

# *1. the darkening*

POV: KEILIKI

MOIST FROM A FEVERED SWEAT, KEILIKI AWAKENED, her bare back protesting against a chilled stone floor. Startled, she gasped for breath but found her chest frozen, nearly motionless and rebellious against her aching need to inhale. Nearing a panic, she forced her eyes open wide, gazed uselessly into an empty void that snubbed her vision.

Instincts to get up and run proved useless. she couldn't move. The only unforced movement she could register was her heart thumping painfully inside her chest. In unified mutiny, her muscles refused movement and left her laying statuesque and naked, a corpse waiting for a mortician.

At first, Keiliki thought her immobility a nightmare, one of those moments when you struggle to awaken and arise, but your body stubbornly resists your call. However, after a few moments, she reconciled herself to the fact that she wouldn't be able to move even if she exerted every reserve of willpower to do so. She was imprisoned within her own body.

Resignation to physical immobility failed to arrest Keiliki's mental resolve. She pierced through a smothering smog of consciousness, searched for some understanding of her situation and then, regretted it.

As greater awareness surfaced, Keiliki recognized the subtle, yet distinct sound of bodies slithering across the stone floor toward her legs. A long ignored primeval fear of serpents welled, forcefully releasing a heaving gasp, and a newly invigorated mind. For what seemed like a boundless epoch, she awaited the onslaught. But as suffering tames time, only a handful of seconds passed before the first serpentine head bumped against the bottom of her right foot, flicked its tongue and slowly brushed its long body along her leg like an attention-starved kitten.

One viper would have terrified Keiliki. She sensed many dozens, perhaps hundreds. Another viper followed a similar cascading path over her leg and then another and another until she felt them meandering all over her body, zigzagging in random patterns until she nearly prayed they would end their movements and rest upon her warm skin, a refreshing oasis for reptilian bodies released into a chilled room.

They didn't stop.

She could feel it now. Her legs and abdomen had been oiled. Soon, she realized her entire body had been saturated with some slippery oil that smelled loathsome to her awakening nostrils. Within a few short moments, she intimately felt each snake dejectedly wriggling off of her body, slipping onto the ground and then thrusting itself back upon her unwelcoming, sweaty flesh. Keiliki perceived every slip, received every reptilian failing as an intrusion upon her personal space, a persistent and unforgivable violation. Revulsion coursed through her veins as she continually failed at renewed efforts to move her rigid, motionless body.

Soon enough, something else competed for her attention. The briefing. This was only the first stage of the *darkening*, an elaborate ritual cursing. Her small, frail body had been thoroughly rubbed down with oil perfumed by the scent of female vipers. The male snakes now draping her body like tangled dreadlocks initially sought not only the warmth of her feverish skin, they sought the enticing scent clinging to her body and would actively seek out the female viper until a frenzy of competitive fighting would ensue. Eventually, one would miss its target and bite Keiliki by accident. Then, the smell of human blood would incite further biting into her vulnerable flesh. She couldn't remember how her body would respond to their venom, how it may have been magically enhanced.

Her heart pounded harder, racing in fear while her body remained dormant, frozen to the stone flooring like a slab of raw meat waiting to be cooked. Now she remembered why: she'd been drugged. The effects were slowly wearing off, but enough residue remained in her system to maintain

her tacit compliance until it would be too late for her to prevent the next stage of the *darkening*.

One snake delicately draped across Keiliki's shoulders began vying for a more southern position where her body was warmer. Its tail tapped her ear as it forced itself through the sickening forest of scales decorating her body. Like the other snakes slithering along her oily skin, the serpent's body felt unnaturally slimy. If there existed a more revolting sensation, she couldn't imagine what it might be. Without the influence of whatever potion she'd been drugged with, she would have expected to involuntarily heave from disgust and horror.

With little traction, snakes continually tumbled off her body and then wound themselves back into a position close to where they'd been, but this latest effort was different. One hiss and then another pierced the relative silence. One strike ensued, a second followed. A tail swatted Keiliki's cheek, leaving a feint sting, but this was the least of her worries.

As twisting and coiling continued, Keiliki craved movement - any movement, any bodily control whatever. In her mind, she willed herself to move, to pitch her body upward, to twist and turn, to scream at the top of her lungs, and to viciously toss the vipers somewhere far away. In reality, she did nothing more than grunt quietly and move so slightly that none of her visitors took any notice whatsoever. They were too busy posturing for deadly dominance.

Having failed to control her body, Keiliki diverted her prodigious mental resolve to controlling her emotions. She could either resign herself to her fate or she could suffer inexpressibly as the ritual continued. She'd probably die one way or the other. The best she could do was prepare herself so it wouldn't seem as horrible as it might otherwise be. The moment she fully resolved herself to govern her emotions, two fangs pounded through her skin and deep into her collarbone. For a moment, the serpent miserably struggled to wrangle itself from her bone, its fang briefly locked in place. Keiliki instinctively opened her mouth to cry out but nothing more than a whispered yelp escaped her lips before the viper pulled itself free.

The immediate pain would have been enough to make her body involuntarily coil but for its persistent refusal to meaningfully move. Then, as if freed by renewed mental resolve, Keiliki's head lurched slightly forward before pounding back against the stone flooring on its rebound. As other strikes followed, the scent of blood invited a more invigorated frenzy until she felt two, then three, and then four separate bites peppering her body with uninvited piercings.

Her eyelids began to droop, her vision blurred, her tongue inflamed, her breathing constricted, and her muscles tensed. If Keiliki's movement had been subdued before, she now felt like a stiffened sheet of metal slowly tumbling into a great abyss. As she neared unconsciousness, Keiliki remembered another portion of her briefing and horridly considered that vipers might not be so bad after all.

Rudely reminded that snakes were only the preliminary course of the arcane ritual, more memories surfaced. In response to the oiled scent on her body, these male vipers were releasing their own secretions to attract the ever elusive female. These secretions would act as the lure for the next round of horrors when her abductors would once again refuse to spare her the luxury of losing consciousness, not even during the most terrifying portion of her ordeal. As her skin's surface slogged into smothering numbness, her mind would acutely awaken for round two. Passingly, she wished for death. That seemed more merciful, desirable. Unable to remember what came after the next stage, Keiliki felt reasonably certain death wouldn't follow. Something more awaited her.

She released an awkward moan as a piercing light dramatically lit the room. Reflexively, Keiliki winced, forced her eyes to stay closed as they slowly adjusted. Finally able to precisely control this small window of her body, Keiliki rejoiced over the trivial accomplishment, but then, strong gusts of frigid winds pushed their way through the room and sent her body into chills, even under the blanket of snakes. Feverish shivers grew despite a strong heat source approaching the soles of her feet. She welcomed that single

rejuvenating sensation amidst the horrors of this arcane ritual, trained her mind toward gratitude for this small blessing.

Her satisfaction soon evaporated. One by one, the vipers meandered toward the heat source, leaving her skin fully exposed to the chilling gusts of air until her otherwise still body trembled uncontrollably.

Pupils adjusted, Keiliki opened her eyes, waited. The gusts of wind ceased and the lighting dimmed even as the heat source steadily increased to an uncomfortable level. As her body broke out into a sweat, Keiliki began to worry her feet would blister – the heat source somehow felt very near to the soles of her feet. Her skin was immune to any feeling but her muscles sensed the uncomfortable, pervading warmth. It was an odd feeling, one that Keiliki was entirely unfamiliar with, but she grew intuitively certain that her feet would be heavily blistered before this ordeal ended. As the heat intensified, she considered the skin on her legs might melt. Perhaps she would feel those pains more acutely in the next stage of the *darkening*. She hated how she didn't know.

What she did know was she could discern the magically enhanced drugs coursing through every system in her body, manipulating it in unnatural ways to enhance her suffering and to keep her alive, preserving her from death for some unholy purpose she couldn't fathom. Several moments passed in silence, interrupted only by the incessant stench of something, perhaps the vestiges of viper perfumes, perhaps her melting flesh.

Thoughts of home suddenly invaded Keiliki's otherwise dreary consciousness. Faint memories surfaced, flashed through her mind like small leaves in a gale of wind. She remembered a young woman, a girl, a daughter? Her memory, ever-murky, refused to answer. Other distant memories faintly twinkled, hinted at disturbing connections. She ignited a blue powder that produced a sweet-smelling, blue smoke and a flash of intense pain that tore through her inner thigh. The memory passed as other macabre scenes pressed closer.

Blue smoke arose from paintbrushes, ruins changed forms, taunted Keiliki, morphed into demonic creatures from childhood stories. Cecaelia

luring unaware sailors into the sea like western sirens, only her ultimate intention delved deeper than mere drowning. Akkorokaimui, more fierce and terrible than Keiliki had ever imagined, and olgoi – far from a silly beast she'd always considered implausible, tore through countrysides and modern cities alike, crashing in and out of the earth with surreal ease. Other beasts of various forms surfed through Keiliki's mind, taunted her, needled her sanity.

A loud clicking sound distracted her. Confused, Keiliki waxed uncertain as to whether the sound was a memory or reality. A strange feeling in her right foot left her wondering whether or not the soles of her feet were already melted away. The terrifying thought left her yearning to scream. Already, she was bridging that mental breaking point where everyone fears to trod the moment it greets them. But after an arduous passage of time, Keiliki tapped deep reservoirs of inner strength, took solace that she now recognized the absence of the biting heat, and found peace with the lingering discomfort of sweltering from its presence. Nevertheless, the wafting stench of her own sweat intermingled with the more revolting smells of the now distant vipers mauled her senses. Involuntarily, she again wondered whether or not part of that nasty smell was her own baked flesh, but resolving herself to refuse to engage with such thoughts, she cast it far from her mind, disallowed it reentry.

Keiliki realized she was nearly hyperventilating, managed to force deep, methodical, held breaths until she regained better control. She rejoiced at this slight, and yet monumental success in controlling her body.

Following a brief respite of self-induced calmness, Keiliki passingly hoped that her mind had been playing tricks on her, that this was nothing more than a bad dream, and that she would awaken in a moment. But things were about to worsen and somehow, her primeval instincts informed her to writhe in fear: some nasty surprise lurked around the corner. Habitual optimism revolted against the forebodings, but the conflict was short-lived.

Thousands, perhaps millions of insects buzzed and made clicking sounds against the flooring as they approached Keiliki. Sensing she could move a little, she breathed deeply and opened her mouth wide to let loose a

primordial scream, but no sound escaped. Instead, she choked, gasped for air. Undaunted, she twitched a fingertip, imagined moving her right arm at the elbow. Soon, she lost herself in efforts to regain the slightest mastery over her body and after finding trivial success, she remembered further details from her briefing.

Clicking sounds grew louder, more threatening. Inwardly, Keiliki panicked as her body mocked her with renewed immobility.

*No!* she violently yelled within the silence of her mind.

Insects drew nearer and began crawling onto her flesh. At first, she barely felt them. That did little to assuage her intuitive revulsion over their violating her personal space.

*No!* she protested a second time. Silence governed her voice, but Keiliki felt as if she should have been heard for miles around. Soon - and unnervingly, she discerned the subtle weight of millions of bodies crawling over her exposed flesh. Uncomfortable twitching seized her attention. Perhaps it was the side effects of the venom, or the drug, she couldn't be certain - that was, until a memory surfaced. Compulsively paranoid bugs with violent instincts were stinging her flesh. Carnivorous, they were busily nibbling, munching. Keiliki felt no physical sensation beyond the twitching but the sounds mercilessly tore at her psyche. Normally well composed, she brimmed with panic and senseless denials about what she was experiencing.

*Firelings.*

Fiendish insects. Some said fireling bites felt like the lick of a hot flame. Surprisingly painful, victims were known to compulsively break out into a lengthy recounting about their experience much like women discussing childbirth. By the end of the *darkening*, she'd have prodigious experience with this. She wouldn't be stung a few times like most victims. She'd suffer thousands of bites and the feeling would eventually resurface. Keiliki wanted to scream. This time, it came out.

As haunting echoes screamed back at her, Keiliki regained control over her muscles with surprising rapidity. And although she passingly remembered something about this from her briefing, Keiliki ignored her internal warning

to govern her reactionary response and began smashing dozens of firelings and swatting others into the air. As quickly as some of the firelings died, others simply flew to more hospitable areas of her body and began munching the flesh on the edges of her backside. These too would die. Senselessly and frantically rolling and squirming her body in strange contortions, Keiliki methodically killed hundreds of insects while thousands more buzzed around her, full of acrid energy and responsive stings. At least they didn't bite her face, she noticed, clinging to the only positive thought she could muster.

A strong spray of liquid across her face forced her to close her eyes. Then, as the cool water distracted her attention, someone threw a bag over her head and cinched it shut, tightly enough to be uncomfortable but not tightly enough to constrict her breathing. She lashed out at the intruder but her fists found nothing. She felt a fireling on her ear and smashed it heard. She recoiled at the sound it made, the first time she had been consciously aware of an exoskeleton crushing beneath her blows. Another fierce and violent spray of liquid splattered all over her body, sending Keiliki into many minutes of screaming as she writhed in pain. She remembered this as well. The liquid was made of some base liquid to counteract the acid released by firelings when they bit. Soon, it changed into a thick, gritty gel. Keiliki instinctively began wiping the liquid off of her body, quickly regretted that impulse. It soothed some areas of her skin as it neutralized the acid but raw nerves were quickly reviving now and the stinging sensations magnified by gritty textures were maddening. Nearly fainting from the pain every several seconds, Keiliki mindlessly rubbed the liquid all over her body, grinding her teeth as the gritty gel castigated overly sensitive skin. Each motion of her hands sent her heart rejoicing for the soothing sensation the liquid brought while cursing the sandy texture. She hopelessly wished she would pass out, but a new, vivid alertness plagued her. She wouldn't sleep for many hours.

Screams morphed into moans. Keiliki moaned not only from pain, but from denial. The room was pitch black again. She didn't remember when that happened, told herself nothing had happened. This was nothing more than a dream right? A horrific nightmare? An insane delusion caused by some

psychotic drug? A hallucination originating from the venom? Keiliki hungered for sleep, hungered for a numb mind.

Eventually, she began to sleep but flashes of pain intermittently awakened her until hours later, some vestige of mercy enveloped Keiliki. She tumbled into a deep and luxurious slumber from which she hoped never to awaken.