and she slowed down.

“Please, Great Kepolo, watch over him, don’t let him be hurt,” her lips moved silently as disastrous scenarios passed one after another through her head. She took a sharp turn but lost the trail and stopped, straining her ears. Leaves rustling; birds screeching; wings fluttering; insects buzzing; toads croaking. The song of the jungle, as the old-timers called it, the sounds she had grown up with. Yet she detected something in the distance, a faint constant humming.

“Butterfly Waterfall,” she exclaimed and ran again.

This path must lead straight there. How dumb I am not to have guessed it earlier! I always take the other way, that’s why... But why would he go there?

The tangle of foliage lashed her face and body, but she hardly felt it. The humming was getting louder and louder, gradually turning into a roar, and the path grew larger. All of a sudden, the jungle ended, and she found herself in a small clearing, lit up by the shining sun and studded with tropical flowers.

A narrow mass of water fell with a deafening noise from a high, almost vertical cliff into a round lake. Kalia took a step forward and waded into the soft, succulent grass, whereupon an iridescent cloud of butterflies rose around her. There were everywhere, lovely and colorful as flying flowers, fluttering all over the glade and alighting now and then on the bright tropical blossoms, tinted in red, orange, yellow, and cream-white. She stopped short, enchanted by the breathtaking picture. This spot was her favorite, the place where she had played as a kid and had spent the happiest moments of her life. The sweet scent, wafting in the air, and the roar of the waterfall, made her dizzy and carried her back to her childhood.

And then, a loud moan coming from her left brought her back to reality. She turned sharply. Lima, her best friend, leaned against a solitary palm tree near the lake, her legs wrapped around Akamui’s waist and her arms folded around his neck.

She was groaning and shouting as if mad, while Akamui thrust into her, moving back and forth faster and faster. Kalia's jaw dropped open. She watched them, stunned: two wild animals clinging tightly to each other, burning with passion. Fiery rage burst in her chest and hit her brain, incinerating her insides. In that moment, she hated Lima so powerfully that the desire to kill her was the only driving force that made sense.

“Fucking betrayer!” Kalia bellowed. Blind with rage, she bent down, grabbed a thick, knotty piece of wood, and ran toward them. Akamui was just easing Lima to the ground when both of them turned, startled by the inhuman scream coming from Kalia's lungs. She fell upon them, lashing the club at Lima's head. Akamui flung himself to shield her, and the club landed heavily on his shoulder. He hollered in pain but did not flinch. Kalia lifted her gnarled weapon again with an effort, preparing for a new blow, and staggered, losing her balance under its weight. Quick as a flash, Akamui took a step forward and backhanded her across the face. Knocked onto her back, Kalia hit her head on the edge of a protruding stone and then remained still.

Akamui and Lima watched with terror as a red pool slowly spread from beneath her head. Lima gave out a shrill scream. Akamui kneeled down, lifted Kalia's head, and started caressing her, muttering gentle words. Her eyes were wide open, staring at the sky, her face distorted in a grimace of pain and hatred.

Lima flung herself hysterically at Akamui, drumming his back with her small fists. Patiently, he lay Kalia on the ground, turned around, and tried to catch Lima's hands. She wrung herself free and jumped forward, attempting to claw his face. He pushed her roughly. She fell, wailing loudly, sobbing and tearing at her hair.

Shock and confusion seized Akamui, and for a moment, he just stayed there, rooted to the ground, staring at Kalia's dead body. He was aware of the consequence of killing a woman, especially a pregnant one...

Sharp pain in his left forearm brought him out of his stupor. Lima had flung herself at him again and had just bitten him. Her squalls were driving him crazy. He grabbed her, lifted her to her feet, and stared at her wandering eyes.

“Listen to me,” he said, shaking her. She was still absent, her look vacant. Akamui slapped her tear-stained face.

“Are you listening now, you stupid fish?” he cried, irritated. “She’s dead, all right! There’s nothing to do about it. Go to your house and play innocent. Did anybody see you coming?” He slapped her again. “Answer me! Did anyone—”

“I don’t know,” sobbed Lima, “leave me alone, please...”

“Listen to me carefully now. You go straight home and stay there as if nothing happened. If anybody asks you where you’ve been, tell him you just went to gather herbs, all right?” He smacked her one more time and shouted, “Look at me! Do you understand? If Hamaki suspects that we have been meeting in secret, we’re as good as dead. Got it? Stop crying now!”

Lima’s look gradually cleared up.

“What will you do?” she sobbed.

“Don’t worry about me. Do what I say and leave everything else to me. Go now, run!”

She jumped and ran, brushing away her tears. When she disappeared into the forest, Akamui looked at Kalia—the woman who loved him so much and who had been ready to sacrifice her life for him. He felt nothing for her. No more than for any other person who he had killed or raped during his life. It was different for the baby, though. He had longed for a son, and now everything was falling apart...

I’ll bring her to my mother. Maybe she can still save the baby, he thought.

He lifted Kalia and flung her across his shoulder, feeling her still-warm blood dripping onto his neck.

“What a mess!” he muttered and set out for the village, desperately shaking

his head.

Several hours later, Akamui stood before the Council in the huge beehive-like bamboo hut, known by the locals as “The Hive.” The elders were sitting in a tight semi-circle in the middle of the room around a large round stone hearth. Akamui stood on the opposite side, his head bowed. The smoke from the hearth was biting his eyes and tears trickled down his cheeks. The elders smoked their pipes and nodded in agreement with Hamaki’s speech.

“We all know that killing a woman is a terrible crime, punishable by death,” Hamaki was saying. “The women are precious, and we have to take care of them. They bring us strength and comfort and are the most important source of inspiration in our life. For ages, all the wars break out over women, as foreign women bring fresh blood to the tribe and give us strong, healthy babies, which is crucial for our survival and prosperity.

“So, wise elders, the crime carried out by the young Akamui is outrageous. We all know that the punishment for such a misdeed is death. However, as the highly respectable Council can see, the death of poor Kalia was a pure accident. She had struck her husband with a club in her rage, the evidence of which is visible on Akamui’s left shoulder, and he had hit her back in self-defense. Sometimes our otherwise gentle spouses get irritated during their childbearing, don’t they?

“Here I want to emphasize the honesty and the courage of this young fellow, who immediately brought Kalia to his mother and did everything possible to at least save the baby. He did not hesitate afterward to come to us and to tell us the truth, thus taking responsibility for the demise of his beautiful wife. I’d like to draw your attention to the fact that the young Akamui struck only one blow at Kalia. It was fatal, it’s true, but come on, who hasn’t ever thrashed his wife or daughter now and then? It’s necessary sometimes, you know, just to keep them on the right track.

“With that said, I ask the Council to consider carefully the fate of this brave, smart, and fearless warrior, who is an irrefutable asset to Tipihao’s army. I don’t think it’s time now to deprive our troops of his might and cunning and to ruin his bright future because of this unfortunate accident.

“Thus, I respectfully request that the respectable Council not to be too hard on this young man. I suggest sending him in exile for two years to the remote outpost atolls as a lookout for the enemy’s boats. Thank you for listening to me, wise elders. My talk is over.”

An agitated murmur met the suggestion. Hamaki bowed to the Council and sat down. Akamui did not budge. Kerully, the oldest of the elders, rose slowly, leaning on a long bamboo stick and shaking all over. He was bald, slightly stooped with age, and so skinny that could barely stand on his feet.

“I don’t want to contradict the wise Hamaki, but I must point out that the sentence he proposes is too clement, given the severity of the crime. I’d like to offer my condolences to my old friend Tanuli.” Kerully bowed to the man who was staring at the ground, crushed with sorrow, before continuing. “The blood of his precious child is calling for justice. Let’s not forget that only three full moons ago we sentenced to death Tamali, a precious warrior, for a similar misdeed—he had beaten his wife so severely that she passed away from her wounds. So, I’m telling you now: this beating must stop once and for all. It’s true that in the case of Akamui it was more of an accident than murder, and I agree that a bright future lies ahead for him. But justice is justice. Two years is too short a punishment for such a crime. I vote for at least five to seven years in exile on the Coral Beck. Life is hard over there, at our most remote atoll on the northern boundary. Akamui will serve his time, building the great stone watchtower along with the slaves and the other law-breakers. His youth will fade in hardship and repentance and he will return wiser, stronger, and atoned for his misdeeds. Thank you, wise elders. My talk is over.”

Kerully slumped back in his seat, apparently exhausted. Each of the elders took their turn to speak, before taking a vote. As the debate grew more and more heated, they eventually agreed to leave it to the sacred smoke to decide the length of the sentence. After careful observation of its direction, Akamui was sentenced to five years in exile at the Coral Beck atoll.

CHAPTER II

LELANI

Since time immemorial, the Tipihao tribe inhabited Maniha Komu, which in their native language meant “Half-Moon Island.” It was one of the biggest islands in Kepula Penu¹, which was comprised of scores of isles, grouped around a formation resembling, as the name suggested, a gigantic loggerhead turtle.

The word “tipiho” in the tribe’s dialect meant a “savage,” “wild,” “intractable,” and “bellicose” warrior—a perfect description of Tipihao men. Nobody could compare with their ferocity and force. For hundreds of years, they kept the other tribes in subjugation, thanks to their perfect military organization, iron discipline, and the possession of knowledge that nobody else had—the secret of building big sailing boats, far more rapid than the primitive canoes used by the other peoples.

The Tipihaos often sailed to the nearby islands, where they sowed devastation, death, and dread. All tribes paid them tribute, making gifts of everything from trade goods—such as animal pelts, weapons, woven clothes and mats, bamboo, wine, fruits, dry meat, and raw materials—to young women, children, and slaves.

The Tipihao tribe integrated the foreign women and children and inured them to their customs. The slaves, mostly captive warriors, were forced to build boats and huts or hew trees in the jungle. When, after prolonged inhumane treatment, the slaves were on the brink of physical and mental exhaustion, they were sacrificed to the tribe’s god Kepolo before Rakapi, which literally meant “sacred tree.”

Life on the island was simple and had changed little since the time of the first ancestors. The men hunted, fished, made war, and governed. The women took care

¹ The Turtle Archipelago

of the children and did all the hard work related to the household. Their social status was not much better than that of the slaves, as they had no right to vote or to take part in any issue related to the tribe's rules.

The hierarchy was democratically organized. All the men would gather once every two years and would elect the twelve members of the Council of Elders, based on wisdom and merit. The Council made all the important decisions related to the tribe's governance, justice, and politics. They would also approve the nominees for the next election and select the chieftain, who was usually one of the Council members. The chieftain fulfilled the roles of military leader and shaman.

By the time of Akamui's return, the Tipihao tribe consisted of about five thousand people who lived in bamboo huts in the island's heart. With plenty of space between them, the largest dwellings, occupied by the chieftain and the elders, were at the foot of the central ridge, so-called *Carapace Hill*. The rest of the village's huts, considerably smaller, were crowded on the slopes of the two neighboring heights—*Whelk Hill* to the west and *Egg Hill*, situated eastward of *Carapace Hill*.

It was almost ten moons since Akamui returned from exile. His punishment had taken its toll on him. The days on the atoll were long and tedious, and the labor hard and exhausting. His life was a burden, as he was doomed to endure living in complete wilderness, without woman or friend, surrounded only by morons and slaves—sheer losers punished for their stupidity and cowardice. He rapidly showed them his superiority, and after several fierce thrashings, nobody ever dared to bother him.

The nights were even worse. In the silence of the darkness, broke only by the loud snoring of his roommates, Akamui stayed up, staring into the void and fretting until dawn about the unfortunate events that led to his punishment.

But he was tough and never gave up. The spite was making him stronger, and after the hard daily work, he spent hours training his body and transforming it into

an incredible mass of muscles. Broad shoulders, enormous dorsals, and bulging biceps made every man think twice before arguing with him. He kept himself in perfect shape, preparing for the big day of his return.

Unfortunately, things did not work out the way he expected. To his surprise, once back on the island, he discovered that his old friends now preferred to keep their distance. The worst of them was Hamaki, who didn't even greet him for his homecoming. The youngsters, especially those unfamiliar with Akamui's former feats, followed the common demeanor of the older warriors and paid him no respect.

It must be that fucking dotard Tanuli who's incited the others against me,
Akamui seethed.

Nobody liked him, and he became sullen and short-fused, dangerous, and unpredictable. Thus Akamui found himself alone, isolated, and depressed, just as he had been in exile.

After a few days of not seeing Akamui around the village, his mother Lalago woke up one morning with a pang of anxiety in her stomach, feeling that something was wrong with her son. With a racing heart, she hurried up the hillside to his hut, terrified of what she might discover.

Lalago was a good-tempered, smiling, chubby woman. People adored and highly respected her because of her kindness and her famous healing skills. Her knowledge of herbs, infusions, and salves was so legendary that her fame had reached beyond the boundary of Half-Moon Island and had spread all around the Turtle Archipelago.

The moment Lalago stepped into Akamui's hut, she wrinkled her nose and gasped in shock. Her beloved son lay motionless, flat on his stomach, with his fists clenched and his face buried in the seating rug. All around him was a mess of leftover

food, scattered empty flasks, cups, and broken pottery vessels. Flies swarmed the interior of the hut, and the stench was overwhelming.

Lalago bent down, grabbed Akamui by the shoulders, and rolled him on his back. After quickly scanning the room, she snatched a half-full bucket of water from the corner and splashed it over Akamui's face. He jumped with a cry, brandishing his knife and staggering, still dizzy from the wine.

"What are you doing?!" he shouted, once he recognized his mother.

"No, what are *you* doing?" Lalago yelled back. "When are you going to stop making a fool of yourself and start acting like a real man? Where did my brave, smart son disappear to? Or did they suck out your brain with a bamboo straw on Coral Beck to turn you into a good-for-nothing wretch?"

"I'm desperate, mother," muttered Akamui. He slumped on the ground and thrust his knife up to the hilt into the earth floor. "The men make fun of me behind my back. They never took me on a raid with them, and this was my only hope to prove my name again and find a foreign gal for the locals are fleeing from me like frightened birds..."

"Stop whining like a woman!" Lalago cried out angrily. "Are you a man, or aren't you? I know what you should do, and you will listen to your mother as you always did, and then you will thank me, as usual."

"What do you mean?" grunted Akamui.

"Go to Kepolo tonight and beg him forgiveness. You must propitiate him and offer him a sacrifice. Then, you must ask him what you should do to gain the respect of your tribe again!"

"A sacrifice? What sacrifice, mother? Kepolo likes our foes dismembered before Rakapi. Where would I find a foreign warrior right now?"

"Well, if you don't have a foe to offer him, then you should promise him one. The important thing is to do it sincerely, with all your heart—thus, Kepolo will know

that you mean it and he will help you. That's the way it works. Now, don't be crestfallen! Go to the brook and wash yourself; you stink like a boar in rut. Meanwhile, I will clean up all this mess and prepare you something to eat."

Akamui squeezed his way through the dense greenery. The gray blanket of twilight was falling over the forest, but his eyes were strong in the dark and the waxing moon was already rising in the east. He occasionally stopped and listened to the familiar noises of the jungle. It was the quietest period in the tropical forest—the deafening concert of piercing cries ebbed away as the diurnal animals went to sleep, and the nocturnal ones had not still come out.

Akamui hurried. Prayers before Rakapi took place a little after the sunset when the big red fireball sank in the ocean and darkness covered the place. The twilight was a special, magical time for Tipihaos. He looked up at the stars. Alina, the brightest one, was pale, meaning that he still had time. A glance ahead reassured him that he was approaching his final destination as the trees thinned out, giving way to shrubs and high grass. And sure enough, a moment later, he brushed aside the last of the ferns to emerge into a vast clearing, called by the natives the *Sacred Zone* or *Kepolo's Belt*.

Rakapi, the gigantic Sacred Tree and the dwelling of the tribe's god Kepolo, was a black silhouette against the dark sky. Its boughs reached in all directions, almost reaching the extremities of the clearing, where multiple cages were built into the crowns of the surrounding trees. The Council's building, known as *the Hive*, stood out as a huge domed beehive on the far left side of the Sacred Tree.

Every time Akamui faced the Tree, a wave of awe and dread filled his heart.

He prostrated himself and glued his front to the ground. He paused in this position for a moment, then got up and advanced toward the enormous trunk. The

hundreds of skulls impaled on its branches gleamed softly in the moonshine. Dangling bones rattled gently in the faint night breeze, which also brought a disgusting stench of carrion. Akamui shuddered and wrinkled his nose. Even though he had grown up with this smell, the first moment was never easy.

A big black bird flew out from inside the treetop with a piercing croak, flapping its wings. Akamui jumped nervously and hit his shin on the stone altar.

“Bloody *burkans*,” he cursed and stepped forward, rubbing his leg.

He kneeled and pressed his forehead against the trunk, feeling the cool, rough bark. A scent of moisture and something astringent filled his nostrils. Akamui knew what it was—a fluorescent mushroom that grew only on the bark of the Sacred Tree. The shamans used it for smoking or chewing and put it in the palm wine during the sacrifices. Akamui reached out and broke a small luminous piece from the large mushroom just above his head, then put it in his mouth and chewed it slowly. It tasted sour at first, and then the strong, bitter savor stung his tongue. He stayed still for a while with his eyes closed. His head was spinning and his thoughts drifted away. After a long moment of silence, he whispered: “Please, Great Kepolo, the strongest of all gods, listen to my prayer. I beg you on my knees, oh, Almighty: help me win back the respect of my tribe; make me an elder or a chieftain; please give me a woman who will bring me a son, Almighty; only you know how much I covet a boy! If you do that for me, I swear to sacrifice to you three young boys from the Taraho tribe, your favorite one... Please, give me a sign, greatest of the greatest gods, and show me the way to my destiny...”

Akamui stayed in a daze for a long time, staring at the green-brownish bark. His lips continued moving, but no sound was coming out. The world reeled before his eyes and made him heave.

He focused all his attention on the rustling of the leaves. Now, the clarity of his hearing was incredible—he could discern every single sound to such a degree

that he had the impression that he could hear the ants walking on the branches. The rattle of the bones above him was banging in his head, stronger than the big gong. The clanging overwhelmed him and carried him away. Now he felt light as a feather, free of his body, like a loose leaf from the tree, tossed by the wind and floating aimlessly in the air. At one moment, he was scudding down, almost touching the ground; the next he flew up and drifted high above the crown; then, he descended earthward and lost himself in the green, rustling leaves... Two firebugs were chasing each other just in front of him. He fixed his mind on the blinking yellow lights, which grew bigger and bigger until a bright light exploded in his brain and he found himself in front of Lalago's hut. His mother was weeping. She handed him a crying baby, wrapped in bloody clothes, and in his head rang her sobbing voice,

“It's a boy... I'm so sorry, son!”

Akamui was about to ask her why she was sorry for such good news when the scene changed abruptly, and he saw himself hunting into the jungle with an eight- or nine-year-old curly-haired boy, clutching a spear in his hand. They were after a wild boar and Akamui was teaching him how to read the trail.

The setting shifted again, and a third vision appeared. Now the boy was tied to the big stony altar, his legs and arms spread horizontally. Heavy rain poured down. A flash of lightning lit up the hundreds of warriors with burning torches who swung their bodies under the rhythm of the drums. The Sacred Tree hung ominously over his son while Akamui raised his knife to sacrifice him to Kepolo.

“No!” Akamui cried out and shook his head, crossing the distance from the future to present in a blink of an eye. He lay under the tree again, numb with shock. A deep, guttural voice, coming from the rustling leaves, whispered in his ears.

“Soon you'll have a son, brave Akamui. This boy belongs to me. I want you to sacrifice him to me the moment he succeeds in his warrior's proof. Once he kills his first foe, he must taste human flesh and drink his enemy's blood before I accept

him.”

“Please, spare me, Almighty Kepolo,” whispered Akamui, shaking from head to toe. “I know you are great in your plans. Let my son be!”

“I’ll give you five sons, brave Akamui,” the leaves rustled in his ears. “I claim the first one. He will be your gift for me. Prove your respect, and tomorrow, before the day runs out, I’ll make you a member of the Council. Furthermore, the day you sacrifice your son to me, you’ll become the new chieftain. Promise me your firstborn, young Akamui. Be my faithful warrior!”

“Do I have a choice, Almighty?” Akamui whispered.

“Of course, you do,” the leaves hissed. “That is the beauty of being human—you can choose your path. Your side. Free will, as it is... But do you have guts to stand against me, little Akamui? Stick with me and I’ll lift you to eminence. Refuse to serve me and I will crush you. You will be a miserable coward, despised and repudiated by everyone. Do we have an agreement, young Akamui? Make your vow now.”

Akamui was trembling like a leaf. Atavistic fear crept inside him, giving him goosebumps. The top of his head was prickling and, if he hadn’t shaved his hair to the skin, it would have been standing straight. He had never felt so afraid.

Unable to move, with a heart torn with grief, he uttered, “Let your will be done, Almighty Kepolo, ruler of our destiny and master of our tribe. I will sacrifice my firstborn son to you right after his warrior’s proof.”

A strong blast of wind swished in the crown of the great tree, and in a flash, another vision swam before Akamui’s eyes. A girl crept out of the sea and crawled on the sandy shore.

“I see your sincerity,” whispered *Rakapi’s* leaves. “Go to the South shore and find Lelani.”

Deep blackness wrapped Akamui in a gentle hug.

When he came to his senses, the moon was shining brightly, high in the sky. He blinked and rubbed his temples as if waking up from a heavy dream. He rose, bowed to *Rakapi*, and rushed toward the beach. Dizzy and confused, not aware of the twigs and branches lashing at his naked body, he ran in the darkness, moving deftly through the jungle, as though led by an invisible force. When finally the cool night breeze whipped his face and he heard the roar of the surf echoing in the distance, he realized that he had reached the shore, although he could not remember for the life of him which path he had chosen. The moonlight cast a mild glow over the beach, bathing the ocean in shimmering gold and making the sands white and lucent. A big round crab scuttled majestically, followed by several smaller whitish ones on their way toward the water. Akamui sank his feet into the cool sand and looked around. About fifty yards away, he saw the outline of a dark bulk near the water. He took out his knife as he approached it cautiously.

It was a girl in her teens, lying prone, half wrapped in long, tangled hair, her face buried in the sand. Akamui sheathed his knife and squatted beside her. He took her by the shoulders, rolled her over, and gazed at her swollen, covered with sand face, all in bruises and scratches. It was hard to tell who she was. Akamui slapped her across the face, but she gave no sign of life. He looked around.

How did she get here? he thought. *I see no boat or raft... Weird... I'll take her home and, if necessary, I'll call my mother.*

He swung the girl with ease on his shoulder and set off stealthily toward his hut. Luckily, he met no one on his way.

Living on the outskirts has its advantages, he thought, as he lay the girl on the floor. He took a small open pot filled with shark oil from the shelf, and hit two flints together several times to give out a spark. The wick caught fire and mild light suffused the room. He brought the lamp close to the limp body, bent down, and moved aside her tangled black hair, staring at the pinched, exhausted face. He

pressed his palm to her cool forehead. She was young, almost a child.

Yes, this is Lelani, indeed... Akamui thought.

He knew her. She was the eldest daughter of an old friend of his, Lairu, who had been killed some time ago. Akamui helped Lairu's wife now and then since he returned from exile, usually supplying her with food when she and her three children were starving. Lelani had disappeared about six moons ago, and nobody had a clue what had happened to her. The Council of Elders conducted a meticulous investigation. They had thoroughly interrogated all her relatives and friends, and combed the entire island for several days without results.

Akamui detached the wooden flask dangling at his waist and sprinkled Lelani's face with water. As he wet her cracked lips, she slowly opened her eyes.

"Glad to see you again, Lelani," Akamui said, "it's been a long time. Where have you been, girl?"

Lelani did not answer. She turned her head and closed her eyes, drifting back into unconsciousness. Akamui pushed her several times and slapped her lightly across the face, but she did not come around.

"I need my mother," he decided and rushed out.

Lalago lived down the hill. When Akamui got in her place, he was met by loud snoring. He grasped her shoulder and shook her.

"Wake up, mother! Get your basket of herbs and ointments and come with me. Somebody needs your help."

"What's going on?" asked Lalago sleepily. "What are you doing here? How did the praying go? Did Kepolo give you a sign?"

"He did. Hurry up!" snarled Akamui. He helped her gather her remedies, grabbed the small covered basket, and hurried out. She trotted behind him, still half-asleep.

When Lalago saw Lelani where Akamui had left her, she let out a cry and

muttered, “Poor thing.”

She kneeled and turned Lelani flat on her stomach, then pulled a small wooden box from the basket. She scooped up a small amount of ointment with the tips of her fingers and rubbed it vigorously onto Lelani’s back. Within seconds, the girl opened her eyes. Lalago rolled her over and, supporting her head, poured some liquid into her mouth. Lelani’s eyes brightened, and she gradually came to her senses.

“Water...” she whispered, and Akamui passed her his flask. She rose a little, leaned on Lalago, and drank eagerly, staring at Akamui, who had bent down, impatiently waiting for her to finish. As she lowered the flask, a wan smile slid onto her lips.

“Thank you, master Akamui,” she whispered.

“Where have you been, Lelani? Tell me what happened to you! We’ve been looking for you for a long time,” asked Akamui anxiously.

“I came from Rocky Island,” croaked Lelani in a husky voice. “I’ve been living there since I left Maniha Komu.”

“What the fuck did you do there?”

“I married a man of the Taraho tribe.”

“You what?” shouted Akamui. “You eloped with a man from Rocky Island? Are you out of your mind? Don’t you know this deed is punishable by death?”

“I do,” uttered Lelani, “and that’s why I’m here. I brought you some important information, Master Akamui. It’s so crucial for the survival of our tribe that I hope bringing it back to the Elders will mean they treat me with clemency.”

“Speak up, girl!” said Akamui, his eyes throwing thunderbolts. “How come you ran away with a Taraho jerk in the first place? Where did you find him?”

“Here, of course. He was a slave; they kept him in the cages at *Kepolo’s belt*. His name was Triko...” Lelani spoke slowly, with a great effort.

Akamui nodded. “I remember the fool.”

“The moment I laid my eyes on him, I knew he was the man of my life,” Lelani continued. “I was ready to die for him... I helped him escape... It was a hardship to get there, and all that for nothing...”

“What are you babbling on about, kid?” Akamui shouted.

Lelani squinted and whispered, “Our people are in deadly danger, master Akamui. The chieftains of the Four Islands have allied against Tipihaos. Now there are fifteen or more tribes, all around the Kepula Penu. They have raised an enormous army, ten times ours, maybe even more...”

“Toadshit!” Akamui yelled. “Where is this army?”

“They rallied on Rocky Island and by the full moon, after they perform their ceremony dedicated to the Moon Goddess, they will set off for Maniha Komo. They vowed to the Moon Goddess to slay us all this time, even the women and the children. Not a single Tipihao alive—this is their oath.”

Akamui leaned at the hut entrance and sat silent for a long time, his gaze boring into the darkness.

“Full moon is in three sunsets,” he muttered to himself, glancing at the sky, where the waxing moon glowed. He turned to Lelani. “Tell me, slut, why did you return? Why did you not stay with your man on Rocky Island?”

“He is dead, that’s why,” said Lelani grimly.

“Go on! What happened?” barked Akamui.

“There was a quarrel about me, between him and a man from Starfish Island,” Lelani brushed her eyes. “The son of a snake leered at me all the time and even groped me more than once. I held my mouth shut. I wanted no trouble... It was not a big deal anyway, but Triko saw him touching me, and...” her voice trailed off. Lalago sat beside her and hugged her, gently grooming her dirty hair.

“They fought, and Triko plunged his knife in the bugger’s ribs,” Lelani continued after a while, sniffing and brushing her eyes. “The jerk fell and didn’t

budge. Then my beloved wiped his knife on his stinking body and bent to tear his necklace, as the winners do. Then, suddenly, the dead man came to life and thrust his knife into Triko's throat... They both died in a pool of blood, one piled over the other. And all that because of me, a stupid fish..." Lelani burst into tears and buried her face in Lalago's breast.

"It's all right, sweetie," murmured Lalago, rocking her gently and caressing her. "The men are the stupid fish, not you. They have no brains, only instincts, these morons; you will understand all that with time. And listen, don't fret too much about your husband—you didn't belong to him, that's why Kepolo gave him a sudden death. You are young; you'll make it through. Here you'll find a strong, handsome man, close to your kin."

Akamui was losing patience. "Cut the crap, will you?" he yelled at his mother. "And you, stop crying and keep talking," he snarled at the girl. "When did your man get killed?"

"It was right after the half-moon, about six or seven sunsets ago," said Lelani, sniffing. "I panicked, didn't know what to do. They would have torn me apart if they found out that two warriors were dead because of me. I ran to the shore and took the same canoe we used when we fled from here. Afterward, I don't remember much—I followed Alina, I drank rainwater and ate nothing for many sunsets. Then my boat hit the reef, and I thought I was dying."

Lelani stopped speaking abruptly and drifted off. Akamui glanced at his mother, who nodded and said, "Go! I'll take care of her."

Akamui ran to the center of the village, straight to the Snakes' Gong. The large, reddish disk hung from a solitary tree. It was with carved wriggling silvery snakes which gleamed in the moonlight. Nobody knew for sure how this strange object had arrived in the village. The story went that it belonged to some pale-skin sailors, who came in ancient times to Maniha Komu in a big sailing boat. According

to the legend, these men taught Tipihaos how to build and steer such boats, cultivate flax, and weave linen sails. They also brought many strange plants and animals, species like boars and snakes, which could be seen nowhere else around the Archipelago but on Maniha Komu. Moreover, the same seamen trained them to make pottery and taught them numbers and the lunar calendar. Based on that, a Tipihao year began with the rainy season, the time of the most intensive rains, and lasted between eleven and twelve full moons.

Akamui dashed straight to the gong. He took the heavy club, which was kept leaning against the tree, and hit the copper disk three times in quick succession—the signal for an emergency meeting of the Council of Elders. After a brief interval, he repeated it two times more, threw the club down, and blended into the forest. Somebody shouted at him from a distance, but Akamui was not interested in discussing his act. Summoning the Council was the prerogative of its members, except in cases of imminent danger. He knew they would go to Kepolo’s belt to check out what was going on, so he rushed to the clearing and hid amongst the shadow of the trees, waiting and keeping a sharp eye on the entrance of the Hive.

The chieftain, Arataki, came first. He opened the heavy wooden door, made of interlaced rods, and left it wide open. From his hiding place, Akamui watched him kneel in the center to strike flints over tinder to light the sacred fire. Akamui remembered the hearth from the time he had been brought before the elders after killing Kalia. It was built in a circle from evenly-sized stones, and the nasty smoke had stung his eyes many times.

The elders used the fire to foretell the will of Kepolo, hence its name: “the foreshadowing fire.” The chieftain always used dry twigs and branches fallen from the Sacred Tree to kindle it. The fire must burn the whole meeting and its purpose was purely practical: during the debates, the elders examined the smoke, thus

guessing Kepolo's will. If it rose straight upward and passed through the small outlet at the top of the roof, it meant that the god agreed with their decisions. Any disturbance in the smoke such as winding, wriggling, or whirling indicated that Kepolo was not pleased and that they must change their decision until the god was satisfied and the smoke began rising straight up again. Akamui remembered how a disturbance in the fumes during his trial had prompted the elders to harshen his sentence.

While the chieftain kindled the fire, the other elders arrived one by one and took their positions around the hearth. Akamui counted nine. He knew there was one vacant place in the Council since *karuli*, the most dangerous snake on the island, bit the old Afari.

As the last two elders appeared and hurried into the Hive, Akamui slipped in after them.

Arataki was standing up and gesticulating nervously, saying in an irritated voice, "... and if none of us summoned this meeting, then who—"

"I have," said Akamui, stepping forward. "I'm the one who hit the gong."

He scanned the men who were sitting cross-legged on shark-skin rugs in a semicircle around the hearth. They all gazed at him in dismay.

"And who are you to do that?" cried out Arataki, "Don't you know that nobody is supposed to touch the Snakes' gong unless it's a matter of life and death?"

"And it is, indeed! I have some crucial information to share with you tonight, and after you hear it, you will all agree that I have acted the right way," said Akamui. His face was passive, but his eyes burned like two black coals in the dark room.

"Speak out then. Come here, before the hearth!" said Arataki.

Akamui stepped up. "Before I reveal to the honorable elders the facts I was given, I want to refer to the law of our ancestors and to claim the vacant place in the Council until the next election," he said firmly.

Silence lingered. Kerully rose with difficulty, supporting himself with his stick, and said in a hoarse voice, “An appointed place on the Council belongs to a man with special merit to his tribe. Tell us what you know; if your tale is worth something and the smoke approves you, we will vote in your favor. However, if you speak nonsense, your punishment will be fifty lashes for summoning us without a justifiable reason. Do the wise elders concur with my proposition?”

The men nodded in silence.

“And you, young Akamui? Do you agree to my terms?”

“I have always appreciated your wisdom and fairness, sagacious Kerully,” said Akamui, bowing. “Let it be as you wish, then. I have been informed that the Four Islands have made a military alliance with the other tribes of Kepula Penu and have gathered considerable forces on Rocky Island. They will wait for the full moon to rise, and after they make their offerings to the Moon Goddess, they will leave for our land, firmly determined to kill us off. I already have an action plan, and if the Council would kindly accept me as a member, I would be glad to share it with you.”

“How do you know all this?” barked Tanuli, who still detested Akamui as strongly as in the day he lost his daughter.

Akamui expected the question. “The almighty Kepolo gave me his signs and led me to the source of my knowledge. Early tonight I went to *Rakapi* to prey, and I had a vision of a girl lying on the south shore. Kepolo told me she had a secret to convey. I ran to the beach and there she was. It turned out to be Lelani.”

Agitated whispering met these words.

“Lelani?” exclaimed Arataki. “Wasn’t she the girl who disappeared some time ago? Where had she been hiding?”

“She told me she had eloped with one captive from Rocky Island.”

“Who exactly?” asked Hamaki, who was in charge of the slaves.

“Triko,” Akamui said.

“Triko? I remember him. He cut trees in the forest with the other slave trash before disappearing mysteriously into thin air,” Hamaki barked.

“Yes, that one,” confirmed Akamui. “The girl admitted that she had helped him flee. Fell in love with him and all that crap. He’s dead now, and she came back with the warning to try to redeem herself. I promised her that nobody would hurt her for her previous mistakes.”

“And who you are to absolve her?” Tanuli shouted. “You have neither the right nor the power to make such a promise! You should have brought her here, instead, so that we could cross-examine her. We should punish her for her betrayal; our law is unequivocal on that matter.”

“And are we sure she’s telling the truth? Imagine if it’s a trap?” asked Ahaki.

“Listen, the girl is very weak. She’s useless right now,” said Akamui.

“How so?” barked Tanuli.

“She lies unconscious, and my mother takes care of her,” Akamui explained. “As for the doubts expressed by the young Ahaki, I am strongly convinced that she is telling the truth because I believe that the Great Kepolo sent her to us as a messenger.

Kerully leaned on his stick, his old body shaking uncontrollably, and croaked, “Some things make sense in this story. First, those fools, the Tarahos and Toragos, do worship the moon. They think everything undertaken at full moon will be crowned with success. Second, Kedia foresaw that the destruction of our tribe would come from Rocky Island. Fortunately, Kepolo is the strongest of all gods. He keeps watch over us and makes us invincible. So, if the girl tells the truth, we need to be prepared. We have to take immediate precautions and lay an ambush for our enemies. Once they set their foot on Maniha Komo, we will strike and kill them off. That is my proposition, wise elders. My talk is over.”

“With all due respect for the wise Kerully, I dare to say that his plan is far

from good,” objected Akamui. “We must not allow our enemies to come and trap us like wild boars in their dens. Lelani told me they outnumber us ten to one. If they attack us on Maniha Komu, they could set the island on fire and chase us like animals. I say we must surprise these stinking frogs the way our ancestors once did. We must go to Rocky Island and hit them when they expect it the least—on the eve of their departure. As I mentioned already, I have a plan on how to do that and if the honorable Council deigns to listen to it...”

“But this is an incredible impudence,” said Keko, a fierce-looking giant whose left ear was missing. He leaped to his feet, licked his thick lips, and brushed his wide, flat nose, from which a bone ring was dangling. “First, Akamui is not a member of the Council, so he has no right to participate in the debates. Second, instead of telling us what to do, let’s make him bring this girl here. We must question her, as the Wise Tanuli suggested! What if she’s lying? What if this is a trap intended to draw us away from familiar territory and help our enemies take the island? The full moon is almost set. We don’t have time to go to Rocky Island and leave our women and children unprotected. My opinion is that the best precaution would be to stay here and to organize our defense. My talk is over.”

Keko slumped down, snorting angrily.

“With all due respect to the Honorable Council, I think Akamui’s plan is excellent,” rose Ahaki.

Akamui looked at him, astonished. Ahaki was in his late twenties, the youngest member of the Council, which was unusual, considering that the appropriate age for this position was at least ten years older. He was of medium height, with short hair, and the only one in the room with no tattoos or dangling bones on his body. His only decoration was a necklace of wild boar tusks, about a dozen, attached on a leather strap. Between the tusks were strung beads of shark teeth. Akamui had heard that Ahaki killed all the beasts only with his knife, a

remarkable feat in any case.

“It’s a fair play,” he liked to say. “They have their teeth, and I have my knife. Let the best one win.” Thus, he received the nickname Kailalele, which meant “The fair hunter.” Ahaki was highly esteemed for his ingenuity, bravery, and intellect, but the exact merit that had ensured him a place in the Council was a mystery for Akamui.

“There are still three days to the full moon,” continued Ahaki, “If we set off tonight with our fastest sailing boats, we will reach Rocky Island the night before their departure. Nobody would expect us, and they will all die, once and for all.”

“What about the outposts? How are we to go unnoticed past the lookouts?” shouted Hamaki.

“As I said, I have a plan...” started Akamui, but his voice was drowned by the din that exploded. Now everybody was speaking simultaneously, gesticulating, crying, rolling their eyes, spitting on the floor, and nobody listened to anybody else. The hubbub was getting out of hand when Arataki bellowed, “Enough!”

Silence reigned over the room.

“There is only one way to find out if the girl lies and which plan is better,” snapped Arataki. “We need to perform the ritual and to ask Kepolo through the foreshadowing fire!”

They all nodded in agreement. The chieftain walked to the remote corner of the room. Arataki was in his late thirties, tall and slender, taunt like a bow-string and quick as a snake. Unlike the other Tipihaos, his hair was shoulder-length, something regarded as being very unpractical for the fighting tactic. The women, however, went crazy for him—he was the only man with five official wives on the island, not to mention the countless mistresses.

Arataki reached the far end of the room, where on a grayish-white sharkskin stood an about a height of a man replica of the Sacred Tree. Around the trunk were

scattered many objects, amid them a long pipe, several small leather purses, necklaces made of small bones, a few shapeless wooden objects, and a leather hat with a crane affixed to its top. A spear with an impaled skull leaned against the trunk. Just beside it lay an impressive headdress, consisting of a semicircle of long colorful feathers.

Arataki put the headdress on, took the long pipe, stuffed it with some herbs from one of the leather purses, snatched the long spear, and returned, walking solemnly. The feathers, which belonged to the divine parrots named *manuka lani*, were remarkable, colored from deep red through bright yellow to deep blue, each one of them two handspans long or longer.

Transformed into a swaying parrot's tail, Arataki approached the hearth with ceremonial steps, raising the spear up and down. He circled the hearth three times on the left and three times on the right, then stopped, thrust the spear into the ground, squatted, and lit the pipe with a coal from the glowing ambers. He took a deep draw and puffed out a great amount of reeking smoke, then passed it to the oldest of the elders, Kerully, who inhaled before handing it to Tanuli, the next oldest, and so on.

During this ritual, Akamui stood upright and watched them. Nobody gave him the pipe. It circled three times, and finally Ahaki passed it back to the chieftain, who laid it on the ground. Arataki took the spear and circled the hearth three times left and right again. Having done that, he stopped in front of the elders, turned toward the miniature *Rakapi*, kneeled, raised the spear, and cried out:

“Oh, God Kepolo, the greatest of the greatest gods, the one who gives us strength and power to rule over our foes. Show us the way, Almighty, and lay your wisdom upon us. We ask you now with all the humbleness in the world: should we accept Akamui, a skillful warrior and a brave man, as a member of the Council?”

The flame flickered slightly, but the smoke moved up straight.

“Almighty Kepolo looks favorably on Akamui's demand,” cried out Arataki.

“Does it mean that Lelani’s story is true and we are in deadly danger?”

The smoke did not change.

“Give us your will, All-Powerful Kepolo, leader of our destiny and protector of our people. Tell us how we ought to confront our foes. Should we take the advice of the old and wise Kerully and wait for them at home?”

The flames suddenly swung, as if a drought passed through the hut. The smoke whirled around and crawled toward Kerully. All the men let out a gasp.

Arataki cried excitedly, “Give us a sign, oh, Almighty, the greatest God of all times! Should we go to Rocky Island and surprise our enemies there?”

The smoke rose straight through the outlet.

“Thank you, god Kepolo, our protector and wise advisor! We understood your signs and we’ll obey your will,” cried Arataki, raising the spear higher, its feathers swinging widely as he bowed. All the men did the same thing. Then Arataki stood up and walked at a solemn pace to return the spear, the headdress, and the pipe to their places in the corner. Once there, he kneeled and bowed again to the Sacred Tree.

When he returned to the hearth, he hugged Akamui and said, “Welcome to the Council of Elders, warrior Akamui. We are glad to accept such a smart and noble man between us.”

All the elders but Tanuli got up one by one and congratulated Akamui, who was glowing with pride, his eyes shining in the darkness. He took the vacant place between Ahaki and Hamaki and, with a thumping heart, tried to focus his attention on the chieftain.

“Ahaki will prepare the boats,” said Arataki. “We will sail before dawn, and thus we will be able to get to Rocky Island in time to surprise them at the moment they perform their ceremony. Keko will organize the men—I want everyone who has passed his warrior's proof to be a part of the expedition. Hamaki and Tanati, you

will go to Kedia's cave for confirmation.

“Considering that warrior Akamui is now in Kepolo's good grace, and as we are all aware of his former feats and his miracles of courage, I appoint him as my first commander. We will be glad to hear your plan, brave Akamui, and create a detailed attack strategy.”

CHAPTER III

LAIA

The colossal cliff of Petrel's Atoll towered above the shimmering water. From three distinct vantage points, the lookouts of the Taraho tribe watched with raising concern the approaching boat, her bow decorated with a full yellow moon—the totem of their allies, the Torago people. Impeded by the falling twilight, they could not make out the painted faces of the men in the boat, but they could see the white warpaint in the darkness.

Kimo, the commander of the Taraho lookouts, didn't like it. According to plan, it had been at least ten sunsets since the Toragos arrived at Rocky Island, so a boat drifting alone at night was more than suspicious. Kimo whistled sharply, and eight men gathered at the cliff overhanging the sea within a minute.

"I smell a rat, boys," Kimo said. "Keep your eyes peeled and be extremely careful. These three are probably from Torago tribe like they claim to be, but the timing is weird."

"All the Toragos are already on Rocky Island. There's something wrong here," grunted one of the guards.

"Aho and Liko, you go down the cliff and keep your bows ready to cover the others," ordered Kimo. "Amari, take four men and hide in the bushes around the shore. You'll lay in ambush, and once they beach the canoe, you'll swoop down on them, tie them up, and bring them here. We'll take them to Rocky Island to see what their story is. Akeru, you stay with me!"

The men gave stern nods and disappeared in different directions while the commander and Akeru worked their way up until they reached a patch of small flat

ground, the highest point on the atoll and an excellent observation spot. A huge stack of wood sheltered with big stones was set up there, ready to be lit. This was the signal fire, which the lookouts had to ignite if it appeared that Rocky Island might be in danger.

Akeru and Kimo crawled toward the edge of the cliff and looked at the shore. The full moon was rising from the east, bathing the sea in soft golden light, and they had a clear view of the boat coming toward the island.

“The cloudless night is a good omen,” said Kimo, observing the sky. “We have to set off immediately after we capture our visitors if we want to attend the ritual. I’ll leave only Amari with two men for the night watch.”

“Do you think we’ll get there on time?” asked Akeru.

“I hope we will. The ceremony will start when the moon levels with the Albatross’s Peak, so we have plenty of time. Right after the sacrifice, if the omens are favorable, we will set off for Half-Moon Island.”

While they talked, the boat reached the shore, and the three men inside jumped in the water. As soon as they dragged her up on the beach, the guards leaped out of hiding and charged with their spears raised.

“Lie down! Put your hands behind your heads!” barked Amari.

The strangers from the boat obeyed at once. “It’s all right, we’re your allies, from the Torago tribe,” shouted one of them in the common archipelago language. “We left late, and the current carried us away, so we lost the course. Take us to the chieftain Moholi, he’ll confirm.”

“My intention, precisely,” smirked Amari. “Tie them up!”

“Seriously, men! What a hearty welcome! Where are your manners?” the captive complained while the lookouts were tying their hands behind their backs.

Something’s wrong here. Amari’s mind was racing as he pressed his knee between the man’s shoulders and deftly fastened the rope. *I’ve never seen such*

submissive jerks, mocking and arrogant instead of scary or angry. All their heads shaved... But wait, all Toragos have a shoulder-length—

A wild yank at his hair broke his stream of thought, and sharp pain burst in his throat. The blood gushed out and choked his horrified scream.

Akeru and Kimo lay flat on their stomachs on the bare cliff and watched as their men tied up the intruders. The evening breeze lashed their faces and roared in their ears, so they avoided speaking. With brisk movements, Akeru touched the commander's hand and pointed at the beach.

“There's something weird about these Toragos, but I can't figure out what is it,” he said, putting his mouth close to Kimo's ear.

“Yeah, they're somehow different,” Kimo replied. “Yes, I know what! It's the hair. The men of the Torago tribe never shave their heads, they braid their—”

“Toadshit!” exclaimed Akeru.

As the guards were binding the captives' hands, a dozen black shadows crawled from the water. Noiseless and quick, they pounced at the lookouts and slit their throats, then cut the ropes around their friends' wrists before all of them disappeared together into the jungle. It happened so fast that both men watching the scene barely had time to grasp what was going on.

“Tipihao cannibals,” whispered Akeru, horrified. “Moon Goddess, we're doomed.”

“Run to the bonfire! Move!” shouted Kimo.

They dashed madly toward the pile of logs, kneeled, and fervently started striking the flints with shaking hands. Once the tinder caught fire and the dry grass crackled, they bent and blew until the first flame began licking the thick lumber.

Meanwhile, the Tipihaos, who could smell the smoke from a mile away, were already there. Akeru and Kimo didn't even hear them coming. They were still

blowing on their knees when several spears hit them in their backs and sent them into the pile of wood. The logs scattered as their blood extinguished the fire.

A sturdy man, tattooed from head to toe, straddled the dead men and urinated over the corpses, giving his contribution to the putting out of the smoldering wood. Satisfied, the man lingered there as his friends dispersed down the cliff in search of other survivors, watching the shore, when suddenly the last two enemy lookouts, Aho and Liko, appeared from the forest. They sprinted toward their own beached canoes, waving their bows.

The man brought his fingers to his mouth, whistled sharply two times, and ran toward the shore. The escapees pushed one of the canoes into the water and started rowing desperately when several Tipihaos appeared at the beach and threw themselves into the sea. They swam with rhythmic strokes, shortening the distance swiftly. Soon they reached the boat and turned it upside down. The water churned and boiled, and then everything went still.

A little later, after thoroughly combing the atoll for survivors, the Tipihaos set off for Rocky Island, where they would deal with the guards in the same fashion as at the Petrel's Atoll outpost. The tactic was simple, but it always worked perfectly. At first sight of land the men dived, leaving only two or three on board. The divers approached the shore invisibly, thanks to thin bamboo pipes which they used to breathe whilst hiding under the water until the perfect moment to strike.

The tattooed man who pissed on fire took one of the lookouts' canoes and rowed in the opposite direction for a long time before reaching Seagull Islet, a bare rock crowded with sea birds. It was the most remote piece of land westward of the Turtle Archipelago, which was not claimed by any tribe. Now instead of seagulls, it teemed with Tipihao's sailing barks. The man neared the first one and cried to the men inside, "The way is clear!"