

Waipi‘o Valley, 1748-1753

Kamehameha—“the one set apart”—began life in near isolation, taken from his sleeping mother’s side within hours of his birth and spirited away to a remote farm at the head of the Big Island’s Waipi‘o Valley. This abduction, in the dead of night, almost certainly saved my uncle’s life.

Late in her pregnancy with Kamehameha, it is said that his mother—my grandmother—Keku‘iapoīwa, dreamed she hungered for the eyeball of a chief. Word of Keku‘i’s strange dream-craving reached the ears of Alapa‘i‘nui, the reigning *mō‘ī* of Hawai‘i. Alapa‘i, then preparing for war against his father-in-law and rival, Kekaulike, the *mō‘ī* of Maui, was not pleased.

Keku‘i was the wife of Alapa‘i’s nephew, Keoua. She was also Alapa‘i’s own niece. She had lived for several years at Kekaulike’s court on Maui, having returned to Hawai‘i just within the past year to become Keoua’s wife. It was common knowledge that during her recent stay on Maui, she had pleased herself with one of the king’s sons, Kahekili. Now, despite her declaration that my grandfather, Keoua, was the father of her baby, and Keoua’s public acceptance of the child in Keku‘i’s swollen belly as his own, rumor-mongers at Alapa‘i’s court whispered that the baby’s father was in fact Kahekili.

Mindful of these rumors, Alapa‘i consulted his *kāhuna* on the significance of Keku‘i’s bizarre yearning. “It means that this woman’s child will grow up to become a slayer of chiefs,” they said. One young priest, Ka‘akau, advised Alapa‘i to slay the infant. “*E ‘aki maka o ka lauhue,*” he counseled. “Nip off the bud of the poison gourd.” The *mō‘ī* resolved on the spot to kill Keku‘i’s baby as soon as it was born.

My uncle Kamehameha was born in a secluded *hale*—a thatched grass house—at Kokoiki, in northern Kohala, where Alapa‘i was then gathering his army and fleet for the coming invasion of neighboring Maui. He came into this world in the midst of a raging storm. Attended only by her sister Kamaka, Keku‘i ground her teeth and cried out as she strained in labor. Outside, the rain fell in near-solid sheets and the wind howled, drowning out the sounds of both Keku‘i’s screams and Kamehameha’s birth cries.

Learning that Keku‘i was about to give birth, the king had dispatched a party of soldiers to kill the infant. “Find her; find her child and slay it—and tell no one,” he said. The soldiers had set out at once, but the intense storm frustrated and slowed their search.

Alapa‘i’s plans had meanwhile come to the attention of Nae‘ole, chief of Hālawa, who was a cousin of Keku‘i’s father. The childless Nae‘ole was about fifteen years older than Keku‘i and regarded her as the daughter he never had. Nae‘ole began to make plans of his own.

Nae‘ole had gone to Kamaka with news of the murder plot against Keku‘i’s unborn child. Now, as Keku‘i lay deep in slumber alongside her newborn son, Nae‘ole slipped into the *hale* through an opening Kamaka had fashioned in one of the thatched walls. Moving quietly to Keku‘i’s side, he knelt and gently picked up the infant. The baby opened his eyes and whimpered softly. “Hush, little one,” Nae‘ole whispered. “Your life depends on it.” In the *hale*’s dark interior, the newborn would have seen little more than Nae‘ole’s shadowy form and Nae‘ole would have barely made out the baby’s features. Yet years later, he swore to my father that the baby Kamehameha had regarded him with a profoundly serious stare and then, without another sound, closed his eyes.

Swaddling the baby in bark cloth against the driving rain outside, Nae'ole stole away. Keku'i, exhausted from her birth ordeal, did not stir. Nearby, Kamaka watched through hooded eyelids as she pretended to sleep.

Daybreak brought clearing skies and a commotion outside the hale. After a long night's search in the rain, Alapa'i's soldiers had at last found Keku'i's birthing place. Their captain, a hulking warrior brandishing a club, burst in upon the sleeping women. "Wake up! Where is the child?" he demanded.

Keku'i's eyes flew open and she reached for the baby who was not there. Ignoring the club-wielding soldier looming over her, she wailed, "Where is my son? He is gone!"

Kamaka feigned surprise. "Keku'i, what has happened? Where is your baby?" she cried.

The king's officer stood slightly stooped over, looking from one woman to the other in confusion. His eyes fell upon Keku'i's full, bared breasts and the thin trickle of milk oozing from her nipples. Somewhere in this hale, he knew there would be further proof of nativity: bloody afterbirth, bundled in bark cloth for ritual burial. But there was no baby.

The captain clenched his war club, turned on his heel, and pushed his way out of the hale through a knot of men trying to peer inside. "There is no baby. This woman has miscarried," he told them. With the Maui invasion fleet's departure almost at hand, he and his soldiers could not waste more time searching for the missing infant, but neither could he return to King Alapa'i admitting to failure. "Come with me," he ordered. "We must return to the fleet. We have a war to fight." The officer marched his men away. Behind them, Keku'i fell sobbing into her sister's embrace.

By this time, Nae'ole—with Keku'i's baby in his arms—was already miles to the east, making toward Kauhola Point and the rising sun.

After burying the afterbirth under a *hala* tree near the birthing house, Keku'i and her sister returned to Alapa'i's court, where Keku'i's husband Keoua and his half-brother Kalani'ōpu'u were making ready to embark with the invasion fleet. Keku'i and her sister found the two men at the seashore, amid ranks of double-hulled war canoes that stretched as far as the eye could see in each direction. The blue-green waters of the shallows near the shore glistened in the light of the new day. Maui's Mount Haleakala, in sharp focus in the storm-cleansed morning air, loomed in the distance across the 'Alenuihāhā Channel.

Keku'i threw herself into Keoua's arms, crying. He broke free of her desperate hug and held her at arm's length. "Where is our child?" he demanded.

"Oh Keoua," she replied through her tears, "someone or something came in the night and took him from me as I slept." With this, she collapsed at his feet, wailing inconsolably.

"Is this true?" Keoua asked, directing his question to his sister-in-law, Kamaka. "Our son... was stolen?"

"Yes, brother," Kamaka replied. "Keku'i gave birth to a fine boy in the night. And when we awoke this morning, he was gone." She bowed her head and averted her eyes.

Keku'i was too distraught over the loss of her infant son to mention the sudden intrusion of Alapa'i's soldiers, and Kamaka said nothing. Keoua and Kalani'ōpu'u were about to go to war in Alapa'i's service and they might soon be fighting alongside the very men Alapa'i had sent to murder the child. Kamaka did not want to jeopardize the brothers' lives with knowledge that could poison their thoughts and distract them in the heat of the coming battles. Of Nae'ole, she would say nothing to Keoua and Keku'i until the time was right. Better to let them truly mourn

their son's supposed loss than to pretend to despair and possibly give Alapa'i cause to doubt them and his soldiers' falsified report.

"Brother," Keoua said to Kalani'ōpu'u, "we must find my son."

Kalani'ōpu'u hesitated. "We do not have time," he said. "The fleet will be leaving soon. Our uncle will be angry with us if we delay him."

"I know time is short, Kalani," Keoua said, "But I must use whatever time we have to find our child."

With Kamaka guiding them and the still-sobbing Keku'i trailing behind, the two brothers set off for the birthing house, where they searched for some sign of the baby's abductor. But Alapa'i's soldiers had trampled the ground and Nae'ole had been careful to leave no trace of his passage through the nearby foliage, and the brothers' search proved fruitless.

The sun was halfway to its zenith when they first heard the calls of conch shells from the direction of the coast. "It is time, brother," Kalani'ōpu'u said. "We have had no luck here and the war fleet will leave soon. We must go back now."

Keoua sighed. His shoulders sagging, he turned toward the two women, who were huddled together on the ground near the hale. "Alapa'i will be looking for us," he said.

"But what of our son?" Keku'i cried.

Keoua gently raised Keku'iapoiwa to her feet and held her close. "If our son is still alive, our families' 'aumakua will watch after him," he said. "The child's fate is in their hands now."

Kamaka kept her silence.

As my grandparents forlornly made their way back to the coast, Nae'ole—with my infant uncle swaddled in bark cloth and tied securely to his back—reached the sandy beach at Kauhola, where two young men from his village were waiting by a single-hull outrigger canoe resting in the shallows. A wet nurse, already seated in the canoe, waited with them. Nae'ole shifted his precious burden from his back and handed the baby to the woman, who put the child immediately to her breast. Then, without a word among them, Nae'ole and the younger men pushed the canoe into deeper water, jumped in, and set off down the coast in the direction of Hilo.

With all three men paddling, the small canoe made swift progress, reaching Waipi'o Bay as the sun was settling toward the weatherworn summit of Mt. Kohala to the west. Nae'ole's goal was the far end of the narrow Waipi'o Valley, where he held administrative title to an *ili kūpono*—a subdivision of land within the larger boundaries of the Waipi'o *ahupua'a*. The sunlight was already cut off by Waipi'o's high walls, and deep shadows were falling on the valley floor as Nae'ole and the wet nurse disembarked from the canoe. Nae'ole took the sleeping baby from the woman, strapped him to his back once more, and slipped away into the gathering darkness. Nae'ole went unseen and unheard by the inhabitants of the night-cloaked valley, just as he had planned. And so the infant Kamehameha—who was destined to unite these islands into one nation for the first time in our people's long history—arrived in stealthy anonymity in Waipi'o, which was to be his place of refuge for the next five years.