

CRUXMACHIA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH

DECEMBER 2012

By

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the various people, for whom, without their selfless assistance, this project would be in stasis. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my committee, Judith Kellogg, Steven Goldsberry, and Jeffrey Carroll, who, through their classes and instruction, have been the inspiration and catalysts for the key elements of the story. To my writing group, Daniel Hugo, Alexei Melnick, Donovan Colleps, Amalia Bueno, Sara Young, Ken Quilantang Jr., Alan Shimosono and Genevieve Suzuki for trudging through the muck with me. And to the other professors who have guided me and shared their knowledge of writing and the fantastical: Cristina Bacchilega, Gary Pak, Witi Ihimaera, Susan Schultz, Rodney Morales, Shawna Yang Ryan, John Rieder and Steven Curry. I extend a heartfelt thanks to my crew at the Kaimuki Fire Station: Captains Rickey Amano and Ricky Mamiya, Engineers Keola Young and Reggie Gawiran, and the firefighters Beau Lee, Kimo Olivera, James Horibata, Chris Edwards, Michael Carter, Conrad Nakamoto, and Travis DesRoaches. Also, to my freediving partners and brothers, Marc Rol, Kyle Watanabe and the late "Richie" Yoshida. The latter of whom was also the reason for my journey into writing. A 'thank you' that cannot be appropriately expressed on the page as much as in a shot glass. Finally to my babysitters who allowed me the time to write, my mother Judine Wing, my aunt Faith Nishita, my wife Darla Won, and of course to the baby herself, Ivy, who, without the benefit of spoken language, has taught her father that magic exists everywhere...especially in the mundane.

Abstract

The allegory has been used as a teaching tool for centuries. My piece is a jaunt with the diverse faculties of the allegory. The title of this work, 'Cruxmachia,' may not seem appropriate considering the settings (Hawai'i and Japan) and the ethnicity of the protagonist, but it is meant to pay homage to 'Psychomachia,' an original poem, and perhaps THE original medieval allegory, written by Prudentius Aurelius around AD 410. Like Prudentius, I have anthropomorphized the virtues and vices, but into corresponding animal characters (instead of female warriors) are created after a cataclysm caused by my three central characters. I have also added other types of characters: dividians and dark dividians, which are humans that have combined with their animal compliments. The last created by the cataclysm are the creatures of folklore and mythology, who must survive the onslaught of the Stigions (vices) and dark dividians. This piece (the first of a trilogy) is also meant to be a commentary on the state of society with regards the impermanence and transiency of tales. Some of these stories have, at some point, been used to shape the cultures we know today, but are already being erased. This 'erasure' is accomplished by inserting the stories with fabricated ideologies that are products of misinformed media and personal interpretation. Most mean to preserve, but to survive, everything must adapt, and therefore evolve. I am hoping that my adaptation is an evolution, that, although it may prove subversive to some, to others it will inspire them to research and experience the originals.

POLOLU BEGINNINGS

In a dry corner of the sea cave, Kawika Richard Funaki looked upward. He studied the hole hundreds of feet above. He wondered how big that hole was and if anyone had ever climbed up to see. It looked so tiny, so insignificant, a white pinhole set upon a black, rocky canvas. In his mind, the hole wasn't round, but star-shaped and flanked by cubed rocks that held it up like an altar. Kawika turned his gaze down to his green tattered copy of "Kamapua'a: The Hawaiian Pig God," and flipped through it.

The ridge above him cradled the right side of Pololū Valley. He'd never seen anyone at the top, even when he hiked the adjacent valley with his mother and stepfather, when they were still alive. A mist always hovered over the apex of that section, which is why he couldn't see blue sky when he looked at the hole, only white.

He set the copy of "Kamapua'a" on the sleeping bag and went outside.

"Ai-sho!" he said to the sunlight. He stood in the mouth of the cave and stretched. The bright rays on Kawika's forehead seemed to bleach his dark skin.

This west side of the Kohala Mountain Range on the Big Island of Hawai'i hugged the right side of Pololū Valley and formed the bay. The cave was behind the tip of a sloping extension, hidden to those who traversed the valley. Waves would usually pummel the landing just below, but today the water was serene. Kawika descended to the narrow and jagged trail that would take him to the inside of the bay, where he could see straight to the bottom even on the blustery days.

The bay shimmered. He scanned for movement in the usual spot near a rock next to the sharpest bend. A diver's orange float drifted into view from behind the yellow

cragged rock. Kawika cringed. It was Mei Kaulike's float, football-shaped, bobbing up and down, mocking him in the know-it-all manner of Mei.

"Aw crap," he said and scanned the other trail that went back through the mountain. "Why she always gotta be here? She not posed to be studying for get into Harvard?"

The Kaulike family was known in the Big Island community for their large business acquisitions and their publicly announced philanthropy. Their hosted parties featured the best caviar, A-list entertainers, and enough politicians and attorneys to attract the occasional detective.

Kawika rarely tolerated visitors to the bay. He would sometimes spear a fish and mangle it to make it look like a shark was hunting nearby--sometimes this would attract the smaller reef sharks. He was least fond of Mei, not just because she was keen to his rapacious pranks, but because she symbolized everything Kawika never wanted to be, and never understood. She wasn't the most talented diver from North Kohala, but she was graced with pleasing hapa features and a family fortune, which made her the most discussed diver along the coast.

"Fricken' every time," he thought, and lobbed a piece of bleached coral towards Mei's snorkel. It missed.

"EY!" a voice boomed from behind Kawika. He stumbled to one knee.

"No trow rocks! Whatsamatta you?"

Kawika rubbed his chest and slowed his breathing.

It was Uncle Charlie. He was bronzed from long days on the lazy shore, where his own cave was just a tad more inland from where Kawika and Sol lived. He was

twining his weathered Lei Niho Palaoa that hung off the top of his walking stick instead of around his neck. He wore a soft-tattered aloha shirt. With his resonant voice, he was the self-appointed guardian of the bay.

“Uncle, why you always gotta scare da hell out of me?”

“I was sitting right here da whole time—what, old man too smooth for you?” He laughed.

“No! Why? I mean...nah.”

Uncle Charlie laughed again. “Auwe, dis kid,” he said.

“Boy, how come you always get punchy when I tease you?”

“Why you always gotta tease me? I thought wise men was above all dat.”

Charlie smiled. “Why you tink I like teasing you?”

Kawika shrugged and turned towards Mei’s direction.

“Why, you tink I nevah tease Sol?”

“No can handle, ass why,” Kawika answered, still scanning the water.

“Why you gotta say ‘em li’dat?”

“Uncle, I grew up in one of da poorest towns on da Big Island...and wasn’t even in one house! How you tink I supposed to talk?”

Uncle Charlie studied Kawika’s posture.

“What, I no can ack li’dat?” Kawika asked. “Hah?”

“Bully, how many times I gotta tell you—where you live, dat no make you; dat no make one man. Brah, not yo’ clothes, yo’ car, job, or even da ohana —iss yo’ choices, bully! Choices make da man.”

Kawika pretended to be more interested looking out into the water. “Where da hell is dat...” he mumbled just loud enough to hear, with one hand on his hip and the other shading his eyes.

“Da book I wen give you,” Uncle Charlie continued, “Kamapua‘a? Look what he had fo deal wit. He was born one pig into one regular kine family...and what wen happen to him?”

“He wen save da islands of Hawai‘i from da wrath of da gods,” Kawika said, static and rehearsed.

“No ack, boy...I know you tink you one supahero. You tink you juss like Kamapua‘a,” Uncle Charlie said.

“Yeah, and Sol is like Kekele‘iaikū,” said Kawika. “Da olda bruddah who make Kamapua‘a do all da work, while he take da credit.”

Uncle Charlie adjusted the Lei Niho Palaoa on his walking stick. “You one good kid—no let da chip on yo’ shoulder come so big da ting block yo’ eyes and no can turn yo’ head, ah?”

Kawika’s hand slipped off his hip and his head slumped forward. He let out a sigh and began rubbing the back of his neck.

Uncle Charlie pushed himself upward and limped across to Kawika.

“No worries, boy,” he said and patted Kawika on the back. “You going see your girlfren soon.”

“Ey,” Kawika said and spun around to face Uncle Charlie, who was already walking away.

“Go train—gon feel better afta, ” Uncle Charlie called backwards.

“K-den,” Kawika said and shot his poised shaka.

Kawika slipped back into the cave, and with a timorous agility but cautious deftness, he turned in towards the tunnel system on the inside. He negotiated the cool dark path using his own style of echolocation. Kawika would make clicking sounds with his tongue and listened to the sound that would come back to him. He could tell from the gravelly reverberations when he was getting close to a dead end or a bend. Over rocks and around protuberant corners, he glided with his head slightly tilted. *Click, click, click.* When the breezes were accompanied by a dim light overhead, he grabbed hold of a lower ledge and pulled himself up. This was his training spot, another cave about the size of a one-room gym with a curved ledge that opened outward, about a third of the way up the mountain face.

SOLACE

Kawika began warming up with push-ups, squats, and sit-ups. He knew it was best to get the circulation up before stretching. He decided that it would also take his mind off his hunger. He began training in the fighting stances. They were low and wide. Although they did not allow for fluid and quick motion, they were the foundations for his fighting styles. All the power in his strikes, he learned to focus by first grounding his feet and then applying the theory of “kinetic linking,” which taught the practitioner to derive the force in the attacks from the earth. He acquired that knowledge from training in karate and also from reading books on kung fu and dusty sparring sessions with the Hawi Boxing and Muay Thai clubs.

Kawika focused on a rock directly to the right of the opening, protruding from the wall. It was dulled from countless punches, palm strikes, overhand elbows, and the occasional knee. Every time he trained with it, his knuckles would go bloody or at least red from the sheer velocity and repetition. The last blow would always be the full body “knockout punch” that incorporated the entire body weight and was punctuated with the *ki-ai*, the breath.

“Hai-tooo,” he shouted, slumped and slowed his breathing. Sometimes he would whip some of the smaller stones at the static training piece and follow up with uncontrolled kicks and elbows. The vein over his temple pulsed wet. The rock snickered at him; he could hear it echoing.

Kawika noticed a small white fishing boat teetering in the distance.

“Fricken’ strip miners,” Kawika muttered.

It was the Hannemen brothers. Kawika had his own personal war with them. “Rubbish,” he called them. Once Kohala High’s school bullies, they would go spear fishing around the bay with scuba gear and leave with three coolers full of fish. Nowadays it would take Kawika a few hours to get a decent day’s catch. In turn Kawika would wait for the brothers to unload their deep-water catch and take off running with the choicest fish.

He bounced until his body felt limber again and sauntered over to the rock still shaking his hands and cracking his neck sideways. He set up in his southpaw stance and took one last deep breath before starting a repressed flurry on the weathered stone. His face had begun to wince. “Gotta push through this,” he thought. “Pretty soon hands gon be numb...jus’ go till can see blood.”

Today he was more controlled. Blood flecked from his knuckles, but he didn’t stop. It came to the point where the pain reappeared, only now it was deeper. With each impact he felt the jolts creeping from his elbow back to his shoulder. Soon Kawika’s eyes were creased shut and his vicious barrage became silent to everything but his heartbeat. He only halted the blind onslaught when his lead foot was nearly flattened by a club-shaped piece of the cave.

“Ahw!” he shouted and jumped back.

Glaring at the piece and slowly closing his mouth, it was a few moments before he realized what he had done.

“Ho, no way!” he said “I wen broke em!”

Kawika took the rock shard out to the ledge and hurled it underhand. His eyes traced its rapid descent to the shimmering ripples below. Immediately after the *splash*

there was another punching of the water's surface, only the object was coming out. It was a small spinner dolphin... a pint-sized cetacean that Kawika had named "Dante."

Dante responded with a quick tail slap and backwards flip. Kawika smiled and clenched before he stepped off the ledge and plunged thirty feet into North Kohala's tranquil ripples with his feet together and arms crossed. The water had that soft feeling, like being suspended inside a pillow gently buttressed from all sides. Even without goggles Kawika could still make out the blurred array of colors that darted around him. He felt the warm sting of salt on his scraped knuckles, and rubbed his hands together. Dante swam a circle around Kawika spiraling like a corkscrew through the rippling bay. The water's surface was a molten glass rippled by two friends unaware of belonging to different species. Kawika shifted through the water, lining up with the dolphin only to get a tail slap splattering water across his eyes. Kawika chased Dante as far as he could underwater before he needed to surface.

"Ey!" Kawika said, "I need help again!" He began flailing his arms and soon slumped over.

He had passed out once before, and Dante had to push him to the surface with his tiny dolphin's beak, his rostrum. He held Kawika face up until he coughed and started moving again.

Kawika floated face down like a palm frond, but with a smirk. Dante swam quick but approached slow, turning his head from side to side. Kawika waited until Dante was in arm's length and grabbed for Dante's dorsal fin. Kawika was unsuccessful, only sweeping his hand through water and was then rammed in his solar plexus by Dante's rostrum.

“Ahh!” Kawika gurgled and covered his chest with his hands. He rolled over and floated on his back for while with mouth gaped and eyes squinting at the rising sun.

Dante glided by, watching Kawika with one eye.

“I forget you guys get da kine superman x-ray sonar,” he said and continued rubbing his midsection. “Could tell I was faking, ah? So mento.”

He turned his head to see Dante floating on his side with pectoral fin out of the water. Kawika latched on without a flinch, and Dante sped off. With the water rushing over, Kawika looked like a palm frond being whipped in a hurricane. Dante corkscrewed again and Kawika tucked into a ball as his hand slid off Dante’s top fin.

When Kawika’s eyes cleared, he saw that Dante had stopped at the black-pebbled beach. He had dropped him off right in front of where Mei Kaulike was resting.

“Brah, you suck,” Kawika said to Dante. Dante reared his head and clicked before darting away.

“Whatsamatter, Davy?” Mei called. “You look like I just schooled you in a diving tournament again.” She knew Kawika hated to be called “Davy.”

“Dat freaking Dante,” Kawika thought, “he gon get it next time I see him.”

Kawika pulled off some seaweed that had caught against his shoulder and trudged to the shore with his head turned away from Mei. Her delicate tanned frame sat leaning backwards onto straightened arms with legs bent. Kawika pretended to not notice the tan-line from her dive suit forming on her thighs.

“How come you’re always in such a bad mood, Davy?” Mei asked, “You don’t need to go to school...no one to tell you what to do...”

Kawika's sideways glare caused Mei's smile to turn flat. "Why you always gotta be here?" Kawika asked, and whipped the kelp underhanded into the air. "No more da kine fancy party for be at with one of your rich boyfriends?"

"What makes you think I like being at those things?"

"Cuz das where you belong," said Kawika. "So beat it."

Mei's grin dropped into a smirk and she wiggled her fingers into the ground. She dug deep into the coarse black sand beneath her, and crunched her fingers deeper so her smooth red nails scuffed to a dimmer color.

"Why you trying fo hide your pretty manicure?" Kawika asked. "What you tink? Just cause you know how fo dive and no like dose fancy parties, you different from your parents? You not."

When Mei and her brothers were younger, they were seldom allowed to stay at their parent's "A-list" parties past eight. The amount of influential persons meandering the yard, sporting overpriced business cards was a dull and frequent occurrence they would watch from inside the house. You could probably assume that they were not allowed to converse with said dignitaries. They rarely smiled. Now, with both of her brothers away at Harvard, quite possibly from the monetary donations from the Kaulike family, Mei was constantly under the scope of her parents. Diving was the one thing that broke the mundane, and Kawika was the one person who broke her illusions about life. He somehow lived his life with no parents, no house...and no money. And he seemed to be more secure as a person than how she sometimes felt.

Kawika's roll of confidence was broken by a shout from the distance.

"Hoooo! Braddahs!"

It was Sol, pounding the sand with frantic feet and carrying two armfuls of fish. His shaved head and scarred torso glistened of translucent scales and water droplets.

“Crazy buggah,” thought Kawika. “He gon get us killed by da Hannemens...dey no play around when it comes to deir fish, or da ego. No matter how much dey suck at fishing and diving.”

Mei pushed herself up and dusted her hands before sliding behind a nearby coral conglomerate with Kawika. They both peered around the dusty coral boulder to see Sol stutter to a scratchy halt.

“Jack-pot!” said Sol. He dropped the multicolored fish at Kawika’s feet.

“Yeah, more like ‘crackpot,’” said Kawika “Brah, they gon smack the crap out of us when they catch us. We wen rip them off too many times already.”

“Well, dis da firs time I went broke all their regulator pieces and bleed their four-stroke engine.”

“Brah, they not gon jus lick us, they gon freakin kill us, dumbass! Remembah, dey get weapons...we no mo.” Kawika shook his head and then started to pick up the mass of parrotfish half-covered in black sand.

“They no can kill us,” said Sol. “They no can even lick us.”

“Oh yeah? So what you call dat time at Ke‘oke‘a Beach when we woke up wit deir broken baseball bats next to us? One elaborate kine set up fo make us tink dey wen beat us up?”

“Ah, I call that ‘blind luck.’ Brah, no way dose kine rich, spoiled kids can give me lickens. Dey was lucky.”

“And I say you ‘lucky’ you not ‘blind’ from dat one.” Kawika said. “Brah, you know dey always going use weapons, like da bats and tazers against us cuz dey no match for us han to han.”

“Yeah, I gon freaking kill them next time dey try dat kine stuff with me.” Sol began picking up the light blue fish by the base of the gills.

“Are you guys going back to your cave?” asked Mei

Sol and Kawika looked at each other and continued gathering the uhu.

“Come on, you think I don’t know where you guys live? I grew up here too and probably caught more fish around that corner of the bay than either of you. Besides it sounds like the Hannemens are already on their way.”

Kawika and Sol tilted their heads upwards and could just barely hear the fast pounding footsteps in the distance over the lazy breeze.

“Yup,” said Kawika. “Das dem.”

Kawika and Mei were nearly knocked over by Sol who rushed past them with two wobbling hand-loads of fish. Kawika pushed Mei staggering her sideways over the last large-scaled fish. She lunged slightly and then underhanded a black clump of sand towards Kawika. It dispersed midair before it reached him.

Mei scooped the tail between her slim fingers and sprinted towards the boys. Sol had already disappeared behind a wet coral boulder, and Kawika was hitting the sand with harder steps to make the quick turn into the cave. Most people who would chance to cross the rocks would do so with great caution and apprehension; Kawika and Sol appeared to glide as if on ice with skates. Mei got to the turn, and used her outstretched

arm along the smooth stone to slow her momentum and ease through the opening to the mountain.

They all stepped with quick gravel-shifting steps until they ended up back on the outside just under the cave. The landing just below the cave opening was a little wet from the waves that splashed across the surface. The three made their way up more deftly than cautiously, and flung the fish into a patch of shadow.

“Whooo!” Sol shouted. He threw heavy fists onto the cave wall. The density of the rock caused the bones in Sol’s fist to echo.

“Not da best idea for yell when get guys who like kick our ass,” said Kawika.

“Why,” said Sol, “you scared?”

“Brah, you da reason we always get beat down.”

“You one panty, Kawika.”

“Shut up! You da freaking panty...no make like you no cry when dat lady sings the Hawaiian chants by the water Sunday morning.”

Sol began to circle Kawika.

“Brah, what kind guy reads freaking tick-ass books that no make sense? Das jus gay.”

With arms crossed, Kawika followed Sol with his head.

“So, if books is so dumb and I’m gay, but I can kick yo ass, what does dat make you? One panty’s bitch?”

“Ho you like die ah, you freaka?” Sol said and thrust with both hands into Kawika’s chest.

“Quit it!” said Mei in a forceful whisper. “I think the back of the valley can hear you guys.”

Just as Kawika and Sol halted their squabble, the three Hannemen brothers walked into the cave with an electric tazer and bats. Gil and Gerald were much larger than Chief, but always stood on opposite sides of him. With the light at their backs, they looked like the Mickey Mouse silhouette.

“Ha,” said Sol. “Bu, das mo funny dan scary.”

The three brothers raised their weapons and rushed in. Kawika and Sol backpedaled before bringing their fists up only to be met with solid varnished wood so hard it dented their bones. Mei screamed from a bat splintering just above her head. The tazers took Kawika and Sol to the ground, causing them to shake viciously with backs arched and hands clenched. The crooked wires coming from their bodies bounced with each contraction. The three brothers chortled watching Kawika and Sol. Their perfect hair was swept to the side, limp.

Mei was crouched shivering in the same spot, her back covered with splintered wood. Gil, the oldest and largest, pulled her up by the ponytail and forced his eye socket onto hers. A single tear escaped, but she fought the urge to let that whimper slip out.

“What, you thought we weren’t going to find you?” asked Gil and dropped Mei.

Mei shook her head and clenched her teeth behind her closed lips. Gerald and Chief brought their heads in close and studied Mei’s reaction. She didn’t appear frightened, which forced them to whip their tazers past her head, shattering the plastic casing against the cave wall. Mei didn’t flinch. She knew she wouldn’t have moved even

if the guns were going to hit her. She believed her act of defiance would break the brothers' spirits.

“You’re a joke,” said Gil, “just like your phony parents.”

“It’s sad,” said Gerald. “They think because they throw all those ‘a-lists,’ Kona’s upper echelon looks up to them.”

“Nope,” Gil chimed in. “Even the families who don’t make as much money laugh at them, just like we laugh at you and your buddies who have to steal our fish and break our equipment...it’s because you’re jealous.”

“That’s why you have to steal our stuff,” said Chief. “Because you guys always come up whitewashed.”

“No,” Mei replied. “We steal your stuff because you guys are dicks who take more fish than you need...or are supposed to. You’re the worst kind of posers.” She said this even though she herself had never stolen fish from them.

There was a pause before the Hannemans flung her onto the slippery rocks and laughed as she slid. Chief ran to punt Mei, but he was tripped by Kawika’s floppy arm, sending him face first into the wet wall. The other brothers immediately jumped on Kawika, pinning him down with their hands and knees.

Chief got up, eyes squinting and watery. He picked up a cracked bat and smashed it again, creating a pointed piece of wood. He struck at Kawika, opening the skin on his back. Chief shouted and jumped onto Sol, whose body had just begun to unclench. He hammered wildly, trying to bloody every part of Sol.

With each blow, Chief's grunts became weaker and each hit sloppier. The laughing from the other brothers echoed. They were too focused to notice the giant serpent that had crept its way to the back of the cave.

CRUNCH!

The thick black snake, over a hundred feet long with scales the size of dinner plates, was able to move without making a sound, and sink its fangs into Chief's lower half.

He shot a painful, hopeless cry that froze Gil and Gerald with mouths wide open. Mei violently hiccupped and had to brace herself against the wall. Kawika lifted his head just as the behemoth slid the struggling Chief down its throat. He disappeared behind rows of long dripping teeth. The other two brothers scampered as fast as they could along the wall. They tried not to stumble, but at the same time they were not upright, nor could they see straight.

The snake reared its head and watched the panicked attackers scrape wildly towards the opening with hands in front of feet. It waited until they started to exit, coiled and flattened them against the cave wall. Its angel-white teeth dripped red juice. Mei screamed again and crouched quivering as the limp silhouettes dropped.

Kawika got up as quietly as possible, sliding to the rear of the cave. He motioned at Mei, pointing at a hole that she hadn't seen earlier. Before they moved again, the snake spun its head back around. The liquid that was flung from its mouth made a sizzling sound as it hit the cool wall.

"Yooou're not fast enough," said the snake. "And tell your friend to come out of his hole."

“He not in one hole,” Kawika said. But was so focused on the gigantic snake, he didn’t notice that Sol was already inching his way backwards down their escape route, as quietly as possible. Kawika called to Sol, who took his time climbing back out.

“Brah!” said Kawika “What you think you doing?”

“What, I was going tell you.”

“When? When you was outside?”

“Silence!” said the snake. “I am the Basilisk, and I have a proposition for the three of you.”

The three looked at each other, and looked around the cave, as if their answer floated in the air around them.

“What you like us do?” asked Sol.

“There are four white pillars at the top of this peak,” said the Basilisk.

“Ensconed within these pillars are very important stones.”

“See,” said Kawika “I told you had someting mystical up dere.”

The Basilisk turned its dragon-like head and hissed at Kawika. Kawika looked down.

“These stones need to be taken to place just north of here,” said the snake. “It’s called Neo-Atlantica, an ancient city on the ocean floor.”

“Wait, how are we supposed to do that?” asked Mei.

“I will give you the powers,” replied the Basilisk “You will be able to breathe underwater and swim swifter than any fish.”

“Why don’t you just get the stones yourself?” asked Kawika

The great snake paused and brought its wide-yellow eyes just inches from Kawika.

“There are rules even I must obey,” replied the Basilisk with scales shivering.

It told the story of the seven beings that inhabit the city and control ‘everything.’ Not so much the climate and seismic occurrences, but the hierarchy of man and by extension, all civilizations. Once they took the stones to the underwater city, they would be able to chart their own destiny, and become rulers of this world.

“Once I enter the water,” the Basilisk said, “the beings will know.”

“And these ‘beings’ wouldn’t know we were there?” asked Kawika.

“They will know, but they cannot stop you,” said the Basilisk.

“But they can stop you?” asked Kawika “Hah?”

“Brah, who cares,” said Sol. “Less move it, panty.”

Mei and Kawika began to motion at each other and shake their heads. Sol grabbed Mei’s arm. His blood-soaked hand allowed Mei to slip free easily.

“Do you have an answer?” asked the Basilisk, “or will you be joining your feisty friends?”

“Brah, it’s one freaggin gi-normous snake dat talks,” Kawika whispered to Sol.

“We’re in,” Sol said.

“Excccelent,” hissed the Basilisk.

JUMP THE SNAKE

The giant lowered its head to rest between the trio and motioned for them to climb on. The three held tightly to the bony protrusions on the sides of its head. The snake slithered up the cave wall with a muscular grace that Sol and Kawika both admired and despised. Their eyes squinted when the snake poked its head through the large craggy hole that once looked so tiny.

Kawika had stared at the opening for years. Now that he had gone through, the other side did not feel as liberating as he once imagined. It was much warmer than he thought, warmer and drier. The cloud formation he had noticed from the distance was nowhere to be seen. Like it was never there. His eyes began to slowly un-squint. He thought that maybe they were in the cloud, and he just was not able to see it. Kawika let his eyes wander to the edge of the cliff where there was dry dirt and loosed rocks. There was also another white stone protrusion that did not match the other rocks.

“So what we gotta do now?” Kawika asked

“Climb down the side to where the pillars are and retrieve the stones,” answered the Basilisk.

“Then we gotta go to that ‘New Atlantis place, right?’”

“Neo-Atlantica! And I will have to give you instructions for what to do once you get there”

“One more question,” said Kawika

The Basilisk listened.

“Why is it called ‘Neo-Atlantica’ if it stay in da Pacific Ocean?”

“All right, let’s go,” Mei said and pulled Kawika by his bicep.

Led by Sol, the trio climbed carefully down the unsteady surface. There was no trail so they had lower themselves from the white outcropping that turned out to be one of the pillars. There was another cave, with walls buttressed by the four white pillars.

They were just over head-high and reminded Kawika of the ones he had seen in picture of the Parthenon, only they were much smaller and more blanced.

Towards the top, each pillar had a dark, oblong mass, which Kawika figured could only be the stones they were looking for. As they were pulling the stones Kawika noticed that there were inscriptions covered in dust, just under each stone.

“*Iustitia*,” said Kawika as he dusted the inscription under the last stone.

“What?” asked Sol

“*Iustitia*. I not sure but I think that means ‘Justice.’”

Mei pushed past them and started dusting off the others and reading them out loud as they loosened the stones.

“*Fortitudo, Sapienta, and Temperantia!* That’s ‘Fortitude,’ ‘Prudence’ and ‘Temperance,’” Mei continued, “Trust me, I aced Latin.”

“You forgot to remind us about your grades in Honors Chemistry and AP Calculus,” said Kawika

“Shut up, Davy. At least I try to do something useful.”

“Why? School is stupid. Only mindless robots gotta go school,” said Kawika.

“Da hell wit you guys,” said Sol as he pushed past them and began climbing back up. “Fricken irritating...go make out and get it over with.”

“Sol!” Kawika said. “Try wait!”

“What?” Sol answered but continued his pace.

“Brah, you no feel funny about dis?” Kawika asked.

“No. Why you always gotta find someting wrong with everything?”

“Brah, dis one giant snake dat can talk and for some reason, it’s forbidden for go into da ocean...sound like one bible story to me.”

“Parable!” said Mei.

“We no care,” shouted Kawika.

“Dis my chance for get outta dis stinking hole,” said Sol. “I sick of only smelling da ocean and dead fish all da time. I like eat some pulehu kine steak—nah foget dat, I like some fricken filet mignon, brah. I freaking kill you if you try stop me.”

Sol pushed the two aside and ascended the rocky ledge. He scraped at the rocks and left long white lines on their faces. Once up top he called for Kawika and Mei to throw the stones up to him. Kawika suggested that Sol lower something so that he could pull the stones up instead of risking losing them. Sol lowered his surf shorts by the drawstrings.

“Ey, you gon put yo pants back on before we get up dere, ah?” asked Kawika

“Shutup, stupid!”

Mei and Kawika packed two of the stones in the pants, tied them off and motioned for Sol to pull the stones up. The two waited until they heard the Velcro from Sol’s shorts rip open before they began their climb back to the top. When they finished the climb, they saw the Basilisk was now coiled with its large head leaning forward.

“Very good,” it said. “Now we can move to the next phase of the mission.”

The snake once again lowered its head between the trio, and waited for them to climb on. It slithered smoothly down the face of the mountain as if there were no

obstacles. The three grasped tightly again to the hornlike appendages coming out of the head. The smooth scales slid left to right and under each other like the slats of the luggage carousel. They all landed safely on a patch of sand, just a little bigger than the cave.

The humans jumped onto the black sand cradling the stones.

“What kind of rocks are dese?” asked Kawika

“These are the heartstones,” answered the Basilisk. “You will need to place them on the tall white altar in the middle of the city.”

“We gotta carry these things in our arms the whole time?” asked Kawika

The giant snake opened its mouth and three wet snakeskin bags dropped onto the sand. Sol was the first to grab one. He shoved two of the stones into the snake sack.

Kawika and Mei each grabbed a stone and dropped them into the sacks.

Kawika lifted the snakeskin bag to his eyes. The rope that synched the bag snug was a dark braided mess. “Dis drawstring,” he said and covered his mouth.

“Dis...human hair?”

The snake smiled and looked back at Sol, who just winked. Mei was standing right next to Sol with her fingertips resting on her lips. Her body began quivering.

“You know what,” said Kawika. “I’m out.” He dropped the bag at Sol’s feet. Mei did the same and started walking away.

“Ey!” said Sol and grabbed Kawika. “What da hell?” Mei stopped.

“You go do em,” said Kawika. “No need us...get all da stones, ah?”

Sol looked to the Basilisk. “The journey will be much more dangerous alone,” said the snake. “Your friend may die without proper assistance,” it said to Kawika.

“Sorry...I no can,” Kawika said. “No feel right.”

Mei and Kawika headed up the trail to the top of the valley, despite the insults and threats that were coming from Sol. They were stopped less than halfway up by Uncle Charlie who was limping towards them at a quickened pace.

He caught his breath and said, “You guys gotta go.”

“What,” said Kawika.

“All you guys,” Uncle Charlie said. “Mei, you too. Da cops, dey looking for you guys.”

“Hah?” said Kawika.

“Da Hannemens musta wen call da uncle, da chief afta Sol wen broke deir stuff,” Uncle Charlie sputtered. “Get guys in yo cave right now an dey wen find da bodies of Gil and Gerald, and da blood in da back...you guys might get jail fo murder.”

“Wait,” said Mei. “Why did you say me too?”

“I dunno, but dey knew you was wit dem,” Uncle Charlie said. “Da offica said dat he wen call yo parents and dey said fo put you in jail.”

“Oh no,” Mei said. She leaned against the nearest tree. “That’s it...I’m finished. My father said if I ever got thrown in jail, that they wouldn’t come to get me out...ever.”

“You too,” Uncle Charlie said, pointing at Kawika. “Tanks to yo boy Sol, you stay in cahoots wit one guy who already get rep fo stealing cars, destruction of propatee, setting fya...any kine. You not gon see da watah long time.”

“No worry Uncle,” Kawika said looking at Mei. “We get one way out.”

Mei focused in on Kawika’s eyes. “What?” she said.

Kawika motioned back towards the bay and nodded.

“You guys bettah hurry,” Uncle said. “I told da cops I saw you guys running past Ke‘oke‘a, so dey stay going south...but prolly not fo long. And no foget da ones stay insai da cave.”

“We see you, uncle,” Kawika said, and began walking back down the trail.

“Ey,” Uncle shouted. “Yo choices...no foget, ah?”

Kawika casually pushed his ‘shaka’ above his head and twisted it side to side.

Mei followed with clumsy steps. “Can I talk to you?” she said. “What are we doing?”

“We gon back to da snake and get da heck outta here,” Kawika said. “I raddah chance whatever he get dan go live in one cage da res of my life...besides, not gon do anyting bad.”

“How can you be sure,” she asked.

“I gon figure one way fo get out,” he answered. “You know me,” he said and slapped at his chest. “No mo noting can fool Kawika...I get em. What you gon do now anyway?”

Mei’s pace slowed briefly, and then sped up to catch up with Kawika. She watched to see if Kawika’s smirk showed any sign of insecurity.

Sol and the Basilisk were still at the same spot of the bay. The snake smiled when they rounded the corner...as if it knew they were headed back.

“K,” said Kawika. “What gotta do now?” He put his hands on his hips.

The Basilisk raised its monstrous head skyward and sniffed the air with a fleshy tongue. The sky seemed to darken when the snake spoke in an echoing, metallic voice.

Sol just stood with eyes closed and chin pointed upwards, while Kawika and Mei nervously scanned the area around them.

“There,” said the snake. “You are now ready.”

They looked at each other and then carefully inspected their own bodies.

“I no feel different,” said Kawika.

“I do,” said Sol.

“Well, except maybe like I wen lose planny weight.” Kawika laughed and hit his stomach.

The Basilisk motioned to the water. Sol was the first to dive in. He entered headfirst causing barely a ripple, and his silhouette disappeared. Mei followed, and Kawika tried to jump in ahead of her, but they ended up diving in at the same time, almost soundless.

It was surreal. The water was now a totally new experience for Kawika. Still the ocean felt cool and harkened that feeling of comfort from the womb, but now he could most naturally ‘swim,’ like all his muscles worked in unison to propel his lighter body rapidly through the water, and somehow his body absorbed the oxygen out of the amniotic liquid. He felt more at one with the ocean now than ever before, and he could see perfectly without a mask.

Kawika darted towards a nearby reef and chased the fish that usually evaded him easily. He circled the cluster a few times, grabbing and letting go of the smaller fish that are normally long gone before he could get anywhere near them. Kawika still wasn’t used to moving that quickly in the water. The fish and reef became colorful blurs as he

tried to see how fast he could swim in circles around the yellow living coral, while Mei and Sol hovered nearby.

Kawika didn't notice the small blue spinner dolphin that had begun to follow him. Dante used to leave Kawika far behind with nothing but a shrinking view of his tail, but now Dante was trailing Kawika. The dolphin darted across the circular path and caused Kawika to roll from swimming into a cross stream. Now the human latched onto the dolphin's top fin and swam hard. Dante had to use his front flippers to stabilize because he had never been pushed before.

Sol swam in front of the two, and motioned to go north towards Neo-Atlantica, and took off. They followed, and Mei darted to the front of the pack. The three humans and one spinner dolphin formed a unique looking pod of mammals skirting along the ocean floor.

"Dis fricken cool," Kawika thought to himself. "We've been swimming about a half hour now and I not even cold."

"Why is it we don't need to breathe underwater?" Mei thought. "We must be somehow absorbing the oxygen through our skin. Unless I've spouted gills that I haven't noticed."

The water got progressively deeper. Kawika could tell because they were all swimming slower and there was a noticeable change in pressure. It was also getting dimmer.

Soon they could see a drape of blackness up ahead of them. As they neared that dark curtain, they noticed that there was a faint fuzzy glow. The four swam faster, to see that it was a shelf in the sea floor that dropped off to a trench maybe a few hundred feet

down. And at the bottom: Neo-Atlantica. It had a natural yellow glow from the stones it was built from, and other shades of whites and purples softly accented the perimeter of the city. Kawika felt magnificent.

“Wow,” Kawika thought. “Even Disney guys couldn’t tink of something like dis.”

Sol took his stones out of his bag and motioned for the others to follow him over the edge. Dante saw the heartstones and immediately turned and swam the other way, fast. After seeing this, Mei and Kawika froze. Sol swam over and began to pull the two by the arms but they yanked back.

Sol snatched the other two bags and pushed off Kawika’s chest. Kawika and Mei started to chase Sol, but as they got closer to the city, Kawika felt an overwhelming sense of guilt, to the point of near paralysis. With each kick he felt power draining through his legs that exited through his feet and seemed to entropy. He could tell that Sol felt it too because he was swimming more erratically and much slower, as if he was fighting something invisible.

As Sol swam in short spirals towards the city, he was halted when seven amorphous figures appeared and surrounded him; they were glowing. They illuminated some of the manta-like deep-sea creatures gliding gracefully around the city. The animals looked like some of the more pelagic creatures Kawika and Mei were used to seeing short distances from the bay, only these were much larger and more flat.

Dante reappeared, encircling Kawika and Mei. The dolphin looked back at the two before speeding off again. Kawika knew this was Dante’s cue to vacate, tapped Mei once before swimming towards his pal.

It wasn't long before Mei passed Kawika and continued to accelerate. With Dante just behind him, Kawika kicked as hard as he could and let Dante ride in his slipstream. They didn't know the reason for Dante fleeing, but had no desire to question him.

Soon the sea became silent and still, as if the natural vibrations of the ocean's currents suddenly halted. Kawika and Mei, with jittery limbs, stopped to scan the ocean floor. Dante kept swimming and disappeared behind a black sea mound.

Suspended and stiff, Mei and Kawika listened. A blade of seaweed swayed past them. Then it happened: a skin-raking *crack* that caused Kawika and Mei's bodies to contract, and shoulders to yank upwards to their ears.

The sea that felt softly still, even patient, quickly turned into a skin-ripping current pulling them back towards Neo-Atlantica. Kawika and Mei began swimming as hard as they could against the intense amniotic vacuum, but they were being steadily towed backwards. And the sea seemed to be living...and angry. A low frequency death wail churned Kawika and Mei's stomachs. They had to start dodging objects flying past them: sand, rocks, car parts, pieces of boats as well as some smaller and a few larger sea creatures.

Mei and Kawika were caught by the broad and barnacled pectoral fins of a sixty-foot humpback whale that was being dragged sideways along the ocean floor. They tried to push off from the huge mammal's appendage, but they were too spent from the high-speed swimming.

"I knew dat freaking Sol was gon get me killed one of these days," Kawika thought. "At least I got for swim unda water witout one air tank."

That was every diver's dream, and the only way to truly be at one with Mother Ocean. Kawika knew that one day he would return to her, and when he did it would be just like that, with no air tank...complete and utter freedom. He just never imagined being latched onto a whale's fin.

Just as Kawika stopped fighting, the violent current died down to what looked like a slow-captioned movie, less than half of normal speed. Kawika looked to see where Mei was. She glided right next to him.

The whale wearily became aware of the deadened current. Sluggish and bent, it floated back towards the surface, letting small groups of bubbles escape from its blowhole along the way. Mei gave the "you okay" signal, and Kawika bounced his head in affirmation. A low and steady rumbling came from the distance and progressively getting louder.

Mei pointed to the whale and shot upwards. The rumbling caught up with them in the form of a mega-tsunami; a near eight-hundred foot wall of water over their heads.

"Gunfunnit." Kawika thought "Shoulda just stayed near the ocean floor."

The wave yanked them feet first straight back towards shore. From under the water, the face of the wave looked like a parabolic mirror, only this could have fit the Superbowl on it. The giant freighter ships that used to transport dozens of Matson containers that were being turned over by the wave reminded Kawika of the toy boats his little cousin used to play with in the bathtub.

Kawika stuck his arms out and was able to flip his legs backward and swim with the wave, now traveling in its slipstream. He had read somewhere that the tsunamis

travel at a speed of over two hundred miles per hour. There wasn't enough research done on the mega- tsunami, so no one really knew how fast they actually traveled.

“Ho, I bet I going like five hundred miles an hour!” Kawika thought as he glided along with the super wave.

Kawika looked over to Mei and saw her with both arms extended straight out in front of her.

“Wow, she tink she Superwoman,” Kawika said to himself. “But what else is new?”

Within minutes they came to pass over a familiar patch of reef. Kawika knew they would be passing over Pololu Valley soon, so he maneuvered to the lower part of the wave. Mei followed, realizing what Kawika was doing. They dunked through the mega current and latched onto what they thought was the strongest tree in the valley.

They held tight as the monster wave passed over, plucking the centuries-old trees as if they were week-old weeds. Kawika could only seal his eyes as hard as he could, and pray that the wave's current wouldn't take him and Mei from the tree that was now speeding to the next valley.

Once the current slowed, Kawika and Mei released the tree and swam back to the Pololu Valley. When the water was gone, they noticed that the sea level had dropped. The shoreline had receded a slushy fifty yards. Kawika looked around at the valley he had known since his childhood. He saw leveled trees, the bald areas, and heaps of trash strewn about the valley.

Kawika also noticed some movement from a nearby mound of shrubbery. It appeared of be some kind of sea creature. He recognized the crescent shaped tail; it was

a shark, only it looked as if it had grown legs on opposite the sides of the tail. The amalgamation struggled to stand and then scampered off staggering towards the now distant shoreline.

“What da,” Kawika said.

Kawika started to climb over the pile until he saw Mei jump off the side and land softly on the wet ground. They both ran towards the shark-thing, pushing through some piles of shrubs and sailing over others. Kawika made a bicycling motion with his legs and arms as he glided just above the soaked clusters of foliage.

The shark-creature was moving too swiftly. By the time they got to the water’s edge, they were not able to see barely even a ripple.

“Wow,” Kawika said as he inspected the reef about head high next to him “Sol wen screw us ova big time...”

“Oh my god,” said Mei. “Do you think it hit Kona Highlands? My mom...my family. I...we finally finished building the mansion that my grandfather started fifty years ago.”

“You tink people actually care when you say dat kine stuff, yeah?” Kawika said.

Mei shook her head and turned to the ocean.

“No ac like you nevah hear me. Why you always gotta tell dose kind stories for?”

“Why Davy? Are you jealous just because you don’t have those kinds of stories to tell? And for your information, I won’t be going to Harvard till next year because of what it cost to...”

“I no need dose kind stories for impress other people...an stop calling me ‘Davy,’” Kawika said.

“It’s because you don’t impress people anyway...no matter how you build yourself up in your own tiny mind,” said Mei.

Kawika turned his back to Mei and the sunken ocean. With hands resting on his hips, he whipped his head from left to right, forcing his cervical vertebrae to pop, and release. Kawika paced slowly away from Mei, using a thumbnail to make red crescent-shaped creases on his knuckles.

“That’s right,” said Mei, “Walk away, because that’s the only way you know how deal with things. Why don’t you just go hide in your cave.”

“Shoot,” Kawika said. “Uncle Charlie.”

The piles of trees started shaking. Kawika yanked Mei’s shoulder back. She nearly slapped him but saw the staggering figures emerging from the thicket of trees.

The creatures all ran like men, but they featured extra appendages; not dexterous, more like children learning to balance with those first running steps.

There were dozens of them. Some with tails of fish, others with tails of mammals like dogs and horses, and still others were covered with feathers.

Mei and Kawika attempted to move but somehow could not. Before long, the feathered creatures took to the air, clumsy but determined. The others just scampered off in multiple directions. They were running on two legs for the first time.

“Now would be one good time for use dat irritating voice,” Kawika said “Dey gon proly die cuz of one broken eardrum.”

Mei could only move her head and parts of her arm. Mouth opened and no sound.

“Great,” said Kawika. “Dat should do it.”

The vast expanse behind him was a wet and living desert. Live coral exposed and thousands of fish, along with turtles, seals and sharks, fought against the saturated sand. Another rumbling came from the distance. Kawika turned and focused his eyes far away. “Seriously?” he said.

Mei trotted up next to Kawika while the amalgamations once again scattered and disappeared. Everything was once again silent.

The starkness of the liminal quietude was far more terrifying than the initial explosion.

What looked like a short wall of water appeared and was making its way towards Kawika and Mei. “Aw, crap,” he said and squinted hard. The wall, now less than a half-mile from shore, displayed dozens of fishing boats and a couple of large ships. It was another mega-tsunami. Kawika guessed it was traveling just a little slower than a passenger jet and it towered a few football fields high.

“Friggin hate snakes,” Kawika said, shook his head and turned his back towards the ocean.

Kawika whirled and pushed Mei into a crouching position and brought his knees to his chest, wrapped Mei with his arms and set his chin on her shoulder. Just as the liquidous leviathan was a few hundred yards out, the great wall parted right in front of them and a luminous figure throttled down the middle of the rushing water and whipped by them. They stood open mouthed while the mega tsunami passed them roaring.

“All right, Kaveeks, breathe...you either went tru da closet and into Narnia, or you getting too good at putting yo mind someplace else.”

Another figure appeared in the distance. It was a beautifully figured woman with thick wavy hair. She motioned to Kawika, “Come to me, I can help you. Don’t be frightened,” she seemed to be saying. Kawika moved before Mei could grab him and sloshed his way past all the floundering animals to her outstretched arm. Before her face was in view, a net of seaweed parachuted over Kawika, immobilizing him. Her raucous cackles singed his skin and he thought about all the gorgeous, deceptive women in the books he’s read; all the cheesy one-liners he knew about and he still fell for it.

She drew a crooked sword and began to thrust, but was abruptly knocked over by that luminous figure that flashed past them earlier. A pair of short glowing blades sliced through the net, and Kawika could once again move. He sprang up, and Mei underhooked his arm pulling him away from the fighting. They both clumsily staggered back to the cliffside.

Leaning against the rocks, Kawika and Mei looked to see between two walls of water the ensuing battle on the sandy pathway. The glowing figure wove bright sparkling circles around the other, who screamed and slashed ferociously. Finally, the brilliant silhouette hooked the heel of the other, swung her like a mace, and let go, flying her into water wall where her bottom half turned fishlike and she disappeared. The figure, still shimmering, turned to the cliffside and started to walk towards Kawika.

“Hey!” Kawika shouted, “Whatever you like use us for...nevamine.”

He could now see that the figure was also a woman, but with wings.

“I mean tanks for saving us, but...”

“You are Kawika, yes?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where is the Basilisk?”

“I-I, we don’t know,” said Kawika. “But I, we, dis oddah guy wen...”

“Sol. Yes, we know. But Neo-Atlantica is now reborn and the Stigions can destroy the earth.”

“Da, what?” asked Kawika.

“The Stigions...they are our opposites, our balances.”

“And you guys are?” asked Kawika.

“I am Castitas, virtue of Chastity, a Sagic. There are six others.”

“This is sounding a bit too ‘psychomachia,” said Mei.

Kawika’s eyebrows raised.

“It’s this work from...”

“Aurelius Prudentius,” said Castitas. “Yes, he was there to witness our first confrontation.”

“I knew that,” said Kawika.

“So that really happened?” asked Mei.

“For the most part. He didn’t see it all so he had to create his own ending. He never knew that we were once joined as seven balanced entities.”

“And the heartstones that were mounted in the four pillars kept you guys together...until we came,” said Mei.

Castitas nodded and relayed the rest of the story to Kawika and Mei. “With the heartstones on the altar, Neo-Atlantica is slowly draining the earth’s crust of its essential mineral. Soon the crust will be too weak to hold the weight of oceans...it will crack and the earth’s core will be extinguished.”

Kawika looked over to Mei and pulled his shoulders up to his ears.

“Earth will become an ice planet,” said Castitas. “Like in the last circle of Dante’s *Inferno*.”

“Are these the human creatures?” said a voice from behind Kawika.

Kawika spun and saw a humanoid walrus with an oversized sledgehammer slung over its shoulder.

“Lemme guess, ‘Temperance,’ no ‘Patience,’ no...”

“‘Kindness,’ young man. But call me Humaximus.” He turned to Castitas, “So which of these is our scripted ‘chosen one?’”

“It could be either one of them,” said Castitas. “They have both encountered the Basilisk.”

“Wait,” said Kawika. “What ‘chosen one?’”

Humaximus told of how only a human who survived the cataclysm because of an encounter with the Great Serpent can enter Neo-Atlantica and then successfully return the hearstones to the pillars. Kawika and Mei are told that they will be trained to fight the Stigions and their minions, the dark dividians.

“Are those the creatures we saw?” asked Mei.

Castitas nodded. “We were split because of Sol’s greed, but thousands of your kind, the ones who either struggle with and live for virtue, became fused with their spirit animals, and the ones who were weakest in morality now serve the Stigions. That’s why we call them ‘dark dividians.’”

“So how come Mei is not one peacock?” asked Kawika.

A slap from behind sent him sprawled and sucking for air.

“Holy crap!” he said and twisted around, blinking. The reflective silhouette just behind him was not Mei. Kawika rolled to the side and hopped up.

It was his dolphin companion Dante, now in his dividian form: sinuous musculature with a tail that curved just about the ground and a melon that rested perfectly between striated deltoids.

“Wow,” said Kawika. “Dose oddah ones, was kinda creepy...but you---you freakin cool!”

Kawika took a breath. “So, everybody else is...all da oddah humans is,”

“Not sure,” said Castitas. “We still need to check all the caves, but we were not able to rescue anyone else.”

Kawika spotted an object just past his feet. Tangled in a soaking heap, it was Uncle Charlie’s lei niho palaoa. Kawika snatched it up and did his best to untangle it and squeeze the water from the thick clusters of braided hair. For the first time, Kawika could tell that it actually was human hair. He separated the strands, and held it against his chest.

“Sol is still alive?” asked Kawika.

“We think so,” said Castitas. “He may believe that he is their king; or at least king of the earth...what’s left of it...”

A echoing roar coming from beyond the hilltops halted Castitas, and caused the group to look to the back of the valley.

“What was dat,” asked Kawika, “one T-rex?”

“That,” said Humaximus, “was one of your indigenous characters of lore: Kamapua‘a.”

“Hah?” said Kawika. “What...what you mean?”

“The cataclysm has also brought to life beings and creatures that used to only exist in tales of the folk and mythology,” said Humaximus.

“Ho, no way,” said Kawika. “Awesome.”

“However,” said Humaximus. “They are now corporeal...therefore mortal.”

Kawika opened his mouth to speak, but paused.

“Means they can be killed,” said Mei.

“Oh,” said Kawika. “Den I’m in...Sol is my bruddah, but he only care about himself. Not going matter if da whole world ma-ke die dead.”

“Count me in too,” said Mei. “What do we need to do?”

“Good,” said Humaximus. “Kawika, you will go to Japan and Mei, you will be going to Africa.”

“So we’re not staying together?” asked Mei.

“Need my space dear,” Kawika said and smiled. “You been kinda needy.”

“There are very specific things that need to be done,” said Humaximus. “And they need to be accomplished by the ‘chosen’ human. But it will only be one of you, so this way we will find out who it is.”

“Or one of us gon die,” said Kawika.

Humaximus dropped the hammer with a *thud* that shook Kawika’s ankles. He wanted to scratch them. “You know what, I no care if I die...cuz my fault came like dis...I coulda wen stop Sol.”

The walrus nodded and placed his finned hand on Kawika’s back. It covered from shoulder to shoulder.

“What families do you come from, Ka-vee-ka and Mei?”

“Uhh, Jones...das my real faddah’s name, but jus call me Kawika.”

“His actual last name is ‘Funaki,’ but he hates his biological father,” said Mei.

“My surname is ‘Kaulike.’”

“Kawika Jones and Mei Kaulike,” said Humaximus. “Come, we have much to do.”

LAND OF THE RISING SUN

Their arrival at Kyoto city revealed putrid desolation. A graveyard of the world's most efficient machinery was strewn about, and the slurred combination of rust and organic waste tinged the air brown. Scattered throughout the streets were smoking cars, shin-kan-sen and some halfling dividiens scampering into the dilapidated department stores and apartments. Their awkward amblings were evidence that these bipeds were not used to walking with the extra appendage. Their tails would occasionally stutter their steps.

“Sad for think these guys was all human like me,” Kawika said. “How come only me, Mei, and Sol never get turned into one of those things?”

“There are more of you,” said Humaximus. “It seems to depend on your lifestyle as a human, but in yours, Sol's, and Mei's case, it probably has to do with your direct contact with the Basilisk.”

“Yeah, but he wanted me and Mei for die, so why would he protect us?”

“No one can say for sure, Davy,” said Humaximus. “Maybe one day you can ask him.”

“Shyeeah...I no think so,” Kawika said.

Kawika found a flat dust-covered rock, brushed it off, and sat yawning.

Humaximus motioned to Dante to begin looking for a place to set up camp. With one flip of his head, the other dividiens began inspecting the structures that had fallen to the waves that hit Kyoto. Although Dante was much smaller than most of the other dividiens, they responded to him as if he were many times their size. Davy could not

believe this was the same Dante he used to play games of tag with around and in the bay. He wondered which human he fused with.

“Kawika!” called Humaximus

“Yeah?”

Kawika looked at Humaximus, who was waving him over. Kawika got up, brushed off his pants and staggered over the rubble to where Hmaximus was standing. The walrus pointed to a patch of green in the distance behind a cluster of clouds.

“What? Thass where I going?” asked Kawika

Max shook his head and scratched at the thick bristles surrounding his mouth.

“That is Mount Kurama,” said Humaximus, “the home of Sojobo Tengu, the legendary King of the Tengu, or mountain spirits.”

“So what I gon do wit him?”

“IF you are accepted by him,” said Humaximus, he will start you on your training.”

“What kine training?”

“Don’t concern yourself with the details, Kawika. Just realize that the tests will come when it is most valuable for you.”

“So den...”

“So then you will be ready to retrieve the stones from Neo-Atlantica and set things back the way they were.”

“Dis guy gon teach me how fo kick butt den, yeah?” asked Kawika

“This guy—and please stop referring to him that way, will provide you with the tools for accomplishing the other tasks.”

“So das gon give me da kine skills so I can kick butt, yeah?”

“I suppose so, but you really shouldn’t think of it in that way.”

“How come?”

“Pride and power, although they seem to edify each other, are always disastrous together.”

“Pride,” said Militius, the Kraken Sagic, while appearing behind Kawika, “without a balanced concern for others or for the earth, will always lead to some form of destruction and death.”

“Brah, you gotta stop doing that,” said Kawika. “Scares da crap out of me every time.”

“You are always too concentrated on only one thing, Kawika,” said Militius

“What?”

“It is a good thing to be able to focus on a task, but tunneling your thoughts does not allow you to see other opportunities clearly.”

Kawika nodded his head.

“I swear iss gon take me like ten years for get used to da way dey talk.” He thought.

One of the scouts appeared behind Militus and reported that he had found a suitable structure about a block away. Humaximus signaled to the rest of the group to round up the equipment and relocate.

Kawika picked up a stick with a dead leaf at the end of it and lightly poked at Dante’s melon as they were walking. Dante waited until Kawika got close enough and swiped at Kawika’s legs with his tail fluke. The *thunk* and the angle that Kawika had

flipped sideways suggested that Dante had nailed his shin squarely and with much greater force than Kawika used to poke Dante with the stick.

Kawika pushed himself up slowly, trying to avoid seeing Dante's eyes.

Kawika had just gotten up to his knees when Dante knocked him over again.

"Ow!" said Kawika as he hit the ground again "What, no can handle one joke?"

Kawika pushed himself up, smacked his hands together and smiled at the other dividiens walking past him.

The building they had decided to set up camp in did not look stable at first glance. The exterior looked washed out, with more and more cracks appearing as they got closer. On top of that, a pair of the surrounding structures leaned up against it. It was evident that the low-rise barely survived the mega-tsunami.

Inside the structure was a completely different story. Double steel reinforced walls back dropped some of the most complicated hi-tech equipment Kawika had ever seen.

"Ho, I tink so dese guys was trying fo outdo Star Wars." Said Kawika

The place was obviously built to withstand a disaster.

Kawika went down a set of thick concrete stairs he had found, wondering if there might be more complex machinery. He stumbled a couple of times in the musty dark, but pulled himself up using the solid metal handrails drilled into the walls.

"Looks too dark down there," said Kawika "better make a couple of torches and bring 'em down."

The scout dividian that found the place, Streak, walked up beside them and struck at a spot on the wall. Lights flickered before turning to a dim buzzing glow.

“Our scientists, led by Planck, built a self-replenishing power source into the structure,” said Streak “Probably running off of a solar or geothermal origin.”

“It’s more of a ‘reconverted signature’ type of energy,” said a voice coming from a dark corner of the room.

“What?” Kawika said. “One...what?”

“Vibrational signatures to be precise,” said the eggplant-shaped being that walked into view. He placed a beaker of red liquid on a dusty metal table. His tattered white coat snagged on a corner and ripped a little more.

“I’m sorry sir, I didn’t know you were working,” said Streak.

“Not to worry young friend, and I gather that this is Kawika?”

“Yes,” answered Streak.

He turned to Kawika and extended a slim fingers covered with brittle fur, “nice to meet you, I am called Planck.”

Kawika shook the hand with a light grip.

Planck continued, “I’m to orient you on how to use our communications equipment.”

The mole man in the lab coat began burrowing through rubbish that was piled to the top of the table. Dust enveloped the group.

“Now,” Planck coughed and dumped four objects that looked like children’s two-way radios without the batteries. “Take one of these with you on your journey.”

“Kay,” Kawika said and picked one of the red plastic toys by its antenna and dangled it. “How dis ting gon even work?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Planck. “Just make sure this switch it in the up position and you’ll be good to go...for now.”

“What, no mo da kine lights to let you know da ting on?” asked Kawika.

“Well this runs off of a different kind of energy. I’ve stumbled upon a new type of technology that should be able to derive useable power from just about anything...but I’ll show you the rest of it when you’re about ready to go.”

“Wow,” said Kawika “you pretty smart. Was your human side some kind of scientist?”

“I’m not sure, sir. I do know that my animal side used to dwell in burrows.”

“Juss like Dante,” Kawika thought. “Can only remember little bit of the life as the animal and nothing of the human.”

Planck politely dismissed himself and left Kawika and Dante to look around the basement. Piles upon piles of decimated rubbish scattered over more unknown pieces of technology. The metallic pungency caused Kawika’s eyes to start watering. Dante’s eyes began watering as well, but he pushed farther into the room and ahead of Davy.

“Eh, try watch out ah Dante?” called Kawika “We don’t know if dis place is safe.”

Dante looked back briefly and then continued moving through the metallic mess. Small clouds of alloy dust hovered in the dimly lit room, causing the two to cough.

“So what happened to your mother and stepfather?” Dante asked.

“I dunno,” said Kawika. “I got loss one time diving and da current wen take me out...far. I tink dey wen die cuz dey nevah stop looking fo me...even though had one mean kine freak swell come in. Was nighttime already too.”

Dante paused to look over to Kawika.

“Dey nevah give up on me an dey wen ma-ke,” said Kawika. “My sperm-donor faddah dig out before I could walk, an he get fo live on taxpaya money...you call dat justice?”

Kawika motioned to Dante, telling him that he was going to head back upstairs, but Dante continued searching.

Dante had always been the more tenacious of the two. Once when they were playing, they saw an uhu, parrotfish. Kawika went back to the cave to get his spear while Dante seemed to be keeping an eye on the gigantic fish. Once Kawika jumped back into the water with the spear, the uhu swam into a nearby cluster of reef and would not come out. Kawika’s first thought of going home came long before he made the move. That was only because Dante kept circling the reef, inspecting every nook he could possibly fit his head into.

Kawika got back to the main floor to see everyone doing the same as Dante. Kawika started pushing some of the trash to the side and moving some of the bulky pieces against the steel walls. Humaximus picked up a dented metal box just as Kawika was reaching for it.

“Be ready to leave in ten minutes,” Humaximus said and walked away.

“Ten minutes?” Kawika said to himself.

Planck called him over to show him how to use the radio. His pointy fingers moved deftly around the dusty red gadget.

“So basically,” Planck said. “As long as you can think of your mind and a receiver, you should have no problem using this to keep in contact with us. You should

think of this thing as more of a power source... 'think of your mind,' I like that," he said and continued to keep mumbling to himself as he walked off.

Humaximus, Dante and Militus were waiting for Kawika near the trail that led to Mount Kurama. He arrived with just his dusty canvas backpack filled with some clothes and Uncle Charlie's lei niho palaoa nicely tucked into the small pocket.

"Just follow this trail, and in a two days time, you should be right there," said Humaximus.

"Right where?" asked Kawika.

"The ironwood forest," said Militus. "If you are worthy of their training, they will take you in...but don't be surprised if you are tested first."

"And try not to be cocky," said Dante. "They despise prideful behavior...they've been known to punish monks for vainglory."

"I not cocky," said Kawika. "Juss confident."

"You should use Japanese when you address Sojobo and the other Tengu as a sign of respect," said Militus.

"What?" said Kawika. "I don't know Japanese...and I no like noting dat has to do wit my faddah."

"Means to an end my boy," said Humaximus. "Sometimes you have to do what hate most to get where you most want to be...or in this case, need to be."

"Alright," said Kawika. "But I only gon do em cuz gotta."

"I can teach you how to say 'I hate father' in Japanese," said Dante.

"Quiet," said Kawika. "Not gon miss you, wiseass."

"Enough," said Militus.

Humaximus taught Kawika the basics of Japanese honorific protocol, mannerisms and appropriate phrases. “Sumimasen” means “excuse me” or “pardon me.” “Kawika desu” is saying, “I am Kawika.” “Yoroshiku onegai shimasu” means a combination of “it’s a pleasure to meet you,” and “please help me.” And lastly “Watshi wa Nihongo ga hanasemasen,” telling them that, “I cannot speak Japanese.”

As Kawika waved and walked up the trail, he could be heard reciting those phrases. Every so often he would do the short bow during the “yoroshiku onegai shimasu” and the hand motions that came with “Watashi wa Nihongo ga hanasemasen.”

“So lame,” he said to himself. But still he continued to practice. The air around him had actually begun to get cooler.

ENTER THE TENGU

The trail to Kurama was covered in mist. The ground was still dry with patches of wet spots. “Must be getting closer,” Kawika thought. “But how I posed to see da ironwood trees?”

A little further down that path, a gust built up from the gentle zephyrs and the mist started disappearing. Soon Kawika could see the top of the mountain again, which was still a bit away. Next the section of the mountain that was covered with ironwood trees became apparent. Layer by layer, the levels of mist were being slid off and revealing more of what lay in front of Kawika.

There was a small flock of what looked like crows playing just up ahead of him. The closer he got, the more he could see that they were in fact “playing.” They were using their ‘hands’ to throw rocks at each other and using their beaks to catch them.

“Woah,” Kawika said. “Is dat da Tengu? Look like dividians to me.”

The bird creatures stopped playing and focused in on Kawika.

“Crap,” he thought and tightened the shoulder straps to his canvas pack.

One of the smaller creatures bounded to the front of Kawika in less than a second. It spread its wings and squacked.

“I am Sanzan,” it began. “We’ve been expecting you,” he said with head turned sideways and eyes closed.

“Su-sumima-sumimasss,”

“You don’t have to speak Japanese to us,” said Sanzan. “We are ‘Kotengu.’ The Tengu children.”

“Das good,” said Kawika.

“But you will need to get past us,” said Sanzan and adopted a low fighting stance...eyes still closed.

“Are you...blind?” Kawika asked.

Sanzan nodded.

“I no tink..” Kawika began, but was cut off by a vicious leg sweep that caused both his feet to leave the ground and not return until after his torso landed with a *thud*.

“Okay,” Kawika said while rolling over to his stomach and rubbing his shin.

The rest of the Kotengu flocked to surround Kawika . He took his time getting up and counted, “Two, four, six,” he said. “At leas no mo like ten.”

Kawika took a narrow stance and spread his arms out. He smiled and motioned to the Kotengu to ‘come get me.’ The first two attacks that came were high and low, as he had expected, so he easily swatted one and jumped over the other to the outside of the circle.

The Kotengu all did somersaults and ended up surrounding Kawika once again. This time he adopted a much lower and wider stance, but with arms still spread apart. They seemed to wait for a much longer time...seeing if Kawika would start to get nervous and uncomfortable.

Once Kawika began breathing more rapidly, they launched. Not in succession, but two at a time. Front/back, high/middle, low/high. Kawika was still standing after the onslaught, but was staggering and shaky.

“All right,” Kawika said. “Not bad,” he coughed and reset in a wide stance with a slight lean to the rear. “Try dat again.”

The Kotengu regrouped, but this time came in one at a time. The first one sailed in and latched onto Kawika, grabbing hold of his head and arm. The others came in succession, diving for his shins. He wasn't able to see the attacks, so his legs were chopped at until he fell forward and was thrown. While on his stomach and catching his breath, Sanzan ripped the canvas pack from Kawika's back.

When Kawika got up, they had formed a line behind Sanzan, who was holding the pack above his head. The other Kotengu were singing in Japanese and slightly dancing.

"Bettah give em back," Kawika said. "I hit kids befo..."

Sanzan threw the pack into Kawika's arms and slid into his shin once again. This time, Kawika turned his shin inward to absorb the force and then redirected with a sweeping kick. Sanzan rolled off to the side and the others started flying in.

Kawika was using his pack to block and parry and following up with low and high kicks sending the Kotegu spiraling sideways. Kawika began laughing and taunting them. They tried the double attacks again, but he simply did a few evasive maneuvers and used the pack to swat at them. He hit his low pose again with the pack above his head.

Sanzan made a crowing noise to the Kotengu, and all except Sanzan took to the air above Kawika. Two swooped from above and Sanzan slid in low. Kawika turned his shin inwards again only to have it met with talons that sunk straight to the bone. He yelled and pinned Sanzan with the pack and squeezed hard into his leg's muscle. Once the vice had released, Kawika turned the slender leg into a leg lock and synched Sanzan's neck and held him outwards, using Sanzan's body to shield him from the other Kotengu.

"You guys bettah stop," Kawika said. "Gon broke his neck."

Kawika began twisting his elbow outwards, but was met by a materializing hand. It's delicate touch quickly turned into a twisting vice with sharp nails. Kawika looked up and saw her. She had dark silken hair and eyes that were pearl black. He immediately released Sanzan.

"I wasn't really gon," Kawika started to say, but was flipped over and made to stand with his arm bent behind his back. "Ahw, ahw...okay I give," Kawika said and was released.

"Look," he said and turned to face her. "I juss..." he began to say, but was cut off by a flying kick to his stomach with a large bird's foot. It sent him barreling into a tree, nearly knocking him out. He stood back up rubbing his eyes with a hunch to his back.

"Are you the one they sent to us?" the birdlike figure boomed.

Kawika nodded. This one was gigantic. It towered above and beyond Kawika. Its wings blocked most of the light hitting Kawika.

"Sumimasen," Kawika began. "Yo-ro-shi-ku..."

"You can save that for Sojobo," the figure said. "I am Daitengu...and this is Hiroko, Sojobo's adopted daughter."

"Cool...I mean, nice to meet you," Kawika said. He saw Daitengu's yellow eyes for the first time and noticed that his pupils were cross-shaped.

"I wen pass da tess or what?" Kawika asked fixed on Daitengu pupils. "Can go see Sojobo now?"

"Sojobo has asked to see you," said Hiroko. "We will take you to him now."

Kawika followed the pack up the trail to the ironwood forest. The Kotengu played pranks along the way. They would drop small rocks on him from above, and then

get underfoot causing him to stumble. Then they would laugh and fly away, only to come right back and walk close to him.

By the time they reached the ironwood entrance to the Tengu stronghold, Kawika was carrying Sanzan on his shoulders and chasing the other Kotengu. They ran through the gate and dispersed. Each of them headed for a different straw-roofed hut. Other Tengu emerged from the huts; not as intimidating as Daitengu, but they possessed the frames of experienced fighters. The huts were built in a staggered row that reminded Kawika of what a summer camp might look like. Daitengu grabbed him by the shoulder and pointed to a shrine towards the back of the camp.

As they got closer, he could see that there was another Tengu, floating there. He looked very different from the rest. He didn't look like he was half-man, half-bird. You couldn't tell what his body looked like because he wore a large ceremonial robe, flowing with shades of red and white. His face looked much more human than bird, and his nose extended out several inches. The rocky expression showed both wisdom and courage.

Kawika bowed low, "Sumimasen. Yoroshiku onegai shimasu. Kawika desu. Watashi wa Nihongo ga hanasemasen."

"Sojobo desu," the floating man said and drifted over to Kawika. "Yoroshiku onegai shimusu, Kawika-san. We have much training to do."

He motioned to the shrine behind him, "There," he said. "That is what you have come here for. That is...the Ueshiba Blade."

"Dat stick?" Kawika asked pointing at what looked like a short staff mounted sideways on top of a small golden altar. "What I posed to do wit one big stick."

Daitengu stepped in, "Sensei, you cannot give the blade to him. He will not know how to use it."

"I can use one staff," answered Kawika.

"When you are ready," said Sojobo. "You need to prove that you can take the blade and handle it." He turned and waved his hand past the shrine. The sliding doors closed and a large piece of wood dropped down and latched them together.

"We start your training tomorrow morning," said Sojobo and signaled to the others. They all began to walk away. "You will be staying there," he said and pointed to a dirty canvas tent on the outskirts of the camp.

"At least match my backpack," Kawika said and laughed. He looked over to where Hiroko was walking. She glanced over her shoulder at Kawika and disappeared. She reappeared almost immediately at the door to the hut next to his tent and the hut the Kotengu retreated into.

"I knew she came outta nowhere," thought Kawika. "No way somebody can move dat fass."

"Maybe one day you will be able to," said Sojobo. "Go rest...you'll need it."

'HEAVENLY' TRAINING

The next morning Kawika was woken by a shaking of his tent and Daitengu's booming voice. "Oi!" he called, and walked away. Hiroko laid out a breakfast of some mountain apple and rice gruel with a pickled plum, an ume.

When he went to go look for Sojobo, he saw the Kotengu with Hiroko near the front entrance. He decided to ask her where he would find Sojobo.

The Kotengu said in unison, "Sabishii yo!" To which she replied, "Ore mo da," and smiled as they all left for the forest.

"Where dey gon?" Kawika asked.

"They are going to train with Daitengu for a couple of days along the treetops," she answered.

"What was dat, 'sabishi?'" he asked.

"Yes," she said and laughed a little. "It means 'I will miss you very much' and 'ore mo da' is saying that I will too."

"Das...nice," Kawika said without looking at her. "You know where I gotta go meet wit Sojobo?"

Hiroko pointed to a trail just behind the shrine, "Just follow that and you will get to his loft."

Sojobo's loft was a very tall room with only two walls and a ceiling. Large brush-stroked Japanese characters covered the walls except for a painting of Ueshiba Morihei, otherwise known as "O Sensei," the founder of aikido. Kawika knew it was rumored that O Sensei had once gone to the mountains and been trained by the Tengu.

"He got trained by Sojobo?" Kawika thought.

Sojobo was sitting on what appeared to be an enormous flat rock. He waved Kawika over and waited.

“Good morning, sensei,” Kawika said and bowed.

Sojobo greeted him with a nod and began instructing him not on his martial arts training, but on how to behave correctly within the Tengu community. “Respect, and humility,” he said. “That is what’s most important.” He continued to give Kawika a list of things that he would be expected to do while he was staying there, on top of his training regimen: Rake the leaves, cook the meals, clean the huts and make sure the all the weapons and training equipment are kept in tact.

“Not gon have one problem sleeping,” Kawika thought.

“Do you have any questions?” asked Sojobo.

“I get one,” said Kawika. “How come get one painting of O Sensei on your wall?”

Sojobo smiled. “Morihei was an exceptional human,” he said. “Before him we Tengu saw ourselves as above the humans, because they always came to us for help. We had no idea that we could learn so much about the use of the universal energy from someone so small, who was so sickly as a child. Therefore the painting was made to be larger than any of us and placed at the highest point of the camp...to remind us that greatness and genius can and will come from anything.”

“All about da humility,” said Kawika.

“Precisely,” said Sojobo. “Now, after you finish your morning cleanup, I want you to take the pile of rocks next to the gate, and bring them up here.”

“Kay,” said Kawika.

“But, I also want you to bring them up one at a time,” said Sojobo. “And, you need to keep your mouth full with water.”

“So I only gon breathe out my nose,” said Kawika.

Sojobo nodded and motioned for Kawika to be on his way. While walking towards the front entrance he was stopped by Hiroko who was holding out a cup of water.

“Tanks ah,” Kawika said without smiling.

Hiroko just smiled and walked away.

Over the next few weeks, Kawika was introduced to a number of different training methods he had never seen before. One was that he was made to sit in ‘seiza,’ which is on the shins, for hours at a time...all the while only breathing out of his nose. His legs would go from sore to numb and back to sore again. When he was commanded to stand and do a technique, he would of course crumple and have to catch himself with his palms. Another required him to handstands for periods of close to an hour. By the time he was allowed to drop his legs, they had gone numb from the blood flowing downward, so again, he would crumple.

Once when he was staggering back to his tent, the Sanzan challenged him to a game to see who would be able to jump the highest, he or the Kotengu.

“You guys gon win,” he said. “Besides, I not training fo jump high...I training fo make my legs come numb and fall down.”

The Kotengu took turns sailing clear over their hut, and jumping back to where they started. When it was Kawika’s turn, he walked up slowly, as if the contest might end before he got there. He bent his knees and pushed.

“Holy smoke,” he said as he was looking down at the top of the hut. He even hung suspended in mid air for a split second before dropping back down. The Kotengu greeted him with cheerful squaking and an attempted tackling. Sanzan latched onto Kawika’s shoulders and tugged at his hair. Kawika grabbed onto Sanzan’s legs and ambled back to his tent, draped with Kotengu.

The next morning Kawika was summoned out of his sleep by Sojobo through inter-cranial communication. Kawika was beginning to be able to access the grey matter of his brain without the use of Planck’s intercom power source.

Kawika followed the instructions to a waterfall he didn’t know existed around the other side of the summit. He saw that the mountain was split into two factions and went on farther than he was able to see. Standing on that convergence, was Hiroko. Her jet black hair flowed gently in the wind as she moved slowly and gracefully between poses. Also, he noticed that there was a rope suspended across the waterfall. Sojobo was waiting for him next to the beginning of the rope.

“Lemme guess,” Kawika said. “I gotta walk all da way across and do flips along da way?”

“No,” said Sojobo. “You will walk out to the middle, drop down and hang there until I tell you to come back up.”

“Shoots,” he said and walked out.

After the first hour of hanging, Kawika felt his arms begin to go numb, starting from his shoulders.

“Sensei,” he called. “What I posed to do if no can feel my arms?”

“Alternate your grips, Kawika,” said Sojobo.

“So if I accidentally let go, den what? I jus gon die?”

“Can you see the ground?” asked Sojobo.

“Not tru all dat mist kine stuff...but look like I gon drop at leas tousan feet.”

“It’s actually over five-hundred meters high, so do not worry about feeling pain when you hit the ground,” said Sojobo. “Are you not familiar with putting your mind elsewhere?”

Kawika rolled his eyes and looked over his shoulder towards Hiroko practicing.

“Ey, how come look like get tree different mountains coming too dis point?” he asked.

“This summit is the convergence of three separate peaks,” Sojobo answered.

“That is why we call your favorite Kotengu, ‘Sanzan,’ because he was born where ‘three mountains’ meet.”

“Oh,” said Kawika. “And when you gon teach me how for teleport like Hiroko?”

“I can teach you right now,” said Sojobo. “All you need to do to teleport is let go of your pride...with a gesture of complete and utter humility.”

Kawika spent the next week dangling nearly two-thousand feet above ground for hours at a time. Sometimes Sojobo would tell him to use only one arm and other times he would be commanded to perform swinging loops like a gymnast.

At the end of the week, Kawika was made to go through a gauntlet of varied walls and swinging weapons. The only catch...he was to stay on all fours the entire time.

By the time he got to the end, he realized that he was able to boost himself through tighter and lower spaces using his arms. When he exited to maze, he was

spinning a staff he had ripped from one of the trap doors in a primal kind of celebratory dance. Sojobo and Daitengu waited just past him with arms crossed.

“Das all you get?” said Kawika and twirled the staff like a baton in one hand.

“Perhaps it’s time for the skills training,” said Daitengu.

Sojobo paused and closed his eyes before nodding.

Kawika was taken to the back to the hut that he had been using to prepare the meals. Behind his kitchen was now a setup that resembled a Japanese rock garden replete with dozens of flat rocks and even a small fishpond. An ax rested on the trunk of a cherry blossom tree whose leaves blanketed a good third of the water’s surface.

“Shoots,” Kawika said and jumped on the closest stone. “I can make Karate Kid action,” he said while going into a one-legged crane stance.

“Get off,” said Sojobo and pointed to a stack of rocks next to the pond. When Kawika got closer, he could see that there was a slab of tofu in between two stones.

“You need to break through the two stones without destroying the tofu...your dinner,” said Sojobo. “And then you must use the ax to split a leaf in the pond without disturbing the other leaves...or they will also become your dinner. You will not be allowed to eat anything else until you can do both.”

Before the end of the week, Kawika would get ill at the mere mention of ‘tofu,’ ‘leaves’ or ‘ax.’ The Kotengu would make sure they reminded Kawika several times a day. During the meals they would make sounds of appreciation with each bite of hot rice, fish and tsukemono. Sanzan would occasionally whisper those words through Kawika’s canvas tent after he had fallen asleep.

“Do not rush this,” Sojobo told Kawika at one practice session. “Listen to your breath...it will tell you when to strike...and the universe...it will tell you how.”

Nearly a month passed and Kawika had become to look like an ascetic, thin and supple, but still incredibly strong with striated muscles. He was training six to eight hours a day on top of his chores as a newbie, but his diet consisted of splattered tofu and dead leaves. He finally realized how he needed to proceed...with humility.

The next day, he bowed to the stone and tofu stack before taking his stance. He had been using the ridge of his hand for the attack, but this time, he switched to his fingertips. “Gotta make em sof,” he said. “Like how Hiroko was training.”

He drew a circle in the air and let his hand hover...waiting. Before he realized what he was doing, his hand dropped and three fingertips landed somewhat softly on the top stone. Neither stone nor tofu moved.

He inspected them more carefully and noticed there were hairline fractures in the centers of the stones. They were only visible because of their chalky white color. Kawika pulled carefully at the ends of the top rock and without breathing and watched it slide off the tofu, in two pieces. His hands were shaking so much that he broke the tofu into three pieces when pulling apart the second stone.

“Ahw,” he said and picked the ax up holding the blade next to his temple.

Again he bowed, and waited. When the ax dropped and swung, it looked as if it missed the leaves completely. A few seconds later one of the leaves slowly separated into two pieces. Kawika stifled his ‘chee-hu,’ but dropped the ax into the pond. The fish scattered and most of the leaves sank.

At dinner that night, Kawika sat slumped in his usual spot with the tofu and leaves arranged symmetrically in a rice bowl. He imagined the bowl of foliage was limu poke and picked up his chopsticks. Before he could lift food, Hiroko removed the bowl, and replaced it with plates of fish, tsukemono and hot rice. The Kotengu burst into laughter when they saw his reaction.

“Ho tank god,” Kawika said. “I was jus telling myself fo not trow up.”

“He looked so sad,” said Sanzan. “I was hoping Hiroko would let him cry first.”

The Kotengu erupted again.

“Your celebration dinner,” said Hiroko.

“Or last meal,” said Sanzan.

Kawika looked around the room...they were all grinning except for Daitengu, who only glared from his corner.

“Tomorrow, you will have your first sparring match,” said Sojobo. “Tonight you will sleep next to my quarters.”

“Shoots,” Kawika said and quietly finished his meal.

VS.

Kawika awoke to the quiet chirping of mountain crickets. It was the ending of summer and the raucous sirens of the cicadas had been quelled by the soothing breezes of early autumn. Still, Kawika's sleeping bag was soaked with the sweat from his torso.

He threw on his training shirt with a loose collar and wandered into the hovering morning mists. Where the trail started dropping down the mountain, he could see the silhouette of a sitting man, with his back facing Kawika while he peered over the valley. It was Daitengu. When he turned around, Kawika could see the cross-shaped pupils focusing across the disappearing mist. With their tiger-yellow background, his eyes appeared to be nearer than his black beak.

After weeks of noticing Daitengu perched atop a tree watching Kawika train with Sojobo, it was strange to finally see him on the ground. It was the closest they had been to each other since the incident when they first met. Daitengu had stepped in to stop Kawika so he wouldn't injure the Kotengu even though up to that point they had been having their way with Kawika.

"He never have to kick me so fricken hard," Kawika recalled. "Musta wen flew back like hundred feet before da ironwood tree wen stop me..."

Daitengu stopped a few feet from Kawika's face and smirked. Now, Daitengu's outstretched wings took up most of his visual field. There was a clicking sound that resembled laughing coming from Daitengu's throat.

"Supah," Kawika thought, and began to clench his fists.

A vicious swat came from overhead before he could get his hands up and set into a stance. With eyes closed and hands swatting, he was hit twice more in the face with

Daitengu's wings. The smell of old feathers seemed to be stuck on the inside of his nose, which he wasn't able to guard. Kawika had to flip backwards to get clear of another attack. He landed in a sage bush on one knee and eyes blinking.

"Shoot," Kawika said and wiped hard at his face.

"The chosen one," Daitengu scoffed. "You think that you have the control to take the Ueshiba Blade? Let alone have the power to wield it?" he asked and once again spread his wings—poised for another attack.

"I tink so I gotta," Kawika replied and spat blood. "What, all this time and you cannot get em too, ah? You supposed to be da baddess, howcome?"

"Ueshiba Sensei never used the blade himself, because he felt it would cause more damage good of the people—he put it in our shrine so it could be found only in the time of greatest desperation by the one who not only needed it the most, but also could use it the way he did—I don't think that's you."

Kawika sprang forward with a jumping side-kick and flurry of punches that were all deflected with masterful swirling of Daitengu's wings—he never moved from his spot. Once he saw that Kawika's movements were getting sluggish, he caught both fists and squeezed until he heard cracking, then launched his heavy foot into Kawika's stomach, sending him backwards scratching at the ground.

"I don't think you're going to lay a finger on me," said Daitengu. "Why don't you show me what Sojobo taught you? No? Wasted his time? He must be losing his touch after the cataclysm."

Kawika leaped from his crouching position and somersaulted towards an ironwood tree behind Daitengu. Daitengu followed Kawika's path with a pointed beak.

Kawika stretched his legs and extended his feet toward one of the lower branches. A fraction before the branch was underfoot, it was torn away—Kawika met the earth with a dusty *thud* and soon his face was pinned under Daitengu's bird feet.

“Fricken teleporting cheater,” Kawika thought.

The air around Kawika got heavier—and then lighter. He knew the feeling well...he was about to pass out. Sojobo had taught him to cough when being choked because it does two things: it interrupts the vasovagal response to arrest synapses, and it gives your body a jolt of energy from oxygen being quickly circulated.

Kawika forced out whatever air he still had in him so hard that his neck felt a scratch from the inside. With eyes clenched and hands synched around Daitengu's stalky ankle, Kawika threw his leg up and wrapped it around the base of the crow's leg and squeezed. As soon as he felt some of the pressure off his face, he adroitly twisted and secured the leg lock around Daitengu's backwards knee.

The squaking and anxious twitches told Kawika to keep tight and allow his body to follow the movements of Daitengu.

One final arch of Kawika's back...one final crack, one final squawk. Silence.

With Kawika's sudden breaths of exhaustion, he gently patted Daitengu until he woke and was able to stand. “Good,” he muttered and disappeared. The crickets began to chirp again.

When he was walking back through the camp, Kawika was too euphoric from his victory to notice that the camp was deserted. It was normally quiet enough to hear the

wind blow, but now there was no movement of any kind. No Kotengu scampering about, no Hiroko walking with laundry and no Tengu.

Then Kawika saw Sojobo sitting in front of the shrine staring at the ground. He called to Kawika. “Oi.” he said.

Kawika sauntered over with confident, heavy steps. “Sensei,” he said.

“They are gone,” Sojobo said.

“Who?” asked Kawika.

“The Kotengu and Hiroko,” said Sojobo.

“What?”

“And we cannot rescue them,” Sojobo said. He held up a letter written to him in English. It was from the Stigions:

We regret to inform you that your feeble attempts to best us in the arms race has failed. Utterly. Our scouts have acquired the technology developed by Planck. We have recorded the vibrational signatures from the Kotengu and can now track movements of any Tengu. If you try to rescue them, we will know. You must send Kawika with the Ueshiba blade to the back of the valley if you desire to see the Kotengu or Hiroko again. We want the blade.

They wanted Kawika.

“Shoots,” Kawika said. “I go leave now den...bring em on.”

“No,” said Sojobo. “The blade hasn’t called to you yet...it is not time.”

Kawika’s hand landed sharply onto his forehead and he chuffed in the opposite direction. Sojobo’s stare fell back to the ground.

UESHIBA BLADE

The stringy mists of Kurama couldn't hide the surly slumping branches on the ironwood trees. The vessels that had been at once planted as barriers to the elements and therefore functioned as natural shields from wayward warriors had become beacons of grief and trepidation--actual physical extensions of the turmoil felt by the Tengu, whose cries would echo amongst the treetops and along the faces of the valleys. Now that their children were, for the first time in danger, the Tengu, for the first time ever, could not fight the physical battle. Now they knew what it might feel like to be human. Helpless, vulnerable—even in need of celestial intervention.

Kawika sat hunched on the stump that he and the Kotengu would practice leapfrogging from. He drew circles around his knuckles with droopy fingers and started to hum the lullaby he was taught to sing to them.

Yu ya-ke koya kere

I-ssun-bo-shi

Chi- chi, pa-pa

Chi-chi, pa-pa

Chi, pa-pa...

'Kawika,' called Sojobo from atop his mountain perch. For some reason when he called, Kawika could actually feel the gray matter in his brain vibrating...like the physical receptors he was developing for the new technologies were not so much receivers like in a phone, but acted as the voice coils in speaker boxes.

Sojobo wasn't sitting on his stone, but floating next to the painting of Ueshiba Sensei. He was carefully tracing the trailing ridge of O Sensei's forehead causing some of the paint to fleck off and float like pieces of paper to the ground. They disappeared into the dirt.

"Sensei," Kawika said and bowed.

Sojobo smeared his finger into the corner of the painting and began to descend next to Kawika.

"O Sensei, was the only one, human or tengu, who was given the right to wield the blade," said Sojobo.

"Not even you?" asked Kawika.

"No," said Sojobo. "I was given my position and powers so that I would never need to use such a weapon...after O Sensei gave up the weapon, I was charged with keeping it from falling into the wrong hands."

"Why can't you just give it to me then?" asked Kawika.

"I've been told that it's not the right time," said Sojobo.

"What? What you mean iss not da right time yet? Brah, try look around...you see anyting good happening?"

Sojobo, fixed onto Kawika with sharpened eyes, and slowly lowered himself onto his stone. He propped himself upward by pressing his hands onto his knees.

"Look," Kawika continued " firs of all, had da cataclysm—dat somehow wen make dese creatures dat is almost as strong as you guys and who knows what oddah kine supernatural stuff around da world. For all you know dey killing off all da tings dat people looked up to from fricken forevers."

Sojobo shifted from where he sat and began scratching at his chin. He shook his head in a way that seemed to make his long nose wobble.

“But it is not only dependent on what manner of chaos is unfolding,” Sojobo said and pointed to Kawika. “Why don’t you tell me what you are really thinking about, Kawika? What is it you want to do?”

“Brah, what da hell I still doing here? I should be out going afta da kids cuz...”

“You are not ready,” Sojobo interjected.

“Yeah, but gotta try do someting, cuz I tink dese tings like wipe out everyting people ever wen believe in, so dat we gotta listen to dem. I no like bow down and worship fricken creatures dat like kill us all.”

“How do you know that the god you look up to now isn’t set on the same homicidal path?” asked Sojobo.

Kawika, stopped momentarily before blurting out, “why, is dat what you guys like to do? I hear dat you guys used to kidnap human children, so maybe da only reason you stay helping me now is cuz you like eat us all.”

“Maybe,” replied Sojobo. “All this time I’ve spent training you, has been part of a psychological game where I get you to believe that my ultimate goal is to help you, but in actuality, I want nothing more that to devour your seedy entrails.”

“If das true, I no need yo permission fo get da blade,” said Kawika. “Da only reason I nevah try take em from da shrine is cuz you told me no can.”

Kawika began marching off towards the shrine just as he was finishing his last sentence, “...so I guess I no need listen to you guys any more, ah?”

“You never needed to,” Sojobo said silently as he watched Kawika disappear behind the canopy of ironwood trees. His mouth turned upward in the orange of the morning light.

Kawika walked up the creaky stairs to the bolted doors of the shrine. The weathered wood that rested over the hooks to the sliding doors seemed to look defiantly at Kawika. He paused as he glared at the piece of wood that, just a day earlier, seemed untouchable and indestructible. Now he noticed that the black paint was falling off in chips and would flutter like the autumn leaves to the rear of the steps...they would disappear into the dirt below.

He lowered his head briefly, before launching forward with his back foot. His heel smashed into and splintered the four by six, causing the two halves to tumble down the stairs and the doors to slightly open.

Kawika bowed before he entered the shrine and went straight to the Ueshiba Blade resting in its display area. When Kawika got closer to it, it floated above the case and hovered there. Kawika stopped.

“What da hell,” he asked. “Da ting goin attack me now?”

Kawika picked up a nearby broom and brought it next to his torso, pointing the end at spinning weapon.

The blade began to slowly move over Kawika and held its position for a few seconds before swaying back and forth. Kawika adjusted his posture with each movement of the blade. Soon it was drawing wide circles in the air with the tip pointing at Kawika’s head. He shielded himself with the broom as the spinning got faster—and

faster. Then it became a large fan blowing blinding gusts into Kawika's eyes through the branches of the broom.

"I better get out," he thought.

With his first step, the blade suddenly dropped and stuck into the tatami mat. Kawika didn't feel the splinters that were now embedded into his foot. He was so relieved that he immediately pulled the blade from out of the mat so quickly that he stumbled backwards and crashed through the stairs and fell amongst the chips of paint. Some of the splinters gently peppered across his face.

Once Kawika stood and tried to pick up the blade, he finally realized how dense and heavy it really was.

"Wow, dis ting," he said. "Dis not ironwood...dis petrified!"

"And blessed," said a voice from behind him.

It was Daitengu. He patted Kawika on the shoulder and limped past him.

"Hey, how come you guys never tell me about dis?" asked Kawika as he tried to swing the blade around his head and then hold an aggressive posture. "Dis ting feel like almos hundred pounds---how I goin fight wit dis?"

Daitengu stopped and turned to face Kawika.

"When O Sensei was given the blade, he had amazing command of ki, the universal energy. Proper use of that energy, will make the blade seem light, and make the blade indestructible."

"Brah, dis ting not even made out of metal—iss da petrified wood," Kawika exclaimed.

“Some of the sharpest slivers of stone and petrified wood are actually many times sharper than even your metal razor...just not as strong. When you are able to flow ki through this and extend the energy, the weapon will merge with you...become an extension of yourself.”

“Great,” Kawika thought. “Juss as helpful as Sojobo.”

“Please do not think too hard about this, Kawika,” said Daitengu. “Just bring back our children safely...I know it is in you; stop fighting it.”

Kawika looked into Daitengu’s cross-shaped pupils as if there existed the answers to the questions floating through his brain.

“I dunno--what I supposed to stop fighting,” said Kawika.

“Then you’re on the right path,” replied Daitengu.

“What?”

“Just remember that not all journeys have the destination that was first envisioned...many times your path revels to you its true purpose...” Daitengu said, and ascended to the tip of the highest ironwood.

Kawika watched Daitengu as he fastened the blade to his back with a canvas scabbard and some tattered rope. It took Kawika a few steps before he remembered that his feet were embedded with shards of the shrine. As he was carefully pulling each piece out, he again looked upward. The wind had kicked up and Daitengu was swaying crouched over the bent top and peering far into the valley. He didn’t look down at Kawika, not once.

Kawika found that the pathway that led to the opening of the valley was now overgrown with water chestnut. He could always see into the valley during his months of training with Sojobo, but never gave much thought to what might be down there. The brush that blanketed the valley suggested to Kawika that there was not much else there than a cozy patch of flora. He pushed past the head-high sedges and stepped a little too hard into the softer earth on the other side. The extra weight of the blade submerged his leg up to his knee.

“Ho, what da heck?” Kawika said. “Good ting I not wearing slippahs,” he continued and pulled his bare foot slowly out of the thickening mud. His face winced as some of the saline moisture seeped into the interstices of his splinter wounds. Kawika decided to walk at a brisker pace the rest of the way into the valley.

When he would run along the ridges, it would take him a couple of hours to finally reach the summit. Kawika surmised that if he kept a consistent pace, he could get to the back of the valley before sundown. That was where he assumed they were keeping the Kotengu because the sudden change in vegetation at the end said that there was a cave there. The way the wind had a baritone howl from that corner, he also realized that it must be a relatively large cave, with possibly multiple other caverns and maybe even underground passageways that led to water, like what he had once heard about Waimanō on O‘ahu. He knew he’d be at a disadvantage without the sunlight, so with a quick motion, he pulled the scabbard up higher onto his back, so more of the weight was resting between his shoulder blades and began to jog, lightly.

About half way into the valley, the ground started to become firm again. Kawika looked up to see the dense canopy that blocked out a most of the sunlight. Most of what

illuminated that section of the valley was what reflected off larger leaves of the low-lying vegetation.

“How come Sojobo nevah teach me how fo teleport?” Kawika thought as he slowed to a walk. “Running wit dis petrified ting kinda sucks,” he said out loud, looked back to the ground, and began jogging again.

As he neared the next patch of light on the ground, Kawika could smell the decaying of animals. He looked to the ground and saw them...dozens of Japan’s folktale creatures had been murdered and mutilated. Kappas, the amphibian-like water sprites looked like giant frogs that were ravaged miscreant teens. The Kitsune, the mystical foxes that were known for their cunning, laid with organs exposed and mouths forced open. Even the supposedly harmless kawa-uso, the charming supernatural river otters, appeared as common weasels or mongooses whose bodies were spiraled like rusty corkscrews. Kawika began to sway and had to cover his mouth. He stopped immediately when he heard a cry from one of the Tengus. An egret flying across the path caused Kawika to come to a jolted stop directly under the hole in the canopy. With hands on hips, Kawika scanned bottom to top.

“I cannot be there already,” he thought.

He brought his hands up to rest on his head, but was thrust forward by a blow from behind. Kawika’s stomach landed squarely on a rounded stone. He exhaled hard.

“Ho,” he said “how come my back mo soa dan my front?”

He rubbed his lower back and rolled over to see an eagle formed dark dividian poised for another attack. Its wings were drawn back with head pointed forward. It looked like it was trying to sniff Kawika. The patch of light became dimmer...Kawika

could now smell the dampness of the ground up ahead. He pushed himself up to one knee and pulled the blade out of the scabbard. Before he got his second hand securely on the blade, Kawika was once again knocked forward by another dark dividian. This one had long skinny arms with claws instead of wings.

Kawika rolled out to the side of the path so he wouldn't have one in his blind spot. The three now formed an acute triangle.

"I get it," said Kawika "One gon attack high, and da oddah gon attack low...less do it, losers."

He didn't wait for the first attack to come, but charged in towards the eagle holding the blade close to his body. Thrusting it forward like using the spear, Kawika took a heavy and off-balanced lunging step to the torso of the bird, who easily side stepped and swatted the back of his head. Kawika recovered with a forward head-spring and swiped hard backwards with the blade. The sound of petrified wood hitting hollow avian bone echoed between the trees and seemed to cause a humming along the ground shrubs.

As soon as the eagle withdrew in pain, a pair of long fingered hairy hands snatched hold of the blade, twirled it clockwise until Kawika's arms were crisscrossed, and yanked it away, sending Kawika spiraling to the ground. As the beast stepped into the light with the blade above its head, he could see that it had cat's eyes...piercing yellow and somewhat terrified. With a near caterwaul cry, Kawika deftly dodged the downward blow, and the blade was buried a deep into the soft ground.

The cat dividian grabbed hold of what little of the blade was sticking out of the ground and began frantically yanking. The eagle flew in and started scratching at the

ground trying to expose more of the blade. Once the eagle had its beak clenched onto the blade, Kawika launched into it with a spinning drill kick, sending both dark dividiens tumbling into a tree.

Now the blade was nearly out and easily lifted. Kawika swung it over his shoulder and trotted towards the dividiens attempting to untangle themselves.

“That might be the Ueshiba Blade,” the eagle said as they both stood to face Kawika. “But you cannot use it,” the cat said and both laughed shamelessly at Kawika trying to secure a solid fighting stance.

“He’ll be easier to kill off than all those menehune in Hawai‘i,” the cat said and continued laughing.

“Laugh it up,” Kawika said. “Gon lick you punks.”

This time he kept the weapon waist level and concentrated all of his attacks from that level down. “Da feet,” he said. “No can walk, no can fight.” The cat came in with a cartwheel attack...feet shooting straight for Kawika’s ribs, which he promptly batted away, and did the same with the eagle’s talons that followed, aiming for his neck. Although the actual blade portion was small, only a fourth of the entire weapon, Daitengu was right, it was horrifyingly sharp. It cut through the feet as if he had used a heated razor to cut through butter...he barely felt it. The two regrouped in front of Kawika with horrible limps. Kawika found the growling more irritating than menacing.

The cat shot in for Kawika’s ankles by extending its long hairy arms, and the eagle leapt high and sailed towards his head. Kawika smashed the two incoming hairy appendages with one downward blow, and with the same forward momentum somersaulted his legs over to catch the eagle with an axe kick that cracked its skull. This

caused its body to go limp though it was still gliding. Kawika landed on the cat's sprawled legs, causing it to scream in a raspy tone. He lifted the weapon off the disfigured arms and turned the blade downward and released it over the cat's neck. The screaming ceased a split second before the eagle was heard crashing into the valley wall. Kawika could hear the beating of his heart.

The silence of the valley was shattered by laughing that came from up ahead...past the trees in front of Kawika. Much farther than he could see at that time, and wondered if he should re-sheath the blade, or just carry it.

"You're going to have to do much better than that," a voice called. "Those were warm ups...there are many more of us to play with."

"And we have a surprise waiting for you at the end," called a different voice. A multitude of laughter followed with echoes that continued long after the source had ceased.

"Guess I gon juss carry em," Kawika thought. "Focus bully...remembah, 'energy like O Sensei'--whatevah dat mean."

Kawika rested the blade near his waistline with a double reverse grip. The weight of the weapon kept it from bouncing on his hip, though he did feel as if there was a bruise forming there anyway. He switched sides.

Kawika slowed down when he felt that he should be near the end of the valley. The sound of the wind howling as if passing through a large cave grew. It seemed to be the only thing Kawika could hear...his heart was untraceable.

He was so intent on finding the location of the howling, that he didn't notice the gradual slump to the ground. He crept forward with ear forward and blade pointing up.

He tripped over what he thought to be a rock, but was actually a solid patch of dirt. When Kawika regained his balance, he was hip deep in water that he couldn't see because of the tall grasses and the low light.

“Crap,” he said. “Stuck again.”

Kawika pulled at his right knee until it slipped through. He huffed and straightened out to see that he was now surrounded by dark dividiants...all of which looked to be some kind of aquatic lizard. They had single-toned yellow robot's eyes, with moist skin.

“So dis really what happen when I flush you guys down da toilet?” Kawika asked.

With that, they all disappeared into the water.

“Son of a...” Kawika said as he watched ripples rattling towards him.

He started stabbing at whatever shapes came close enough to him. The blade was halfway through one of the slippery bodies, when Kawika was pulled under the water. They had his four limbs pinned, and he fought as if he were being strangled. His body went limp. The creatures, which turned out to be giant newts, pulled him from the mud.

When they were over drier land, Kawika's eyes opened, “What, you guys foget I can breathe unda wata?”

He rolled sideways hard, pulling the remaining newts into each other, releasing their grips and ricocheting backwards. Kawika grabbed one of the newts and threw it like a skimboard across the top of the water, pounced on and rode its squirming body back to the blade, yanked it up and dropped into his slimy skimboard. It gurgled, but only for a second...the motionless body still floated.

“Das all you guys get? Weak,” he smirked.

The newts were crouched with backs hunched forward and glimmering eyes focusing on the water.

“Don’t get so cocky, boy,” hissed one of the dark dividiens. “We gutted your hero...that haughty pig.”

“Kama...pork chops?” another said. The rest mockingly laughed in unison.

“No ways,” Kawika said. “Brah, he would turn you losahs into fish food.”

“Perhaps, but we weren’t alone,” continued another.

For the first time, Kawika noticed that the howling through the cave had died down. The low rumbling that now came from the cave at the end of the valley told him there was something approaching...either a lot of something or something colossal. He gripped the blade tighter and peered hard into the opening of the cave. The near silent newts began to guffaw, stood up and walked towards the cave entrance.

Kawika called, “Eh, bring all da guys can, ah? Gotta be fair...like me tie up one hand?” he asked and raised his right hand.

There was no answer from the newts. They just continued to the cave and turned around to form a flank facing Kawika. He noticed an enormous banyan tree just above the cave opening that already had some of its roots out of the ground.

“One good rain, and buggah gon fall,” he thought. “No wonda no can see da cave from up dea.”

A crackling chuckle arose from behind the newts, followed by distant cries from the Kotengu.

“Dey close,” Kawika thought. “Jus gotta get pass dese fools.”

The Kotengu's calls were soon muffled by a pair of creatures that seemed to fill the opening to the cave. Once they came out of the shadow, Kawika could see them. One was definitely larger than the other. It had the torso and limbs like any human except for the paddles at the end of the appendages. It was about ten times larger than the others by comparison, and its head looked like a cross between an Arabian Stallion and a Saltwater Crocodile. "Handsome buggah," Kawika thought. "For one monsta." The other was much smaller, but still considerably larger than the newts, who weren't much bigger than Kawika. It had wide fins in place of arms, and a face that Kawika couldn't see clearly, but he could tell that it was square-shaped. He could see its eyes, and what looked like multiple weapons secured to its wavy frame. They reflected the light onto its eyes with more of a red tinge than the newts and they took up a good portion of its face.

"Kawika," the larger one called out. "Give us the blade and we'll kill them quickly...if not, you'll be made to watch them suffer."

"What?" Kawika called. "I thought you wanted to kill me...Superbion. Das you, ah? Da Stigion leader? I figure gotta be cuz you handsome, so you tink you all dat, ah? Pride," he smirked. "And das Irax nex to you...Wrath—stay always mad cuz no can handle."

Superbion smiled. "Clever," he said. "But realize that you are a loyal follower of mine...one of my favorites. Why else are you not able to use the Ueshiba Blade?"

"I no follow noting...especially one donkey," Kawika replied.

They all began to walk out towards Kawika, who started sculling towards the closest shore. "Give us the blade," they called.

"Why you need da blade?" he asked.

“The Tengu worship the blade,” said Superbion. “To them it’s a connection to the ethereal...to the supernatural that they cannot yet fathom. They, like the humans, just don’t realize yet how pointless it all is...how transient beliefs are. Once we destroy the blade, the tengu will crumble, and they will die wailing—like your Kamapua‘a.”

Kawika stopped sculling.

“Ironic how the ones once worshiped by the humans are now depending on them for their survival...pathetic,” Superbion sneered. The others laughed and pointed towards Kawika.

Kawika used the blade to vault over the remainder of the water and sprinted as fast as he could with the blade raised. All six started running towards Kawika.

“You guys want dis?” he shouted. “Come get it, panties.”

His yelling was a prolonged grunt that would lead up to the ki-ai deathblow. Moments before they were to collide, Kawika hurled the weapon ki-ai-ing. The blade surprisingly soared far past the oncoming marauders and stuck into the hillside just below the leaning banyan. Without a flinch, Kawika leapt laterally and started running past them sideways along the wall of the valley. The newts climbed after him as quickly as their shorter legs allowed them. Kawika hit a sprint and catapulted up using bamboo growing parallel to the ground. He landed hard onto the hanging banyan and it began to creak. Kawika sprung upwards again and came down next to the blade. As soon as he freed the blade, the banyan creaked more and slowly began falling towards the cave.

Kawika looked over to see the newts reaching to grab him. Again he tossed the blade, but into the cave, and leapt and twisted sideways. He straightened his body and grabbed onto the top of the slowly descending banyan. The tree, whose roots looked like

feet being unearthed, came down with Kawika, who barely made it into the cave before the tree filled the opening.

The newts were pinned between the branches and squirmed with chuffing breaths. Kawika could hear Suberbion and the Irax begin to break apart the branches.

“Bettah hurry up,” he thought.

With the banyan blocking the opening, the cave was dark—dark, damp and from the sound of the wind echoing, deep.

“Juss like home,” he said and began doing the echolocation clicking with his mouth. He did a quick scan left to right, and figured that there was a very long, very complex tunnel system that led to both the top of the mountain and the ocean. Kawika knew that they wouldn’t hold the Kotengu near the top of the mountain where the Tengu would have easier access to them, so he followed the system to the right—where the smells of saltwater emanated.

The crunching noises into the banyan became louder and produced more aggravated sounds. With the blade holstered across his back again, Kawika began clicking and walking briskly.

“I tink dose newts can squeeze trew pretty soon,” Kawika thought. “But no way dose big suckas gon make em until da whole tree is buss.”

Kawika halted when he felt a draft pulling him towards the left. Normally the wind seemed to be pushing, but this was as if there was a high-powered vacuum cleaner sucking up anything that tried to take the path to the right. It was loud enough that his clicking wasn’t producing a distinguishable echo. Kawika just used the weight of the blade to lean to that direction, and off he staggered.

Once the noise from the current died down, he began calling to the Kotengu.

“Sanzan?” he shouted for his favorite one because he knew that, because he was blind, chances were that he would be able to hear him.

“Ka,” a soft voice answered. “Kaaaa.”

“Sanzan? Is dat you?” Kawika shouted again and started to jog in the direction of the echo. The blade was bouncing on against his back, which caused him to stumble but did not slow his pace...he was running with head forward, using his clicking to guess where he was headed.

He came to another section that split off into two tunnels. Kawika called for Sanzan again, but there was no answer. He called a few more times and decided to stick to the right. mostly because it smelled of the ocean, which made sense if the Stigions and dark dividians wanted a second avenue of escape, or another way to leave with the Kotengu. Kawika walked now. *Click, click, click.*

Before long he was able to hear the sounds of small crashing waves and see a faint glow coming from the distance. He immediately stopped clicking and jogged towards the light.

There was a small protrusion that Kawika wasn't able to see near the last steps to the water where the ground became flat, smooth and angled downward. His right instep hit it square sending him sliding head first beneath an oncoming wave. He waited for the next set of waves to push him back up.

“Trouble?” said a familiar voice.

Kawika spun around. “Dante? Da heck, brah? How come you stay hea?”

“I was poking around outside, and decided to do a scan...”

“Yeah, but da Stigions gon know you hea an dey gon kill da Kotengus,” said Kawika.

“Don’t worry,” said Dante. “They can only track the Tengu using the new technology, not me or the Sagics.”

“You shua?”

Dante nodded. “They never got a chance to record my vibrational signature, and they haven’t been using it long enough to understand its full capacity.”

“So, where is da Kotengu?” Kawika asked.

“According to my readings, they are below us,” said Dante.

“What? How can?”

“That other cave you bypassed continues underground, where they are somehow trapped in another body of water... couldn’t you tell when you scanned?” Dante asked and pulled Kawika up the sloping surface by his arm.

“No,” Kawika chuffed and pulled his arm away from Dante. “My echolocation not like yo’s... not fricken supahman,” he murmured and started to walk back up the tunnel, clicking.

The sucking wind had returned and was accompanied by cackling. The laughter was followed by half a dozen pairs of glowing eyes... yellow like robots. When they got closer to Kawika and Dante, Kawika could see that they were not the same newts as outside. They were wearing thick metallic bands around their upper arms and just below the knees. These also walked with more of a strut.

“Wow,” said Kawika. “Looks like Robocop had one yard sale.”

The newts gathered together tightly and slowly approached Kawika and Dante.

Kawika pulled the blade out and reversed up to Dante's back.

"Too cocky?" Kawika asked.

"Not more than usual," Dante said and began scanning the aggressors.

"The bands," Dante said. "They are enhancing the muscles and joints of the newts."

"Hah?"

"They are giving the muscles more strength and elasticity," said Dante.

"So how come dey all stiff looking?"

Before Dante answered, the newts' tight formation scattered and they seemed to bounce off the walls and head straight for the pair, but from multiple directions. They were moving fast enough that Dante and Kawika just curled their bodies to brace for some kind of impact. The first hit the pair from the top which split them apart—the second and third both hit Kawika, who nearly dropped the blade. Dante swatted the fourth and fifth attackers with his tail, sending one into the water and the other barreling into the wall...it lay motionless after it slid to the ground. The sixth newt bounced behind Kawika and unraveled itself into a two-footed flying kick. Kawika reversed the blade under his arm, and the newt impaled itself up to its right knee.

The force from the impact caused Kawika to fall forward and the newt's limp body to fall on him. He rolled the slimy mess over and yanked the blade out. It made a *shlink* when the petrified wood slid across the metal band. He was immediately pounced on by two more newts...one wrapped its legs and tail around his arms to secure the blade

while the other fastened a sleeper choke around Kawika's neck. The more he tried to free the blade, the tighter the slippery vice around his neck became.

"Dante," Kawika shouted and scanned the tunnel.

"A little busy," Dante answered and did a spinning maneuver to send the three newts flying. "But leave your message after the beep," he said and stretched his arms out as if he were telling the newts to "keep back."

Kawika started coughing, to keep from passing out, and threw his back to the wall. The newt's grip loosened, only to refasten tighter than before. Everything around Kawika blurred, and the sounds of the waves and struggling echoed. He felt his hands release the blade and his body fall backwards.

The force of the impact caused the newt to release its grip completely. Kawika quickly shot an elbow backwards, flipped over, delivered punches and punted it backwards. He saw that they had landed on a sharp rock.

Kawika turned to see the other newt charging at Dante with the blade held low. He grabbed its tail and yanked it viciously into his sidekick, causing the newt to drop the blade with an arched back and mouth open. It turned to face Kawika but was met with another sidekick to the stomach followed by a jump-spinning back-kick to the side of its head. Kawika followed the newt to the ground with a barrage of punches to its face before he smoothly cradled its drooping jaw and cranial ridge...after which, he fiercely twisted so its robot's eyes were looking sideways.

The other newt that had already climbed out of the water, leapfrogged over Kawika and snatched up the blade. Kawika sprang forward with a flying kick to its chest, followed by cut kicks to its arms and legs, and finally dropped it with a combination foot

sweep and head kick. The newt still clung tightly to the blade. Kawika stepped in with a football punt to the back of the blade, sending it sliding into the newt's throat.

"Ahh," Kawika said. "K, now I wish I had shoes," he continued and rubbed his foot. There was a drop of blood forming on his heel.

Dante had two of the newts pinned against the wall, one with his hands and the other with his tail. The third was holding its head and swaying. Kawika pulled the blade from the newt's soft neck and ran towards the staggering amphibian and swiped horizontally, just barely keeping his balance. The newt fell into two pieces.

"Dante!" Kawika called.

The dolphin immediately let go of the newts and ducked as the blade swung over his head and separated the newts' bodies...top from bottom. Kawika was taken sideways with the blade. Dante laughed.

"You try use dis ting," Kawika said and pushed himself up.

Dante grabbed hold of the hilt and raised it slowly. His forearm was shaking.

"Impressive," he said.

"See?" said Kawika. "Supposedly iss heavy for anyone who try use em."

"Well, whoever made this blade wanted to make sure that only certain people could use it," said Dante.

Kawika nodded, and Dante motioned for them to continue back to the path that would lead them to the Kotengu.

"I have to warn you," said Dante. "When I did my scan, I saw that there were a lot more of these newts down there."

"Bring em on," said Kawika.

“I’m guessing in the hundreds...and it sounds like the Stigions might break through that banyan tree soon.”

Kawika reholstered the blade and jogged up the tunnel.

“You realized they outnumber us a hundred to one, right?” asked Dante.

Kawika didn’t answer.

“You think just because you are in the right, that we’re going to somehow defeat a couple hundred foes and rescue the Kotengu?” said Dante. “What’s your plan? Once we find the Kotengu, we will undoubtedly have a war on our hands. What are we going to do about the Stigions, who, by the way, we have no idea what they are capable of? What if they end up killing the Kotengu before we get to them, and then kill us? Or vice versa?”

“Dey not gon kill me,” said Kawika. “If dey was, dey woulda done em already...I tink Superbion get plans for me.”

“And what if you’re wrong?” said Dante. “Are you willing to risk it? Are you willing to risk letting the earth die with you?”

“Might not be me dat posed to save em...might be Mei.”

Dante tail slapped Kawika.

“Ahw,” Kawika shouted. “Brah, I juss like save da Kotengu, kay? Wass wrong wit dat? We gotta try save some of dese tings from da folklore and mythologies...bumbye what kine earth dis gon be? What gon get fo believe in?”

“Maybe everyone will just make up new stories, and create new heroes...just look where the technology is going. Just look at where I went; what I became...is this really bad? Am I a mistake? An unintended accident?”

“Why you gotta, twist around da stuff I say?” said Kawika. “Sound like Uncle Charlie.”

A new breeze began to form, coming from the front of the cave. The pair stopped, and Dante scanned using his high-speed clicking.

“They got through,” said Dante.

“You had fo use da echolocation fo dat?” asked Kawika.

“Ahw!” Kawika shouted as Dante’s tail fluke left a red mark on his leg.

Dante and Kawika started running down the other tunnel, and once enveloped by its walls, they heard the faint yet growing sounds of garbled misery.

“I tink dey wen tie em up in da watah,” said Kawika. “Das one way for keep dem from trying fo fly.”

“Isn’t Hiroko able to teleport?” said Dante.

“Dey probably wen cover her eyes,” Kawika said. “She no can see...no can *poof!*”

The sound of resounding and unadulterated distress reverberated across the walls, both in front of and behind the pair. Evenly spaced torches that lined the path animated the ghosts that danced and whispered around the corners. Then they saw it.

A large pool appeared at the end of the tunnel. It glowed blue from the light reflecting off the top of the tunnel, with what looked like a cage formed by stalagmites growing out of the center.

“Dea dem,” said Kawika. “Das da kids.”

Dante shushed him and motioned to follow to the edge of the pool.

“Where all da newts?” said Kawika.

Dante's head pricked up. "Here..."

They appeared from everywhere. Out of the water, down the walls and across the path. Kawika and Dante were overtaken before they had a chance to get back-to-back again.

"How come you nevah see dem dis time?" said Kawika.

"I'm not sure," said Dante. "I think maybe the dampness of the cave and the water hid them."

"Hah!" came a voice from up the path. It was Superbion.

"Your dolphin sonar won't work with interference from this," he held out a small black box. "This will redirect any vibration meant for scanning."

With Kawika and Dante securely boxed in between dozens of newts, Irax floated directly in front of Kawika and smirked. He pulled out a long serrated blade, slowly, and rested the back edge on Kawika's shoulder.

"Bring me the blade," Irax hissed.

It took three newts to slither the blade in front of him. They set it down and quickly retreated to the ranks surrounding Irax and Superbion. Superbion tried to pick it up with a single arm but struggled. He swatted at the newts that began snickering. After fastening both arms around the blade, he held it out, just a few feet from Kawika's eyeline. Superbion nodded to Irax, who raised his weapon and slashed, shattering the blade. Flecks of the weapon floated to the ground like leaves...they shimmered from the torchlights as if they were dancing.

Waves of gurgled cheers followed, and the newts were grabbing at whatever sharp pieces they could get their slippery fingers on. One that had secured a large shard swam over to the cage of stalagmites and pointed at Hiroko.

Her head was trying to hide that she was in fact listening. She dodged the first stab attempts, but soon the other newts got involved and she was pierced by three pieces of the blade. When they pulled them out, her body sank, but was pushed up by Sanzan and the other Kotengu. The aquatic cackling of the newts was somewhat muted by the sneering of the two Stigions.

Kawika didn't look, didn't flinch, but a glimmer of a torch's reflection now danced on the inside of his light-brown pupils. The laughter that followed was deep and resonant. It could have easily come from one of the Stigions, but it came from Kawika. Superbion's sneer turned to a full-toothed, clenched jaw.

"Kill the blind one!" he said. "It's his favorite."

Kawika's laughter trailed off and he just smiled.

The newts poised, and thrust at Sanzan. Their shards sunk deep into tight flesh...Kawika's. He had teleported. The newts frantically tried to retrieve their pieces, but they wouldn't move. Instead they all began to glow and vibrate. Quickly, the pieces recombined in a flash of light, and the blade, magically reconstructed, fell gently into Kawika's hand.

Immediately, he used the blade to splinter the cage and free the Kotengu from their binds. He removed Hiroko's blindfold, wrapped an arm around her, and they both teleported to the front of the tunnel.

"Go," he told her. "Sojobo will be able to save you."

She smiled and gently touched his chin. Kawika rubbed her shoulder as if trying to warm her.

“Arigato,” she said, and disappeared.

Kawika teleported back to the cluster of newts that held down Dante. He proceeded to scatter them with the furiously spinning blade. It made a humming sound that got louder as it went faster. Dante rolled out and began to throw newts into each other.

Irax drew another blade, a smaller one, and darted for Kawika with both tips pointing forward. Kawika began twirling the Ueshiba Blade in a circle. It spun so fast that he let go of it, and the humming progressed to one even tone. The stick became a round shield that ricocheted Irax backwards into Superbion.

“Oi!” Kawika called to the Kotengu and motioned towards the exit.

Dante got behind Kawika and they began making what looked like a comet’s trail with the spinning blade in the front and the Kotengu in its slipstream straight to the mouth of the cave.

Once past the rubble of the banyan and outside, Kawika grabbed hold of the spinning blade and rested it on his shoulder. He turned to Dante, “Juss go straight and you gon come out da valley.” Dante led the way, and the Kotengu followed closely. Kawika heard the Stigions and newts, so he scanned possible options of re-blocking the mouth of the cave.

The blade began to glow again...much brighter than before. Kawika squinted and released the blade, that didn’t drop, but instead floated over a large section of the broken

banyan. The scattered pieces then started to vibrate. A low hum brought them upwards and they began to recombine. Stampeding in the background seemed to hasten its pace. Soon the entire banyan was once again blocking the opening, and its branches were digging into the valley wall over the mouth...as if it were grabbing the wall tightly. It looked like a hand covering a mouth from letting out a scream.

Kawika looked towards the front of the valley. He heard where Dante was taking the Kotengu, and caught up with them by teleporting to where he assumed they were. Kawika materialized right behind them.

“Wow, you guys move slow, yeah?” Kawika said as he jogged past Dante.

The Kotengu chirped in elation and flocked around Kawika. He attempted to evade them, but Sanzan was successful at landing on his shoulders. The rest followed and tackled Kawika to the ground. Dante just laughed and swiped some fallen leaves on top of the pile up.

“Nice job, Kawika,” said Dante.

Kawika had to struggle free to respond, “Tanks, ah?” He maneuvered out only to be tackled again.

“Come on,” Dante said. “Let’s go home.”

As soon as the group passed through the ironwood entrance, they could see Sojobo sitting in front of the shrine. Hiroko was standing next to him and they were flanked by the rest of the Tengu. Standing just behind Sojobo was Humaximus and Militus. As soon as he saw them, Kawika noticed that the Ueshiba Blade strapped onto his back became heavy once again. He could see the slight grin on Sojobo.

When they were still approaching, the Tengu bowed to them. They stopped and returned the courtesy. Sojobo rose, and floated over to Kawika and Dante. The rest of the group followed.

“Thank you,” said Sojobo.

“Doo itashimashite,” said Kawika with a slight bow. “Thank you...for everything...honto.”

Sojobo nodded and the Kotengu chirped and scattered. The other Tengu, including Daitengu, dispersed to greet the Kotengu. There was much wrestling and laughing.

“Well done,” said Humaximus. “How is the blade?”

“Heavy...wait, you knew?” Kawika asked. “And how come you guys stay?”

“Sojobo called to us,” said Militus.

“And we knew that you couldn’t have taken control of your pride just yet,” said Humaximus and placed his finned appendage on Kawika’s back. “The blade will only stay light and retain its magical properties when the user is able to completely release his or her hold on pride.”

“So then, never for Kawika,” Dante chimed in.

Kawika swung at Dante’s melon, but was sharply parried by his tail. “Ahw,” Kawika said. “Why you gotta be one hater?”

Humaximus laughed and said, “Kawika’s intent proved his humility, that is why he was able to teleport and command the blade. But that was only because he had reacted to a specific reason at a given time...he needs to completely adopt the humility before he is able use those abilities whenever he wants to.

“So I gon put em back in da shrine, den?” Kawika asked as Kotengu and Tengu frolicked around them.

“No,” said Sojobo. “You may take it with you. You have earned it.”

“You’ll need it,” said Humaximus. “We need to leave right away...to Africa. Mei is doing well, but there is a much bigger problem there than we first anticipated.”

“What’s that?” asked Dante. “Is the fifth heartstone in a different location from where it was originally hidden?”

“Wait, what?” said Kawika. “Get one noddah heartstone?”

“Another one was kept hidden in case the other four were taken,” said Humaximus. “It will serve to slow the decline of the earth’s crust, but now it is being guarded by something that hasn’t been alive for centuries...the mokele mbembe.”

“The dinosaur that used to block the waters feeding into the Okavango Delta?” asked Dante.

“Yes,” said Militus. “The cataclysm brought it back to life.”

“Well den, less go,” said Kawika.

Kawika, Dante and the Sagics took turns bowing to each of the Tengu, Kotengu, Sojobo and Hiroko.

She walked them to the ironwood entrance and stopped just outside. “Kawika-san,” she called.

Kawika stopped and turned to face her.

“Sabishii yo,” she said.

Kawika hugged her and responded, “Ore mo da.”

They walked away to her waving and silky hair swaying in the gentle mountain breeze. Her pearl black eyes shimmered like the sky.

“I thought you didn’t want to speak Japanese,” said Dante. “Too connected to your biological father.”

Kawika smiled slightly and kept walking.

Dante continued, “I guess sometimes the language you don’t speak is the one that can speak to you.”