

Chapter 1

The Lord of the Underworld stood overlooking the crystalline waters of the South Pacific Ocean from the first-floor patio of his estate. The long strands of his dark hair whipped around his face in the wind, and the sun beat down on his skin, pushing the golden-brown into an even bronze. The markings etched onto his body warmed, the ink stretching from his neck down to his fingertips and along his thighs in various lines, shapes, and objects.

For the last several weeks, Mataio had felt something stirring among the islands. He'd overheard rumors of a plan to challenge him and force the instability of the Underworld. But, as he'd said it would be since childhood, he was the strongest warrior of the Tauati lineage.

He felt zero fear.

So let them come.

However, there was also something else he felt, hot and curling and feminine. Familiar. And it was closer now than it had ever been.

"Mataio, Fai's here."

His best friend was bent in a half-bow behind him, Sefa's dark hair hanging in a mass of loose curls about his face.

He and Sefa were born within the same hour, on the same night. Sefa's mother lived only long enough to give her son his name. Two days later, his

very own mother, the mother of the island nations which made up Oceania, was slain while protecting his infant body from discovery.

He and Sefa had formed a kindred bond from their shared tragedies and circumstances, even before they learned to walk. Now, not even blood could make them any closer.

“I should make you really start bowing when I enter a room,” he warned.