



## **Bloody Fingers: Book of Prologues**

### **Chapter 5- Ka'ia**

**D&D based novel by R Jon Matrim from the Echoing Worlds series.**

**Bloody Fingers Trilogy book #1: Book of Prologues**

**Chapter Five: Ka'ia the Anguished**

**Location: Western Cays of Laramidia**

**Year: 0**

The woman, Ka'ia the Anguished, was tiny by traditional Orcish standards. Small and thin, she could easily be mistaken for a child. She crouched low to the ground and hissed at the brutish warrior looming over her. He moved towards her slowly, a deep growl rumbling in his chest and throat. His huge hands were down near his hips. The thick fingers open and ready to grasp his quicker opponent. His massive chest and shoulders were covered in tattoos and scars, ritualized trophies of the many battles he had won. Orcs normally charged quickly, overpowering their foes with brute strength and ferocity- but this huge fighter was advancing very carefully.

Ka'ia stayed low, moving on all fours. Her sinewy body stretched and moved easily. Her weight was evenly distributed so she could move in any direction without hesitation, lifting any hand or foot from the ground without slowing or drastically shifting her stance. This crouched style of martial combat was unique to this clan, developed by females to take leverage away from a larger and more powerful opponent. The low center of gravity created a stable and powerful base for leg attacks and grapples and made it difficult for an enemy to land strikes with their full power. She skittered in quick bursts, pushing forward and then sliding back at an angle opposite the male's movements- continuously taking away power and leverage from his stance while generating momentum to increase the power and reach of her own low kicks.

Her foot smashed into his lead ankle once again, kicking him as he tried to step forward. The powerful blow landing at the precise moment his foot touched the ground, before his weight could shift properly. He stumbled slightly once more, both his ankles showing some swelling from her repeated attacks. He huffed loudly in frustration, spit falling from his tusks. Ka'ia smiled and shifted to her left- forcing him to step forward in that direction with the same foot she had just punished. Another well-timed kick earned another grunt from him. He would have to try

something soon, before she hobbled him too much to stay on his feet. To this point, he had only landed two glancing kicks that did very little damage to her. He was on the verge of losing, and it made him furious, and she hoped it also made him reckless.

With a roar, he leaped towards her. Leaving his fighting stance to try and grab her was a lethal mistake. His best chance was to land a blow powerful enough to incapacitate the tiny woman, and by grappling her on the ground- that became almost impossible. Ka'ia moved impossibly fast- falling backward and slightly to the side to keep his full weight from taking her breath. Her legs wrapped around his massive thigh, her feet locking together. Her body pressed tightly against his side with her head tucked in near his armpit. Her arms were close to her body, both hands grasping his elbow and pulling it into her tucked position. By placing herself tightly against him, she took away all of his striking power. He tried to pull her away with his free arm, but she was already moving up his body- her legs shifting from his thigh to surround his waist. She was now almost entirely on the side of his body, his weight no longer having any impact on her. He roared again, trying to push himself back up from the ground but she still controlled his elbow so all he could do was rock his body towards her by pushing up with his one free arm. She shifted further, one leg stretching up to wrap around his now extended free arm. He reacted by pushing his shoulder forward to counter, but Ka'ia shifted again and moved forward with him- the momentum sliding her onto his wide back. She then flexed with the strength of her entire body, the combined muscles of her leg and core just enough to stretch his arm back at an angle- effectively trapping that arm as well. At the same time, she pulled his other elbow into the crook of her neck, squeezing with her head and shoulder. The extra leverage allowed her to free one hand from his elbow, while still holding his arm trapped against her upper body.

The large orc roared again, realizing that both his arms were now essentially useless- hyper flexed and trapped by the female grappler. He tried rolling back and forth, but he could not dislodge her. The rocking movement just allowed her to cinch her holds even tighter. Finally, in desperation- the massive orc pulled his legs up under him and roared while lifting his upper body until he was kneeling. And with that final roar- the dangerous viper struck him repeatedly. His rage held him upright for a few extra seconds, but her flurry of blows ended the contest. Her free arm moved up and down as her elbow crashed repeatedly into his temple. As his body loosened- it allowed her to curve and flex her entire body into the final blow. One critical hit, and the huge male was pummeled into unconsciousness.

Ka'ia disentangled herself from the male's limp body, one hand reaching down to his neck to feel for a heartbeat. He was still alive. Ka'ia then stood and placed a foot on the unconscious man's neck to signal her victory. The watching clan showed its approval by hooting and roaring, as well as pounding fists against shoulders and shields. There were also a few growls of frustration as a few men made good on lost wagers. Ka'ia reached back down and slapped the big man- hard. One of his eyes had already swollen shut. She slapped him again, and this time his good eye opened and regained focus.

"One of these times I will get your mark, Viper." He gave her a smile, his tusks smeared with

blood. He took her extended hand and let her help pull him back into a seated position. His eye closed and the smile changed to a grimace because his pain and dizziness increased as the rage dissolved.

"Yes, Ugot." She answered. "One day I will make a mistake. But that did not happen today." She smiled back at him and slapped him once more to keep him conscious. She looked around as the watchers disbursed to their tents. She was part of a small group, a raiding party consisting mostly of males. They had successfully tracked and pillaged a tribe of barbarians, killing them and plundering their holdings. The savages had fought surprisingly well, however, and almost half of her party had gone into the Black. Only eleven raiders remained alive, eight males and three females. They had all drank the Red greedily, honoring their fallen as well as many of the barbarians who had fought them. The dead had been arrayed. The living were all tired and sore, most were injured, and full bellies always brought sleep- so they had stopped early to camp for the night.

"Let me know when you can make your mark." She instructed. Ugot snarled at her in reply, angered.

"I am not shaming you." Ka'ia answered back. "You are a powerful fighter. I want your mark to show clearly for my honor." Ugot met her gaze with his one open eye. He nodded and his face relaxed, the tension leaving him.

"It was smart to challenge me, now." She continued. "The raid may have weakened or injured me, and the full belly may have slowed me just enough to give you an advantage." She smiled at him, her lips pulling back to show all of her pointed teeth and the full length of her tusks. "It is good to know that you are far more than just muscle, Ugot."

"It... is... good..." She repeated slowly, reaching down with one hand to stroke his face lightly. She then slapped him again, just as hard as before.

Ugot's eye widened in surprise, and then he began to laugh. It was a snorting, grunting sound of pleasure. A sound, that while not exactly rare in Orcish society, was unusual enough in the current circumstances to draw the attention of the last few stragglers moving to their tents. Hev, one of the other females in the raid, huffed a few times to show her pleasure at the potential pairing before ducking into her own tent- pulling two large males inside with her.

Ka'ia walked over to sit beside the camp's fire. Ugot briefly entered his tent, coming back out with a small leather pouch. He sat beside her and opened the pouch to withdraw a stained needle carved from bone, and a small wooden mortar and pestle that was also stained black. Ka'ia unbuckled her strapped leather bodice and placed it carefully on the ground next to her, exposing deep bruises along her ribcage and across her back. It also showed her bare upper torso was an already crowded canvas of body art- a blend of warrior ink and artistic scrollwork. She turned slightly so the back of her shoulder was facing Ugot. He was already familiar with this space, as

there were three of his marks tattooed in a tight formation.

Ugot speared a burning coal from the fire with the needle, depositing the charcoal ember into the small wooden bowl. He then used the needle to pierce the inside of his arm, adding his own blood to the mortar and grinding the pestle to form a thick dark ink. He then dipped the needle into the ink and pushed it under the small woman's green skin. He did this time and time again. Ka'ia did not flinch, but she raised a hand to wave some of the smoke away from her face.

"Stay still." Ugot instructed.

"It never matters where I sit, the smoke always comes for me." She replied, still waving her hand.

Ugot chuckled. "The mist likes you as well." He nodded his head off to the side, where tendrils of fog were beginning to reach into the circle of firelight.

Ka'ia laughed quietly, putting her arm back down by her side. She closed her eyes and sat unmoving- soaking in the warmth of the fire. The larger orc stayed focused on his task, inserting the ink beneath the woman's skin. His mark was a large ink blot with 8 lines emerging from it. Everyone thought it was the image of the sun. He never corrected them. But he had chosen the spider as his mark when he was very young. He remembered being afraid of spiders when he was a tiny child. Making that shape his mark was his way of embracing and overcoming that fear. Ugot had completed the large blot and three of the lines when he had to pause. A cough shook him, and his one open eye was watering. The smoke had gotten much worse. Ka'ia opened her eyes and they stung from the smoke. She looked around and then rose to her feet in alarm. Ugot rose with her, confused.

"It's fire, not mist." Ka'ia motioned out into the darkness, drawing Ugot's eye. The flicker of light was now visible. A line of shimmering smoke danced just outside the grouping of tents. She turned slowly and her heartbeat raced as she saw the fire line encircling the entire campsite. By the time she had completed her rotation, the flames had grown to waist high, and the noose of fire was tightening.

"We are being attacked!" She snarled as she said it. Ugot took a deep breath, ready to hoot loudly in alarm and warn the others- but the sound did not escape his throat. A dark rope dropped over his head, immediately tightening as the large man was jerked from his feet and ripped away from her. Ka'ia saw the thorns embedded in the rope tear into his throat, cutting through his skin before he was pulled into the smoke. She felt frozen in place, her mind unable to do anything other than experience what was happening. Ugot was now gone. The tendrils of smoke quickly filled the gap where his body had been pulled. The flames were now taller than a man standing, the dry grass and muck igniting quickly. The heat pushing upward and sucking in air from outside the fire line made the noose tighten very quickly. Ka'ia was coughing, unable to catch her breath, as the fire ate most of the good air. In reflex, she crouched into a fighting stance, still staring at the space where Ugot's boots had disappeared. Dropping into this lower position did help her to

breathe. And as the coughing subsided, her mind was finally able to refocus. She could now hear shouts coming from the tents. The rest of the party was already aware of the fire.

A huge dark shadow moved just behind the fire line, dashing across her line of sight so quickly that the billowing smoke swirled as it tried to fill the space just vacated by the large figure. Ka'ia moved towards it in a crouch, her fingertips brushing the ground as she stepped towards the fire. The heat was intense, and the air was now rushing past her. She was not holding a weapon, but she did not hesitate any longer. Ka'ia herself was the weapon, and she wanted to hurt something. She heard roars and screams behind her, but they were from Orcish throats. The monster at the edge of the fire remained silent.

Ka'ia continued to push forward. Her hair was scorching now, and where her fingertips had touched the ground, they had blistered. The big shadow was approaching again, completing another circle. She was closer and could see it a little better. It was long and undulating, and very fast. A small dragon, perhaps? She realized she was coughing continuously, strings of mucous hanging from her lips and nose. She couldn't stop her noise. The monster stopped, and she could just make out the shape of a man riding the beast. The smoke swirled away from him for a moment and Ka'ia could see. It was a barbarian, riding one of those giant lizards they kept as pets. He was swinging a rope above his head, but he stopped as he looked at her and dropped his arm back to his side, coiling the rope again against his thigh. He turned to reach behind him and then threw something large and heavy in her direction. Ka'ia hissed violently as the great lizard began running again- resuming its circle. She watched the monster move back into the smoke, and a moan escaped her as she saw roped corpses being pulled behind it. There were four, dragging and tumbling, all ensnared by a rope around their neck. Ka'ia also saw two bloodied nooses that were empty. Those bodies had already been torn asunder. The fire continued to burn her.

She looked down at the object the barbarian had thrown in front of her. It was a heavy blanket. She stumbled forward and found it was hot, wet, and smelled of metal. She wrapped herself in the thick cloth soaked with blood, and it smothered the flames from her hair and her pants. Ka'ia limped forward again- moving away from the campsite. She was leaving her clan behind, but she could see where the fire ended, and she desperately wanted to get away from the pain and finally be able to breathe again. She stayed crouched and continued to push forward until she was free of the flames but still concealed by the heavy smoke. She fell prone into the grass and muck, completely covering herself with the heavy blanket. Her eyes closed, and as she lost consciousness, she escaped the nightmare.

\*\*\*

Ka'ia awakened to the smell of burned flesh, and the sound of gulls fighting. She uncovered herself from the now crusted blanket and stood. She had burns along her arms and on her hands, and her long hair was matted with filth. Her skin had been stained dark brown from the blood soaked blanket. Small wisps of smoke still rose from the ground around her, and bits of ash swirled around her legs with the wind. The entire area was charred black, and only rubble and

steaming corpses remained to show where her camp had been. The bodies were stacked into a mound. Another pile was near the first- this one containing only the disembodied heads of her friends. Ugot's one good eye was just an empty hole, staring at her but seeing nothing.

Ka'ia wailed and screamed her anguish. These deaths brought no honor. The treatment of the bodies told no story. Their Red had simply been drained into the ground. It had not quenched any thirst. It did not convey their power and their life to another. It was simply discarded as worthless. There was nothing here but fury, and shame, and the stench of the Black.

After a time, numbness covered her like a bloody blanket, smothering the despair and allowing her to breathe again. She had watched the gulls picking at the remains until the horror had dissipated, and she had picked through the burned campsite to recover anything that still had value. The fire had been very quick, so there were numerous blades and a few thick leather items that could be salvaged along with various buckles and some trinkets. Her leather bodice had been damaged, but she was able to secure it around her using a few other belts she found in better condition. She took the bodies and shaped them into a morbid mandala, a circular pattern along the ground. She put their feet together at the center like the hub of a wheel, with the torsos radiating outward like spokes. She placed their heads, weapons, and any trinkets she had found upon their chests. Other than a handful of coins and jewels she scavenged, Ka'ia kept only one item for herself. It was a Vael double-bladed Scimitar- a short wooden shaft with a curving blade at either end. Ugot's symbol, a circle and eight radiating lines, was carved into the wood handle. It was a weapon he had looted from the survivors of a shipwreck the tribe had found grouped near the shore. It was a company of elves, emaciated and weakened from exposure, but the woman who bore this weapon still managed to kill four orcs during the battle. Ugot had been mesmerized by her dance-like movements as she fought, and it had been his blade that finally took her life when her legs gave out and she stumbled. He had never had the dexterity to use the weapon effectively, but it was still his most prized possession, and he carried it on every raid.

Strapping the double-bladed scimitar to her back, Ka'ia walked outward in ever growing circles from the remnants of her friends. She was looking intently at the ground. The lizard's tracks were plentiful, although obscured in many places by drag marks. She finally located a clear track heading away from the massacre, and she followed it. The trail seemed to wander, curving back and forth as if there were no real destination- just a pointless journey. Once the tracks led into the rim of one of the mud bogs where a tangling vine waited but then veered sharply to avoid it.

She followed for most of the day and then lost the track where the meadow turned to swamp. She tried swimming through the water, but it burned her eyes and skin. Instead, she climbed into the branches of the sickly trees and slowly picked her way forward- trying to maintain a straight line by following the sun. She was forced into the water a few more times but managed to stay above the waterline for the most part. She was still working her way through as night fell, but her dark vision allowed her to keep moving. Night brought out the frogs. And the frogs brought out the snakes. She unstrapped the Vael, and its length protected her from the serpents, but her progress was slowed even further as she climbed using only one hand.

Finally, the stunted trees began to thin and Ka'ia was forced into the water more frequently. The brackish water was colder, and the salt stung the burns on her arms and face, but it was better than before. Ka'ia swam as much as she walked, but her rate of movement increased dramatically as she cleared the swamp. The sky to her right showed a strip of orange as the sun drew closer. This type of light was difficult for her eyes, and being in the water made it worse. The changing light rippling on the water tricked her eyes into switching back and forth from her dark sight. Chasing a devil while blind was foolish, so she found a sandbar that was just beneath the surface and she waited with most of her body out of the water. The air felt colder than it should. Or perhaps, her skin was hotter than it should be. The result was the same either way. She shivered as she waited.

The wind was always stronger as you neared the coastline. This morning, it was a constant icy push against her back as she watched in the direction of the blue. She knew the barbarian was out there, and he had proven himself to be a very dangerous monster. She was grateful for the cold, as it kept her vigilant at the start, but then her body began to shake violently, and she suddenly vomited without any warning. She sat as still as possible, her eyes tightly closed until the tremor lessened and the dizziness passed. It was risky to sit blindly, but she didn't really have a choice.

When she reopened her eyes, Ka'ia finally took the time to look at herself. There were some strips of wet, white skin that were hanging from her arms and hands. The exposed meat beneath was dark and slightly swollen. Her feet and her legs had been mostly protected by her boots and hide pants- but she could see more wet, blistered skin on her shoulders and chest. She started to unbuckle the belts that secured her bodice, but her skin had adhered to the edges of the tight leather, and it started to rip away from her body as the bodice loosened. She re-tightened the belts. She needed to start moving again. The longer she waited, the more the pain pulled her inside of herself.

She continued on, now trudging through the water more than swimming. The sun had risen enough that her vision cleared with the steady light, but she could not see any movement ahead of her that might indicate she was still on the barbarian's trail. She used the Vael to cut through a fish that got too close to her- and forced herself to eat its firm flesh as she walked. The saltiness made her thirsty, but the fish at least filled her belly. The water was shallow now, rarely reaching her knees. However, the tall grass gave plenty of cover so she moved with confidence. Once, she came upon a giant lizard hunting in the shallows- but it was not the barbarian's mount. It was much smaller than that beast. After circling her twice it decided she was too great a risk and it moved on looking for easier prey.

She then reached the sand dunes. Great piles of sand and broken shells that rose and fell like the waves themselves. The grass grew in patches here. Most of the ground was dominated by bunches of short palmettos and by tall palm trees that grew on the inland slopes of the dunes. She tied the Vael to her back again and then fell into a bear crawl, loping up and down the dunes on all fours- stopping at each peak to scan carefully ahead. She saw nothing except the dunes, the

wide beach, and then the unending expanse of blue. Nearing the edge of the dunes, she climbed a lonely tall palm. The sores on her hands, her arms, and her chest ripped open and bled again from the tree's roughness. When she reached the top, she squinted her eyes to scan up and down the beach- but again she found nothing more than vegetation and sea birds.

Ka'ia painfully lowered herself back down to the sand, the tree trunk now streaked red. She sat down with her back to the base of the tree. She placed her head into her hands. And she cried. It started first as just tears on her cheeks. Then her breath grew ragged, and the sobs became frantic- shaking her entire body. Ka'ia screamed. And she cried. And she screamed again, just trying to release the emotions. She cried until her abused body had no water left to make tears. She screamed out her pain and anger until her lips and her voice cracked. And then she slumped forward into the sand, her mind and body finally shutting down.

She awoke once more to find the sun high in the sky near its apex. Its heat had warmed the sand, and the wind had now changed direction, so it was coming from the water. Under the hot sun, Ka'ia was shivering. Her burns had formed dry scabs that had congealed with the sand. Her entire body hurt to move, as each movement stretched and cracked those scabs open. She vomited again, this time mostly a frothy yellow foam. She realized that infection had most likely started to eat at her body. She tried to laugh, her voice breaking as the croaking cackle barely left her throat. Turns out, the burns and the dirty swamp water had been more dangerous than the monsters she had been chasing.

Ka'ia forced herself to her feet and began walking down the beach- ignoring the pain and the blood. She hoped to find anything other than birds. There was no honor in dying from infection, so she kept stumbling along the sands. She needed to find something that would be large enough to kill her and give her spirit a death song that could be sung with pride, but all she found were more damned birds. She fell forward into the sand- rousing only when the bravest gulls started to peck at her flesh. Being killed by birds was not a song worth singing, so she forced herself back to her feet and stumbled forward again. The second time she fell, she was ready to surrender to the black. She opened her eyes to watch the birds tear at her flesh, but her vision focused instead on the sand. There were tracks!

Once more, Ka'ia forced her body to rise up. Her muscles were now twitching, spasms moving up and down her arms and legs. Her eyes were locked on two sets of tracks. One track was a huge lizard, its wide tail nearly sweeping the sand clean behind it as it walked so only an occasional pawprint remained. The other track was a man. He must have been ahead of the lizard, as the beast's meandering trail crossed and covered the man's prints in many places. She looked both ways down the beach but still saw nothing larger than birds. But she had a trail. She followed the tracks. She stumbled and fell a few more times, but now there was no doubt that she would rise up and continue forward.

She walked until the wind changed direction again. The sky had turned red, and the sun was very low over the land. The man's trail suddenly turned into the water and disappeared. Ka'ia went



forward and then came back, looking for the spot where he had reemerged. It seemed like the lizard had done the same thing, its large tracks moving back and forth along the shoreline. They were very deep in some places, as if the great beast was running or jumping. The tracks led to nowhere else. The lizard had also gone into the water.

Ka'ia hurried to a nearby palm, again climbing the tall tree to increase her vision. She saw them! The man was a small speck in the water, lifting with the waves as he moved away from the shore. The great lizard moved gracefully in the water, swimming easily. It would go up to the man, only to be chased away. It would retreat a bit and then circle the man several times before approaching him again. Ka'ia watched as they repeated the scene over and over.

Ka'ia hissed her frustration. The man must have slipped into madness, and his lizard was trying to recover him. Ka'ia knew he had moved too far into the water for her to reach him. There was no way she had the strength to follow, and even if she tried, he would sink below the waves long before she could get to him. She stayed in the tree, and she watched. The man sank beneath the water twice, but the lizard dove and brought him to the surface each time. The first time the man flailed at the beast, forcing it to release him. The second time the lizard rescued him, the barbarian hung limply in its teeth. The great lizard easily carried the man's weight, but it still struggled to keep him above the waves.

The lizard turned back towards the shore and Ka'ia felt her heart beat faster in response. The monster was being returned to her! She whispered a thank you to the Red, for giving her an opportunity to regain her honor. Even if the man had already gone to the black, Ka'ia expected the loyal animal would defend him. If she could not kill the man- killing the massive beast would have to suffice. She started to descend, but one final look to the sea locked her in place.

Ka'ia had forgotten that gods can be cruel, and the Red often punished those with no honor. As she watched, the great lizard turned again- this time swimming parallel to the beach and away from her position. It moved through the water quickly, not struggling as much with the man's body. Ka'ia could see one arm was still inside the beast's mouth, but the other arm was now clinging to its neck- which helped lift him above the water. The man lived!

Ka'ia watched as the lizard turned slightly again, heading back into the deeper waters. She looked past, and she saw the reason for the change. A large ship was moving down the coast, its sails reflecting the last bit of the day's light. She had been so focused on the lizard, she hadn't noticed the approaching ship! The giant lizard was swimming to intercept the vessel, and with the boat sailing parallel to the beach- the distance between them disappeared quickly.

Ka'ia glared in fury as her prey slowly disappeared in the failing light. They had gotten too far away for her dark vision to pierce through the descending black. She slid down the trunk quickly, ripping those wounds along her arms. She didn't feel any pain. She ran down the water's edge towards where she had last seen them, but her eyes could not make out anything other than the tops of the waves as they broke. She could hear some shouting, but the ocean's constant rumble

washed away the words. She knew the monster had reached that ship!

She collapsed onto her hands and knees, letting her head hang down between her arms. If the sailors took him onto the ship, the monster could cross the blue. If they rejected him, the lizard could possibly make its way back to shore. However, the likelihood that it would come ashore close enough for Ka'ia to see was almost zero.

She stared at the wet sand as she thought it through. If they returned to shore and she found the track again quickly enough, she might be able to overtake them on the dunes and send them both to the Black. The soft sand could slow the great beast if the man was unable to mount properly, and the Vael scimitar might just give her enough reach to kill the lizard. However, if they made it to the marsh and swamp, the lizard would have every advantage in that murky water even if she somehow found them. Her odds were not good in either scenario, but Ka'ia couldn't rest yet. She had to try!

She got to her feet and hurried down the beach- back in the direction she had come from. A moving ship could not stop on water without anchoring, so the ship's momentum would have carried it past her. She believed the lizard would take the shortest route to land, so any tracks should be this way. Ka'ia walked near the water's edge, where the sand was still heavy and compacted. She made good progress, her dark vision scanning the surf and the sand ahead of her.

She saw something in the water! There was a dark shape in the water where the waves broke. It looked big! She watched intently, trying to discern what it was in the darkness, and she gasped when the giant lizard broke the surface once more. It was struggling in the waves. There was no sign of the man.

Ka'ia was surprised she had already entered the water up to her knees. She paused, seemingly unsure what she was doing, and then she threw the Vael behind her onto the sand and kept going. The water reached her chest, the swells now lifting her just off her feet. The lizard had kept moving towards the shore so Ka'ia was getting close now. She could see a harpoon sticking out of the lizard. The weapon had struck the lizard about midway down its body and pushed through the animal at an angle. Another wave hit the lizard, lifting it from its feet and making it roll towards one side. She could see the moonlight flash on a hooked metal point that extended below the lizard's belly. The beast righted itself once more and lifted its head in her direction. A weak hiss was all it could push out, and she could see dark blood and froth fall from its open mouth. Its head dropped into the water again as another wave pushed it even closer to the shore. Ka'ia moved as quickly as her battered body allowed, getting herself behind the lizard and putting both hands against it to keep the retreating water from pulling it back under. Somehow, her footing stayed firm and helped keep them both in place. Then, another wave crashed against her back- pushing her and the lizard both into the shallows. It was enough. The beast was able to drag itself out of the water and onto the sand. Ka'ia followed.

The lizard collapsed, groaning as its weight pushed the point of the harpoon into the sand

beneath it. The other end of the spear rose above its back- a short, chewed rope trailing from that end. Ka'ia moved to the side of the beast, staying out of the range of both its tail and its bite. She could see its eye was focused on her and followed her movement. It tried sniffing the air, and it coughed weakly. Ka'ia crept forward very slowly, trying to stay balanced on the balls of her feet but they kept sinking into the wet sand. The lizard released a heavy and bubbling breath and did not inhale. Its eye closed. Ka'ia took two steps forward and reached her hand out towards the lizard. As she drew closer, its huge body twitched violently!

Ka'ia lurched and fell backwards, landing prone. The great beast twisted its body to bring its head towards the woman. Its sharp teeth snapped, clicking together with a hard sound and Ka'ia felt a mist of blood and spit as its bite just missed her. Her feet kicked and pushed, trying to create some distance, but the wet sand just gave beneath her frantic movements. Sitting up was all she could accomplish.

The lizard moaned in pain again. Its failed attack had wrenched its body against the harpoon. Ka'ia could see a heavy dark stain spread below the beast, too much blood for the waves to wash away instantly. The animal's eye was once again focused on her, and then its gaze moved to the Vael which was lying on the sand a few feet from its body. It looked back at the woman once more. A wet and heavy exhale seemed to release tension from the lizard's body, and it seemed to sink further into the sand.

Ka'ia slowly rose to her feet. Her teeth were bared, but into something between a grimace and a smile. New tears were on her cheeks. This incredible animal was breathing its last few breaths, and it had still almost bested her. Ka'ia looked at the great lizard in wonder, truly seeing its wild beauty. Then, suddenly slamming back to reality- her head swiveled and her eyes darted around her, looking both in the water and on the sand. She expected the barbarian to be standing there, swinging a noose in the air next to him. The monster that had mastered this magnificent beast to earn its love and respect must certainly still be alive. But Ka'ia saw nothing else in the darkness. The man was not there. The monster had escaped her. She struggled for a few seconds to catch her breath and overcome her panic.

She turned back to the great lizard and it was finally still. The Blue had washed the Red from its body, removing any dark stains from the sand and water that she could see. Ka'ia went over and picked up the Vael. She approached the beast again. This time, however, she carefully extended the bladed weapon instead of her hand. Its tip touched the animal's thick skin and then she pushed through it. There was no reaction. The great lizard had truly gone into the Black.

The woman's pain and exhaustion overtook her once more. She collapsed onto her knees beside the huge body of a dead lizard, leaning into its side. Gasping sobs shook her body. Her face lifted to the sky and she screamed. And then she continued to cry. She cried for her pain. She cried for her dead friends. She cried for this great beast. She cried for Ugot. And she cried for her failure, for allowing the monster to escape.

When her tears ended, Ka'ia rose to her feet. She used the Vael to cut into the lizard's corpse and removed its heart. She bit into the organ and swallowed. She left the blood on her lips as she sang a death song to the Red, honoring the animal and praying to her god to gift her a bit of its strength and courage. She would need them. Ka'ia knew where the ships sometimes anchored up the coast before crossing the Blue. It was where the Sea Witch collected and sold her slaves. It would take some time, but Ka'ia could walk there. She had a few gems she had collected from her murdered comrades. It might be enough to buy a place onto a ships crew. Somehow, Ka'ia was certain that the monster had gotten onto that ship she had seen. Somehow, she knew that it would take him across the Blue. So, she would have to make her way onto another ship and follow him. Ka'ia looked down at her burned and swollen hands. She ignored the pain and made her decision, clenching her hands into fists. The small woman was determined that her hunt was not yet over...

\*\*\*

Ka'ia stumbled along the beach. Walking until long after the sun rose over the water. Her wounds hurt worse than before, and the swelling had increased. She had finally removed her leather bodice. She did so very slowly, but the blistered skin on her shoulders still bled. She had washed her wounds with salt water, shaking from the pain but still forcing herself to clean the burns. By the time she had finished, her hands and fingers had swollen so she wasn't able to strap the bodice. Instead, she placed it over her head, trying to create some shade for her face and shoulders.

She stopped to rest in the shade of a large growth of Sea Grapes, eating the salty and crunchy fruit from the tree. Also growing in the shade beneath the trees, she found a huge patch of aloe. Her people called it the Bitter Burn plant, mostly for its taste but also because it contained a sticky balm for burns and other small wounds. Opening the plant was difficult with her damaged hands, but she used broken shells she found in the sand to slice open the thick green skin- exposing the clear gel inside. She ate some, licking at the plant. The bitter taste seemed to help her focus, and the moisture helped further reduce her thirst. She couldn't consume too much, however. That would cause stomach cramps and diarrhea, which could be extremely dangerous in her weakened condition. She opened many of the fleshy spear-like leaves- smearing the cooling gel over her wounds. She slept for a time and then went down to the water to wash the sand from her burns once again. She treated the wounds with the aloe, and then she cut and packed as much of the purple fruit and the aloe leaves as she could easily carry and resumed her walk.

Ka'ia continued to walk north along the beach for several days- moving primarily at night and in the early morning, while resting in the afternoon heat until the darkness returned. She foraged for food as she walked, as the night travel made hunting virtually impossible. Luckily, Sea Grapes were plentiful in the region, and she was also able to use her bodice as a screen to catch bait fish in the surf. She wrapped the small minnows inside leaves and cooked them over small fires she made in the sand. It wasn't much, but it was enough to sustain her. As darkness fell and the winds shifted, rain would fall along the beach for a short time most nights- so while fresh water

was scarce, Ka'ia was able to collect some to drink. The hardest issue for her to overcome was simply boredom. Without the company of a raiding party- a full night of walking provided no real stimulation. She began to feel numb physically, mentally, and emotionally- and as time passed the wounds on her arms and shoulders were starting to heal but her swollen hands and fingers worsened. The flesh was red and puffy and there was a sticky whitish discharge from her deepest burns. She was also suffering from severe headaches, and her body felt hot and flushed even at night. Bathing in the surf helped with that, but the salt still burned her wounds and made contact with the water more and more uncomfortable as the infection worsened.

On the fourth day, she slept from early afternoon through the entire night- only waking when the late morning sun beat down on her. She crawled to the water, vomiting yellow foam twice into the sand before almost collapsing at the edge of the surf. The cold water roused her enough to plunge her hands into the salt water. She barely noticed the sting this time. Her head felt heavy, wobbling on her neck as she struggled to stay up on her knees. She crawled back towards the dunes where there was shade under the large round leaves of the Sea Grape trees. She forced herself to chew a handful of the grapes but vomited them back up almost immediately.

The day prior she had foraged some Planta. This was one of the most common and also most useful plants in existence- a true gift from the Green. It grew close to the ground, its broad leaves growing from a central point to form a rosette. The leaves were easily identifiable by the parallel veins that ran from the stem to the tip. This plant could be eaten, could be chewed to form a poultice, could be dried as tea, and could also be cultivated for its fibrous veins which can be dried and twisted to form string.

Ka'ia chewed some Planta leaves while she opened the last of the aloe she had found. It was bitter, but Planta did help to soothe her throat and also helped settle her stomach. She swallowed the first few leaves she chewed, but then she spit some chewed Planta into the opened aloe, mixing the green mash with the aloe gel. She then pressed that poultice into the wounds on her hands. The fibrous mixture felt cool and slick on her burning hands, a small comfort against the creeping dread that the crimson lines of infection inspired. They weren't a bright, surface red, but rather a deep, simmering color that seemed to emanate from beneath the layers of her green skin, weaving like fiery threads around the stark black of her tattoos. Where a crimson vein crossed the ink, it seemed momentarily swallowed, only to reappear on the other side, a relentless advance up her arms. Around the most vivid of these red pathways, the green of her skin seemed to sicken, taking on a bruised yellow undertone, a visual testament to the unseen battle raging within.

She knew the poultice would not be enough, but she still had to try. If she stopped fighting against the Black, she would lose her honor. The medicinal mash should help to draw out some of the infection, but those red lines were a clear indication that the poison had already worked its way deep into her body. If Ka'ia had returned to her clan, the tribe's witch and spirit walker could have used her magic to burn all of the infection away. But Ka'ia had not done so, for she knew her mother would never have allowed her to go to the Sea Witch. Ka'ia had never been able to keep a

secret from her mother except by avoiding her altogether. So that had been her decision. That had been her mistake. The rot in her hands and arms would kill her once it reached her heart. If she tried for home now, she would likely die before reaching her family. All she could do now was to try and continue on. To keep fighting against the Black for as long as she was able.

Ka'ia gathered her belongings and forced herself to her feet, using the stunted tree for support. Standing, she wavered in place, taking deep breaths and trying to focus her eyes on a fixed point in front of her. When she felt somewhat in control of her body, she began walking once more. As she stumbled along, she realized that her feet were dragging in the sand leaving short furrows as evidence of each step. She tried lifting her feet higher, but her legs were sluggish and heavy. She trudged forward.

Her sense of time blurred, and she often found herself walking with her eyes closed and her head tilted downward. Her willpower kept her legs moving, and if she veered towards the water the cold waves against her legs would awaken her from her stupor and give her a moment's clarity to reestablish her direction. Her throat was tight and sore. Her lips were cracked and she could taste the blood. Her head throbbed in time with her heartbeat and her eyes and cheeks felt hot. But she was shivering, her exposed skin like gooseflesh- tingling as the winds brushed across it. She kept walking.

Ka'ia kept walking...

She was still stumbling forward as her eyes closed again...

Ka'ia gasped as the cold water splashed across her face, choking her as it rushed into her mouth- the salt tasting much like the blood. She lifted her head, realizing she had fallen at the edge of the water and that the waves were now reaching her. She no longer had her bags. She looked back the way she had come but saw nothing other than her meandering tracks. As she turned her body, she felt a blade slice across the back of her calf. The pain was there, but she felt somewhat numb to it. Her mind pushed through the haze for a moment, and she realized the double-bladed scimitar was still strapped to her back. Lifting her upper body to escape the water had pushed the blade into her lower leg and a gash the length of her hand was now bleeding heavily.

Ka'ia gently pushed her chest and face back down into the wet sand and disengaged the loops holding the Vael in place across her back. She lifted up just enough to cross an arm beneath her just as the next wave crashed down beside her- pushing salt and sand up her nose. She grasped the wooden shaft, and slid the weapon down past her shoulder so that it lay in the sand beside her. She released it and quickly pushed herself up onto her hands and knees, her nose and throat burning with the salt water. The discomfort focused her mind again and she put her hand back on the staff, using it to help push herself to her feet. Ka'ia stumbled up through the soft sand to get away from the water and took another look around, hoping to find some of the things she was missing, either on the beach or at the edge of the water. There was nothing to be found.

Another two steps and she turned back to face the ocean. Tears were streaming down her face. She honestly did not know if that was because of the salt stinging her eyes, or just the desperation of her situation. She tried to release one of the belts holding her bodice in place, but her swollen and numb fingers could not work the buckle. With no other ideas, Ka'ia scooped up a handful of sand and pressed that against the gash on her leg- hoping it would be enough to stop the bleeding. She gasped and tried to catch her breath, but her breathing was far too fast and shallow. Her head flopped backward on her neck, and then snapped forward again as vertigo spun her world in tight circles. Her eyes fluttered once more as the Orc warrior heard shouts, but the Dark overtook her before she could react to the sound. Hands grabbed her arms and legs- but Ka'ia was still alone in her own mind. She was not even aware that she had been found...