

## *Racing the Dark*

# *Racing the Dark*

Alaya Dawn Johnson

A Bolden Book

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AGATE

CHICAGO

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To Lauren,  
*my partner in crime and novel agony aunt.*  
*You don't get to pick your sister,*  
*but you do get to pick your best friend.*

To Scott,  
*who opened up my world*  
*so I could write this one.*



## Prologue

ON THE SECOND NIGHT, the girl who was not yet an angel fell asleep and dreamed. She dreamed of water, thick and viscous as blood, home to what seemed like a thousand terrifyingly alien creatures. They caressed her adult wings as they pulled her deeper into the water and she cried out in pain. She could hardly see them through the murk—but what she glimpsed seemed inverted, impossible, sickening. A disembodied heart with grasping hands. A monstrous fish whose tail had melted into its head. She shrieked and struggled to swim away, but her wings weighed her down, and she sank deeper. When she opened her mouth, the water came flowing in and now it really was blood—metallic, salty (and slightly sweet?). Was it her own? It seemed to be streaming from her back.

She used to love water. Even through all the pain and fear, she remembered that. But the old love had been replaced by terror, and she knew her longing for the past was futile. No, she could not turn back now—she could only plummet. As she descended, the pressure drove at her ears relentlessly. First the left, then the right—she felt them pop and rupture. Her screams tore at her vocal chords, but she could not hear a sound.

And still she sank.

The strange creatures around her grew more substantial, and subtly less menacing. A silent crowd of them accompanied her on her descent, and in their gazes she saw a wary acceptance and—

could that be fear? No one had ever told her it was possible for a spirit to fear a human. But then again, she was more than half spirit herself, this far down—a creature of wind and water and earth and death. Yes, perhaps death most of all.

As they neared the bottom of this ocean of blood and water, she felt a growing anticipation. Something was waiting for her down there. She felt herself sinking into its consciousness as though it were a physical force, at once repelling her and reeling her in. Her limbs jerked and spasmed, while the pain in her back grew more intense. Her wings were the first to touch the mud-soft clay of the sea floor: a sudden, searing pain. When she opened her mouth to scream, she felt the unbearable force emanating from the creature that had been waiting for her. It rushed down her throat, then gripped her heart and her bowels. She would die, she thought. A relief.

*Who are you?* she thought, since she couldn't very well speak, or hear herself even if she could.

To her surprise, the creature eased its bodiless grip and its outline slowly emerged from the sea's red-tinged fog.

This was entirely different from your average dream phantom. It *existed*, in far more concrete terms than any of the spirits that had accompanied her here. And yet, sure as she was of its existence, she had a much harder time comprehending its appearance. Massive, with oddly malleable edges that seemed to shrink and expand at whim. Were those wings she saw, or fins? Or hands? But feathers—of those she was certain—coated its body in slick cerulean and a black dark as octopus ink. Two eyes that seemed almost normal until you actually looked into them and noticed how they reflected your face like shards of a broken mirror, shattering the watcher into infinity. She shrank back at the sight—somehow, in those horrifying eyes, infinity felt like nonexistence.

*Is that death, then, or something beyond it?*

“Both,” the creature said, its surprisingly gentle voice somehow penetrating her thoughts. She shuddered.

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*Who are you? What are you?* Panic, desperation, infinitely reflected in those impossible eyes.

The voice smiled. “You don’t realize, even now?”

A possibility occurred to her. *The waterbird? But why?*

“A glimpse of your future. Do you understand yet, Lana?”

*No. No, no, no.*

“You will.”

And when she awoke, alone except for the death among the long-deserted ruins, the dream seeped from her mind, wrung free by blood and pain and fear like water from a rag.

PART I

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*Bloody Sunrise*

THE WET SAND BETWEEN HER LEGS was stained dark red. The insides of her thighs were sticky with it, but she resisted the urge to rub the blood away. It was her first, and it must remain there until cleansed by the ocean itself. Lana curled her toes in the sand and shivered as the wind lashed the early-morning drizzle against her naked body. It was a sun shower—half the sky was dark and cloudy while dawn brightened the rest. A good omen, Lana supposed, although to be certain she would have to ask Okilani later.

It seemed as though everyone on the whole island had turned out for her trial of womanhood, although common sense told her it was only half as many. The elders were there, of course, dressed in sea-green robes and leibo, the traditional diving pants that Lana too would earn this day if she could harvest her own mandagah jewel. At their head stood Okilani. She was more than sixty years old, but her beauty had always dazzled Lana. Her long, bone-white hair blew around her shoulders, brushing against her necklace of the finest mandagah jewels. At their center was a jewel of bright orange—the color of the sunset, and the rarest of all because it could only be taken from a dying fish. Its harvest years ago, at Okilani's own first blood, had marked her for life.

Lana bit her lip as a particularly harsh gust splashed the cold water against her body. Her stomach was churning so badly that

she was afraid she might vomit if they didn't let her into the water soon. The elders looked as though they were waiting for something, but she couldn't imagine what. Lana squinted in the rain and looked out at the horizon. The wisps of clouds that surrounded the dawn sun looked as though they had been streaked with blood. The color surprised Lana—it was unusual for a sunrise on her island to be so unrelentingly red. And stranger still that she would have her first blood during such a dawn. She had awakened two hours earlier with a terrible stomachache and a strange wet sensation between her legs. For all she had been expecting it, she had taken nearly ten minutes to realize what had happened. She had rolled off of her pallet and onto the cold wooden floor and stared at the worn ceiling beams. It crossed her mind to keep her first blood secret until the next month—she didn't feel at all ready for her first solo dive. She could barely hold her breath for a minute and a half, let alone the four and even five minutes her mother and Okilani could accomplish. How could she possibly complete her dive? And coming up without a mandagah jewel would be a terrible shame for both her and her family. Now that she was thirteen, Lana was too old for her age to be an excuse. She had lain on the floor in a state of terrible indecision until her mother entered the room and solved the problem for her. She knew her mother would not consider even the idea of spurning tradition and hiding her daughter's first blood until the next month. So Lana had stood up and tried to pretend that she was ready for her rite of passage.

As she waited on the sand, she was still attempting to convince herself.

“Iolana bei'Leilani.”

The sound of Okilani's powerful voice booming above the surf made Lana's head snap up as though it had been tied to a puppet string. Okilani was using her formal name. The trial was starting. Lana hadn't thought it possible, but her heart started beating faster, and her stomach gave another lurch.

“Today it will be decided whether you will attain womanhood

or remain a child. You have your first blood—what remains to be seen is whether you can pass the test that all who wish to harvest the sacred mandagah jewels must face. Are you ready, Iolana?”

Lana swallowed. She wanted to shake her head and run straight back home, but she felt her mother’s eyes on her back and knew that was not an option. She took a deep breath, raised her head, and stared straight into Okilani’s wide brown eyes.

“I’m ready,” she said.

The elders stood behind her as she walked alone towards the surf. Lana wished that she could have been initiated at sunset instead—the tide always made diving at dawn more difficult than in the evening. She bit her lip. No time for regrets now. She had never entered the water for a dive alone before—her mother or one of the other experienced divers had always accompanied her, to show her how to breathe properly on the surface and how to maintain her air supply under the waves, how to find the mandagah fish and then carefully harvest the jewels hidden in the tiny pouches inside their mouths. It was a delicate process, and one that could only be accomplished in early morning and late evening, which is when the mandagah schools would move from one shoal to another. Lana stared at the blood-red sunrise and balled her hands into fists. She couldn’t fail. Despite the steady rain, she was startled to see the silhouette of one of the sacred outer islands—the death shrine. She shivered. It was rarely visible from the shore, even on clear days.

Feeling the anticipation of the crowd waiting behind her, she stepped far enough into the surf that the waves came up to her waist. With a holler that was as much a cry for strength as it was the traditional diver’s prayer to the water spirit, she bent her knees and sucked in air until it hurt. Before fear could force it from her lungs, she dove.

She pushed herself against the undercurrent with powerful strokes, plunging as deep as she could. The water around all of these small islands was fresh, not salty. This allowed the mandagah fish to flourish, which in turn made it possible for Lana’s people

to harvest the jewels and trade them on the main islands. The mandagah, and the fish trade in general, sustained the islanders in these remote regions. Lana felt her ears beginning to hurt and used a small amount of her air to ease their pressure. She opened her eyes.

She had reached perhaps thirty feet below the surface. All around her was the beautiful living coral that she had become so familiar with, growing up here and diving with her mother. She began to relax—this wouldn't be so difficult. At first, she simply swam around the reef, hoping to find something that caught her eye. The mandagah could be tricky to see because their colors blended so well with the ocean floor. She paused. Had something moved below her? As slowly as she dared, she swam closer to the sandy bottom and peered underneath a sharply jutting piece of coral.

She almost exhaled in relief, but caught herself. She had found one. But why was it alone? She hadn't seen any others near it moving together to another shoal. The large fish stared at her with its oddly human-like face, while she contemplated how to harvest its jewel. Usually she had to grasp and hold them to prevent them from getting away, but something was strange about this fish—its sunken eyes made her think it didn't have the energy to move at all. Unsure of what else to do, she gently moved her fingers towards its thick lips. She had barely touched it, let alone started the process of prying out the jewel, when its mouth sprang open of its own accord. Her mind went numb. Mandagah fish never willingly surrendered their jewels. Before she could even recover from that surprise, the fish moved its head slightly, and not one but two jewels fell from its mouth into her palm. Her heart pounded, and the churning in her stomach changed into some strange mixture of excitement and dread.

She had found a dying mandagah fish. Only the dying mandagah produced two jewels—and only on the rarest occasions were they of two different colors. This mandagah, still staring at her passively, had first produced a striking jewel of common blue. The

other, however, was orange-red, like the color of the dawn above the surface of the water. The only other person Lana had ever heard of who'd recovered a jewel liked this was Okilani; it had been her discovery of that orange jewel that had marked Okilani for training as an elder. Lana's mind whirled. Even though she knew how proud her mother would be if Lana was marked with the distinction of becoming an elder, Lana herself didn't want that responsibility—she wanted the freedom to travel to other islands when she got older, and to marry, and make love to a man. For an instant Lana wanted nothing more than to toss the strange red jewel into the sand and pretend that she had never found it. But she had received a willing gift from a dying mandagah and she could not throw it away. She couldn't even leave it here and come back for it later, because by then the sea would have claimed it. Mandagah jewels, once yielded by the fish that had formed them, had to be cured right away—otherwise they dissolved within a day.

Lana felt herself growing light-headed, and she realized she would run out of air if she didn't surface soon. How long had she been under? Two minutes? Three? Certainly longer than she'd ever managed before. The red jewel felt like it was burning her hand. She made a decision. Whatever happened, she could not let anyone else know she had found it. She would keep it and cure it herself, but it would be her secret. No one—especially not Okilani—could know that she had been marked.

Lana looked at the mandagah. Its eyes were fluttering, and she realized it was dying even as she watched. Impulsively, she brushed its mouth with her finger and then touched it to her forehead. She had to leave. Taking one last look at the dying fish, she kicked off and swam with powerful strokes back to the surface.

Leilani had endured the first two minutes in silence, radiating an outward appearance of calm. Inwardly, she wondered if her daughter was at all prepared for this task. Lana could barely hold her breath for a minute, and only luck would allow her to harvest

a mandagah jewel in such a short time. After two minutes had passed, she turned to her husband Kapa, panic in her eyes. He looked worried as well, but pressed her hand in a way that made her keep silent. She kept staring at the choppy water, hoping that any second her daughter would surface triumphantly, holding a mandagah jewel. Another minute passed. Was it possible that her daughter had actually chosen to drown rather than face the shame of surfacing without a jewel? Hot and cold chased each other across her skin. She should have let Lana hide her first blood and wait until she was ready. Had she killed her only child with her stubborn desire to follow tradition? Kapa looked at her again, this time with a similar sort of terror in his eyes. She stared at the waves breaking on the shore. Nothing. It had been nearly four minutes since Lana dove. Damning propriety, Leilani left her husband and strode forward to the line of elders. Okilani broke their ranks and turned to meet her.

“Could she have drowned herself?” Okilani asked.

Leilani felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine ... please, let me dive and save her. It’s been too long.”

Okilani’s face was grim. “Not yet, Leilani. The rite cannot be considered failed yet. She has only been under four minutes. Your normal dive is at least that long and we’ve both done as long as six. We cannot break the rite until there is no possibility she has succeeded.”

“But she’s young! She’s never managed for longer than two minutes. Do you want her to die?”

Leilani’s shout echoed across the beach. Everyone was staring at the two of them, but Leilani didn’t care how much they talked later.

“Lei,” Okilani said softly. She had opened her mouth to say something else when they both heard Kapa yell. He was pointing to the water.

Leilani sank to her knees in the sand.

Lana had surfaced, and in her upraised hand she held a blue mandagah jewel, glinting in the sunlight.

Her father rushed toward her as she climbed out of the ocean. Lana was exhausted—far more exhausted than she had felt moments before, under the water. He handed her a robe, which she wrapped around herself gratefully. He made as though to carry her, but she pushed him away. She was a woman now, after all. Her left hand was balled in a tight fist, which she made an effort to distract from by holding out the normal jewel in her right hand.

“How ... long was I under?” Lana asked her father as they walked toward Okilani. Her mother was standing next to the elder, with wet sand stains visible on the knees of her leibo.

He looked down at her, with a small smile, and she saw the relief in his tense face. “Nearly six minutes,” he said.

*Six minutes?* She pushed the shock from her mind; she had reached Okilani. She allowed her father to step away from her, and then she bowed slightly to the elder.

“I have passed the test, honorable elders. I return with this jewel, taken from the mouth of a sacred mandagah.” She thought of the ancient creature and the way it had stared at her, how it had given her its jewels as a gift. It was probably dead by now, she realized.

Okilani took the jewel and stared hard at Lana. She cringed inwardly under Okilani’s gaze but managed to keep her face calm. The elder glanced at Lana’s tightly closed left fist and then at her eyes. Blood was rushing in Lana’s ears, but she met Okilani’s stare. She could not let Okilani discover the red jewel. The elder could suspect all she wanted, but Lana would not betray that secret. To Lana’s relief, Okilani looked away from her and toward the other six elders.

“She has passed the test. Do any object?”

There was silence.

“Very well. Iolana bei’Leilani, you have passed the rite of womanhood. You are now, and for the rest of your life, a diver for the sacred fish and a disciple of the water spirit.”

There was a cheering on the beach, but it seemed like an insignificant buzz in her ears. She had passed the test. She had become a diver—like every woman in her family had been for generations. She should be happy, or at least relieved. But all she could think about was finding some excuse to get away and hide the red jewel in her left hand before it was discovered.

Her mother came up to her and hugged her tightly. Lana was shocked to feel the sudden wetness of a tear on her forehead. Was her mother crying?

“I’m ... I’m so proud of you, Lana,” she said.

Lana realized suddenly how long those almost six minutes must have been for her mother. She hugged her back just as tightly.

“Don’t worry, Mama. I’m fine.”

Her mother broke away and smiled, wiping her eyes.

“This is an incredible specimen,” Lana heard, and she turned to see Aya, one of the other elders, reaching out to hand her blue jewel back to her. “Larger than normal, and such beautiful swirls of color. I imagine it will be even more breathtaking once it’s cured. Such a good omen—don’t you agree, Okilani?”

Okilani looked speculatively at Lana and at her jewel. “Perhaps.”

“Honorable elders,” Lana said, and bowed again, “I’m afraid I am a little strained from my dive. If it would be permissible ...”

Okilani smiled slightly. “Of course, Lana. You may go rest.” She raised her voice so it could be heard further away. “Tonight we celebrate Iolana’s passage to womanhood with a feast.”

Back home with her parents, Lana ran to her room as soon as they’d climbed the stairs and quickly placed the red jewel under her straw pillow. She would have to cure both jewels soon. She paused, her hand hovering in the air above the hidden jewel. For the first time, she was struck by the implications of her deception. The sacred fish had marked her as one for the spirits. Her mother would be horrified to learn that she would subvert her destiny like this. Leilani would turn it into a privilege, an honor,

but Lana already knew the honor cost too much. Maybe she was irresponsible, maybe she was selfish, but even now the thought of going back to Okilani and admitting what she had found was untenable. She wanted her life to be her own, not the spirits'. She wanted to make her own decisions. She wanted ... for a moment, the face of Kohaku, her teacher from the outer islands, flashed across her mind. She wanted love. She had enough defiance to hide this—even though she couldn't bring herself to destroy the mandagah's unwanted gift entirely. She heard her mother's soft footsteps outside her room.

"Lana? Can I come in?"

She made certain the red jewel was completely hidden, and then pulled back the curtains. Her mother was holding some rags that Lana was afraid she recognized.

"Why don't we sit down?" her mother said, gesturing toward Lana's sleeping mat.

Lana shook her head. "I'll just bleed all over it again."

Her mother smiled. "All right. I just wanted to show you how to use these. And don't grimace like that. It's part of becoming a woman."

Lana suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.

"You have to face it sometime," Leilani said. Her reproofing expression was ruined by the slight smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

Lana laughed a little herself. "All right, Mama."

She went outside to the pump to clean herself off after her mother had explained how to swaddle herself in the women's rags. Lana felt uncomfortable, but she supposed she would get used to it eventually. The sky had cleared since she had returned home, and even this early in the morning it felt like it would be one of the hotter days of the season. As she pumped water into a large bucket, she wondered if she should heat it, but the air was already too hot to take the trouble. She poured some of the water over her body, shivered with the icy shock of it, and then grabbed the half-used bar of

soap set beside the bucket on the wooden platform. She scrubbed her entire body, making sure to clean the last of the dried blood from her thighs before she tackled her long, tangled hair. She left a good deal of it in the comb by the time she managed to get it into some semblance of order. She tugged at it more impatiently than normal, eager to get started on curing her jewels. She knew that she still had a little time, but was irrationally afraid that they would start rotting immediately.

When she stepped outside, still moving uncomfortably in her swaddling, she noticed that her mother had laid some new clothes out for her on the porch. She smiled a little—finally, she would get to wear her own leibo, like the other divers on her island. She recognized this particular pair—they had belonged to her grandmother. Lana pulled them on and then fastened the buttons. They were a little long—reaching to her mid-calf instead of just below her knees—but they actually fit her in the hips. She checked to make sure that no one was watching and then twirled around quickly.

When the women dove, they wore just their leibo without a shirt, but her mother had laid out something special for her celebration. It was a shirt of sheer fabric—cotton, she realized, which meant it must be quite expensive since it had to be imported—hemmed by shiny bits of seashells. She put it on and then let down her hair.

“You look beautiful, Lana.”

Lana whirled, her heart pounding. Her mother stood behind her on the stairs to the porch. Her arms were crossed, and she was laughing.

“How ... how long have you been standing there?”

Leilani smiled. “They’re a little long for you, but I don’t suppose you’ll mind. Your grandmother was taller.”

Lana put her hands in the deep pockets and imagined filling them with mandagah jewels. The pants were that peculiar shade of white only achieved by constant use under the harsh island sun.

“Thank you,” she said.

Her mother shrugged. “They’re your birthright. Now, why don’t you go and cure that jewel? If you do it now, it should be finished by tomorrow.”

Lana nodded and went back inside to get her shoes. She brushed some of the sand off her feet before she entered her room—sand tended to fill the room like floodwater unless she was careful. She shut her curtains and made absolutely sure her mother was still outside before moving her pillow and taking the red jewel from underneath it.

Her hand trembled as she picked it up. She could hardly believe what had happened just a few hours ago—her decision to hide it already weighed heavily. She put both jewels in her deep pockets, tied on her sandals, and ran outside. The quicker she finished curing them, the quicker she could forget that the entire incident had ever happened.

She ran over the hot sand to the shed where they kept the curing supplies. Her father sat inside, diligently working on one of his tortoise shell lutes. She groaned inwardly. How was she going to get him to leave?

He looked up as she approached and smiled. “You look beautiful, Lana. Just like your mother did that day.”

Lana blushed. “Please, Papa!”

“I guess you want to cure your jewel, don’t you? Well, I’ll leave you in peace. Just let me finish stringing this.”

Lana watched as he delicately pulled the shiny cured mandagah tail hair over the length of the tortoise shell. Making and playing instruments was her father’s passion—any time he could spare from fishing was spent in this shed. On the days when Eala, one of the older divers, opened her large house to sell palm wine, he spent hours playing for her customers in the makeshift village watering hole. Lana’s mother supported Kapa’s passion for music, but Lana sometimes got the sense that Leilani wished her husband could have pursued a more profitable hobby. But Leilani always harvested the mandagah tail hairs that Kapa used to string his instruments. Once cured, they produced a sound finer than any

other material. He sold a few every year during trading season, but they hardly earned enough money to justify all the time he spent making them. For her part, Lana didn't mind at all, because her father used his instruments to make beautiful music.

Kapa ran his fingers experimentally over the strings. He closed his eyes as he listened to them reverberate inside the tortoise shell and smiled a little in satisfaction. Later he would place the sliders over the strings that would produce a wider range of notes.

He stood up. "I'm going over to Eala's for a while."

"I'll see you tonight, right?"

He smiled. "Of course, how could I miss it? Congratulations on today, Lana. We are both ... your mother and I ... incredibly proud of you."

Lana fiddled with her ear. "Silly parents. Now get going."

Kapa laughed and left the shed.

Lana shut the door carefully before she pulled out the two jewels. She laid them on a piece of dry canvas that she had spread out on the worktable. Then she hauled out a sack of heavy curing salt from one of the lower cabinets. Salt was best for curing mandagah jewels, but it had to be used carefully, because it was the worst of bad luck to drop any salt on the sand. After all, mandagah were freshwater fish, and even the smallest bit of salt could kill them. Kohaku, who had come to their little island from the great Kulanui on Essel, would call that sort of thinking "rustic superstition," but Lana was still superstitious enough to be careful. After all, it wasn't as though Kohaku would have to know. She cringed at the thought of his glare of withering condescension directed towards her. She thought he liked her—maybe even respected her. Well, she hoped, anyway. She bit back a sudden smile and shook her head. She hoped.

Balancing the heavy bag precariously on one knee, Lana used her left hand to scoop out a handful of salt. That ought to be enough for both jewels. The rough white crystals were still cupped in her hand when she lost her balance and bumped into the worktable.

She watched in horror as the red jewel began to roll off the canvas. If it hit the sand, the rotting process would start immediately, and she might not be able to salvage it. With a silent cry, she tossed her handful of salt to the sand and caught the jewel just before it rolled off the table.

“Oh Kai ... water spirit, please, please don’t pay any attention to this. It was just an accident. Please don’t make the water salty!”

She couldn’t be sure if the spirit had heard her, but she couldn’t let the salt linger on the sand any longer than necessary. She struggled to put the heavy salt bag back in the cupboard under the table, and then scooped up as many of the white crystals as she could separate. The rest she muttered a prayer over and used her foot to bury.

Lana’s heart was pounding and she looked around frantically, half afraid that her mother had seen what she had done. No one was there. Her secrets were safe. Her breathing began to return to normal. Besides, Kohaku was probably right; there was no way spilling salt could actually make the water salty. It probably was just a silly superstition.

Lana finished burying both jewels beneath the salt without any further mishaps. Then she pushed up the roof so that the sun could shine down on the salt-covered jewels and finish the curing the process. Covered as they were, she figured that she didn’t have to move the red one to a special place—her parents would never touch her jewel without her permission.

Offering one last silent prayer to the water spirit, Lana left the shed.

It was, to Lana’s relief, a gentle sunset—unlike the violently red dawn that had greeted her dive. The other women—those who had never wanted to become divers, or those who hadn’t passed the test—had spent all day preparing the feast for Lana’s celebration. She was suddenly embarrassed that they would have gone through so much trouble on her behalf, but she could hardly object to it—such celebration was only tradition.

There had been shouts of congratulations and a few toasts—even this early in the evening, the palm wine was flowing freely—when Lana first entered the gathering. Okilani and a few of the other elders greeted her and led her to the area near the large bonfire, where only the elders and the divers were allowed to sit. She felt dazed as she squinted her eyes against its heat. Was she really an adult now? She still felt as much like a child as she ever had. Her parents still treated her the same way. Would she marry now, and start a family of her own? She was still young and didn't have to if she didn't feel ready, but yesterday it hadn't even been a possibility. She knew all about sex, of course. Her mother hadn't thought it proper to leave her daughter ignorant and, in any case—her parents engaged in it frequently and their house was not large. The prospect of it didn't scare her so much as the thought of being so beholden to another person. She had seen the way her parents looked at each other. Their fortunes were connected so tightly they had ceased to exist as entirely separate people. In an abstract way, Lana might want a husband and a family, but thinking of it now, she realized that they would bind her as irrevocably as this morning's discovery. Would it be worth it? Someone handed her a plate heaped high with roasted fish, boiled vegetables, and rice sweetened with ginger root and coconut milk. Lana stared at it blankly.

"It isn't poisoned, dear," said an old woman Lana thought she recognized.

"Oh ... I'm sorry ..."

"You haven't eaten all day, have you?"

Lana shook her head mutely.

The old lady clucked, revealing a sturdy tongue in a mouth lacking about half its teeth. "You're all the same, poor dears. After you come up with your first jewels. Too stunned to even enjoy the food."

Lana visibly shook herself and then smiled. "You're right, I should eat. Enjoy myself."

The lady nodded. "And if you're still feeling nervous, you ought

to smoke some of that.” The lady gestured to the pipe filled with amant weed that was being passed around the circle. Lana had never tried it before. It hadn’t even occurred to her that she would be allowed to, now.

“Maybe ... maybe I will.”

“Well then, eat up.”

Lana picked up a spoon and put some food in her mouth. She stared at the old woman again. She seemed familiar, but Lana couldn’t figure where she might have seen her before.

“It’s good. Thank you.”

The lady chuckled and waved her hand in the air. “It’s nothing, nothing. So long as you’re enjoying yourself, Lana, that’s all I care about.”

Lana smiled nervously. Why was this woman addressing her so familiarly?

“Those leibo, they’re too big on you, you know. You’re a bit shorter than the rest of the family, I suppose. They fit me perfectly.”

“Um ... do I know—”

“That was some discovery of yours, this morning, wasn’t it? I don’t blame you for keeping it a secret. There aren’t many of us who would be willingly marked like that. But that color ... and given to you so freely by a dying mandagah. You may be marked despite what you’ve done, dear. There may be nothing you can do about it. Perhaps you might have been better off hiding your first blood after all. Too late now, of course ...”

Lana’s hands were shaking so badly that she heard her spoon rattling on the wooden plate.

“Who ... are you? How did you know that? Please don’t tell anyone ...”

The lady smiled. Was it Lana’s imagination, or had the gaps in her teeth disappeared? “Oh, don’t worry about me, Lana. I’m just here to wish you luck. And you may need it, at that. You may need it.”

Lana looked around frantically to see if anyone else had heard their conversation.

“Listen—” She turned back and stopped short.  
The old woman had disappeared.

The hand she then felt on her shoulder nearly made Lana drop her food altogether.

“Oh ... Okilani. It’s you.”

Lana didn’t dare ask if Okilani had seen the old woman. Instead, she tried to smooth her features into some semblance of a normal expression. Okilani sat down beside her on the reed mat and gave her a penetrating gaze before she spoke.

“It was just a spirit, Lana,” she said quietly. “A benign one. No need to be so afraid.”

Lana put the food down. She felt like throwing up the spoonful she had eaten.

“You ... you heard, Okilani?” She could barely keep the terror from her voice.

The elder turned to her and patted her hand. “No. I only sensed its presence. It came for you, after all—I wasn’t meant to see it, or hear what it said.”

“Oh.” Lana’s voice was a reedy whisper.

Okilani narrowed her eyes and Lana looked away quickly.

“A spirit?” she asked falteringly. “How is that possible?”

“We’re especially close to the outer death shrine. I’m sure you noticed that it was visible today. Sometimes spirits with particularly strong wills can come back for a short time on special occasions. Did you recognize it?”

Lana considered for a second. “She seemed familiar, but I don’t remember ever seeing her before. But she commented on my leibo ... they were too big, she said. Said that I was short for my family. They had fit her perfectly.”

“Why, it was your grandmother, then. Your mother told me those leibo had been hers.”

“My grandmother?”

“You never met her, after all. She died before you were born. She probably came to wish you luck.”

“That’s ... that’s what she said.”

Okilani stood up and looked back at Lana. “Then you probably need it.”

As her grandmother’s spirit had predicted, Lana felt much better once she smoked some of the amant weed. It made her cough painfully at first, but the other adults just laughed and gave her something to drink. She didn’t even realize at first that it was palm wine they placed in her hands. Between the wine and the amant, she felt little more than a slight twinge of anxiety when she thought of the strange encounter with the spirit.

That amant weed was wonderful, Lana decided as she reclined on a mat by the fire. It made everything seem clearer, somehow. She looked at the moon, so bright and massive in the sky it drowned the light of all but the brightest stars. Something flickered in the corner of her eye and she turned to it. For a second she caught a faint glimpse of her grandmother, her form insubstantial and wavering by the fire. She looked younger this time, but still recognizable. The spirit winked at Lana and then raised her hand in a farewell.

Lana frowned a little and then waved back. The spirit wouldn’t tell anyone Lana’s secret, but her warning worried her a bit, even past the amant weed and palm wine. Her grandmother disappeared. Lana stared at the place where she had been for a few moments and then lay back down on the mat.

“Lana?”

She sat bolt upright, looking around again for her grandmother again, but it was only Kali, who had snuck up to the adult area by the fire. Lana wondered if the others would make Kali leave, but it seemed that they were too preoccupied to notice or bother.

“What is it?” Lana asked. “Here, sit down. I don’t think anyone will care.”

Kali smiled and sat. “Wow, Lana. I can’t believe that you get to sit here now. Do you feel like an adult?”

Lana shook her head. “Not really ... but it’s nice to be close to the fire, I guess. And I like the amant.”

Kali looked wistful. “That sounds great to me. I almost wish that I had been training as a diver, too. I’m a year older than you and I still have to sit with the babies!”

Lana smiled. “Better find yourself a husband quickly, then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Who would I marry now? Kohaku? But I couldn’t do that, could I—you’d have to kill me for stealing your one true love.” Kali looked at Lana’s furious blush and started laughing.

“What ... what are you talking about? Kohaku is our teacher!”

“Don’t tell me. I know that. *You’re* the one who’s always staring at him like a fish.”

“I do not!”

“Well, you like him, don’t you?”

Lana looked away without saying anything.

Kali put her arm around Lana’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. But perhaps, just to make sure, you could let me try a little of that amant ...”

Lana smiled a little. “Sure. Just try not to be too obvious, okay?”

Actually, Kali coughed so much that Aya came over to see what was the matter. She didn’t seem to mind that Lana had given Kali some amant. Afterward, they both sat in companionable silence as Kapa played a traditional song on one of his harps. Lana was almost moved to tears—her father was, in his own way, saying goodbye to the little girl he had raised.

Yaela, the very first mandagah diver, supposedly composed the song a thousand years ago, before humans had bound any of the three great spirits—death, fire, and water. When the capricious nature of the water spirit had threatened to destroy all of the mandagah fish, Yaela had left the island and offered herself as the sacrifice that allowed the water spirit to be bound—imprisoned and thus controlled. On the inner water shrine, the prison that still held the great spirit, officiates left offerings in her memory. “Yaela’s Lament” was the song the legendary diver had written just before she left to be sacrificed—saying goodbye to the great ocean and

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mandagah fish that were her first love. Although a female traditionally sang the song, her father's light falsetto commanded it as well as any woman singer Lana had ever heard:

*Starlight's sweet dance on sand below  
A dance for none, for none will it wait  
What joy tomorrow? I cannot know  
But I'll dive again, beyond the gate*

*This dawn, no jewel lies in my hand  
And I've given all my love too late  
Oh, for one more morning in the sand  
Ere I meet my love beyond the gate*

*Come dawn's red gaze I must leave here  
And the leaving some may think is fate  
But within my heart, love battles fear  
For I do not know what lies beyond the gate*

Lana walked back home slowly beside her parents. She felt a little dizzy, but she wasn't sure if it was because of the amant, the palm wine, or her excitement. Perhaps all three? She looked up at the sky and made her fingers form a circle right above her eye, so it looked as though she had captured the moon within her hands. Giddy laughter left her lips almost involuntarily. Her mother looked at her, opened her mouth, and then shook her head.

"Hurry up, Lana," she said. "You still have school tomorrow, remember."

That night, after her parents had gone to sleep, Lana snuck out of the house—as she had done many times before—to dance beneath the moon. She wasn't sure why she enjoyed doing this so much, except that it made her feel close to something both beautiful and intangible. She heard her father singing "Yaela's Lament" in her head as she twirled in the moonlight. At first she felt joyful—reveling

in how marvelous the day had been, and how strange. But as she continued to dance, she felt almost sick with the knowledge that from now on her life would be irreversibly different. She felt tears come into her eyes and abruptly stopped dancing. What would happen tomorrow? She thought about the red mandagah jewel and more tears sprang to her eyes. Her grandmother might have been right—maybe she was marked despite herself. She couldn't know what it meant, but at this moment it felt like the worst of omens.

Lana fell to her knees in the sand and felt some of the water from the receding tide seep into her leibo.

“Great Kai,” she whispered. “Please let everything be okay.”

She looked out at the ocean to see if there would be any response to her prayer. The waves continued breaking gently on the shore. Nothing changed.

Then Lana realized that even now, in the moonlight, she could still see the outline of the death island.

LANA MADE HER THIRD FULL CIRCLE OVER THE REEF that morning, straining her eyes for the slightest sign of movement over the sandy ocean floor. The other women swimming around her were doing the same, and she knew that the pockets of their leibo were as empty of mandagah jewels as her own. Lana had sensed something was wrong back on the morning of her initiation. She had only seen one fish—and that one was dying. In the six months since, the situation had grown progressively worse. The divers had consulted the elders and performed rituals of supplication to the water spirit, but nothing had helped. Lana couldn't shake the nervous feeling that had settled in her stomach like mildew. The day after her initiation, she had taken her cured jewels and hidden them in her clothes chest—maybe if she never looked at them again, she would be able to pretend that nothing had ever changed. But of course she couldn't. Many of the divers went days without harvesting a thing. Lana had become one of the most productive of the divers, but even she only harvested about one jewel each day. Two years ago, that might have been grounds for removing her privileges as a diver. Back then, ten jewels had been an average harvest. Today, it would be a miracle.

A brief billow of sand on the bottom caught her eye and she pushed herself farther under the water. She smiled—it was a mandagah fish. It began to swim sluggishly away from her, but when she grabbed its tail, it stopped struggling immediately. Had she

somehow found another dying fish? She turned it around. Its eye ridges were still a healthy pink, not the dull gray of the one from her initiation, but it stared at her in that same disconcerting way. She reached with her other hand to pry open its mouth, but its lips wouldn't part. She tried stroking its belly to relax it, but it still refused to open its mouth. Her vision began to go white around the edges—she knew she should surface, but she didn't want to relinquish her find.

Then, without warning, the fish poked its sharp tail-hairs into her arm and wiggled out of her grip with a huge burst of energy. But instead of fleeing, it swam closer to her face. She floated, stupefied, as the fish kissed her forehead and dropped the jewel from its mouth. She reached her hand out and caught it, staring as the fish swam away. She stuffed the jewel in the pocket of her leibo and kicked up off the bottom.

Her hand trembled as she examined her find on the surface, but to her extraordinary relief it was just a white jewel. An unusual color, but not anything that would mark her. She would just have to hope that no one had seen the fish's strange behavior.

For months she had been having recurring dreams about the dying mandagah fish from her initiation. In the dreams, it would be crying—although she knew, of course, that mandagah couldn't cry—and it would always say "Goodbye, Lana. I'm bound to cross the gate." She would touch her finger to its lips and then to her forehead—just like she had done that morning—and then she would wake up. And now a second fish had willingly given her an unusual jewel. She knew the events of the past six months must be important, but she had no idea why, and because of the way she had hidden what happened during her initiation, she was too afraid to ask one of the elders. Her mother and another diver surfaced nearby.

"Did you find something, Lana?" her mother asked, swimming closer.

Lana nodded, and hoped that her face didn't show her agitation. She held the jewel out silently.

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Leilani and the other diver looked at each other. “That’s amazing, Lana. Neither of us found a thing. You really do have a gift for diving.”

Lana blushed. “Just beginner’s luck, I guess. Anyway, can you take this for now, Mama? I’ve got to get to school.”

Her mother took the jewel and put it in her pocket. “Sure. Hurry up—you might be late again.”

Lana nodded and swam back to shore.

She had to run back home to get a shirt and grab her slate before sprinting to school. Although women on her island often went all day without shirts, at school it was required. Kohaku seemed to think that wearing shirts was more “cultured,” whatever that meant. She usually changed out of her wet leibo, but this morning she didn’t even have time for that. Their classroom was in one of the ancient kukui trees that grew on the east side of her island. She was almost five minutes late before she finally climbed up the ladder for class. Kali had saved the seat next to her, and Lana went straight to it, trying to make as little noise as possible. Of course, since her initiation she had been late to class nearly every day, so no one paid much attention anymore.

“You find anything today?” Kali whispered as Lana knelt on the mat.

Lana nodded. “Just one. It was white.”

“Wow. You really are good, you know. I heard Eala hasn’t found anything in more than a week.”

“You too? I’ve just been lucky, that’s all.”

“Lana, Kali!” Kohaku slammed his book shut with enough force that both of their heads snapped up. “If your conversation is so much more interesting than this class, perhaps you would prefer to continue it outside?”

Lana’s heart pounded painfully. She hated it when Kohaku rebuked her like this. She and Kali shook their heads mutely. Kohaku looked at Lana for a moment, smiled a little, and continued with his lecture.

Today was geography. Though she had always dreamed of traveling when she got older, Lana found it difficult to stay awake. Her mandagah fish dreams had been keeping her up at night, and she and the other women had taken to doing longer and more demanding dives in the effort to find even the few jewels they had been able to harvest. She struggled to suppress her yawns as Kohaku patiently discussed the relationship of the inner spirit temples to the outer shrines. Although she missed a good deal of what he said because she kept nodding off, she gathered that Kohaku was talking about the climate of the islands being connected to the outer shrines. The duty of the hereditary guardians of the outer shrines was to keep the minor spirits within the cycle of their islands. This kept them away from the inner islands so they couldn't strengthen the great spirits bound there, and help them to break free. The concentration of minor spirits made the outer islands much warmer. Her island was always warm, but all of the islands got colder the closer they were to the center.

She fell asleep after that, and Kali had to wake her up for lunch break.

They climbed higher into the tree, as they always did during lunch, where they had a great view of the ocean. On clear days they could see the outline of the death shrine, although lately that sight had just made Lana feel like caterpillars were crawling in the pit of her stomach. The two girls perched in the branches and opened the lunches that they had brought from home.

"I thought I was going to die in there, the way he kept rattling on about the spirits and the temples!" Kali leaned back on her branch and stretched out with a grimace.

"I don't know. It seemed pretty interesting to me."

"*You* were the one who fell asleep."

"I've been ... kind of tired lately. Besides, don't you think it's so fascinating—the ice-mountains on the inner islands, the huge volcano on Essel ..."

Kali shrugged. "I don't know. I guess. Sometimes I just can't

wait to get away from this place. It feels so stagnant here, like nothing interesting could ever happen.”

Lana might have agreed six months ago, but now she couldn't help but think that things were already changing, in a way that nobody wanted.

Lana peeled away an orange rind and tossed it into the grove.

“Okay, Kali. Let's make a pact.”

“For what?”

“To go away together. To see all sorts of things we could never see on this island and then come back and tell everyone about it.”

“But you're a diver.”

“I'm not an elder, I can leave the island if I want. What do you think?”

Kali placed the last orange wedge in her mouth and chewed slowly. “You know, Lana ... you're the kind of person who can do things the rest of us can't, but assumes that there's nothing special about you.”

Lana suddenly felt nervous again, but covered it with a smile. “Come on—do you want to travel with me or not?”

Kali stared at the ocean. “If you want me to go with you ... if I can. Why not?”

At the end of the day's lessons, Kohaku told Lana to stay behind after school. She loitered in the classroom as everyone cleared out, worrying. She felt terrible for falling asleep in class earlier and prayed that he wouldn't rebuke her for it. She watched him bustle about the classroom, picking up broken bits of writing gum and straightening the precious readers that he had brought all the way from Essel. She wondered if he ever regretted coming here—she knew their way of life must seem so primitive to him. She gathered that he was here looking for material to make his name in the great Kulanui in Essel. Maybe that meant he was using them, but Lana didn't mind as long as he taught her about the world. It was hard not to love someone who had shared so much of his knowledge

with her. He was the very first teacher her island had ever had from the Kulanui, having come here because he had wanted to do his field study on a remote island near the outer shrines. She loved his exotic looks—his long reddish hair, his slim build, and his fashionable clothes.

“Lana.”

Her heart started pounding. She had been so intent on studying him that his voice surprised her.

“Yes?”

Kohaku smiled. “No need to look so scared. It’s nothing bad. Here, sit down.” He gestured to a chair next to his desk. After a surprised moment, she sat down.

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“You are a very promising student, Lana. I’ve given this very serious consideration, and I would like you to ask you to come back to Essel with me when I leave in two months and pursue your studies there. I hate the thought of you wasting away on a backwater island like this with your kind of talent. You could do great things, Lana. I see it in you.”

Lana’s mouth opened, but her vocal chords didn’t seem to be working. What was with everyone today?

“But ...” her voice came out in a whisper and she cleared her throat. “But, I’m a diver.”

Funny how she now used the same excuse that she had so easily brushed off earlier that day.

Kohaku frowned. “I know your island’s traditions are important to you, Lana, but you have to understand the kinds of opportunities you would have on Essel. Do you want to live your whole life on this island without ever exploring your intellect?”

Lana felt panicked. On one hand, Kohaku was offering her the exact kind of opportunity to see the world that she had always wanted—and, even more extraordinarily, to do it with him. On the other, she knew that something was wrong on her island. She

couldn't just abandon everyone before whatever was happening became clearer.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry ... I just don't know. I don't think I can leave right now."

Kohaku put his hand over hers and stared earnestly into her eyes. "Don't say no yet, Lana. You still have some time. Just think about what I've said, okay?"

Lana couldn't have said anything had she wanted to. She nodded.

"Well, then. Your parents are probably expecting you home by now. See you tomorrow."

Lana fled the classroom and scrambled down the tree before she allowed herself to relax. Her entire body was trembling. He had held her hand. He had stared into her eyes. He wanted her to go away with him. It was the happiest day of her life.

She really did love Kohaku. She had realized it one morning less than a month after he arrived. He had been telling them about the great Essel wars that lasted for a century after the wind spirit broke free, and she had been suddenly gripped with astonishment that anyone could know so much, yet think so little of it. Even the most knowledgeable women on her island confined it to useful subjects, like diving or fishing or farming and trading. What possible purpose did the history of five century-old wars serve? He was so different from every other man in her experience—his clothes and manner of speech were only the most obvious. Sometimes she felt like just being in his presence was itself a trip across the earth.

But now she felt agonized by the decision he had asked her to make. She couldn't tell anyone about their conversation—not Kali or her parents—because she was afraid of what they would say. She loved diving, no matter how dismissive Kohaku was of "rustic traditions." Besides, the rainy season was fast approaching, and then it would be virtually impossible to dive for the greater part of three months. She felt responsible, since she had so rapidly become

one of the better divers, to find as many jewels as she could before the rains.

During a sunset dive two weeks after her conversation with Kohaku, Lana was having little luck finding any fish at all. Tayi, one of the other divers, was combing the water with her, and they were swimming much farther out than normal and diving deeper than Okilani would have approved. They were about thirty feet underwater when a large eel slipped out from one of the reefs beside them. Its deep green skin and large mouth looked a little sinister, and Tayi hid behind Lana's back as it swam by.

"It looks like Uncle Oha," Tayi said, using the hand signals all divers knew. Uncle Oha was a large man who spent most of his evenings drinking himself into a stupor at Eala's, but Lana felt warmly toward him because he loved listening to Kapa's music.

The comparison was so appropriate that Lana burst out laughing. She started to panic when the burning water accidentally filled her lungs. She gnawed her lip and kicked to the surface, where the water was darker than it should have been, and cloudy. She floated while she hacked up what felt like half the ocean. What kind of a fool was she to laugh during a dive? The water left a funny taste in her mouth, though, and she realized that it was burning her throat more than it should. What on earth was that taste?

Panic settled in her stomach, a fear so strong she knew she would never get it to leave.

The water tasted, ever so faintly, of salt.

The next day the rains started and the dives were called off. In fact, by the middle of the day the students were all sent home from school as well—they had to help their parents prepare their houses for the rains. Lana climbed on top of the roof with her father to cover the thatch with a stronger resin and larger palm fronds from the forest. They were soaked through by the time they came back inside, but at least the roof had stopped leaking. Her mother made them change their clothes before they sat down to dinner.

It was a strange, silent meal. The only noise was the insistent sound of rain drumming against the roof of the house. In a few weeks, the whole island would start to flood, and people would have to take barges just to get from one house to another. She usually loved this time of year, but now all she could think of was the salty-tasting water. She stuffed the food into her mouth, but hardly tasted any of it.

“Lana, aren’t you going to say something?” Her mother sounded impatient.

“Say what?”

“Like maybe thanking your mother for taking the trouble to cook your favorite dish?” her father said.

Lana looked down at her plate and saw with vague surprise that her mother had indeed made her favorite dish—day-roasted grouper in a sour pineapple sauce. She hadn’t even noticed.

“Sorry, Mama. Thank you for making it.” She turned back to the food, and struggled to find an interest.

Her mother and father exchanged a worried glance. “Are you feeling okay, Lana?” Leilani asked.

Lana nodded.

“Has . . . something been bothering you lately? What happened?”

For a brief moment, her mother’s question seemed inviting. Should she unburden herself and tell them what had been chasing her thoughts in circles? But she had hardly sorted it out enough herself to tell her parents. It would only worry them unnecessarily. She was an adult now, after all. If spilling the salt those months ago had caused this problem, she had to deal with it herself.

She forced a smile. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just a little tired, that’s all. I think I’ll go back to my room to rest, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re sure you don’t want any more to eat?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Lana stood up and went back to her room.

Leilani and Kapa sat in silence after she left.

“I really thought she’d like the grouper,” Leilani said, finally.

Kapa looked at his wife. She was biting her lower lip and a line had formed between her eyebrows. It was uncharacteristic of her to get so upset over food, but he knew how she had hoped to help Lana past her inexplicably dour mood.

He reached across the table and touched her hand gently. "It's okay, Lei. She's growing up. She can't tell her parents everything anymore."

Leilani stared at the table. "I know ... it's just ... I can't help but feel that something is tearing her away from us. Something happened to her that morning, that day she was initiated. I don't know, but whatever happened ... she's changed, Kapa."

Kapa had felt the same thing, but he didn't say so.

Minutes later Lana came running out of her bedroom with her sandals on and reached for her father's waterproof fishing coat, hanging in the entrance.

"Where are you going?" Kapa asked.

"I'll be back soon. Don't worry."

Lana ran out the door before either of them could say anything else.

"Kapa ..."

He hugged her. "She'll be okay, Lei," he said softly. "She's just growing up." But he didn't really believe that himself.

Lana ran through the driving rain, splashing through sandy puddles that went to her mid-calf. She had to find Okilani. She had lain on her bed for a few minutes, thinking about her discovery, when she had been overcome with the terrible sensation that the salty water, and thus the smaller numbers of mandagah fish, were all her fault. After all, hadn't she spilled all that salt on the sand six months ago? Hadn't she hidden the red jewel? This must be her punishment. Kohaku must have been wrong about salt being a rustic superstition—why else would the water, which had been fresh for thousands of years, only have turned salty after she broke the taboo? She didn't mind the stinging rain. It served as a distraction from her thoughts.

Okilani's house was all the way on the other side of the island, and in the rain it took her nearly an hour to get there. As the head elder, she lived in one of the ancient kukui trees—an even larger version of the one that held the schoolhouse. The rope ladder was flapping in the wind, but at least Okilani hadn't pulled it up for the night. Lana didn't know how she could have gotten the elder's attention in this weather. She climbed it and tossed herself on the landing. Despite the waterproof coat, the rain had soaked her through nearly half an hour ago. Now she was beginning to shiver. She pounded on the wooden door, forcefully enough for Okilani to hear her over the wind.

The door opened and Lana fell inside. Okilani shut the door behind her—already the floor was covered in puddles of rainwater. She sat shivering on the floor.

“Lana?” Okilani's face was unsurprised. “I had thought you might come here. Let's dry you off.”

Okilani left and came back a few moments later with two large towels. Lana wrapped them around herself gratefully and tried to stop shivering.

“Well, come on, get away from the door at least. That's the coldest part of the house.”

Lana nodded and stood up. She walked with Okilani to another room that had shelves lined with books and comfortable-looking cushions on the floor. She took off her wet sandals before stepping inside. The room was warm—there were hot ashes in metal braziers on the floor, which she was careful to avoid.

“Sit down,” Okilani said, gesturing to one of the cushions. She sat down next to Lana. “Now, I imagine what brought you pounding on my door in the middle of a rainstorm was important, so we can skip formalities. What happened?”

Now that she was sitting in Okilani's house, she began to wonder if she had not overreacted. How salty had the water been, after all? And how could spilling the salt possibly have caused it? She frowned and fought back her doubts. She knew as well as every

other diver on her island that the mandagah were dying, and yesterday she had just discovered why.

She clenched her fists. "I'm sorry for barging in like this ... I thought it was important. Yesterday I discovered ... I mean, by accident, of course, but ..."

"What is it, Lana?"

"The water ... it's salty. Tayi and I couldn't find any mandagah fish and were swimming much farther out than normal and she made me laugh and when I came back up to cough, I realized that the water was salty. And see ..." Lana blurted, unable to stop herself, "I think it may be my fault, because on my initiation, when I was curing the jewel, I accidentally dropped some salt. I said a prayer and I tried to clean it up, but maybe ..."

"Are you *sure* you tasted salt, Lana?"

Lana cringed and stared at the floor. "I'm sorry," she said.

Okilani's eyes were grim but she still tried to smile reassuringly. "Don't worry, it's not your fault. I had suspected that might be what's happening, but the salt is still undetectable close to the island. Something like this ... it has nothing to do with whether or not you dropped the salt. This is something much bigger. I can't say I understand it yet, but I have sensed a change.

"Our way of life may be ending, Lana. If the water continues to get salty, then all the mandagah will die."

Despite the warmth of the room, Lana began to shiver again. Could the situation really be that serious? "But ... how could that possibly happen? The mandagah have lived here for thousands of years!"

Okilani shrugged. "The spirits are restless. We may be at the beginning of some sort of upheaval. But I'm just an elder, not a diviner. I can't tell you what will happen to us."

Lana felt like crying. Once again, divers would be forced to give up the ocean. Even now, in Okilani's warm room, she could smell the seaweed and the fishy bilge from the boats docked near her house. She wondered how all that could possibly end. She thought of Yaela, forced to leave the sea forever to offer herself as a sacrifice.

All the years she had sung that song, she had never imagined that one day the words would describe her.

Okilani's voice broke the long silence. "We may be able to save a few of them," she said.

Lana looked at her. "How?"

"Tomorrow ... we have to harvest the fish themselves, not the jewels. We still have the freshwater lake at the center of the island. A few of the mandagah may just be able to survive there. Maybe, in time, the water will return to normal and we can take them back to the sea."

"Will that work?"

"Who can say? But I think we should try."

Okilani stared at Lana for a few long minutes. "Is there anything else you wanted to tell me, Lana?" she asked.

Lana stared at the glowing embers and tried not to cry as she kept her silence.

The next morning, the divers assembled on the beach a few minutes before dawn and waited for Okilani to explain what she had decided to do the night before. Everyone's face wore the same mixture of fear and determination. Even the men had come to the beach that morning. They would risk bringing their boats out in the driving rains to help the women harvest the fish. The shore was lined with tubs filled with freshwater to hold the mandagah while they were transported to the lake. Okilani had to shout to be heard over the wind, rain, and the waves pounding on the shore. They had to be crazy to dive in weather like this, Lana thought. Still, she felt brave standing beside her mother. She was aware, though she didn't want to be, that this might be her last dive.

The waves were so huge that all the divers had to take their air before they got near the surf. After she dove, it was hard to see because the heavy waves had turned up so much of the bottom, making her feel as though she were swimming through an impenetrable cloud of sand. Still, she and her mother made sure to stay close to each other while they searched for mandagah. The fish

were so big that they could only bring one at a time to the surface. She and her mother were the first two divers to find any. They handed the fish to the men waiting on the boats and then dove back under, looking for more. Again and again they dove, often not finding anything. Okilani told them to stop around midday, when the rain had grown so fierce they could hardly see even on the surface. Despite all of their efforts, they had collected only about one hundred fish. Lana tried not to feel disappointed, but she knew everyone else felt it too. How badly had the numbers of mandagah dwindled while she and the other divers refused to notice?

Everyone helped carry the fish to the lake. Lana insisted on carrying a tub herself although it dragged at her shoulder muscles and she was already exhausted from the morning dives. By afternoon the sky had grown dark as twilight.

“Mama?” Lana said softly, when she and the other divers had taken temporary refuge in the schoolhouse.

“Mm-hmm?” Her mother was leaning against the wall with her eyes closed.

“There’s something I ought to tell you ... about my initiation. The mandagah was dying. It gave me two jewels. I don’t know what it means ...”

Her mother snorted abruptly and her eyes flew open. “I’m sorry, Lana, were you saying something?”

Lana turned her head away. “No. Nothing important,” she said.

There was an impromptu party at Eala’s that night. Lana’s father and a few other musicians played determinedly upbeat music. Kohaku had come, but he sat by himself in a corner of the room, taking notes. He was always like that, Lana knew—an observer rather than a participant. For all Kohaku was fascinated by her island, Lana always got the sense that he considered himself above them. Lana smoked a great deal of amant weed and danced around giddily with Kali. On a strange level, she felt happier than she had in weeks, if only because she felt she was *doing* something about

the things that had been worrying her for so long. Of course, there was still Kohaku's proposal, but the amant was doing a great deal to help her forget about that.

Later that night, after she had stuffed herself full of food, she and Kali were dozing against each other in one corner. Kohaku, whose walk was unsteady (although Lana hadn't noticed him consuming much palm wine), staggered over to them and sat down.

"Enjoying yourself, Lana?"

Lana stared at him. There was an uncharacteristically sarcastic bite to his words. She wondered what was wrong. "I guess so," she said. "It looks like you are, too."

"Yes, well. Perhaps I did imbibe a bit too much in the spirit of things." He suppressed a burp. "Have you thought about what we discussed, Lana? I'm thinking of going back to Essel a little early. All this rain, the disaster with the mandagah fish ... not very good for the research, you know? I'll probably leave in a week or two. I'd like you to come back with me."

Kali opened her eyes and yawned. She looked at Kohaku and then Lana, and seemed a little startled at their grim expressions.

"Are you two okay?"

Kohaku ignored her. "Well, Lana? I need an answer."

No, it was too soon—he couldn't force her to decide now. There were too many aspects she hadn't even considered, like convincing her mother to let her leave the island in the company of an outsider. Lana put her hands to her suddenly queasy stomach and avoided meeting Kohaku's challenging gaze. She had thought she would have more time. Things had been so hectic lately ... and now with the mandagah and the rains, how on earth could she leave the island now? How could she leave her parents, Kali, Okilani, and all the other people she loved here? It would be too much like abandoning everything she loved.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Kohaku. I just can't now. Maybe in a few years I could leave, but not now."

He looked as if he wanted to say something harsh, but just nodded. "May I ask why?" he said after a moment.

“Things are changing. I can feel it. If I left now ... if I left now, it would feel too much like running away.”

Kohaku stood up. “Maybe one day you’ll realize what you’ve just wasted.”

He walked out of the room and into the pouring rain. Lana felt like crying.

“Lana?” Kali shook her by the shoulders. “What on earth was that all about?”

“Kohaku asked me to come back with him to study at the Kulanui on Essel.”

Kali gasped. “Really? That’s incredible. But ... you said no, didn’t you? Why?”

Lana felt a funny sensation in her chest, something that hurt too much to breathe around. Had she really just said no to Kohaku, to the chance to leave with him, be with him?

“Well ... if I had gone to Essel with him, I couldn’t have kept the pact.”

“The pact?”

“Remember? We both have to be around if we’re going to travel the world together.”

Kali laughed and hugged her. “You’re crazy, you know.”

Lana silently agreed.

Over the next two weeks, the rains pounded the island relentlessly. The ground wasn’t visible over most of the island anymore. The men poled barges from house to house, checking on the older people and making sure the supports were sturdy. Even the oldest on the island said that they had never been through a rainy season like this one. Okilani looked grim, and when pressed would say only that the intense rains were part of greater changes to come. The feeling that had lodged in Lana’s chest that night at Eala’s wouldn’t go away. And in the middle of everything, when Lana’s life was changing so much she hardly recognized it, Kohaku left to return to Essel. She hated him a little for that, though she knew he felt no loyalty to her people or her island, and there was no real

reason he should. To him, they were little more than unusual creatures worthy of study. Yet, he had offered Lana an opportunity for more than that, and she hated herself a little for refusing him. Was she stupid, she wondered that awful night after his barge left the island and she cried herself to sleep. He didn't love her, she knew that, but he had offered her a chance to see the world. Maybe she would always regret her decision, yet even when she thought about it now, she didn't know how she could have made the other choice. Because she couldn't abandon her island at a time like this? That's what she had told him. But that was too easy, wasn't it? Maybe the truth was harder. Maybe she was a coward, too afraid of what she didn't know.

Her father had been acting strangely, too. Because their shed had long since flooded and his supplies had been moved into their house, he sat in the main room all day long, making his instruments. He worked on them with a single-minded intensity that Lana had never seen before. Part of it was that he couldn't take out the boat to fish with the rains falling so heavily, but there was something stranger in his fixation. She knew that her parents were fighting—they rarely touched each other anymore, and her mother would often stare at her father while he made his instruments, looking as though she were about to cry. Then one day, when Lana was given a ride back from Kali's house earlier than normal, she overheard them arguing.

"It's all you do, these days. Cure the tails, string the instruments, play the instruments, tune the instruments. You never pay any attention to me anymore. Me or Lana."

Kapa shrugged. "There's nothing else to do on this damn island, Lei! Not with these rains. And after they end, it'll be back to the same thing—catching fish, bringing them back, waking up early the next morning. Don't you think I wanted to do something more with my life? At least when I'm making these instruments, I feel like that. Just a little."

Leilani chewed her tongue. "How can you say that, Kapa? You are doing something with your life ... just like your father did and

his father. You were born on this island, your life is on it. Do you hate it so much?"

Kapa looked at his wife and his expression softened. He walked over to her. "I don't hate it, Lei. But I don't want to waste my entire life here either. Since these rains came, since the mandagah have started dying ... I've been thinking that there's nothing left for us, anyway. I've been thinking ... I've been thinking that we should leave. I could sell my instruments on Essel. We could start a different life."

Leilani wrenched herself away from him. Lana had never seen her mother look so angry before.

"You expect me to abandon my home, my life, for some crazy dream you have of selling your instruments? How can we leave when things are like this? It would be running away."

"Fine. Let's run away, then! It would be like running away from nothing."

Lana couldn't stand hearing anymore. She pushed the door open all the way and stalked inside. Her parents stared at her, surprised.

"How ... how long have you been standing there, Lana?" Leilani asked.

Lana just shook her head and walked into her room. "Mama's right," she said finally. "I don't want to run away, either."

She pulled back the curtains and rolled out her sleeping mat.

"Why does everything have to change?" she whispered to herself as she sat shivering on the floor.

Three weeks later, the rains hadn't even paused. If anything, they had gotten stronger. Lana stared out her window, and barely registered the familiar wash of dread. The sun should have begun drying up her island by now. The houses, though designed for floods, wouldn't be able to hold up much longer in this kind of deluge. What if the rains never stopped and her island remained flooded forever? Okilani was right—something was happening. Something to do with the water spirit, maybe, but what?

It was Kali's birthday. Lana had promised to visit, but she wondered how her parents would feel about her leaving in this kind of rain. The water had gotten too deep and choppy for all but the largest barges to work, but her family owned a small canoe that ought to get her there.

She walked into the main room, and her father glanced up from his instrument.

"You're not planning on going somewhere, are you?" he said.

"It's Kali's birthday. I promised I'd visit."

"How are you going to get there? Swimming?"

"That little boat of ours."

He frowned, then shrugged. "Just don't tell your mother. She'll be upset."

Lana glanced at the kitchen where her mother was cooking. "All right. I'll be back soon."

She tied her sandals and then put on her cloak. The boat was perched on the roof, tied down with rope that her father had fastened when the rains first started. She scrambled up the side of the house, almost slipping several times. The wood was soaked and slippery. The waterlogged knots were impossible to untie, so she reached into the pocket of her leibo and pulled out a small knife that she kept for diving emergencies. She cut one of the ropes and then let the boat slide off the roof and into the water. Then she positioned herself right above the tethered boat and slid down the roof herself. Once she was sitting in it fairly comfortably, she cut the second rope and took the paddle.

It was slow going—it took her nearly forty-five minutes to reach Kali's house. She was soaked through by the time she began to see the brown blob of the house through the rain. It looked strange, though. More lopsided than she remembered. She paddled closer. It looked as though one of the supports had crumbled in the rain. Her chest tightened—was Kali's family okay? It must have happened recently, because as of last night she hadn't heard any news of people's houses collapsing. As she moved closer, she saw two figures huddled on the roof of the

side that hadn't fallen. Lana felt a little relief—at least they had all gotten out.

Then she realized that she couldn't see Kali.

She paddled faster until she was about ten feet away from the house. Kali's parents were so agitated that she had to shout and wave her arms to get their attention.

"Hey! What happened? Where's Kali?"

"The whole thing went down a few minutes ago. We can't find her!" her father called. "We're afraid she got caught somewhere."

The terror that had settled in Lana's stomach threatened to make her whole body numb.

"She was in the house?"

He held his wife while she began to sob. She wasn't a diver. They had probably tried looking for Kali and couldn't dive deeply enough.

Lana pulled off her coat and shirt and took a deep breath. Then she jumped into the water. It was hard to see through the sediment and broken wood from the collapsed house, but she pushed her way through it ruthlessly, looking for any sign of her friend. She swam around the ruined supports, but didn't find a thing. Her hands were shaking. Where on earth would Kali be? She tried to picture their house in her mind. The kitchen was toward the right side—the part that hadn't collapsed. Kali's room was on the left side. Toward the back. Lana made her way to where the room might have fallen.

There too, all she saw was a mess of scattered debris. Had Kali gotten pinned underneath it? She blew out the pressure in her ears and dove to the muddy bottom and looked up. In the middle of the mess of the collapse, she caught a glimpse of Kali's brown hair. It seemed bright, as though it was caught on a piece of sunlight. Had it stopped raining? Lana swam as close to her friend as she could. Kali was pinned underneath two large wooden beams. Lana bit her tongue to keep from crying out. Was she still alive? She shook Kali's limp hand and was incredibly relieved when it tightened a little around her own. How long had she been pinned here?

Four minutes? Kali opened her eyes. They were frantic, but she seemed to smile a little when she saw Lana. Lana shook her head, trying to tell her to relax. She gripped the first beam—roughly as thick as her waist—and struggled to lift it. Although it should have been lighter under the water, it would hardly budge. She glanced at Kali. Her eyes looked familiar, and Lana realized it was because they reminded her of the eyes of the dying mandagah fish from her initiation. Renewed panic gave Lana the energy she needed to shove the beam off of Kali's body. She watched it fall and then felt her friend grip her hand. Kali's face was twisted in a grimace, as though she could barely suppress the pain. Lana's own thoughts felt burned through with fear. Was her best friend really going to die? She bit on her lip until she tasted blood, and started struggling with the second piece of wood. Kali suddenly gripped Lana's hand so hard she felt her bones grind against each other.

She had the sudden impression that Kali wanted to say something, but of course she couldn't speak underwater. Instead, she bent Lana's head closer to hers, and kissed her gently on the forehead.

How had she known? Then Kali gasped, and Lana realized that she had finally given into the temptation to suck water in the place of air. Lana pushed the second log off of Kali in one mighty heave and picked up her friend's limp form. She struggled through the maze of supports, back to the surface.

It wasn't raining anymore, she noticed vaguely, even as she struggled to hold Kali's limp body above the water. She heard some cries and a splash behind her. Someone pulled Kali from her grip and onto a barge. She treaded water next to it, staring helplessly as Kali's father and one of the other men tried to breathe life back into her body. Was she dead? Lana didn't want to believe it, but she had understood that gesture. Yet how could Kali possibly have known? Lana was terrified—so scared that she could taste bile in her throat—that she had been given Kali's dying blessing. She heard Kali's mother, still on the roof, wailing. Her father was

crying, too, but silent tears that seemed to fall from his eyes without him noticing.

The second man who had been blowing air into her mouth stopped, and laid her head back down on the barge. Kali's mother let out a sound that made Lana's brain shiver. She jumped into the water. The water swelled and a little spilled over the top of the barge. Kali's hair floated and turned a strange, beautiful iridescent burgundy. Lana looked at the sky.

The sun had come out.

They held her funeral that same day at sunset—one of the first real sunsets in weeks. Already the water level was beginning to recede. It was as though Kali's death had been a sacrifice of appeasement to the water spirit. Maybe now things would go back to normal.

She hadn't managed to cry yet. Not when they had told her that her best friend was dead, when she already knew. Not when her parents had finally heard the news and her mother had hugged her tightly. Not when she had tried to explain to Kali's mother why it had taken her too long—just seconds too long—to remove the logs that were pinning her daughter below the surface. Not even when she thought of how Kali had kissed her forehead right before she died.

They held the funeral high in the great, sacred tree of the kukui groves. It was a place of high honor—normally, only elders and divers had funerals held there. Lana appreciated, vaguely, the honor they were giving Kali, who had been neither. But Lana knew how long Kali had stayed alive under the water. If she had wanted to be a diver, she would have been a fine one.

Everyone who could leave their houses had come. They climbed up the tree silently, wearing their best clothes. Lana hadn't changed. She climbed the tree without a shirt, wearing the same leibo and sandals she had worn when she dove in after Kali earlier in the day. Every person brought a covered lamp, and as the crowd grew the great tree began to look mystically illuminated, as though there were hundreds of spirits gathering among them to see Kali away.

Okilani and the other seven elders stood on the platform built in the middle of the upper regions of the tree. Kali's body lay there as well, naked except for three large leaves covering her torso. Lana had a good view because people seemed eager to let her through to the closest branches. She wondered what they had heard about her dive. She wondered if they blamed her for Kali's death.

Her hands started trembling on the branches and she forced herself to stop. Okilani glanced at her from the platform with an expression of pure pity. Lana found herself growing angry. Why did everyone seem to pity her? She didn't deserve it. If anything, she deserved their blame. She hadn't been able to save Kali ...

Okilani raised her hands and pounded her staff three times on the platform.

"Tonight, we gather for the sending of Kali bei'Maiu. By rights, today should have been a celebration of her year beginning, but circumstances have proved otherwise. The changes that have affected us all have now taken one of us away. If there are any words of comfort I can offer tonight, it is that Kali, whose gentle spirit we all loved, will be in a place far away from the great changes I sense coming. Changes that may alter our way of life forever."

Lana stared at Kali's face. What would she think of this? Would she find it funny, that everyone was according her such respect? She didn't really look dead. She looked like she would get up at any minute and sneak away with Lana, to go off and giggle in one of the tall trees while they ate oranges and threw away the peels. Could it really all be over?

The elders moved around Kali's body so that Okilani stood by her head. The high elder took off her necklace and unstrung one of her jewels—the orange one, Lana saw. She placed it in the center of one of the palm fronds that covered Kali's body. Aya was next. She pulled a beautifully colored white jewel from her necklace and placed it on the second leaf. Lai'i, another elder, placed a blue one on the third leaf.

Lana had only seen one of these rituals before in her life, when she was much younger. She stared, fascinated despite herself.

When the jewels had been placed, the elders held hands and bowed their heads over her body. They chanted in unison, but Lana couldn't understand what they were saying. It sounded like her language, but some ancient, unfamiliar version of it. Lana felt a strange sense of a presence gathering as they chanted, and the air smelled thick, like it was about to rain. When she glanced at the sky, however, it was clear—the wisps of clouds she could see above the tree branches hardly looked like they could threaten any rain. She looked back at the elders. Their chanting grew more intense, and now Lana was sure she sensed something. It was a strange kind of power—it smelled like the sea, but also like the earth. If she had revealed the red jewel and they had initiated her into these rites, she may have known what they were doing. But as it was she could only sit and watch. It felt, though ... it felt as though they were calling an earth spirit. Maybe even the spirit of this tree. Earth spirits were one of the wild ones—the ones that humans had never tried to capture and control.

With a shout, Okilani broke the circle, picked up her staff and pointed it at Kali's body. The air began to shimmer—like it does when you stare through the heat of a fire—and then Kali's body burst into flames.

The flames were pure white, and they didn't spread to the wooden platform although there was nothing separating it from her body. Lana's fingers tightened around the branch she was holding. Kali was dead.

"It's not your fault, Lana."

Lana felt tears spring to her eyes. "It is. If I moved a little faster, I could have saved you." Then Lana realized who she was talking to. Kali was bathed in the crackling white light from the fire, but she still wore the clothes Lana had last seen her in.

"You're ..." her voice came out in little more than a whisper.

"I'm leaving soon. It wasn't your fault, Lana. The house had half-crushed me. I wouldn't have survived. I knew that."

Tears were streaming down Lana's face, and she wiped them away furiously. "Is that why ... you ..."

Kali smiled. “You’re special, Lana. The mandagah see it, and now I’ve seen it too. There’s something about you. Something that eases death.”

Lana was pretty sure that this was a quality she didn’t need, but she just nodded.

“You’re marked,” Kali said. She seemed to be fading. “I can see that now. It will be true for the rest of your life—but watch out for those who can see it. They’ll want to find out why. They’ll want to use you for it.” Her voice even sounded distant.

“K-Kali, please don’t go!”

Kali looked sad, but shook her head. “I have to. There’s nowhere else.”

“What about our pact?”

“Keep it for me, Lana.”

Kali waved, and then floated up the tree until she was in the highest branches. The sun sank below the horizon and she disappeared.

Lana looked back at the fire. It had gone out. There weren’t even ashes to indicate that Kali’s body had been there—only the three mandagah jewels, untouched.

People stared at Lana as she and her parents made their way down the tree. They knew she had been visited by Kali’s spirit—they had heard her side of the conversation, after all. Lana tried not to look at Kali’s parents, but she felt their accusing stares anyway. Why had Kali visited Lana and not her own parents? She didn’t really know, but she felt guilty all the same. Kapa had tethered the canoe to the bottom of the tree. The three of them climbed inside and Kapa began to paddle home.

Tears slid out of Lana’s eyes and she couldn’t seem to stop them. To her shame, some of the tears were for herself. Even if she had doubted it before, now she knew she was marked, and in a way she had never wanted. Something about her “eased death?” The very idea terrified her. How had this happened? All she had ever wanted to do was dive for mandagah fish and then travel with Kali. She

had planned to find the Kulanui when she was older and learn all the magnificent useless things Kohaku so prized. How had all of her dreams been so ruined?

Her father broke the silence. "I think we should leave," he said in a quiet but clear voice.

Lana stared at his back through her tears. She felt her mother's hands tighten on her shoulders. Although she knew that she should still be supporting her mother on this issue, she found that she couldn't summon the energy. Suddenly, she realized that she didn't care anymore if they left or stayed.

"I already told you," her mother said, "I won't leave. It's too much like running away."

Her father turned around angrily. "Kali is dead. Do you want to wait for Lana's turn? Life on this island is dying, Lei. Even Okilani sees it. The skies might have parted now, but who knows what this terrible flooding has done to the island? It's not safe to be here anymore, and without the mandagah fish, I don't know why we would."

"But this is my *home* ..." her mother sounded desperate.

"Then make another home, with me in Essel. Don't you love me enough to do that, Lei?"

When her mother just buried her head in her hands without replying, Lana was shocked enough to stop crying herself. What was happening to her family?

Kapa said nothing more as they slowly made their way home.

Leilani left an hour after they had returned home. Kapa refused to stop arguing that they should leave the island, and finally she had stormed out in disgust. It was a beautiful warm and clear night anyway, and she was relieved to be away from her frustrated husband. At first she was simply paddling aimlessly, but eventually she realized that she had made her way near Okilani's house. She smiled a little, despite everything. Somehow she always ended up here when her life started to overwhelm her. She pulled up to

the base of the tree, tethered the boat, and climbed up the ladder. As she knocked on the door, she thought of traveling to a place where there weren't any ancient kukui trees with houses built into them and felt her chest constrict. How could Kapa ever consider leaving this place?

Okilani opened the door.

"Oh, Leilani. I thought I had heard someone in a boat. Come in."

Leilani walked into the familiar house. She had been here countless times before to drink tea and talk with her mentor. She had always loved those moments.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it," Okilani said as they walked through the house. "Why don't we sit on the roof?"

Leilani smiled and nodded. Okilani first went to the kitchen and took a pot of simmering tea off the fire and brought it up the stairs with two clay teacups. Okilani insisted on pouring them each a cup and settling into the chairs before she let Leilani speak.

"So, what brings you here tonight? You look too worried for a social call."

Leilani laughed. "You know me well."

"I've known you since you were born, Lei. And tonight you look the way you did when your mother died. What's wrong?"

Leilani took a long sip of the tea, ignoring the way it burned her tongue.

"It's Kapa. He says he wants to leave the island and sell his instruments on Essel. He says that things have gotten too dangerous here and our way of life is dying. Without the mandagah fish, he says, there's no point in staying. And now poor Kali ... it just seemed to make him want to leave even more."

"And how do you feel?" Okilani was staring up at the moon, sipping her tea.

"I know I can't leave. I'm a diver and I have a duty to this island. Leaving now would just be running away, wouldn't it?"

Okilani sighed. "Lei, I know this may be a hard thing for you

to hear—and it’s a hard thing for me to say—but I think it might actually be a good idea for you to leave. When these waters recede, I’m afraid we’re going to discover that the only mandagah left are the ones we saved in the lake. There won’t be *any* diving. Even the regular fish trade will be slow. Things are changing, and in a way, you may be safer on Essel. I can’t leave—my soul as an elder is bound to this place. But you *can* leave, Lei. Let Kapa follow his dream, and let Lana put some distance between herself and what happened today.”

Leilani stared into her cup, her hands trembling. “But ... but this is my home. I love this island.”

“If you can stand to stay here and watch as it’s slowly destroyed, stay. But something is happening to the spirits, and those things always affect the outer islands first. You’re usually the rational one, Lei, but this time Kapa may be thinking more clearly.”

They sat in near silence for an hour afterwards, while Leilani sipped lukewarm tea and thought of what Okilani had said. Leaving would be the most painful thing she had ever done, but perhaps there really was nothing left for her and Kapa to do but move on. And Lana ... she didn’t even want to think of what had happened to her daughter today. She was terrified that the haunted expression would never leave her face.

Finally, Leilani stood up, and the elder looked at her calmly.

“What have you decided?” Okilani asked.

“Since the binding, my mother’s mothers have lived here. But I think ... I must be the one who leaves.”

Okilani stood up and embraced her. “I wish you luck, my daughter. If we never meet again, perhaps your soul will find its way back here and find mine, still tied to the land.”

Leilani bit her tongue to keep back the tears.

“Goodbye, earth-mother,” she said, using the elder’s formal title.

“Goodbye, Leilani.”

As Leilani walked down the stairs, she was overcome with

the saddest sensation that she would never hear Okilani's voice again.

When her parents told Lana the next morning that they would be leaving the island, she could hardly summon the energy to feel anything at all. Without Kali or the mandagah, what was there to stay for, anyway? Of course, she loved the great trees in the grove and the smell of her island after a rainstorm, but none of those memories made her fight to stay. She would be traveling, then. Keeping her side of the pact with Kali. And seeing Essel, after all. She knew that she wouldn't seek out Kohaku. Her dreams of him seemed so childish and impossible, now. As though he had ever seen her as anything but a native of above-average intelligence. The only person besides her parents who had ever loved her had just died. What was a childish crush beside that?

They packed all day, and the smell of the waterproof resin they had spread on the heavy canvas to protect their belongings made the house reek. It was a silent, somber affair. Even Kapa didn't seem very enthusiastic. That evening he left them to exchange his fishing boat for a barge roomy enough for the three of them and their belongings. Her mother packed everything with a look of fierce determination, as though she refused to doubt her decision. Lana stared at her mother and wondered what had made her change her mind.

That night, after most of the packing was finished, she and her parents went to Eala's, so that they could give some kind of goodbye to the people they had grown up with and known so long. Everyone stared at Lana as she came in. Some people gave her tentative smiles; others turned away abruptly and stared at their drinks. Lana stared back at them, distanced from all the tension in the room. What did it matter, anyway? Tomorrow she and her parents would leave this place and she would probably never see any of them again—these people who knew what had happened to Kali, who knew that she had been visited by her ghost. Her father

didn't seem to notice the tension. He was in his element here at Eala's. Today his grin was especially wide as he made his way to the center of the room, where he always sat to play his songs. He took requests that night, and a few others played with him. He looked happy there, and Lana could tell by the look in his eyes that he was dreaming of doing this every day in the city. Her mother looked vaguely ill and, after one last worried glance at her daughter, sat near Kapa and stared into space.

Some of the tension in the room seemed to penetrate Lana's gray haze of indifference. Suddenly feeling awkward and inexpressibly sad, she moved away from her parents and sat near the kitchen in the darkest corner of the room. There was a pitcher of palm wine at the table, nearly untouched by whoever had ordered it. Lana stared at it, vaguely registering the boisterous music her father and his friends were playing. It seemed incredibly inappropriate, somehow. Kali was dead. Lana hadn't been able to move the logs that crushed her friend. They would never be able to keep the pact. A tear seeped out of her eye and was soon absorbed by the wooden table.

She poured herself a glass of palm wine. In the smoky torchlight, its natural golden hue looked luminescent. It looked like liquid fire, something that could burn all thought and emotion from inside her. Though she had never enjoyed the taste of it before, she relished the burning sensation as she poured it down her throat, finishing the cup in nearly one gulp. It felt nice, sitting in her belly like that. She filled her glass again and drank it all. Everything seemed to be going a bit fuzzy around the edges. The light looked brighter and her father's happy music didn't bother her so much anymore. Kali would have loved this. They could have danced together after drinking too much palm wine and then gone running on the beach. Lana always loved doing things like that with Kali.

She poured herself another glass and couldn't help but cry when it seared her throat.

It took Leilani a good two hours before she noticed that her daughter was quietly drinking herself into a stupor in a corner. She was

passed out on the table, in fact, by the time Leilani thought to check on her. Suddenly panicked, she rushed to Lana's side and held her head up. Her daughter's eyes opened and she stared at Leilani as though she was trying to determine who precisely she was.

"Mama?" she said.

"Iolana! What are you doing?" Leilani moved the near-empty pitcher from Lana's fumbling reach.

She blinked up at Leilani for a few moments before answering. "Drinking," she said.

"I can see that. Why would you drink this much?"

"I'm an adult. An adult ... you can't stop me."

Leilani suddenly wanted to cry at the despair in her daughter's voice. What had happened to them all? "Lana, baby, I know you are. But why did you drink so much?"

Lana shrugged. "It burned. I thought ... maybe it would burn it all away."

Leilani closed her eyes for a second, and wished for the strength to help her daughter. "Lana, you can't take it away like this. It will just come back, and hurt more than ever. Trust me, I know."

Lana stared at the table for a while, as though intensely fascinated with its rough wooden surface, pitted by years of use.

"Is it my fault, Mama?" she said.

"Is what your fault?" Leilani asked, painfully aware that she already knew the answer.

"Kali ... that she died. She said it wasn't, but ..." Tears were sliding down her cheeks but she didn't seem to be aware of them.

"No, Lana. It wasn't your fault. You did everything you could."

"She said I ease death. I don't want to ease death! I don't want to be marked!"

Leilani looked at Lana in shock. She hadn't told them what Kali had spoken to her about during her passing. *Was* her daughter marked? Terror gripped her at the thought. It made sense—too much, in fact. She had always felt that something was special about Lana. But in times like these ... being marked could hardly mean

Lana would have an easy life. If she was marked, there was no way Leilani could ever protect her.

She shook her head. She could do nothing about that now. She put her arm around Lana's shoulders and helped her out of the chair.

"Come on, let's go home."

Lana overslept the next morning and woke up with a splitting headache. She staggered into the main room, and saw that it was bare except for the pile of neatly packed items in the center of the floor.

"Your room is all that's left to pack up, Lana," Kapa said.

She tried to think of some appropriate response to that, but ended up running outside and vomiting. After her mother had settled her stomach with some unidentifiable, but warm, drink and some breakfast, Lana managed to pull herself together enough to help pack her stuff. She took her two special mandagah jewels out of her chest. From now on, she supposed, she would have to keep them close by, for all they terrified her. Until her family settled down again, she had to make sure they were never lost. However much she had lost the morning Kali died, these jewels were the best reminders she would ever have of her old life. Nothing could change how much she loved diving, even if that path was closed to her now. For a moment, as she held the red jewel in her palm, she contemplated drawing back the curtains and showing it to her parents. But her mother had made a decision, and telling her now would only put their plans in question. Maybe one day, in some future she could hardly imagine, it would be possible to tell them. But for now ... she put the jewels into a smaller bag and stuffed that in her pocket.

An hour later, they had loaded everything onto the barge and were ready to leave the only home she had ever known. It looked empty and soulless without their possessions—there was nothing left to remind her of her childhood, of her life there before her initiation.

“Are you coming, Lana?” her father asked by the door.

“Kapa! This may be the last time she’ll ever see it again.”

Lana turned around and looked between her parents. Her chest ached, but it had ached steadily ever since Kali died, and she knew that there was nothing she could do about any of it.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m ready. We can go.”

They left the island a little before noon, when the sun was bright enough to reflect off the floodwater in gold sparkles that made them all squint to see. Her father poled the barge slowly—the water had receded, but since they lived so close to the shore, it was still easy to maneuver onto the waterways that connected the islands.

There was no one outside. The water was still except for the ripples from their barge. Lana sat in the back and stared silently at the kukui groves. The majestic trees were slowly fading into the distance as she looked—her last view of her home. She thought of how she and Kali had sat in their high branches only months ago, thinking of Kohaku and their future. She wondered what would happen to her now—what did being marked mean? Was she destined to be miserable for the rest of her life?

Her mother knelt behind her and put her hand on her shoulder. Lana looked back at her for a moment, and then relaxed. At least she still had her mother. They watched the kukui groves together after that, and stared together at the distant, proud figure of Okilani, standing high in the branches of her tree as though it was her duty to witness their departure. Lana felt her mother’s hand tighten on her shoulder. Would they ever see the elder again?

She thought of the jewels in her pocket. Did Okilani know she was marked? It was too late to ask her now. Her mother looked as though she wanted to cry, but was keeping the tears back by sheer force of will. Lana turned away and found her eyes drawn out to the ocean. The death shrine was silhouetted against the edge of the ocean, as clearly visible as she had ever seen it.

They slept on the barge for the next two weeks. She spent her nights shivering helplessly under thin blankets, wondering how

much colder it could possibly get on the inner islands. Her parents had agreed that her father should go ahead with his instruments and supplies to Essel first, while they stayed behind in Okika City, the major port town on the eastern side of Okika Island. The city-island of Essel was at least two weeks away by clipper from Okika. When they first pulled into the docks, Lana was amazed at the lack of sand. Narrow, cramped city streets butted right against the water, filled with more people than she had ever seen in her life, and everywhere she heard people shouting. Leilani looked dismayed as well, staring at the loud, dirty scene. And this was a *small* city? What on earth was Essel like? How could her father survive in a place like that?

Lana supposed that she and her mother would have to find work somewhere, because her father would be taking most of their savings with him to Essel. When he had settled in they would be able to join him. It had sounded like a fine plan sitting on the barge on the way here, but now that she saw the kind of place they would have to live in, she wondered if they would have been better off staying on the island, no matter what kind of changes Okilani sensed coming.

By that evening, Kapa had found them a place to stay—a small but fairly clean room on the top floor of a boarding house near the docks of the Eastern harbor. The smell of the salt water and dead fish was strong, and the wind blew it straight into the room, which probably made it cheaper than it would have been otherwise.

Some of the despair that Lana had been feeling for the past few days changed into acute anxiety. She tried not to show it for the sake of her father, but she knew that Leilani felt it as well. She needed a chance to catch her breath, to adjust to what her life had become. She needed it, but she knew better than to expect it.

“Good luck, Papa,” Lana said after they had moved their belongings into the small room.

He looked at her and then they hugged tightly. “Don’t worry. In a month or two you’ll be able to come to Essel, too. Everything will be fine.”

Lana smiled, because she knew that he expected it, but she doubted her father's assurance. Here, they were all out of their depth. She loved her gentle father, but she couldn't imagine how he or any of them would handle life on Essel.

Leilani hugged her husband tightly. Her body was shaking, but she seemed to have managed to keep the tears back. Lana turned tactfully away and walked to the window as they said their good-byes. The sun was setting over the harbor and the huge fishing vessels—larger than any she had ever seen—were all coming into port. Brawny sailors wearing strange, weather-stained clothing hauled huge nets of helplessly flopping fish off the boats and onto large carts. She saw women walking around as well, wearing brightly dyed loose pants and matching button-down shirts that flapped around their knees. They wore heavy socks with their sandals that would have been entirely too hot on her island, but seemed to be standard dress here. Lana was wearing a shirt, but it barely covered her belly button, and people had been staring at her and Leilani as they walked through the streets. Kohaku had told her that women on the inner islands rarely showed their breasts or wore short pants. On very formal occasions, he had said, women might wear a sheer top, but it was generally seen as a rustic practice. Just one more thing she would have to adjust to.

“See you soon, Lana. I love you.”

She turned away from the window. “Goodbye, Papa.”

She and her mother stared at each other when he shut the door. Somehow they would have to survive. Somehow.

KOHAKU'S JOURNEY BACK TO ESSEL was plagued with the most extraordinary bad luck, such that he finally saw the familiar spire of the Kulanui towering above the rest of the town a full three weeks after he had planned to arrive. Between unseasonable rains, unexpected schedule changes, and leaking boats, Kohaku had begun to wonder whether he would ever get home at all. Finally away from the hated ship, he waited in line beside the bustling docks for a street vendor who was selling sticks of rounded sweet potato dumplings. They were ten kaneka each now—fully double what they had sold for when he left a year ago. The dripping sugar that burned his tongue tasted of home, though, and he found he didn't mind the price very much at all. He downed five on the spot and then waited in line yet again so he could order ten more to bring home to his sister, Emea. Her frequent illnesses made it difficult for her to get out much. She probably hadn't had a chance to eat sweet potato dumplings since Kohaku had left for the outer islands. The thought made him lose his appetite—maybe he shouldn't have left her alone, no matter how forcefully she had insisted that he go.

But still, he could hardly wait to see her again. The frustration he had felt at Lana's rejection of his incredibly generous offer had rankled him during his journey home, but now it seemed to dissipate with the thought of his sister. Really, what had he expected from someone raised on such an anachronistic backwater? Lana

might be intelligent, but it took a particularly strong character to overcome such a crippling background. He had offered to rescue her, but she hadn't been smart enough to want rescuing. But Emea would have liked her, he thought unexpectedly, and felt a moment of pure regret for opportunities lost, different roads taken. He hurried down the familiar seashell-lined streets, completing what was usually an hour-long walk in forty minutes. He lived with his sister on the middle floor of a boarding house right at the foot of the great volcano, Nui'ahi. It was an awe-inspiring sight at dawn, with the bright orange sun coming up behind the smoking top.

He took the stairs two at a time but slowed before he opened the door. Emea was sitting by the window, in the special seat he had built for her before he left. Some embroidery rested on her knee, but her hands were idle and she stared into space with an air of almost inexpressible sadness. At that moment, her golden hair seemed brighter than the sun itself. Once again, Kohaku found himself stunned by the beauty of the sister their mother had died giving birth to sixteen years before.

She turned abruptly when his shadow fell on her. Her frown of surprise widened into a smile that seemed to cover her whole face, and she ran to him.

"You're back early," she signed, using the language they had created together so that she could have some way of communicating.

"There were some disasters on the island," Kohaku signed. "It was impossible to conduct any more research, so I decided to leave. I wanted to get back sooner ..." He paused and looked at her. "It's been such a long time," he said. "How have you been?"

For the next twenty minutes, Emea's hands moved so quickly Kohaku had a hard time following what she was saying. She must have been starved for conversation. She could communicate a little with the landlady who sometimes kept her company, but the only person who really knew her language, since their father died three years before, was Kohaku. Emea had been deaf since a nearly fatal fever when she was five years old, and it hurt him to know how

isolated she was from other human beings because she couldn't hear. Men would admire her in the streets when she took walks with him, but the looks on their faces when they realized she was deaf often made him want to keep her inside forever, just to protect her from that sort of pain. He had debated for months whether or not to leave for the outer islands for his research, but finally she had told him to go, that she would be all right on her own.

"I'm sorry," Kohaku said abruptly. "I shouldn't have left you here. You were too lonely."

Emea looked surprised. For a girl who was still so young, sometimes she acted much older. "I can't always tie you down like this, Kohaku," she said. "I have to learn to take care of myself."

But Kohaku thought he saw traces of bags under her eyes, and her skin was paler than it had been before. "Were you sick while I was away?"

She looked down and shook her head. He lifted her face back up by the chin.

"There's no use lying, Emea. I can just ask Palau."

"A little," she said. "I had a fever and a cough. The doctor said I should keep away from the docks ... I walked down there sometimes, hoping to see you coming back. I'm mostly better now, though."

He hugged her tightly.

"I'm sorry, Emea," he said out loud, because he knew she couldn't hear him. "I promise ... from now on, I'll be here for you."

Lana's mother found work. There was a sailors' hookah lounge a few blocks from their boarding house, and they hired her to be a hostess. Lana's employment search took nearly a week because she was too young for hostess work and too unskilled to do anything else. A laundry service in the richer northeast part of the city finally took her on to do manual labor in the steaming laundry vats. After a week, Lana gathered that the job was so horrible no one person managed to stay in it very long. She dyed and scrubbed a

seemingly endless supply of clothes, using harsh lye soap in water just a few degrees below scalding. Despite the gloves she wore her hands felt raw and sore by the end of the day, and the fumes made her eyes water and her throat hurt. Her only companion most days was the supervisor, an older woman with a bad back who had quite possibly been doing the same work since she was Lana's age. The thought terrified her. How could anyone possibly live like this her entire life? She came home late every night, with barely enough energy to stuff some food down her throat before she went to sleep.

Her mother saw how tired she was, but Lana never told her exactly what her work entailed. She knew Leilani's job was hard enough without having to worry about her daughter. They both just had to make do until Kapa could send for them—they had to eat, after all, and the room cost money. Also, they had both bought second-hand clothes, which had consumed most of their small store of money. Their outer island clothes looked inappropriate here. Lana wasn't particularly fond of the way the dulled mother-of-pearl buttons up the front of the long shirt constricted her torso, but she absolutely refused to wear the heavy socks everyone here seemed to favor. It was still warm enough outside to go without them, and she had no intention of giving in until she had to—never mind the stares she got on the street.

One night nearly three weeks after they had arrived, Lana was trudging back home on a quiet, rosestone-paved side street in one of the richest parts of the city when she saw two people hurrying toward her. The council guards sometimes gave her trouble for her dirty, lye-stained clothing in this part of town, so she ducked into an alley and pressed herself against the rough-faced wall.

"They told me you could birth a stone," Lana heard one woman say quietly, "and still keep the mother alive. You won't get a kala till afterwards, so it had best be true."

The other woman—whose faded clothes seemed out of place next to her companion's exquisitely dyed crimson cloak—snorted contemptuously.

“Threats won’t do you much good. I’m here because I choose to be, but I can leave just as easily and let your daughter die. I’ll have a hundred kala before, six hundred kala after.”

The well-dressed woman clicked her tongue. “Seven hundred? It seems a little much for a one-armed midwife ...”

“How about for your daughter’s life?” The voice had a hard-edged humor to it that fascinated Lana.

The other woman looked around nervously. “Fine. If you save her, I’ll give you what you want.”

Lana saw her pull a pink hundred-kala coin out of her pocket and hand it to the midwife. Lana nearly salivated looking at it—that coin would let her and her mother eat fish and rice every day for the next two weeks. They entered a large house across from where Lana was hidden. Defying all common sense, her exhaustion forgotten, Lana crept across the street and sidled through the narrow alley, picking her way through piles of refuse. Through the thick sandstone walls, she could hear a woman shrieking and the unintelligible words of someone trying to calm her.

The woman shrieked again, this time so loudly that a raven, sorting through the midden heap, looked up in surprise and then flew away. Lana suddenly began to wish that she hadn’t run so impetuously into the alley—or at least that she had worn some socks. She didn’t want to even think about what liquid exactly was seeping between her toes. Still—the woman was making the oddest noises now, some strange cross between a gulp and a moan that sent shivers up her spine. She crept closer, avoiding as much of the refuse as she could. Up ahead, in the garden, she thought she saw dimly flickering lamplight, as though through a shuttered window. A short wall, reaching up to about her shoulders, separated the refuse-filled alley from the meticulously clean garden. Lana scrambled up over it and, without looking down, dropped on the other side. Instead of encountering solid ground, however, she fell with a splash into a pond. Luckily most of the noise was covered up a moment later, when the girl screamed again. The sound was much louder in the garden.

“Put out the incense.” The preemptory voice of the midwife cut through the room. For a moment, the subdued, worried voices and even the woman’s gulping moans stopped in what Lana imagined to be surprise.

“We couldn’t possibly.” It was the voice of the well-dressed woman Lana had seen on the street. “Perhaps you are unfamiliar with civilized customs, witch, but that incense is burning to pacify the death spirit—so it doesn’t visit my niece tonight.”

The midwife didn’t sound offended at the insult. In fact, she seemed amused. “Of the two of us, I think I have the most reason to know what will and will not pacify the death spirit. But as you like it—either you keep your incense, and I leave, or you put it out and I stay. Perhaps in the morning you’ll see how well your incense kept the death spirit away.”

The silence in the room was broken only by the pregnant woman’s gasping moans. It stretched on for nearly a minute, and then the well-dressed lady must have nodded, because the midwife began giving orders again.

“Ignorant fools,” the midwife said. Lana, trying to maneuver herself out of the waist-deep pond, looked up just in time to see her flickering silhouette through the latticed rice paper shutters. Abruptly, the woman turned and slid them back. Lana ducked quickly into the water, and then turned to stare at the woman standing in the open window. The one-armed midwife’s nearly black eyes darted over the rippling surface of the pond as if she had seen her. Lana held her breath—not as large a one as she would have liked, but enough—and prayed that she would leave the window. The midwife had the oddest intensity in her eyes, as though she was almost afraid, but the corners of her mouth were smiling. A lao-lao fish, of the most expensive iridescent kind, swam close to Lana’s rock-steady arm and began nibbling at it. It splashed its soft white light carelessly around the pond, and Lana could feel her heart thundering. The woman looked abruptly down at the water, at the exact spot where Lana was hiding. Her empty right sleeve terrified Lana for some reason that she could not fathom. For one

bright, painful moment, Lana thought that the woman had seen her—that she would tell the owner of this house and Lana would be arrested and tossed into the notoriously accident-prone dockside jails. But the woman just nodded slightly and turned around.

Lana waited until lack of air burned her lungs and made her vision go hazy. Then, very slowly, she raised her head out of the water. From where she crouched, she had a fairly good view of the low bed where a gasping, sweaty, and disturbingly bloody pregnant girl was struggling to give birth. The one-armed midwife held a glass filled with some gray-green mixture to the girl's mouth and gently forced her to drink it. A great deal dribbled from the sides of her mouth, but she seemed to get some of it down.

"Tell me, lady," the girl said, her voice trembling and hardly audible. "If I die here, will my baby die too? Can you at least save my baby?"

The woman put her arm gently on the girl's swollen, heaving stomach. "I will save the baby," she said. "And I will save you. Perhaps no one else could promise you that, child, but because I am here, I swear to keep death away tonight."

The girl's eyes grew wider, but she seemed to believe the woman, because she visibly relaxed. Lana was surprised. What powers did this midwife have that she could make such a rash promise? Because, Lana could tell, those had not been empty words of comfort—the midwife had been quite serious when she swore she would save the girl's life. But when Lana looked at that girl—so thin, apart from her swollen stomach—and saw how much blood she had already lost, she wondered how anyone could possibly keep death away from her.

From the time she was born, Lana had been marked as a diver. She had never considered herself as anything else, and so she had never actually seen another woman give birth. Other girls from her island learned midwifery, and cooking, but not the divers. So Lana had the strangest sense that night that she was being given a glimpse of a new and different world. Perhaps it was more

mundane than the one she had been trained for, but it still held a strange kind of fascination.

The pregnant girl lived. An hour before dawn, when both she and the midwife were covered in sweat and panting with exhaustion, she gave birth to a female baby. After they cleaned her, Lana saw that she had a head full of hair—an odd shade of reddish burgundy that reminded Lana suddenly, painfully, of how Kali's hair had looked the day she died, after the sun came out.

“What will you name her?” the midwife asked.

She and the new mother were the only two people awake in the room. The girl's aunt and the two servants who had been helping with the delivery had fallen into an exhausted sleep. After all the noise of the past few hours, the world suddenly felt very quiet.

“My aunt ... she thinks I should name her Hiapelo ... after my mother. But I don't know ...” She gently stroked the baby's head. “She has such unusual hair, doesn't she?”

“Kali,” Lana whispered.

She realized what she had done too late. The midwife turned her head toward the window, but instead of getting up to look, she simply nodded and faced the girl again.

“Kali is a pretty name, I think,” the midwife said.

Lana's legs, already shivering uncontrollably from standing in the water for so many hours, started to buckle.

The girl looked up. “Kali? It's nice ... rustic, I think. Kali ...” She looked back down at her baby and then closed her eyes. Lana waited to make sure that she was still breathing and then stood up slowly. It would be dawn in an hour, and suddenly she could not bear to think how much her mother must be worrying. With a last glance at the strange tableau through the window, she climbed back over the alley wall.

Hours after Lana should have been home, Leilani pulled on her jacket and walked all the way to the northeast quarter, banged on the door of the owner of the launderer's, and demanded to know where her daughter was. She had left just after seven, as usual, the

ruffled man had angrily told her. No, she hadn't looked any different than normal, and would she please take her petty domestic troubles elsewhere so he could kindly get some rest?

She had trudged home in silence, praying that Lana would be waiting for her when she returned, but somehow knowing that she wouldn't. She paced the floor for hours afterward, debating whether she should call the council guards. But would those guardians of the wealthy help her at all, or simply ignore her—or worse, find some pretext to arrest her? She worked herself into such a state of worried exhaustion that she fell asleep despite herself a few hours before dawn. When she awoke, it was to the unmistakable sound of old, groaning wood. Someone was coming up the stairs. Lana appeared in the doorway moments later, soaked to the skin and shivering. She was smiling slightly, as though she was hardly aware of the expression, but Leilani thought she saw tear tracks on her damp cheeks.

She'd had a furious barrage of questions prepared for when she managed to find her daughter again, but seeing her shivering in the doorway, looking so bewildered and inexplicably elated, she found she couldn't say any of them. Instead she stood up and fetched a towel.

"You smell like fish," Leilani said as she wrapped the warm, faded rag around Lana's shoulders.

"I was standing in a pond," Lana said, as though that explained everything.

Leilani sighed. "Take off your clothes and lie down. If you go to sleep now you might get an hour of rest before you have to go back to work."

Lana never told her mother about that night, but in the days that followed she found herself growing gloomy and distracted. She lost her appetite. Working at the launderer's sapped all of her energy, and the fumes irritated her throat so badly that sometimes it hurt to eat. Leilani was so exhausted after work herself that she

rarely noticed how little Lana was eating. Which was just as well, as far as Lana was concerned. There was something bothering her mother—she could tell that much, but Leilani refused to speak about it. She would come home close to midnight, her eyes red and puffy. Lana worried about her, but in a distant sort of way. There were so many more things to worry about, these days—it was easier to work mindlessly, and forget about her other problems.

Kapa wrote them a letter, finally, that arrived two weeks after the night Lana spent in the garden pond. It came on market day—the only day off either of them had all week, when people traditionally went to the bustling market fair at the Eastern docks. They were both exhausted, however, with barely enough energy to talk to each other, let alone explore the market for items they couldn't possibly afford. Leilani slowly stood up when someone knocked on the door.

It was the landlady, holding a thick, folded letter.

“This just came on one of the trade ships. From Essel,” she said.

A look of barely suppressed excitement came over Leilani's face. She thanked the woman profusely and took the letter in shaking hands.

The pitying look the lady gave her mother just before she closed the door made Lana inexplicably nervous. *Had* her mother been acting strangely lately? She just looked tired to Lana, but maybe there were other signs that she had been ignoring.

Leilani sat back on the floor and broke the seal.

“Is it Papa?” Lana asked.

Leilani gave her a tight smile and nodded. Despite her rush of excitement, part of Lana couldn't help but wonder if even being all together again would solve their problems. It would never be like it was back on the island, and in her heart, that's what she wished for the most, however childish. But even “not as good as before” was better than now, with her endless, painful labor over the vats. They had been here for two months, and already the island seemed like

a fairy tale of someone else's life. She had her memories of happiness, but the sensation was impossible to access—as though the steam and lye had burned it away.

“What ... what does he say?” Lana asked, vainly trying to keep her voice calm.

The paper crackled as her mother's hands started shaking uncontrollably. She rested them on the floor and put her head between her knees. When she lifted her head a moment later, she looked as though she wanted to cry, but her eyes were dry. Lana's breathing grew rough.

“We have to stay, he says. At least two more months.”

So there would be no escape from the vats tomorrow.

Two more months.

The old lady hadn't come in for the past week. Lana stooped over the huge stone basin for dark-colored clothes and stirred it with a wooden paddle twice her size. She was more profoundly exhausted than she had ever been in her life. Even the smallest movement of her back sent daggers of pain shooting down her legs, but she hardly noticed that anymore. She worked in a strange haze, forgetting to eat, unable to think—concentrating only on getting through the next second. Lana took the paddle out of the water and settled it against the wall. She staggered back from the tub a little and tried to straighten her back. The effort made tears spring to her eyes, and she collapsed against the nearest wall. What was wrong with her? Her back had never hurt this much before. She started to hobble to the bleach vat, but had to stop when a sudden coughing fit overcame her. This sort of thing had happened before, but she was usually able to control them. This time, however, the coughs were deep and explosive, searing her lungs and her throat until she was doubled over with the pain of it. Globbs of rose-colored phlegm fell from her mouth onto the tightly packed dirt floor. The old woman was gone. There was no one else around to hear her call for help, but she struggled to yell anyway, sinking to her knees with the effort. Her head pounded each time she coughed, and the

viscous, salty mucus coming from her mouth began to look bright red. She collapsed, watching the blood-streaked phlegm sink into the earth as her world went dark.

A boy, out of breath and clutching his hat in his hands, appeared on the dusty wooden step outside the lounge. He was too young to be a customer, Leilani thought as she tapped the used ashes out of the hookah pipes. She wondered if he might be a young sailor, but his hands weren't rough enough. Even at that age, a few months out at sea made all sailors develop a set of unmistakable calluses. She stared at him curiously as Heluma, one of the other hostesses, approached him.

"What do you want, boy?" she asked, wiping her forehead with a rag.

He fidgeted with his hat a little. "I have a message. I was told a woman with a daughter who works at the launderer's up in the northeast district should be here."

"Hey, Lei, isn't that you?" Heluma said, but Leilani had already stumbled up from her chair and ran toward the boy.

"What happened to Lana?" she asked. Her heart was beating frantically.

"She collapsed in front of one of the vats. The doctor told me to fetch her mother."

Leilani closed her eyes briefly, then turned to Heluma. "Tell the boss what happened. I have to go."

Heluma nodded and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

Leilani nodded and then ran back inside to get her bag.

"I'm sure she'll be okay, Lei," Heluma said before Leilani left.

Leilani didn't say anything, but she prayed as she followed the boy through the narrow city streets.

The doctor, a stout man in the traditional gray embroidered robes of his profession, made her sit down and take some tea before he would discuss Lana's condition. She waited impatiently—she had

seen Lana sleeping on a cot in the infirmary, but still worry gnawed at her stomach.

“To be perfectly straightforward, your daughter is very sick.” His voice and manner were calm, as though he were discussing something of significantly less importance. Leilani’s breath caught in her throat. “I don’t know how long this condition has persisted, but she is clearly exhausted and the chemicals at the vats have irritated her throat and lungs to a point near poisoning. She has, at the moment, a dangerously high fever.”

“Is she dying?” Leilani’s throat felt strangled as the words left her mouth.

He pursed his lips. “I’ve seen much worse cases come through. There is a medicine I could provide that would probably guarantee it—especially regarding the situation with her lungs and throat—but it’s quite expensive. I get it exclusively from a trader on Kalakoas and it is very difficult to come by.” He looked at Leilani’s second-hand attire appraisingly. “I’m afraid it may be above your means,” he said.

She felt pins of anger in her chest. “Don’t make assumptions. How much is it?”

He raised his eyebrows. “A week’s supply, in her condition, would cost around a thousand kala.”

Leilani felt herself shaking and tried to stop. A thousand kala was more than she made in a month at the lounge. Barely that much money remained from the small stash that she had brought with her from her home island. But this man seemed to be telling her that Lana was dying. She would simply have to find some way to get the money, no matter how difficult it was. For now, at least, she could pay for the first week.

“I’ll come with the money later this evening, for the first week’s supply.” Her voice shook as she said it, but she knew it couldn’t be helped.

The man looked surprised but nodded after a brief moment. “As you will. For now, let’s get your daughter home.”

Some men from the infirmary carried Lana home on a piece of heavy canvas stretched between two poles. As they neared the docks, one of the men tripped over something in the road, and Lana nearly tumbled off.

“Be careful!” Leilani snapped. The man muttered an apology and adjusted his grip on the wood. Beside him, a woman in a heavy yellow cloak whom Leilani hadn’t noticed before bent over and picked something up from among the littered seashells on the main road.

“I think this is hers,” she said. Her gravelly voice made Leilani oddly uncomfortable. She leaned in closer to see what the woman held. To her surprise, she recognized the bright azure mandagah jewel that Lana had harvested during her initiation. Why had she been carrying that with her? Leilani had always thought that she kept the jewel in her trunk.

Leilani forced a smile. “Why, thank you.” She took the jewel back and put it in her pocket.

“I hope your daughter recovers. It takes a special person to harvest a jewel like that.”

The woman’s tone was almost acquisitive, but her smile was sincere enough. Leilani forced herself to be civil. “Oh,” she said. “Are you a diver?”

The woman gave a dry chuckle and shook her head. “No, no. Just a connoisseur.”

And with that, the woman gave Leilani a brusque nod and seemed to melt back into the crowd. She stood still for a confused moment, and then, shaking her head, followed the men back to her apartment. She ran up the stairs when they reached the boarding house and rolled out a sleeping mat. She tried to make it as comfortable as possible, but she was painfully aware of its insufficiency. How could she have allowed this to happen to her daughter? Tears ached in her throat, but she forced them down. One of the men picked Lana up and settled her in the bed. After the men had left, she allowed herself to cry for half an hour. Then, she put a pitcher

of water and a glass by the bed and went to get the money. Clutching the bit of twine heavy with strung-together stone coins, she left to give away all of their savings for a chance to save her daughter's life.

Lana came to very gradually. The bed felt familiar, but she couldn't remember how she had gotten home.

"Mama?" she said. Her voice was a scratchy whisper, and even that small sound made her throat feel as though some animal was clawing at it. What had happened? Suddenly, she remembered the coughing fit and collapsing on the floor. She felt horrible, like she might pass out again at any moment. She lifted her head a little to see if her mother was there and then fell back on the pillow, exhausted. She was alone. Her mother had left some water by the bed for her, but she wasn't sure if she had the energy to drink it. I must be sick, she thought. She certainly felt sick, but for some reason it hadn't seemed like a possibility before. She had just begun to drift off again when her mother opened the door.

Her face was pale and her back was unnaturally straight, as though she might collapse if she relaxed it. Lana wondered what had happened. Leilani looked at her and then ran to the bed.

"You're awake! How do you feel?" She set a small bag down on the floor and pulled the covers up over Lana. "Do you want some water?"

Lana let her mother tip some water down her throat and leaned back against her pillow when she had had enough. When had she ever felt this weak? She didn't recognize her own body, and she hated her helplessness. Ever since they had left the island, everything in her life had gone careening out of control, and she didn't know how to get it back again.

"Mama," she began to say, but Leilani shushed her.

"You don't have to say anything. I know it hurts. Here, I bought you some medicine that will help. You'll get better soon, Lana. I promise."

Her mother was scared. This realization ought to frighten her,

Lana thought, but instead she found it comforting. Her mother was no longer the infallible goddess of her youth—she was human, and scared, and trying to hide it, and Lana loved her. Leilani stood up and took out a judicious amount of a dried green herb from the bag and used it to brew tea. She poured a cup, waited until it had cooled enough, and then sat patiently beside Lana again.

“You have to drink all of it. It probably won’t taste very good, though, so I’m sorry.”

Lana shook her head and drank the whole thing obediently, even when it hurt her throat to swallow. The warmth briefly stopped her shivers, and made her feel sleepy.

“Mama,” she said again as Leilani gently smoothed her hair away from her forehead. “I’ll be all right.”

Two tears, unmistakable, streaked their way down her mother’s cheeks. “I’m sure you will, Lana. You should sleep.”

So she did.

The man had been propositioning Leilani for weeks. It started with broad winks and suggestive hand gestures that had become progressively vulgar as time went on. Heluma, she knew, did the occasional sexual favor for extra cash, but the idea had always been repugnant to Leilani. She wanted nothing to do with the weather-beaten, self-assured merchant, no matter how many expensive chains he wore around his neck. As her supply of the precious medicine dwindled, however, and she was faced with the impossible prospect of finding a thousand extra kala, she began to consider it. She forced herself past her own nausea to smile at the merchant as she served him sour palm wine, or refilled his hookah bowl with mid-grade amant. Sometimes, she even brushed his shoulder suggestively with her arm as she left. He responded to her slightly less frosty behavior with even more obscene propositions.

“I want you in my bed, Lei,” he growled the night before she ran out of the medicine. He was on his third bowl of amant. He was impeccably dressed, as usual, but the way his slicked-back graying hair shone in the lamplight made her feel nauseous. Heluma clearly

thought he was a good prospect—unhandsome, but not unappealing, and clearly wealthy. But Leilani felt ill at even the thought of going to bed with him. “Why d’you think I’ve been coming to this crummy place every night for the past three weeks? I’ve got plenty enough money to frequent more high-class establishments.” He rattled his chains suggestively.

Leilani was thinking of Lana, who was getting better enough to talk for a few sentences without coughing. What would happen if she ran out of the medicine?

“For a price,” she said.

He looked at her appraisingly. “Now that’s what I like to hear. How much? You’ve kept me away for so long, I’ll pay anything.”

“A thousand kala,” she said, and could hardly believe her audacity when the amount left her mouth. What humble hostess in a third-rate sailor establishment could possibly hope for such a large amount?

He looked surprised as well, but then narrowed his eyes. “You have guts, Lei, I’ll tell you that. You think you’re worth so much? Well, for a thousand kala it would have to be the whole night. You’ll have to do whatever I want.”

The back of Leilani’s mouth filled with the taste of vomit, but he had agreed. A thousand kala. She could buy enough medicine for another week. She nodded. “My shift is over in an hour.”

He smiled. “This will be a night to remember.” He took a long pull on the pipe and blew the smoke into her face.

He took her to an inn with clean sheets and a proprietor who looked the other way when rich guests with anonymous partners booked rooms. He took his time with her, kissing and touching her far more gently than she would have expected. At first, she went through the motions numbly and struggled not to be sick. But then, unexpectedly, she felt herself respond physically to his caresses, even while she cursed him in her mind. It seemed to her like the worst sort of betrayal—it was one thing for her to give her body to another man, but to *enjoy* it? Her moans occurred

somewhere halfway between pleasure and grief. It seemed to go on forever, no matter how she tried to speed it along. She felt crushed by him, horrified by both his and her own desire. Before tonight, she had only been with one man in her entire life, a man she was completely in love with. Was this how sex was for most women? Pleasure without love? How could she ever tell Kapa of what she was doing, of what she'd had to do—even if it was for the sake of their daughter? She felt as if she were dying when he finished, despite the fact that she had taken every necessary precaution earlier.

He came at her all night long. All she wanted to do was leave, melt away, and she couldn't because he was on top of her again, and she couldn't even tell which one of them was gasping in pleasure. And then, finally, it was all over. Sated at last, he rolled onto the other side of the bed. She shook him awake.

"The money," she said. Her voice was flat.

His cold gray eyes looked amused. He levered himself upright, reached into his purse, and tossed the coins on the bed.

"You were all right. I figured you'd have more stamina, though," he said as he collapsed on the bed again. She struggled into her clothes and put the money in her pocket.

Outside the building, she ducked into an alley and vomited violently. Then she went to find the doctor.