

Prologue: House Masudo

“Di Masudo uman a laik staam, yu no siel dat de saalt ef yu no waahn deth.

-Bezalel “Bez” Masudo

Decades earlier...

Bez tried to calm himself, which wasn't easy given the circumstances. He swallowed, mouth feeling dry, as her hand reached down to pick up one of the perfume jars. He'd first met her last night, when he and his younger friend Absai had gone to a local tavern, and like an idiot he'd flirted with and bedded her before knowing who she was. Now this was his reward, a glorious fate, if it wasn't such a terrible joke.

Bez had heard the Masudo women were crazy, but he'd never expected one to be at a tavern drinking and dancing. He sighed, watching her lift the clear glass jar off of his cart, and looked up meeting her eyes. Tiare Masudo, sister to Ni'moku's matriarch, regarded him evenly. Her deep brown eyes said everything, she could feel the difference in weight.

Her gaze held him like a vice, he may as well have been chained before her like a slave, which he still might be. He couldn't hope but remember the previous evening, the dancing, the alcohol, and her lithe muscular body against his. The House Masudo tattoo on her side seemed to glow in the bright sunlight. He had somehow missed it last night, and now he was paying for that mistake. To think he had been happy at first, when the woman from last night had appeared at the docks, watching him. He forced himself to look away from her tattooed body and back into her eyes. She smiled, noting where his eyes had been, while opening the perfume bottle and pouring its contents on the



ground. The sensuous smell of musk, lily, and vanilla came to his nose as the blue sapphires hit the sandy gravel by his boots.

Absai sighed audibly next to him and looked at Bez sideways as she finally spoke to them both. "Dat a very interestin perfume." Her eyes shifted between them both and their full cart of bottles. She smiled, her voice sounding amused of all things, as she waved to the nearby dock guard. "Dem deh unda arrest. Tek dem tings an put dem inna a cell, mi ago bi kweschan dem miself."

Both he and Absai put their hands up as the guards came to them, there was no reason to fight now, sometimes fate was an inevitable thing. A short time later they were both shoved into a small cell at the dock master's station. Absai looked at him as they both got up, and spat to the side, rightfully disgruntled. "Dis a yuh fault. Shi wudn bada wi ef yu neva fuck ar laas nait. Eediat."

Bez had to laugh, the situation didn't call for much else, because his friend was right. "Yu rait mi fren, mi sari." He looked up as they heard the station's door open again. "If mi hab a chance fi tek di blame mi will, maybe shi will let yuh go, yuh a few years younger dan mi."

Then two guards came in just before Tiare herself, the guards opened the cell without a word and dragged Bez into an adjoining room. There they sat him in a chair and strapped him down before leaving. He looked up as Tiare entered the room, shutting the door behind her. He tried to look confident as she strode to him and lifted his chin with her hand to make eye contact. "Dis a one unexpected pleaja." Her eyes held a smoky heat as she smiled. "Yuh good at fucking, mi did hab a gud taim laas nait, bot nuh tink dat earns yuh leniency."

He tried to smile back. "Mi no tink dat, mi did jus a look fi mek some marks pan di side."



She smiled very sweetly, a good indicator that he was in trouble, before sliding her hand between his legs. "Yuh like avoid mi family's tax an call it side money yuh like?"

Her eyes held his again and her hand too, he could feel himself responding to that even though he was very nervous. She was not just dangerous but fatal, beautiful, and powerful. "Maybe yuh tax too high?" She tightened her grip, noting his physical response, and arched her eyebrow at him. Bez shivered, almost feeling himself convulse, but was barely able to reply. "Dat is... Mi mean, a lower tax woulda bring more trade an mek yuh family more marks." She stared at him and moved her hand just a little. "Den maybe likkle merchant, like miself, wouldn't need fi mek side marks."

She smiled wickedly and withdrew her hand. He sighed audibly, but then became nervous again as she languorously ran her fingers down his arm to one of the straps holding him down. "Mi like yuh Bez, yuh a criminal bot brite tu." She undid that strap and ever so slowly moved to the other one. "Yuh haffi pay fi yuh likkle crime douh..." She let those words hang in the air as she undid the second strap, then pulled his hair with her hand before forcing him to his feet. The blow to his gut that came next made him fall to his knees in pain, wheezing for breath. She knelt down, pulling his hair back again, to meet his eyes. "Yuh an yuh big fren free fi go, but yuh gems a fi mi, fi di inconvenience."

She smiled wickedly again before dropping his head and swaying out of the room. Bez watched her go, still breathing heavily, and in pain. He had never met a woman like Tiare in his life, she made him want to be more, because then he would be good enough for her. A woman like that was worth all the profit of a man's life.



Tiare waded into the surf, feeling the powerful cold waves beat upon her naked body. She was a strong woman, power was all that mattered to her, as with any woman in the Masudo family. She dove beneath the surface, feeling the cold salty water invade every part of her, before coming up for air. The sun was only a few hours from setting, Tiare paused while treading water, to appreciate its beautiful rays shining upon the waves. Before now the sea had been the only thing that could make her feel weak, the only thing whose mighty strength engulfed her own, but now there was Bez.

Years ago she had let the man go, because he'd shown her a good time, and had displayed intelligence. Tiare still wasn't sure what had happened after that day. The man had set to life with the will of a sea storm. Earning his own ship, forming a crew from across the islands, trading throughout Innatraea to become one of the highest profiting captains they had, and always bringing the most thoughtful of gifts back to her. Not wealth or gems, she had those, but fragrances, tastes, and words; the things of beauty only he knew she loved. Tiare smiled, feeling the waves as they pushed her naked body around with their rhythm, and the beautiful sun's warmth on her shoulders. No man had ever pursued her with the single mindedness of Bez, like she was his fate, and the man knew it.

Tiare shook herself and focused back on the present. She needed a shell, and not just any shell, her kaluluwa, or "soul shell." The unique and beautiful shell that would show Bez how she felt about him. She dove, pushing herself towards the sea floor with powerful strokes, and opened her eyes to the cold salty underwater world. There were shells everywhere, most shattered, some with creatures still living inside of them, and even some too large for her to bring back. She floated there, stroke after stroke, air bubbles fleeing to the surface, gazing out into the cold beautiful and harsh sea.



Then she saw it, wedged between a large rock and the coral reef. Its inner contours twisting in a colorful spiral, highlighted by the sharp I spines around its edges. A bahaghari shell, something rare and possibly deadly if what lived inside was still there. It was the perfect shell, but removing it would take patience and caution. She swam to the surface again to catch her breath, feeling nervous, excited, and happy all at once. Tiare took a deep breath and dove again.

On her way to the shell she grabbed a broken piece of ship debris and carried it with her. When dealing with papaka kamatayan, or “death crabs,” caution would save your life. She poked the shell gently and it did not move, placing the debris on it and shaking it gently also produced no response, which meant it was empty. Tiare went to work trying to gently remove it from the crevice it was stuck in, shells were fragile, and this one needed to be perfect.

Tiare scraped her hands a few times, and her lungs were screaming for air, but the shell eventually came free into her waiting fingers and it looked beautiful. She swam for the surface, she was proud of herself and couldn't wait for Bez to see her kaluluwa, the irony of Tiare Masudo feeling such things over a man didn't even occur to her in those moments of pure joy.

