

Excerpt from Ch. 1: Waimoku Falls

We climbed the backside of the canyon, still winding through the singing forest. A sudden gust blew through the treetops, causing the tall hollow stalks to cry a warning and my heart to beat faster. What danger was Nahoia getting me into this time?

By midday we reached the tree line, and the terrain became near vertical, with slabs of volcanic rock stacked in a series of small ledges and caves.

I turned around, looking out over the green bamboo treetops. To my right, the towering snow-capped summit of Mauna Kea dominated the sky. It was the tallest and most sacred spot on the Great Island, and on rare occasions smoke and ash billowed from its peak, rising above the icy white snowdrifts. Fortunately, there had not been a major eruption or lava flow in many generations.

“I’ll race you to the top,” Nahoia challenged. “I’ll even give you a head start.”

We had always enjoyed a spirited rivalry, feeding off each other’s competitive nature. I surveyed the cliff, picking my route.

“You’re on,” I said as I hoisted myself up and grabbed onto a small lava finger hold. Just above me was a long fissure in the rock, sloping upward to my right and then back to the left. While this path would take me on a longer course, it was less demanding, and my best chance to beat Nahoia to the crest.

He saw my plan. “Good, little brother. That path is safer.”

I carefully moved forward, while Nahoia soon got stuck above me on the sheer vertical wall of lava, his legs dangling and his feet probing the cliffside.

“Fingers getting tired?” I asked him as I moved closer to the top. I was going to beat him, for once.

“I won’t be here long,” he said.

As I followed the crevice back to the left, Nahoia whipped his body to the right and leapt off the cliff, his foot landing on my shoulder. He pushed off my neck and hoisted himself onto the ledge above me, just below the crest.

“Thanks, omo,” he said with a wicked laugh.

As I pulled myself onto the ridgetop I saw Nahoia ahead, following a fast-moving river that disappeared in the distance.

“Move it!” he yelled above the sound of the rushing water.

I hurried to catch up and we crossed the river along a jagged path of partially submerged boulders smoothed over by the rapids.

Before us, the river gained strength where it merged with a smaller tributary and formed a swirling vortex that plummeted off the cliff as Waimoku Falls.

“That’s it,” said Nahoā, pointing at a small hill piled with rubble just in front of where the two rivers joined.

There we found the remains of a crescent-shaped fortress made from stacked lava rocks. The curved wall was crumbling, with crusty orange lichen growing in the crevices and bright green geckos sunning themselves on top. The ground was littered with shark teeth, razor sharp and bleached by the scorching tropical sun.

I was disappointed. I’d hoped to find a great temple with cryptic markings or intricate carvings. What lay before us was nothing more than a pile of weather-beaten rocks.

“Well, this is a waste of time,” said Nahoā. He picked up a stone and hurled it at the remains of the fortress. From beneath the broken wall, a gathering of centipedes scrambled to escape the sunlight.

An icy wind went through me. It wasn’t like a tropical breeze that cools your sweaty cheek. No, it pierced my flesh like I was no more solid than a palm frond. Disturbing the centipedes was a bad omen—they were minions of the shadows.

“Did you feel that?” I asked.

Nahoā stood frozen, the hair on his arms standing on end.

He swallowed. “Feel what?”

“I don’t think we should be here,” I said, motioning for us to leave. For once, I hoped he’d agree with me.

“Do you want me to hold your hand, little brother? We’ll just have a look around, that’s all.”

Nahoā walked over to where he’d thrown the rock and knelt to examine the rubble. He picked through and uncovered a wooden tiki head. The carving was badly weathered, its left ear missing. Its mouth snarled, and its eyes glared with menace.

I looked at my brother’s face. He was in a trance, his head tilted down and his

eyes looking up. They were cold and lifeless.

“Nahoa,” I screamed. “Stop playing around. That’s not funny!”

But he just stood there. I yelled again, “Nahoa! We shouldn’t be here. Let’s go!”

He blinked, but otherwise remained perfectly still.

As I stepped toward him, Nahoa pulled his knife and backed me toward the rushing river.

“It’s you that doesn’t belong here, little brother,” he said in a hushed tone.

Then he charged at me like a wild boar, knocking me into the water. I stood up, knee- deep in the fast-moving river, and dug my feet into the rocky bottom, bracing myself so the current didn’t pull me downstream. Nahoa leapt again and landed on top of me, sending us both tumbling into the whitewater.

Since we were old enough to walk, Nahoa and I had been schooled by the masters in *lua*⁴—wrestling, hand-to-hand combat, and the use of our tribe’s most savage battle weapons. From years as sparring partners, I knew all his offensive moves and counter attacks as though they were my own. But as we raced downstream, bouncing off the rocks and plummeting down the rapids, I felt as though I was fighting a stranger. And I was fighting for my life.

Up ahead, jagged rocks rose above the waterline. I flipped onto my back with my feet below me, struggling against Nahoa’s hands wrapped around my throat. I kicked free of him, but that only quickened my pace down the rapids. I slammed into a boulder, my feet bracing my impact. I was exhausted, but knew I had to get out of the water before I reached the falls. I managed to clamber partway up a slippery rock, then gathered the strength to hoist myself completely from the rushing current. Upstream, I saw Nahoa dangling from a tree branch, the rapids churning below him.

My footing slipped and in an instant I was back in the river. The turbulence engulfed me, pulling me into the foaming whitewater. Then I was weightless, freefalling.

⁴Anicent Hawaiian school of martial arts