

## THE DEPTHS CHRONICLES: EVIL FROM BELOW

“Steady as she goes, Johnathan.” The old white wolf smiled and laid a paw on his companion’s shoulder. “Should be out of this fog soon.”

The younger wolf peered into the dark velvet that surrounded them. Even with the tramp freighter’s bow lights penetrating the ghostly mist, it was hard to see more than several feet ahead. “Aye, captain.” He glanced at the controls and noticed the barometer still showed less than cheerful readings. “Seems strange we’d pick this up though, so far from the islands. Isn’t the water normally warmer here?”

“Could be from a leftover storm.” The captain shrugged and walked from the control room of *The Mercurian* to get some air on deck. “Just keep steady, mate. To my knowledge, there’s never been any icebergs sighted in the Polynesian islands.”

Johnathan chuckled after him and looked at the compass, bearing them almost due west – and then suddenly dead south. He frowned and tapped on the glass, and waited for the needle to engage once more – but instead it started to spin wildly. “Captain?!” Quickly he reached for the telegraph knob nearby and, as per protocol, tapped out a message in Morse code.

When he was done, he looked up to the deck where the older wolf had been standing before, but there was no one there now – just more of the strange, dark-blue mist. “S-Sir...?” He trained his ears on a new sound, one that almost faded out that of the freighter churning through the waves. It sounded like something very heavy was being dragged across the main deck. Suddenly, he felt the freighter lurch to one side and he cried out as he slammed into the wall in a tumble.

Dizzy and disoriented, bleeding into his eyes, he staggered back to his feet and stumbled outside as the cargo ship continued to pitch and sway violently. “CAPTAIN!” He heard the dragging sound close to him, turned and screamed again as darkness overwhelmed him and he knew nothing else.

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Maku nearly slammed into a pretty merwolf carrying a large bouquet of sea flowers and hastily bid her a quick apology as he continued swimming quickly through Castle Poseidon, his long, dark hair flying behind him. One thing his father King Neptune had always tried to instill in the young merwolf was punctuality – especially when it came to royal audiences. Though time had no real meaning hundreds of fathoms below the sea, to Maku when his father asked for his appearance “as soon as possible”, it meant “right now”.

He turned and glided down a large ornately-decorated hallway filled with portraits in golden frames, and headed for the set of tall double doors at the end. As he approached, a mechanism above him clicked on, and the doors slid open, letting in a steady current of warm, comfortable water. He waited for the current to settle before hurrying inside the throne room, where King Neptune and Queen Anahita, dressed in their regal clothes, awaited him.

As Maku approached, the raven-haired couple slowly got up from their seats and swam to meet him. Queen Anahita was quick to hug her oldest son, while Neptune opted for less affection and clamped a paw on his shoulder gently. "Prince Maku, it is good to see you," he said before motioning back to the thrones and leading him to his place beside them. "Apologies for summoning you, but there has been another report of more wreckage near our kingdom. Scouts confirmed to me earlier. Another of the surface-dweller's vessels torn apart on the bottom."

The merwolf frowned. "That is four now in just the past several days, is it not?"

The King nodded. "It is perplexing and no longer a coincidence. Perhaps the surface world's weather has turned to rage and fury, much as we suspected would happen. Their vessels can no longer withstand the sea's power."

Maku thought about the few times he had visited the surface and shook his head. "Begging my Highness' forgiveness, but I have seen nothing to indicate patterns such as that which would cause so many vessels to be lost to the sea. These waters here are generally calm, and storms usually do not last as long, nor with the level of severity-" He caught King Neptune's look of admonishment and immediately held his tongue. His father already was annoyed with the fact the prince often went to the surface to interact with some of Tahiti's inhabitants – one much more than most.

"And would Ambassador Leilani feel as you do...?" Queen Anahita asked, with the trace of a knowing smile.

Now the young merwolf let a little blush escape and shyly brought his paws in front of him. Just the mention of the beautiful sea otter was enough to stir his loins, and he fought an erection beginning within the soft confines of his fishtail. "I-I think she-should be consulted, yes. She knows much more about these vessels than we do. She may not know the waters as well, but nonetheless, her insight could prove valuable."

The Queen leaned forward expectantly and her light blue eyes twinkled. "When was the last time you saw Leilani, my prince?"

Maku looked away and shook his head. "N-not too long..." In fact, only a few days ago he had returned to the surface to find the diver gathering seashells in the surf. They had looked at each other for quite some time before becoming a tangle in the water and making love in the surf for many hours.

"I think you spend quite a considerable amount of time with her..." Anahita interrupted his fantasy and Maku blushed all the more.

King Neptune intervened with a growl. "Enough. Leilani Perierre has done much for our kingdom and has earned the decree as ambassador to Poseidon." He raised a paw to Maku. "But that is as far as it goes. None of my offspring will marry a surface-dweller. They are from a completely different world."

Maku nodded wistfully and looked steadily at his father. "You are right, Father. I know Leilani can be nothing more than...than what she is. But...I still feel she can help us learn more about these strange occurrences."

The King replied, "I would not even be concerned of this at all, but I do believe we should inform the surface world of the mystery. Maku, will you leave at once and see Ambassador Leilani?"

Maku looked excited and quickly nodded. "I...oh gods yes, I-I mean, yes, Your Highness!" He started swimming away and looked over his shoulder. "At once, sir!" He knocked over a small column of gold and shells in his haste and cried out before quickly setting the column back up, bowing reverently, and swimming out again.

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Maku's deep blue eyes watched the beautiful naked diver affectionately as she slowly kicked down towards him and anchored herself on the ocean floor, before pushing a webbed paw into a cropping of reefs and rocks to pull out a large oyster. She knelt in the sand, working her delicate fingers across the shell until it opened, and the dark brown sea otter could enjoy the succulent meat inside. A few bubbles tumbled from her lips, and momentarily trapped within long, streaming black hair that swayed back and forth across luscious brown breasts and stiff black nipples.

Maku pawed at a thick erection pushing up from the slit of his tail and continued to watch Leilani Perierre lustfully as she swam back and forth along the reef. He had never seen a surface-dweller quite like her, and marveled often about the girl's ability to not only plunge into incredible depths, but stay underwater several minutes at a time without a breath. Indeed, he had fallen hard for the aquatic beauty since the first day they had met – when he had rescued her from a horrible fate in the sea. She had been so grateful and happy...

He trembled as he stroked his member further, now in complete, throbbing arousal. He watched her for another moment, and when her back was to him again, he swam slowly from his hiding place and stalked her. The diver continued to kick her legs slowly, making no attempt to hide her mound, the swollen aroused mons now engorged fully by the water.

The merwolf couldn't stand it any longer. He dove forward, clamped around Leilani's waist and mashed his body against her back. She spun around quickly, letting out a startled burble from her mouth, afraid at first. When she saw who it was, she smiled gleefully and nearly pounced him with delight. Maku had enough time to kiss her deeply before she wrapped her legs around him, sunk herself down fully onto his erection with urgent need, and eased them both to the ocean floor to make love.

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Much later, Leilani appeared on the surface and gasped several times before swimming up tiredly towards the shallows and laying out, exhausted and dazed. Maku came up after her and crawled to the edge of the shore, looking spent but happy. She smiled and rolled over on her side to stroke Maku's

stomach, and brush across the flesh still semi-hard along the tail. As she started to crawl atop of him to make love again, Maku quickly pushed her away.

“W-wait, wait...Leilani...this is just amazing, and I am happy to see you too. But I...I actually needed to speak to you...” He sat up in the surf so he could stay mostly submerged. “I-I am here on orders from King Neptune.”

Leilani sat up as well and tilted her head curiously. “What does he want?” She did not particularly care for the King that much, whom she thought saw her as an outsider and not to be trusted, even with her newly-acquired honor as their representative on the surface.

“Well, actually, it is a message from Poseidon.” He gestured to the horizon. “Several of your world’s vessels are sinking deep in the sea, near where our kingdom lies. King Neptune suggested your weather but...”

Leilani shook her head quickly. “There would be wreckage washed up on shore by now if a storm were to cause them.”

“There *is* wreckage but on the bottom, nearly 400 fathoms deep. The vessels seem like they have been ripped apart, according to the King’s scouts.”

“The pressure of the water would do that. But if there is no debris on the surface...”

Maku nodded. “The vessels are sinking down into the water somehow. Almost like they were being pulled down whole.”

She looked concerned. “How many wrecks have your people discovered?”

“At least four.”

She got up slowly from the waves and stretched, still dripping wet, and Maku found it impossible to take his eyes off of her. “We must venture to port authorities in Papeete and alert them. There may be something in the water that is either disabling the vessels or...attacking them...”

“Attacking them? What could possibly bring down a vessel like this, and so frequently?”

Leilani knelt down to retrieve her sarong and tied it about her waist. “It would have to be something large that could pull down an entire ship. A giant squid comes to mind but I have never known them to be this aggressive. Usually they stay on the bottom and feed.”

Maku nodded. “Perhaps you are right, but it could be some other kind of creature.” He ran a paw slowly over his fishtail and in little time, the scales sparkled like diamonds and then shed away entirely, giving the wolf strong legs to walk upon.

Leilani smiled and offered her paw to Maku as he stood up, then glanced down and realized that he was still naked. “Um...” she pressed against him and reached up to caress his hair. “Perhaps first we should stop at my hut and get you some proper clothes. I may have some pants left behind which will fit.”

The wolf smiled and blushed as his erection nestled gently into the sea otter's warm, soft stomach and the urge to take her into the surf again became nearly overpowering. "If you insist..."

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"I'm sorry, Lani, there's not been much news at all." One of Leilani's friends, a white-tailed deer named Benjamin Washer, laid out a small pile of papers as the three sat together inside Papeete's central port authority. "Sometimes we'd get a distress signal but it's garbled and the codes seem wrong."

"Codes?" Maku asked, scratching his chin.

Leilani smiled and rubbed the wolf's arm. "Morse code. Through a telegraph. Our vessels communicate with one another, and ports of call, to relay information such as location, headings, speed, weather patterns, and emergencies." She caught Benjamin's inquisitive look and quickly added for his benefit. "Maku is...not from, um, around here..."

The deer nodded. "I see. Well, like I said, we've had four boats go missing so far this month and not a peep from any of them."

Leilani gently stayed Maku with a paw and motioned for him not to speak. It would be very difficult for him to explain how he knew the boats had indeed been discovered and were not so lost after all.

"Now, this one report..." Benjamin rifled through the papers and pulled out a status sheet on a tramp steamer called *The Mercurian*. "Here. See where it gives headings? They reported almost due west towards Papeete, about 150 miles out at 10:30 PM. But look at the transmission we got about two minutes later."

Leilani read. "Bearing 180 degrees." She looked up, puzzled. "They were heading South?"

Benjamin nodded. "Straight south."

"Well, why would they change course?"

Maku replied, looking excited. "Leilani, maybe they were trying to avoid something in the water. Like that giant squid."

The deer blinked several times. "Giant squid...? That's not possible, Mr. Maku."

"Prince Maku," the wolf countered haughtily.

Benjamin stiffened but remained civil. "Sorry, Prince Maku. You see, if a giant squid were to attack a ship, it would not only pull it down below the sea, but as the tentacles squeezed the hull of the ship, it would eventually splinter and rip apart. We would see tons of debris, cargo, oil slicks, even bodies out on the surface. There's not been any sightings of any of that, despite our best search efforts."

"Then what would be causing these disappearances?" Leilani asked, playing it safe.

Benjamin got up from the table and sighed. "I really don't know, otter. The best we were able to do is suggest altering courses for incoming and outgoing vessels to steer clear of the area. It seems to be limited in scope, which has me even more curious. For any kind of monster to stay in one area, and directly in a known shipping lane...it just doesn't make sense. The creature would likely fear the noises from the boats."

"Maybe something is attracting the creature. Perhaps not the vessels themselves but what they carry in the holds."

The deer consulted the papers again. "Well, we have seen one pattern emerging. Each of the missing ships was carrying weapons, ammunition, explosives..." He looked at them. "Hmm. If I didn't know better, this seems like the work of enemy subs, if they were going after certain ships. We're nearly at war, you know. But the moment a ship was torpedoed, it would be leaking fuel, oil, debris. Plus any munitions on board would erupt."

"Ben, the waters are quite deep there, yes?"

"A thousand feet at the minimum. That's why it's been impossible to even send down a crew to look for the wrecks – if any exist." He touched Leilani's paw. "You're a great diver, Leilani, but even you can't take that kind of pressure."

Maku growled menacingly at the deer. "I would ask that you refrain from making any assumptions as to my companion's abilities."

Benjamin sized the wolf calmly. "I'm not assuming anything, but I know her limits." He looked away sheepishly. "And...she knows mine..."

Leilani slowly smiled and rose from the table to take Maku's paw. "Thank you for your time, Ben."

The deer nodded. "Um, yeah, anytime, Leilani. I'll keep you informed, okay?"

She reached up to touch his cheek. "Of course. You know where to find me."

Maku sensed something warm passing between the two and again cursed his luck to be born a denizen of Poseidon. The idea that there were surface-dwellers who could interact with his lover day or night, away from the sea, was almost too much to bear, and he didn't speak again until they were well on their way back to Leilani's hut.

"I sense that the commander is more than a passing acquaintance," he sighed as they walked through the sand.

Leilani smiled softly. "We swim together sometimes."

Maku snorted. "Just swim...?"

Leilani stopped walking and turned to face him, holding both of his paws close to her. "No, we make love sometimes in the reef, when it suits either of our needs." She saw him frown and slipped her arms

around his waist in a hug. "Maku, please do not be jealous. I...I like sex very much. With Benjamin. With Aidan. With you." Nuzzling at his chest, she continued. "And right now...I am with you." She grinned and hurried inside the hut as Maku walked in after her. He watched the sea otter rummage around a large steamer trunk until she found a gold trinket box and opened it.

"Is that what I think it is, Leilani?"

She chuckled. "Yes. Your kingdom's gift to me." She took out a thin golden chain with a beautiful blue diamond in the middle and slipped it around her neck. "Come, my love," she untied her sarong and let it drop to the floor, then padded naked past him and out of the hut again. "Time for a swim."

Maku looked beside himself then trembled as he quickly undressed and caught up to the otter on the shore. They kissed passionately for a moment before Leilani headed through the waves and pointed out to the whitecaps in the far distance. "Can you take me? We need to go quite far."

The wolf smiled softly and transformed his legs back to a fishtail. "Grab on." He waited for her to wrap herself around his back, feeling her breasts pressing against his bare fur, then dove down, dragging the beautiful diver after him.

Underwater, the blue diamond around Leilani's throat glittered and then glowed fully and she hesitantly took a breath, feeling the warm Pacific water flow through her mouth. As her mouth filled, she spat it back out with a soft blurping sound, and could then hold her breath again. She smiled softly and nuzzled the back of Maku's neck, getting a tighter hold on him as the merwolf's large fishtail bounced and swayed behind her.

After about an hour of swimming, Leilani saw the ocean floor dropping away into dizzying dark blues and violets – the way to Poseidon. "We should-!" Her mouth filled quickly with water and she nearly choked as she spat it out and lowered her head this time to avoid the backwash from the current Maku was making. "We should be near one of the wrecks if we dive now, Maku!"

The merwolf replied, "I agree. Hold on tightly, Leilani."

Leilani wrapped her legs around Maku's waist and looped her arms about his neck as the merwolf dived. Deeper and deeper they went. Leilani felt intense pressure beginning from her ears to her toes as the depths squeezed tightly around her. After 100 or so fathoms, the pressure began to dissipate however, and the deeper they went, the more calming and comfortable the water became. She let out a soft churrip and nibbled at Maku's ear, now quite aroused by these depths she could never reach before.

Maku laughed, wiggling his fishtail. "Enjoying yourself?" He had an erection and as his fishtail bobbed, it caused his hardness to sway and arouse him further. He had to fight the desire to turn around, grab Leilani's buttocks, and ram his member as deep into the otter's sex as he could while kissing her wildly.

Leilani giggled. "Much." The magic from the amulet the kingdom of Poseidon had bestowed upon her never ceased to amaze her. "Light," she uttered, and the blue diamond glowed even more intensely,

now acting like a bright beacon that could cut through even the darkest depths. While Maku was quite accustomed to the lack of light and could see just fine, Leilani was grateful for the added benefit of the amulet. "We cannot be too far, Maku."

The merwolf nodded and continued descending into the darkness, illuminated only through Leilani's amulet. She could see dark shapes of large rocks, reefs, and various vegetation. Several startled pilotfish wiggled and then swam quickly away in front of them as the pair approached, and finally they were at the very bottom. Leilani fanned her arms as she released herself from Maku's waist, and knelt prettily. She chanced a look above her and felt a quick rush of vertigo. She had only been this deep a few times in her life, and she could never quite shake the fear and uncertainty of not being able to see the surface – and being so very far from life-giving air.

Maku moved behind Leilani and gave her a tender hug, and the sea otter churred warmly, turning around to loop her arms around his neck and nuzzle. Maku's stiff member pressed against her stomach again and Leilani teasingly reached down to grasp the tip. "Mmm. Not now. Later..." She giggled softly and frog-kicked backwards away from him, rubbing gently between her legs. There was no doubt she was just as aroused as the merwolf, and would have welcomed his warmth pushing so deep inside of her, but now was not the time to play on lusty desires. True, Maku was a very unique lover, one she could stay underwater with indefinitely, and deeper than most living things, if she chose to, but they were on a mission. She looked lovingly at him and flicked her ruddertail, before turning and swimming off into the darkness, with Maku close behind her.

They swam for quite some time before Leilani could see the dim, hazy shape of a large turret in the distance, and as they got closer, she suddenly understood why none of the wreckage from the freighters had ever been found. This particular one, *The Mercurian*, had been ripped completely in half down the center, but apart from that, the vessel seemed entirely intact. Leilani looked back at Maku in confusion, then took the lead and swam towards the hull. As the merwolf joined her, she pointed to the fissure. "Maku, what-what did this...?"

Maku ran his paw over the jagged steel. "I...I really do not know, Leilani. This is quite puzzling."

The sea otter peered into the hole, nearly three feet wide, and covering the length of the hull. "Come with me." She wiggled through the fissure, careful not to cut herself on the sides, and Maku followed her inside.

Leilani stroked powerfully through the wreck, stopping here and there to examine debris floating about or littered across the floor. As she went into the control area, she cried out in alarm. A dead wolf, eyes mercifully closed, was pinned underneath a pile of heavy machinery, most likely from the engine room. Hesitantly she swam towards him and touched his forehead sadly. "The poor dear."

Maku looked sad too. "It seems like he was taken by complete surprise. Something took this vessel down so fast, no one had a chance to do anything."



Leilani looked back at him. "Something does not make sense to me. I know a lot about depths like this, and if a vessel were split apart at the surface, the deeper it went down, the more it would break apart. We would see wreckage scattered all over the ocean floor...and yet..."

"I understand, lovely otter. Whatever damaged this vessel..."

Leilani's eyes widened. "It happened down here..." She looked up suddenly and beckoned Maku with her ruddertail as she swam away again. "I want to look for something!"

"What is it, Leilani?" Maku hurried to catch up to her as she approached a set of stairs and swam down into the holds. As she reached the bottom of the freighter she looked wildly around her. "Maku!" she yelled back. "Look!"

The merwolf stopped in confusion for a moment, then looked around him curiously. "What am I looking at?"

Leilani growled and swam to him, taking his paw, and jerking him forward to the end of the large room. "Maku, these are cargo holds! These are sections that keep what a vessel carries. But look!"

Now Maku understood. There was no cargo. The entire section of holds was completely empty. "But...how is that...possible..." She watched Leilani as she swam from one hold section to another, and it was the same result. There was nothing on board. "Leilani, what is going on?"

"I do not know!" Leilani threw up her paws in defeat. "There should be something here. But I do not see boxes or crates!"

Maku shook his head. "So...something tore this vessel apart and...took the cargo? Leilani, no creature in the world would do this..."

She looked at Maku intently, suddenly deep in thought. "No...no water creature would. But..." She turned back to the latest hold she had visited and swam slowly around the floor, looking for any clues. As she hoped, she spied a set of strange marks etched across the floor and motioned Maku close to her. "Maku, look. These are drag marks. They lead out of the hold..." She stopped and stared at the merwolf in bewilderment. "Something, or someone, emptied out the vessel."

Now Maku grew angry. "Leilani, if you are suggesting my people..."

They both heard a large, dull thump and clang above them, and Leilani backed away fearfully, looking up. "The freighter. It may be collapsing. We should leave."

She swam carefully through the maze of machinery, stairwells, and hallways until they were back at the fissure. "We must tell others!" she said behind her. "I fear your kingdom could be in great danger!"

As she squirmed through the fissure, she heard the clanging again and looked worriedly over her shoulder for Maku. She never saw the group of oddly-dressed creatures that surrounded the wreck until it was too late. She let out a startled cry as one of the strange invaders came forward and clamped an

arm around her chest. Growling, she whipped her ruddertail up and slammed it against her attacker, causing him to whimper in pain and let go.

She turned around to get a better look at their assailants. The creatures, various foxes and wolves, she saw now, were covered head to toe in peculiar diving equipment. Large fins protected their feet, rectangular glass encased their torsos, and bubble-shaped helmets surrounded their heads. Protruding from their backs were devices that resembled twin air tanks of early scuba designs she had seen before, but looked much more sophisticated. Their hands were covered by thick metal-netted gloves.

“Leilani!” Maku shouted out as he exited the wreck and saw the danger. Quickly he put his paws out and flung a hard current of water towards two of the other creatures, bowling them over like tenpins. Two more swam after Leilani armed with spearguns and the sea otter spun around to face them. She grabbed one of the spears and tried to wrench the weapon free, but a third grabbed her from behind and wrapped his arms around her tightly. As she struggled, another wrapped his arms around her legs, dragged her down, and the two pinned her to the bottom, looking at her lecherously.

Maku dispatched three more of the attackers with his water magic, then charged after the two holding Leilani down. He ducked as a spear sailed out of the watery mist and pummeled its owner with his fishtail. The creature pitched and swayed, clutching his helmet, then twitched and sank to the bottom. As he swam towards Leilani, he noticed with horror that one of her attackers had a hold of her amulet, and was trying to rip it free. “Leilani! No! Let her go!” He growled and focused a wall of water at the one trying to take the amulet away, and he went violently head over heels into the distance. As he turned his attention to the other one, Leilani finally broke free and tried to spin away. One of them grabbed her foot and yanked her back down and, before Maku could stop him, ripped the amulet away from Leilani’s throat.

She suddenly twitched violently and big bubbles erupted from her mouth, and as the full effects of the incredible depths took over, she lost consciousness. The attacker shook her still body several times, and her head lolled side to side, streaming bubbles. Then a couple of the assailants grabbed her and swam away, dragging the otter behind.

Maku screamed and used one more bout of magic to try to stop them, but only succeeded in knocking one of the attackers, a grey striped wolf, off of Leilani. In fury, he tackled him, drove him hard into the sand and smashed through his helmet to choke the life out of him. When he looked up, the other attackers and Leilani were gone.

“Leilani?” Maku pushed off of the dead wolf and looked in every direction. He spotted a few more of the creatures swimming hard with their fins, and quickly followed them.

They passed by other wrecks, in much the same condition as the *Mercurian* had been, and finally came to a large, open area of the ocean. Maku could scarcely believe his eyes as he stopped in his tracks and looked in horror at what lay several hundred feet ahead.

It was a squid – at least, it looked like a squid at first. But instead of fleshy tentacles, Maku saw strange metallic servos and panels. Four of the attachments were rooted to the bottom, like giant legs, and at the top, several more panels formed an enormous dome. At the front of this dome, bright streaks from several attached lights cascaded outwards, illuminating the water around it. As he marveled over the immense size, he saw in the far distance, a lifeless Leilani being pulled and tugged by her captors towards the squid. As the group approached, a hatch opened underneath the squid's body, and the girl was carried inside as the hatch closed after them.

"Leilani..." Maku sobbed softly. He growled and started towards the squid but then realized he was no match. Even if he used his powers to try to gain entry, it seemed like a large number of these creatures would be ready to fight him. "Hold on, otter. Just hold on for me..." He reluctantly turned and headed back towards Poseidon.

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Leilani opened her eyes slowly and waited for the blackness and dizziness to disperse. She turned her head and vomited out sea water in a rush, and saw red spots swimming in her vision. When she was done coughing, she shivered hard and realized she was cold, wet, and naked. Slowly she sat up from a rather crude cot and looked around the dank, musty room. When her vision finally normalized, she got up shakily to her feet and wandered up to a door with a barred window in its center. "H-hello...?" Leilani whimpered to the darkness.

No answer.

She reached up and grasped the bars before standing up on her toes to try to peek out from them. "Is anyone here?"

She heard shuffling feet close by and let go of the bars, backing away from the door. A shadow appeared at the window and then the face of a lemur. He looked curiously at the otter with bright yellow eyes and then shook long dark-grey braids away before passing a small cup of water to her through the bars. "Here, drink," he said hesitantly, "it's...safe and clean."

Leilani took the cup and drank deeply. "Where am I?"

The lemur replied, "You're still in the ocean. We had to depressurize you at once or you would never have made it." He looked at her shyly. "We were all a little surprised to see a creature like you this deep below."

Leilani frowned. "I was surprised as well when your people attacked us. Who are you? Why did you attack us?"

"You were trespassing."

"That vessel does not belong to you," she replied with a snort then asked, "Did your people sink it?"

“Look, I cannot speak with you now. Others will come soon. If you want to stay alive, you will do as they say.” He pulled away from the door.

“Wait! What others?” But he was already gone. Leilani looked around her small prison carefully, trying to find some means of escape. She knelt to the bare, stone floor and felt the slick surface. It was wet and cold. Lowering herself down further, she pressed her ear to the floor and heard water sloshing. She got up and went back to the cot that had been provided her, and looked for something sharp she could use inside or underneath. Everything was wooden, but the slats under the mattress were splintered and worn. Thinking quickly, she took one of the slats and gnawed at the tip, getting it eventually to a sharp point.

She was just arranging her makeshift weapon on the cot under the blanket when she heard more footsteps outside and curled up protectively. The door opened slowly and two more creatures, a black wolf and a tan and grey feline, dressed in pantaloons and shirts, walked in. As they approached her, the sea otter carefully slid her paw under the blanket to take hold of the slat.

“Well, you’re finally awake, huh? Want some food?” the wolf asked, sizing her up with expressive blue eyes.

“I want some answers! Why are you keeping me here?” Leilani demanded, still gripping the slat.

“Sorry, lass, but you were getting mighty nosy swimming ‘round that ship of ours.”

The feline added with a lecherous grin, “Hell of a beauty to encounter on the bottom of the sea though.” He then frowned. “You got some of our people dead.”

Leilani spat back, seething. “And you have killed many more. These shipwrecks, they are your fault!”

“Easy, lass...” The black wolf reached for a scabbard at his side. “You just stay calm now and we won’t hurt you. We might even keep you ‘round as sort of a mascot. Been a while since we’ve seen a pretty girl like you.” As he was speaking, he ran a paw down his hip and brushed it across his groin. “We could make you feel really good...”

Leilani slowly smiled and, still holding on to the slat, uncrossed her legs on the cot. “How good...could you make me feel?” She managed to blush a little and stole the other paw between her thighs, rubbing slowly at the short fur just below her stomach. “can you...make me feel good...here?” she asked and wet her lips, looking at them both seductively.

The feline smiled and walked over to her as the wolf stood by the door.

Switching tactics quickly, Leilani looked over at the wolf. “And...c-can you...make me feel good...in other places...?” She watched intently as the wolf released his hold on the sword and approached her.

“Oh aye, lass. I’m sure as saints I could...” He was already removing his pantaloons.

“Brin, ain’t we supposed to be taking her to Captain Shane?” the feline asked nervously as he took off his shirt.

“Oh, we got time. I don’t need more than a few minutes with her, what about you?”

“I guess I-“ The rest of his words were lost amidst a blood-curdling scream as Leilani quickly got to her feet and slammed the slat dead-on atop the feline’s head, knocking him out cold. Before the wolf could react and run for his weapon, the sea otter growled and ran him through from the back with the sharp end of the slat. For a moment the wolf tottered on his feet, then groaned and fell flat on his face, smashing his nose. He hitched in a couple of shaky breaths and then was still.

Leilani knelt by the dead wolf and retrieved the sword from the scabbard then, thinking it might be a bad idea for her to wander naked through the place, took his pantaloons and shirt and put them on. She reached down and picked up the feathered hat the feline had worn and placed it atop her head.

The feline on the floor started to moan and twitch and Leilani quickly silenced him by pointing the end of the sword to his throat and growling. “You will not make another sound. Is that clear?” Inwardly, she was terrified. She detested weapons of any sort and had no experience at all with them. But she saw the sword as simply a longer form of the dagger she would arm herself with while pearl-diving, and knew enough that the pointed, sharp end was to be feared.

The feline’s eyes blinked several times and then he nodded.

Now Leilani didn’t know what to do. She certainly couldn’t leave him conscious in the cell room with his dead companion and she couldn’t really take him with her either. “I...I should kill you...” she trembled and the paw holding the sword lowered briefly.

“You want out of here?” the feline spoke hoarsely, still staring at the sword.

Leilani looked suspicious. “You can help me?”

“I can. But you’re gonna need equipment.”

“Those strange suits you wore in the water. They protect you?”

“We breathe from them. Captain Shane gets all kinds of gifts from the mer-folk. And they got him all this. The suits, the materials for the monster, everything.”

“Mer-folk?! From Poseidon...?!”

The feline looked at her in confusion. “Don’t know anything about Poseidon, sorry.”

Now Leilani looked puzzled. “Have you seen these...mer-folk?”

“Captain Shane probably has but I haven’t, no. But they’re very intelligent creatures, whatever they are. I think he mentioned the leader by name. Mel...Meltem, I think.”

Leilani's eyes widened and she gasped, gripping the sword again tightly. "The Abyss..." She whispered. The Abyss Empire, located in the deepest part of the sea, had been bent on war and the destruction of Poseidon for eons. Its denizens, mostly sea dragons and other hideous monsters of the deep, wanted not only to conquer Poseidon, but to expand its reach to the surface world as well. Their leader was Emperor Meltem, a black and red sea dragon monster, and King Neptune's deadliest foe. She had once fought together with the merfolk of Poseidon against the Abyss, and managed to stave off a brutal surprise attack. But Meltem had sworn vengeance.

She raised the sword again warningly. "Why are you taking the cargo? For what purpose?"

The feline raised his arms slowly. "Steady, otter, steady. All I know is we're collecting them." He smiled softly and leaned back against the wall, all at once casual. "So...do you want to get out of here now, or not?"

Leilani started to reply but then the butt of a gun slammed into the back of her head and she crumpled to the floor unconscious.

\*\*

Maku had already spread word throughout the kingdom of the metal monster that had taken Ambassador Leilani, and most likely was responsible for the many vessels sinking. Now he stood with the commander of their main forces, Battlemaster Robert, while they studied a massive stone map and a diagram of the giant monster Maku had seen.

"This thing must be incredibly huge," the polar-bear sighed.

"Large enough to not only capture one of the surface-dweller's vessels but to carry it somehow to the bottom of the sea." Maku was worried about his friend but now was not the time to dwell on his carelessness nor his guilt in not being able to rescue her.

The polar bear turned to a nearby scout. "How large was the sunken vessel you encountered?"

"Sir, at least 300 feet, sir!"

Robert looked at Maku then pointed to the diagram. "If it is indeed metal, our water magic will be ineffective. We would have to go in as one mass, infiltrate, and destroy them from inside."

Maku consulted the diagram. "I saw an opening...about here, just below the main body."

Robert scratched his chin. "They will be expecting great numbers of our scouts. However, if we went there with a small group, and hid the rest of our forces--"

Maku brightened. "We could lure them out then take them by surprise and enter the metal monster! Robert, that is a great idea!" He clapped the polar-bear's back and earned a sheepish grin.

"Thank you, Your Highness." He looked steadily at him and laid a paw on his chest. "If Ambassador Leilani is still alive, we will find her, I promise you."

Maku turned grim but nodded. "I believe in my heart she is."

Robert turned to several scouts around the large room. "Prepare for battle!"

\*\*

Leilani opened her eyes slowly and swallowed water. In alarm, she coughed it out and realized she was underwater. Flailing, she looked wildly around her and finally managed to push off a glass bottom and glide to the surface about 15 feet up. As her head appeared, she gasped and coughed uncontrollably.

"Well, little otter!" She heard a deep voice from the side and glanced around her. "We wondered whether you would come to – or if you'd just give us the pleasure of drowning instead. You are quite the resourceful one, I must admit!"

She was in a huge room, nearly fifty times the size of any hut. The ceiling sloped upwards to form a dome, and along one wall, she could see the beautiful ocean lit up by several sea lights, through a large section of special glass.

A hulking, very tall black tiger with coursing grey stripes dressed in red pantaloons, a white chemise, and a gold sash across his chest stepped down from an ornate chair and walked with purpose down a short group of steps over to the huge water tank in which Leilani fought to stay afloat. "You've been a bit of a problem. And I'm not too happy with the way you ended dear Shamus' life. He was a good friend."

Leilani stopped coughing and found her voice. "Who-who are you? What is it you want?!"

"My dear, I'm Captain Emil Shane. As for what I want, well..." He chuckled as he walked up to the glass underneath Leilani and tapped it smartly. "I suppose wealth, riches beyond my wildest dreams. Just like any pirate."

Boisterous laughter greeted this and Leilani saw two more pirates walk up, each carrying deep-sea diving equipment similar to what she'd seen in the first attack. One was a large black wolf with piercing red eyes and dripping fangs. The other, a Russian Blue feline with a black ponytail in his hair and glittering green eyes, was relatively shorter than his comrade, but wiry with a swimmer's build. They both looked hungrily at the nude otter in the tank and licked their lips.

Leilani ignored them as she managed to climb up to the top of the tank and hold on, exhausted. "Why are you... taking these vessels?"

Captain Shane shrugged. "They're needed, my dear otter. My employers desire weapons. I give them weapons."

"Your...employers. You mean...the Abyss and Emperor Meltem. You do not understand...what you are doing or what horror you are aiding. They will destroy...all of us, even those on the surface. No one is safe!"

Captain Shane laughed uproariously. "You think I care at all? As long as these creatures continue to bless us with their technology and riches, we have nothing to worry about down here. We're completely safe."

"You...live here?"

"For a few months. It took about that long to build the *Kraken*, but once she was up and operational, we saw all the possibilities." The tiger walked across the length of the tank, still speaking. "Meltem is quite intelligent. His people gave us the wherewithal to build this, as their engineering team was killed in an attack perpetrated by the merfolk of Poseidon some time ago."

"That is a lie! They attacked the merfolk!"

The captain waved a paw dismissively. "Details. Once the *Kraken* was finished, Meltem told us his plan to get rid of Poseidon once and for all. It was brilliant. But he would need substantially more firepower. And that is where we help. We grab vessels from the surface and store them within the *Kraken* in a massive pressurization chamber. Once the ship is flooded, we come in, do away with the survivors, and take the ammunition and weapons. When finished, we eject them from the beast onto the sea floor, and they become a part of the scenery forever."

"No...wreckage..."

Shane nodded enthusiastically. "That is the sheer brilliance of it. It will just seem like the vessel simply disappeared. And no equipment exists yet on the surface world that would venture this deep to investigate."

"They will...eventually find...them..." Leilani slipped from the tank rim and splashed back in before getting a fresh hold.

"Perhaps one day. But...that doesn't really concern me now. At this point, it really shouldn't concern you either." He motioned to the wolf and cat. "She's all yours." They undressed down to undergarments and fastened the helmets around their heads. Then they attached the air packs and checked the equipment carefully.

Leilani pulled away from the rim of the tank, looking fearful as she tread water again. "Wh-what are they doing?"

"I have no need for you anymore, otter. I thought perhaps you had gifts like your merwolf friend, and truly we marveled how a surface-dweller could last that deep or that long in the sea. But as it turned out, you're just a commoner. Nothing special about you." He smiled nastily. "And I'm afraid you must answer for the deaths of some of my crew." The wolf and cat approached the tank and climbed up the ladder slowly. "See to it she never takes another breath..."

Leilani watched in horror as the two pirates continued climbing up the tank. She could hear their quickened breathing through the glass helmets. As they neared the top, she quickly pushed off the tank



and swam on her back away from them, keeping them in view. The pirates reached the edge and sat on the rim, watching her lustily as they fitted their feet with flippers.

The black tiger nodded, satisfied, and went back to his seat. This was one show he did not want to miss.

“St-stay away from me...” Leilani whimpered and kept her distance.

The wolf nudged his companion. “What say you? Think she’s worth a good fuck or two?”

The feline smiled and shamelessly rubbed an erection in his underwear. “Oh aye, and then some...never seen such beauty...” There was a crazed look in his eyes, almost infatuation.

The wolf splashed into the tank and adjusted his helmet for a tighter fit. Leilani felt the back of the tank behind her, suddenly gulped air and dove. The feline finished his adjustments and joined his companion, then together they dove down to give chase. She looked behind her as she descended to the bottom of the tank and knelt there, fanning her arms slowly, keeping her muscles tense so that she was ready to swim. The wolf motioned to his companion and the two separated. He slowly circled her while the feline swam up about halfway to the top and stayed above her. He grinned through his helmet and wiggled out of his underpants, already sporting a thick erection.

Leilani found it hard to keep both the pirates in her line of sight and she kicked slowly to one of the sides, trying to figure out what to do. Suddenly the wolf charged her and she deftly spun and twisted away from him, diving back to the bottom of the tank. Now she thought she saw what they were trying to do. As the wolf re-circled her again, she noticed the feline tense above her, waiting for her to try to return to the surface.

They were trying to keep her underwater, where she couldn’t breathe – but they could.

*Never take another breath*, she thought. The idea of drowning always terrified her but now it was a distinct possibility. Unless...

Her body motions changed. She knelt on the bottom again and blew a few bubbles from her lips as she ran her paws over full breasts. When she had the feline’s full attention, she lifted her head to look up towards him and dug a paw between her legs, rubbing her mound slowly while blowing a smooth trail of bubbles sexily from pursed lips. Then steeling herself, she swam deliberately towards the feline above her as he watched her warily. She smiled softly at him then reached out to surround his erection with her paw. She heard him whimper through the helmet as she pushed her head forward, opened her mouth and engulfed his member in warmth. The wolf watched, fascinated, as the sea otter orally began to please the feline, and jerked down his own underwear to stroke his building erection.

Leilani bobbed her head quickly on the feline’s sex, cupping and massaging his balls, going faster, as the feline closed his eyes and began to twitch. After about a moment more, his whole body stiffened and Leilani pulled off of him again to grab his member and jerk it as hard as she could. The effect was as she hoped. The feline floated back as several threads of semen spurted from his length. She took another

moment to make sure he was fully sated, then shoved off of the feline to get a fresh gulp of sweet air at the surface, refilling her lungs.

Below, the feline twitched a few more times before righting himself and kicking up to the surface a few feet away from the her, gasping and out of breath. "Y-you are...that was...amazing..."

Leilani smiled sweetly and realized how she could survive this after all. "R-really?" she churred softly and breast-stroked towards the feline, her eyes gleaming. "I fall...in love...with felines...so easily..." She caressed his helmet. "M-maybe you and I are...meant to be?" She reached down again to caress his pouched sex. "I...I want you...in-inside me so much..."

She suddenly felt a paw grab her foot. "Help me, please!" she managed to get out, and took in a deep breath as she was forcibly dragged down and into the arms of the wolf. He was in full arousal. Leilani burbled gently to him and wrapped her legs strongly around his waist, sinking down on warm hard flesh eagerly. The wolf shuddered hard as she coiled herself tightly around him and they sank to the bottom again.

The feline watched the two mating and growled. Quickly he dove down and launched himself at the couple, spilling them both on their backsides and kicking wildly. The wolf tried to grab at the sea otter again, but she had already swam to the feline, and was now mounting him, looping her arms around his helmet and moving eagerly on his length. After about a moment, the feline removed his helmet entirely so that he could kiss the otter with passion and fever, now completely enamored. Another moment passed before the need for air came over him. He wiggled in Leilani's grasp, and the two pushed off back to the surface again to get another breath.

"Oh gods...oh gods..." the feline said between deep gasps, trying to catch his breath, treading water and trying to thrust into her at the same time. Leilani suddenly took in the deepest breath she could, pushed on his shoulders, and dove them quickly back down to the bottom. Once there, Leilani pinned the feline beneath her and rode his length eagerly, grabbing his chest-fur to balance.

The feline bubbled huge bursts of air as he fought to control his lungs and the wolf grew angry again. He slammed into Leilani, knocking her off of the feline, and she pinwheeled her arms as she hit the bottom. Then the wolf swam atop the feline and clamped both paws around his throat, seething with rage. The feline scratched at him and tried to break free, but the wolf was much stronger. After another minute or two, air began to escape from the feline, and his head drifted side to side. The wolf held on for another minute until the feline lost his struggles entirely and drowned.

Leilani moved to the other side of the tank as the wolf swam away from the dead feline and finned towards her. *At least now it is one against one.* For several minutes, she led the wolf on a chase around the tank. Every so often as her air ran short, she'd arch her body and glide back up to the top to get a much-needed breath. Even with his fins, the wolf couldn't keep up with the grace and speed of the sea otter, and he was soon tired as he swam back up to the top to rest. Leilani surfaced on the other side of the tank and held on to the rim again, panting from her long and constant swimming.

“Enough!” Captain Shane stepped out of his chair and walked up to the tank. “You’re proving more cunning than I thought, otter. Maybe we should keep you around just a little while longer. Who knows? Maybe even join my crew, eh?” He motioned to the wolf. “Get out...”

The wolf glared at Leilani and pulled himself weakly from the tank and climbed back down the ladder. At the bottom, he leaped to the floor and crumpled there, exhausted. Shane kicked him hard in the side in anger, then looked up to Leilani. “You can come out too. We have clothes for you. And...I suppose you might need a good meal too.”

Leilani didn’t answer but dove back down again to the bottom. Gingerly she slipped an arm around the drowned feline and pulled him up with her back to the surface. She tried haphazardly to revive him, but his lungs were quite full and he’d been underwater too long. Sadly, she pulled the Russian blue cat to the side of the tank and floated him on his back. Then she painfully pulled herself out of the tank, and carefully lowered herself the rest of the way down the ladder until she could hop off.

“Here,” the tiger removed his sash and chemise and handed it to the dripping-wet otter. The wolf had managed to catch his breath at last and got slowly to his feet. “Don’t just stand there. Get out of my sight.” The wolf growled but picked up the rest of his clothes and scuttled out. To Leilani he said, “Rather well done, pitting them against one another. Very tactful. What is your name, lovely otter?”

Leilani hesitated before answering, “Ambassador Leilani, of the Kingdom of Poseidon.”

Captain Shane grinned widely. “Is that so? Well then...ambassador...” He drew a long dagger from a sheath at his side and pointed it at her. “It appears I have something to bargain with...”

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“Maku, take your group now.” Robert said as they hunkered down amidst a large reef. Behind them were at least a hundred scouts, armed with daggers and spears. The polar bear looked awestruck by the monster in front of them, several hundred feet away, but crushed his anxiety quickly. Now was not the time to harbor any doubts.

“Do you think ten would be enough?”

“To draw them out? That may be too many.”

“But too few and we may not overpower them, even with our magic.” Maku looked ahead of them. He too was fearful but kept his feelings to himself. All he could think of was Leilani, and prayed again to whatever sea gods there were that she was alive and safe. “We must also be able to get close enough to get inside.”

“If they suspect a trap, I have no doubts they are prepared. They may be able to monitor the area around them, for all we know.” He grew fearful. “They may even know of our forces already.” Quickly he turned around and signaled wordlessly to the scouts to retreat further back.

“I do not think so. There would have been activity already and their fighters would have come out.” Maku thought a moment then nodded to himself. “I need to create a diversion...”

“Prince Maku, please do not arouse your father’s anger with me by getting yourself killed.” The polar bear growled.

Maku rolled his eyes. “I have a plan.” He crept from behind the reef and swam slowly towards the behemoth alone. As he approached, he spotted the lights he’d noticed before high on top of the metal squid’s head, and swam quickly towards them. As he hoped, the moment he did, he was suddenly bathed with light and the squid rumbled. Instantly a hatch opened, and three pirates exited from the squid, holding spear guns. Maku waited for them to see him before racing back towards the reef while the pirates gave chase.

Battlemaster Robert rose up from the reef and before the pirates realized it, they were surrounded by several merfolk. One of the pirates tried to flee past the group and a well-placed spear went through his chest. He cried out in pain, grabbed at the spear as it sunk in, and sank to the bottom motionless. The other two pirates surrendered and Robert quickly disarmed them. “How do we get inside?” he asked, pointing his spear at them.

“You don’t,” one of the wolves growled. “The minute they see any of you mers come near the place, they’ll lock it up.”

Maku came forward, his face a rictus of hate. “Is that so?” He waved a paw over his fish-tail and reformed legs again. “Hold him.”

Two scouts came forward and grabbed the wolf’s arms, pinning them behind his back.

“Wait! What are you doing!?” the wolf cried out, trying to struggle.

Maku grabbed the wolf’s helmet and after some effort, wrenched it free from his head. The scouts held fast to the wolf as he twitched and jerked and finally drowned in their arms. After he was dead, Maku placed the helmet around his own head, armed himself with a dagger, then turned to Robert. “Once I am inside, I will have to signal to you all somehow.”

“If you stay near the hatch, you can let everyone in.”

“There may be guards there. And they will wonder why these did not return.” He motioned to the other wolf. “He will come with me.”

Robert gave the wolf a hard shove. “You heard him.”

Maku grabbed the wolf and yanked off his helmet. Without waiting for him to die, he sliced through his throat with the dagger, filling the water around him with fresh blood.

“Maku!?”

“He does not have to be alive, does he?” he sneered at the polar bear and he backed off. He had never seen Maku so angry. “I will take his body back with me. It will seem like there was a fierce battle and they are taking back one of their own. You be ready for my signal.”

“We will wait, Your Highness.” He frowned as he watched the merwolf drag the body of the wolf back with him and swim towards the metal beast.

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“Two coming back, sir. One looks hurt.” A black fox peered through a small window in the control room.

Captain Shane folded his arms and nodded. “Open the hatch. Take a few down there and see what can be done. No sign of the merwolf?”

“None, sir.”

The large black tiger smiled. “Prepare for leave. Meltem’s waiting.”

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Leilani sat alone in her cell, arms folded, looking distraught. If Captain Shane succeeded in delivering these shipments of ammunition and weapons and explosives to the Abyss, it would create a more powerful theatre of war. The Kingdom of Poseidon, even with its magic, would never be able to withstand the fury of Meltem and his weapons of mass destruction. And what of the surface world? She thought about her many friends and lovers on the island. The idea that they could be hurt or killed by the onslaught of the Abyss upset her greatly.

The sea otter got up from her cot and wandered over to the door where the feline she had attacked before kept guard. “Why?” she begged, almost sobbing. “Do you not understand how many of our people, your people, could die? Have you no family on the surface or friends?”

The cat answered gruffly, “My parents died in a flood when I was but a kitten. I watched them get swept away and never saw them again. I learned that day that the world is cruel and unkind. And I learned you have to look after yourself at the end of the day.”

“We are not all cruel. You experienced hardly any life at all, if you truly believe that.”

“Spare me. What matters now is delivering everything to these sea creatures and ending this partnership. Captain Shane has promised we can go anywhere we want to after that.”

Leilani continued to sob. “There will be no place safe for you to go. The Abyss will come to the surface world and destroy you all!”

“We can handle the Abyss. With this new technology, Captain Shane is going to build even greater machines, and even stronger weapons. The Abyss will dare not oppose us. No one will.” There was a deep rumble throughout the vessel followed by several small trembles, and Leilani dropped to the floor

protectively. "It appears as if we're ready to make delivery. We'll be leaving soon." He walked away. "You're lucky the captain wishes to keep you around."

\*\*

Maku held the dead wolf under his arm as the hatch closed after him and the water streamed out. He felt strange, almost dizzy as the area depressurized and then he saw three pirates coming towards him. He quickly dropped the wolf to the floor and knelt away from them, pretending to cough, keeping his head covered.

"What happened to him?"

"I think he's dead."

Maku slowly removed the helmet and set it aside, then clenched both paws and focused as much energy within him that he could. As the pirates turned their attention to him, he spun around and projected several stinging water blasts at them. The pirates cried out and tried to cover or run away, but then Maku was atop of them, snarling with new rage as he made short work of them with his dagger. When all lay dead, he took one of the pirates' clothes and put them on, then went back to the hatch and opened it, pitching all four bodies into the ocean. Once they were gone, he crept back to the door and stepped outside.

In the hallway, he passed a number of other pirates, but they paid him no mind. He knew he didn't have much time. Someone was bound to notice the others gone and soon. He wandered aimlessly through a number of rooms and hallways before he found a particularly dank hallway that led to several rows of doors. At one of them, he nearly cried out with relief when he saw who was sitting on a cot inside.

"Leilani, you are alright!" Maku gripped the barred window as she ran to him. "I could not tell who you were at first from your clothes! Thank goodness, I was so worried--"

"Not now, Maku!" Leilani hissed. Quickly she told him what was happening, how the Abyss had hired modern-day pirates to gather weapons for their murderous quest. "They are leaving soon! We must do something! We cannot let the Abyss control these weapons!"

Maku was dumbfounded for a moment but quickly came to. "I understand, otter, but Battlemaster Robert's forces are waiting to attack right now. I need to get a signal to them!"

Leilani shook her head. "They will never be able to fight this machine."

Maku used his water magic to burst the lock free and open the door. "I was going to have them come aboard. We could fight them then."

Leilani looked dubious. "Using their magic with all these explosives on board could be..." Her emerald eyes suddenly lit up. "Dangerous..."

Maku caught her look. "Leilani? What is it, otter?"

Leilani crept past him out into the hallway. "We need to get a signal to Robert's forces. We need to tell them to get away!"

"What are you talking about?!"

Leilani turned to Maku to smile grimly and her voice was like shaved ice. "We are going to destroy this monster ourselves."

Maku stared wide-eyed at the otter and followed her down the mercifully-empty hallway.

\*\*

"Sir, there has been no signal yet. What should we do?"

The polar bear kept his eyes trained on the metal squid and shook his head. "We wait. If the Prince has managed to infiltrate, he will find a way."

"If he has, yes..."

Robert looked at his second in command and growled. "I am doing enough worrying for both of us!" He thought a moment. "Send word to the full battalion. We strike on my command."

"Yes, sir!"

\*\*

Maku followed Leilani as she meandered down several halls, down flights of steps, poking her head in and out of doors. "At some point are you going to tell me your plan?" He whispered as they passed by a couple of pirates.

She rolled her eyes and looked back at him as they walked. "It is simple. Your water magic. It is powerful enough to cause force, is it not? We find where Captain Shane and his men are hiding the cargoes from the stricken vessels, and then we look for a torpedo."

Maku blinked. "What is a torpedo?"

Leilani snapped back, "Honestly, Maku, we do not have time for a lesson in warfare! You will know it when I find it and point it out to you..." She then stopped walking. "But you must be very careful too. The moment we set off one torpedo, this whole abomination goes with it."

"Goes...where?"

She fought to hold her temper and her patience. "It will explode, Maku. Torpedoes are armed with an explosive material that is triggered by a sizeable force that bears down on the front of it." She tapped his chest and smiled. "Your water magic will create that force."

Maku slowly smiled. "Leilani! That is ingenious!" Then he frowned. "Um...would we not explode too...?"

Leilani sighed, "I was getting to that. Your protection bubble, that you placed around me the first time we met, do you recall?"

The merwolf grinned. "Very much so." He had kept Leilani safe at the bottom of the sea once, when they had first met one another. He had been anxious to present him to his family as a new, possibly formidable ally to Poseidon, so had encased the then-naked sea otter in the bubble until he could come back with proper clothes for her.

"Is it strong enough to withstand an explosion of some magnitude?" She broke him out of his daydream.

Maku thought a moment. "Huh? Oh. It should. It is able to withstand the deepest depths of the ocean. I believe it would protect you."

"It will need to protect both of us. Even if you triggered the torpedo from far away, the explosion of everything on board would be massive." She didn't want to think how massive. Her internal calculator thought four ships' worth of weapons and ammunition could set off an explosion large enough to have a crippling effect on the ocean's environment around it. But there was no time to worry about consequences now. Were the Abyss to get control of these weapons, more than just a tiny corner of the ocean world was in danger.

As they came to another stairwell, she noticed the air was quite different and musty. "This must be the ballast area below. Usually it is kept filled with water to control the pressure of an undersea vessel."

"So this squid is like...a giant protective bubble?"

Leilani nodded. "This far down, a vessel of this size would be ripped apart without a ballast and some means to bring water inside. If any other part of the area were to flood, the pressure would no longer be equal, and cause this place to crush down on itself."

"Fascinating," Maku gasped.

"As shameful as it is that this was built, it was done with much intelligence and knowledge. We must hurry. We need to find where they are keeping the cargo, Maku. Turn back."

They wandered down a few other hallways but passed hardly anyone else. At another hall, she saw a large set of massive doors about ten feet high, lined with steel bolts. "Perhaps here," she whispered as they crept towards it. Two pirates walked past them, heading back, and she tried to duck her head under the hat.

"You there!" One of them barked, "Otter!"

Leilani slowly removed her hat and shook hair from her face, looking up at the black wolf, whom she now recognized as the one she had been with earlier in the water tank.

"What are you doing out of your cell?"

Maku quickly spoke up gruffly, "Captain wanted her. I was just taking her to him."



The black wolf sized up Maku slowly. "I have never seen you before."

"Replacement," Leilani cleared her throat and added hastily, "For the one you *killed* earlier, remember?" She even managed to add some smugness. "Perhaps next time, you will swim faster, wolf."

The black wolf growled and brought out his knife.

Maku glared at the wolf and slapped his paw away, throwing the knife to the floor. "Raise a weapon to the ambassador again and I will kill you."

"Enough, you two." The other pirate, a ferret, stepped in between them. "Take the prisoner to Captain Shane then."

Leilani tried a trick and pointed towards the double doors. "Are the weapons safe inside there? Captain Shane will be very upset if not."

The ferret looked towards the doors then back to Leilani. "As safe as they could be. Why should it matter to you?"

"Maku?" Leilani smiled. "Would you like to introduce these two to water magic?"

The merwolf beamed and raised his paws. "With pleasure." Two shots of water-jets blasted forth, knocking the wolf and ferret over. As they struggled and moaned on the floor, another burst put them both out cold.

Leilani squeezed Maku's paw proudly as they stepped over the fallen pirates and to the double doors. It took some effort, but they were both able to soon slide the doors completely open, and they were nearly overwhelmed by the stench of gun powder. All they could do was stare at the nearly 100 crates lined and stacked neatly around the large room.

Maku whispered in awe. "My gods. Leilani, which one would have a torpedo inside?"

She hurried towards a nearby set of crates and looked for anything that would offer content information, but none could be found. "I...I do not know...We have not much time. Help me open one of these and--"

"Well, my dear otter," a low, familiar growl came from the door, and they both turned their heads to see Captain Shane and several pirates around him, training small guns on them. "You are just proving more resilient and useful by the moment."

Leilani slowly turned around to face them. "Do you really want to fire a gun in here, Captain?"

The black tiger laughed. "Of course not." He motioned to the others around him. "But I trust their aim. You should as well. Step away, now."

Maku and Leilani looked at one another then carefully put up their arms as they were herded from the cargo room.

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“Battalion!” Robert shouted behind him. “On my signal, we head for the outer hatch of this beast and attempt entry. If it appears fruitless, we focus all power on the legs that touch the bottom. Perhaps if we can disable it, we can defeat it.”

He was met with several affirmations and then looked back at the battle that was about to come. He swallowed hard and prayed that the Prince was safe.

A few more minutes...

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They were led, guns at their sides, back through several hallways and to the main chamber, where Leilani had been before. She glanced over at the water tank and, filled with dread, clutched Maku’s paw tightly.

“We’ll keep you both someplace safe until we make delivery to the Abyss,” Captain Shane said as they walked. “Maybe I’ll give that wolf another try at you in the tank, eh?”

He ordered the pirates to stand down as he walked up the small flight of steps to his control chair to sit. The group surrounded the pair, guns holstered. “But I’m not quite sure what I want to do to you, otter. The way you’ve managed to gain allies, to fight your way through battles, to get into places you’re not supposed to be...” He chuckled. “Quite honestly, you would make a fine pirate.”

Leilani huffed. “I would be nothing of the sort. The moment you turned your back, you would find a sword through it.”

The tiger laughed all the more. “Perfect! You are truly as bloodthirsty as my companions!”

Leilani went silent and a rush of guilt washed through her. She had indeed killed, something she had never done in her life. She thought of the wolf she had been forced to kill in her cell, and the drowned feline at the bottom of the water tank, and fought back tears. She leaned against Maku and pressed her face to his side.

“But...what should we do about your friend here, huh? And more to the point, how the hell did he get on board?” He snapped his fingers to two of the pirates who came forward with swords to cover him. “Who are you, stranger?”

Maku held his head high. “I am Prince Maku, eldest son of King Neptune, from the kingdom of Poseidon. And in capturing me, you have committed an act of war!”

Captain Shane looked unimpressed. “I see. Why are you not mer-folk, like the others?”

Maku started to answer and Leilani suddenly elbowed him. “He is a surface-dweller who came to fall in love with another merwolf, who is a princess, and married her.” As Maku stared in disbelief at her, she continued. “Prince Maku is an honorary Prince, by title, and a rightful heir to the kingdom in his time.”

“What are you saying!?” Maku whispered angrily.

Leilani didn't answer at first. She was looking at the main window intently. “Pressure...” she said to herself quietly.

“What?”

“What are you two babbling about? Speak up!” The tiger stepped out of his chair.

Leilani turned to Captain Shane and there was a hint of a smile on her face. “Captain Shane...do you know anything about water magic?”

The Captain looked puzzled and drew his sword. “What are you on about, girl?”

She turned to Maku and pointed towards the huge plate glass window. “Show them...” she said through gritted teeth.

Maku suddenly understood and turned to the window, raising a paw and concentrating as much power as he could.

“STOP HIM!” Captain Shane shouted to the others and a sharp stream of hard water shot from Maku and slammed into the window. The black tiger watched in horror as the water smashed into the window and bounced harmlessly off. But in its wake, a spidery crack formed, and began to grow. “No...” he whimpered and saliva ran from his gaping mouth.

Before he could say another word, there was a sickening, loud crack, and the entire plate glass window exploded inwards, bringing with it a wall of unstoppable water.

“Maku! Bubble!” Leilani cried out and the merwolf quickly transformed himself back and covered Leilani in a protection bubble just as the waters rushed in, swept everyone else to the ceiling and drowned them instantly.

Maku swam through the dead, floating corpses to locate Leilani safe inside her bubble. He grabbed it and held it in front of him as he headed out the broken window and back into the sea.

Robert saw the pair racing towards him while behind them, the great beast beginning to break apart. “My Prince! You are alive!” He went to hug him and Maku gave him a hard shove.

“Get everyone back! Hurry! Full retreat!” He tucked the bubble close to him and followed behind Robert and his scouts as they swam for their lives. Behind him, he heard the first rumbles of explosions rocking the great beast and dove immediately down to the sand. “Cover!” he cried out, and then the whole world seemed to blow up around him. He kept a tight hold on Leilani as a huge current of water smashed into them, knocking everyone over in the sand, and sending several sections of reef crumbling into rocks.

When the silt settled and the current dissipated, he looked anxiously to Leilani and found her unconscious again – but breathing. He held her in his arms and wept with relief as Robert and his scouts carefully came forward and surrounded them.

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King Neptune and Queen Anahita sat in their thrones and listened incredulously at first as Maku and Leilani, now fitted with a new magic necklace and looking resplendent in her floral blue royal dress, explained everything. A few times the King stopped them to ask a series of questions, but on the whole he was respectful and attentive. When they were finally done speaking, the King sent for one of his guards.

“Alert every scout patrolling the outer rims. Make sure none of that beast or its cargo remain.” Looking at Leilani he continued gently, “And have the kitchen prepare a banquet. This is a time of great celebration and to honor our dear ambassador. Officially.”

Leilani blushed and curtsied low. “Your Majesty, I could never have done this without Maku.” She smiled and took his paw. “He is quite special to me...”

“Father,” Maku interjected, “if I may ask, has Leilani proven herself to be a suitable wife-“

“Do not press me further, Maku,” the old merwolf growled deeply, and Leilani couldn’t help but giggle.

Maku sighed, “Very well, Father.” He turned to nuzzle the otter affectionately and took her paw. “If it pleases the ambassador, I would like to take her for a swim now.”

“Please, Maku...” Leilani raised a paw. “I believe I have had far too much time being in the water lately.”

Maku chuckled and took her arm gently. “Just trust me...” He bowed low to the king and left.

Queen Anahita leaned over to the King and smiled softly. “She would not make a bad princess at all, my love.”

The King chuckled and shook his head before giving the Queen a tender kiss. “That is what I am afraid of...”

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Maku led the sea otter through the castle proper until they came to a closed and bolted door under the watchful eye of a stationed guard. The merwolf shooed him away, then opened the door, and led Leilani through a spacious bedroom covered in royal blues, reds and golds. A large bed sat in the center, with a churning curtain of bubbles surrounding it.

“Maku...please...” Leilani whined.

“Shh, we are almost there.” He grinned as they came to the end of the bedroom and another closed door. Above it, on a golden stencil, were the words “Ambassador Leilani Perierre”.

Leilani looked curiously at the door then at Maku again. "What...is this?"

Maku said nothing but reached past Leilani for a large silver lever by the door. A faint rumbling sounded from within followed by heavy rushing water. As the sounds ceased, the door hissed and then slowly slid open. The merwolf smiled and stepped aside gallantly so Leilani could enter.

The minute she walked through the water and into the next room, she first realized she could breathe normally without swallowing water. Then she saw and felt that there was no water at all.

"M-Maku," Leilani gasped, looking around the slightly smaller bedroom. It was so much like home. The floors were bamboo slats, still dripping with beads of water, and a comfortable hammock, complete with several silk pillows, had been arranged between two golden posts. In a corner of the room was a large, iron bathtub, encased in crystal, filled to the brim with still-steaming soapy water. Beautiful hibiscus buds and blooms floated on the surface.

Maku smiled and transformed his fishtail to legs, then stepped up to nuzzle the sea otter's ear as she churred fondly, still wide-eyed at the tub. "I thought...perhaps the ambassador would like to get...at least a little bit wet..."

Leilani turned and kissed Maku passionately, already slipping out of her blue dress, then smiled and led the prince – not by the paw – to the tub.

END