**Rite of Passage:**

Prequel to **The Neverborn: A Young Adult Dystopian Novel**

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Dad drops me and my two brothers off in a remote canyon on Kauai, then drives off. We watch him as rain dumps on us for this rite of passage into adulthood—our first survival weekend without parents. Canyon stands next to me on the edge of the ravine with his muscles flexed like Atlas as if he’s posing for some chick flick. Then he holds out his hands to catch the rain. That’s all we have—rain.

“Wood. Now,” Canyon orders like he’s playing Noah in a film.

Kana stands tall, his hands on his skinny hips, “Canyon, it won’t burn if we don’t have a way to keep it dry. What good will it do?”

“You tell me, Mr. Know-it-all.” Canyon shakes the water from his palms.

We’re drenched already. Kana looks around as if we have all day. “Stack it under the big albizia tree.” He points down the ravine from where we’re standing.

“Race,” Canyon yells.

We all take off running in different directions. I leap upward toward the mountains but angle down into the ravine toward a downed tree with sun-bleached white, weathered limbs. Perfect. Dead albizia trees should burn. Dad knew the sky would dump the moment he left. But it is a survival test. We’ve been preparing for this test for years. I break smaller limbs off the albizia and load myself up. Then I dump all my wood and pull off my t-shirt to place it on top. It’s soaked, and the rain is drenching the wood, but what else can we do? My gut aches, fearing we may disappoint Dad and fail in his eyes.

 Water soaks into my jeans as I race beside the soaked ferns. I dump a load of wood under our chosen canopy before my brothers do. For once, I’m first. I run through the six-foot-tall guinea grass smile dodging around Hale Koa shrubs with their empty brown bean pods hanging down. By my next trip, I see the two loads my brothers have gathered. At the dead tree, I jump on some branches to break off bigger limbs. Kicking and pulling only gives me twigs.

There is a branch a couple of feet off the ground. I jump on it but lose my balance as it breaks. As I tumble to the ground, twigs snap, and I land on my back—hard. I can’t breathe. Rain pelts my face and flows over me. With the rain and the breathlessness comes panic. There must be a sleeping grass plant under me by the pokes in my back.

I roll over, and little thorns shoot into my back. My breath comes back. Centipedes, I remember, could lurk around. I jump up. The last time a centipede stung me on my face, my eyes swelled shut. I scan the area but don’t see any, so resume breaking branches.

Canyon has the only machete, so I hope to impress my brothers when I come back to our stash with an arm full of wood. Soon they too each have another armload of wood.

Canyon dumps his load and brushes his hands together. The rain has let up. “Kekoa, you stay and get a fire going. We’ll go and get some pig for dinner.”

My face curls in a frown but arguing over who gets the cooler jobs won’t get us anywhere. “Matches?” I hold out my hand.

Kana digs in his pocket and hands me a small book of matches. Great. They’re damp.

“Later,” Kana says.

Canyon and Kana pick up their crossbows and trudge downhill.

Dad wouldn’t allow us to bring anything except pocketknives, crossbows and one machete, so they’ll have to track down the wild pigs without bait that would draw them and without the help of our golden Labrador, Mischief, to sniff them out.

The wood is still wet. Dad wouldn’t let us have paper to start a fire. I hike up to a peak, slipping on the crumbly rocks twice, and study the albizia forest. A grove of kukui nut trees is growing just above some hau trees next to a stream running down from the dormant volcano. I hike down, gather nuts in my t-shirt, and make my way back. I find a big rock to crush the nut shells, make a pile of the nut shells, and then pull out a few hairs, and swirl it into the nuts. By spreading the nuts under some of the dry bean pod shells, and with my drier twigs nearby, I’m ready to start a fire. God, please help me get a good fire started.

The breeze blows the first match out before I can touch the nut/hair mix. I create a wind barrier with big philodendron leaves that wind around a tree. Soon the fire crackles. Larger limbs steam as I put them over the flames. They have to dry out before they burn. After babying the fire for a while, it’s time to gather dry rocks. Wet ones will explode. I hunt under an overhanging cliff and soon have a good two dozen. Sweat drips down my chest and forehead. Once I stoke the fire again, I jump into the water to cool off. My stomach rumbles and I think about food. It’s only noon, but we haven’t eaten since five this morning.

Mom’s Crock Pot was stewing away on the kitchen counter when we left. Since each of us boys has a different set of parents, but we all live and eat together, each of us guys rotates cooking with his mom. We’re all sure our mom is the best cook. But I know mine beats everyone. I’ve got to stop thinking about food.

The guys come back after a couple of hours, but don’t even notice my fire.

Canyon holds a sow’s front feet on either side of his head. It hangs down his back with its back feet dragging on the ground. “Kekoa, check out at this beauty. I shot her perfectly at the base of her neck.” Canyon turns around to show me her size, then drops her to the ground.

“She’s a big one. We’re never going to eat that much meat,” I say.

“No, but we can take her ears and get the bounty money. Might as well. Help us get rocks and banana leaves for the imu,” Canyon says. It takes at least a couple feet of dirt or rocks to cover the pig as it roasts.

“I got rocks,” I say. “We just need to keep the fire going, bro. The rocks will be hot enough by the time you get back with the leaves,” I say.

Kana is busy up the ravine, cutting up the small pig he’s going to roast for lunch. “Enough coals yet?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say and scoop some coals to one side, then pile rocks up to make a spit. The flames are dying back, but the rocks are red hot. It will take four hours to cook Canyon’s pig through.

Kana sticks a limb through his small pig and sets it over the two rock walls around the smaller bed of coals. “Wish we had some shoyu and ginger to glaze it with. Or some pineapple,” he says.

“Yeah, I agree. There were some ginger plants about a quarter of a mile downstream.” Soy sauce and ginger make everything taste better.

Kana yells at Canyon down the mountain, “Can, get some ginger.”

“Yo,” Canyon calls back and waves without turning around.

We spread out the stones and place Canyon’s gutted sow on top. With green sticks, Kana and I maneuver one hot stone at a time and place them in the pig’s cavity. By the time we’re done, Canyon is back with the ginger and a load of banana leaves. We clean and crush the ginger root to sprinkle around the cavity and cover the pig with the leaves. At first, it stinks as the flames burn the pig’s hair. Later, the aroma will be yummylicious.

“Swim?” Canyon asks us, tossing his head back to get his golden hair out of his eyes. I wish I had golden hair. I appear Native Hawaiian with a mix of something else, and Kana is part Asian American, but tall. All our parents are haoles with blue eyes like Canyon, but they have white hair since they’re all in their late seventies or eighties. They can’t be my or Kana’s bio parents. I hope they’re our grandparents at least, but no parents could love their children more than they have loved us.

“Firewood first,” Kana says. “I’ll weave us some hammocks.”

Thoughts of my parents, my brother’s parents, and my aunties and uncles, fill me until we have a waist high pile of wood. “Should be enough,” I say to Kana.

“Good.” Kana weaves together a shelter over the three hammocks he’s created by using the vines, then begins assembling a framework of sticks to build a shelter around the hammocks. “Where’s Canyon?”

I glance around. “Swimming in the stream.”

Kana shakes his head. “If we’re gentle and don’t throw our weight into them in one spot, they should last the one night we’re here,” he says.

I watch, impressed, as Kana forms the leaf-shingled tent over the stacked hammocks to keep out the mosquitoes. I hand him the large green and white leaves one by one, and he tucks the stem into the wooden frame. He works from the bottom up, like when we shingled our new carport. It takes a couple of hours to complete.

“Good enough,” he says, smoothing the leaves down over each other. We set small stones on top to keep the wind from blowing the leaves off.

“Let’s check it out,” he says.

We pull up the woven flap and each lie on a hammock. Kana lies in the middle one and I take the bottom. We’ll let Canyon figure out how to climb up to the top one. My head is a couple of feet from one trunk. The hammock swings. I’m only a foot off the ground and it sags. It’s stuffy inside with no breeze, but I’d rather have stuffy than mosquitoes and centipedes any day. Kana’s body drops on top of mine. “Ugh!” We both land on the ground as his weight breaks my hammock, too.

There’s no floor, and I think of centipedes, who love wet dark places, like under the leaves of the forest floor. They’re an inch wide, up to a foot long, with hundreds of creepy legs. On their tail are two antennae and, two stingers penetrate and eject venom from near their small head. The beast then wraps around its prey and waits for the poison to take effect before it eats the prey. The devils. I roll Kana off and scramble out of the flap. He bends down to get out.

“Dang. I’ll have to use double vines to hold my weight,” he says.

We climb trees to gather more vines, cutting them down with our pocketknives. Kana secures vines to a small tree and knots them like a macrame. When he’s done, he maneuvers it into our shelter and forms hammocks for us, one above the other.

It’s humid. The trade winds don’t blow into the canyons as much as they do into our home, on a rise in our canyon. There are two seasons in Hawaii—warm with occasional rain and warmer with occasional rain. This is September, our hottest month, where the highs are in the mid-eighties and the lows are in the mid-seventies.

I see pictures and movies of autumn trees on the mainland, but on our island, fall means the plumeria trees drop their blooms and leaves. The rest of the plants don’t drop their leaves and stay the same year-round. Snow fascinates me, although I’ve never seen it. There’s a world outside our canyon, and I dream of throwing away books and movies and experiencing life. We’re almost done with our online secondary education classes. Excitement tingles into my brain and down to my fingers. Soon, our parents will have to let us loose to see the world.

While Kana is weaving another set of hammocks, I rotate the small pig Kana shot on the fire. The aroma makes me want to sneak a leg that’s already cooked, but I wait.

I want to see Alaska, Disneyland, the Rockies, autumn leaves in Maine, and a cattle ranch in Montana. More than any of those, I want to talk to girls. Canyon butts in every chance he gets when a girl comes to our market on Saturdays to buy produce, and they seem to love him with his sing-songy voice, giant muscles, and expressive eyes. Kana doesn’t even try, but I know he wants to. I see it in his eyes.

With a stick, I clear a spot and draw a picture of the perfect girl in the dirt. She has long blond hair. My perfect girl loves to surf and swim as much as I do. She likes me. I draw her on a surfboard.

Canyon comes up behind me. “Kekoa, introduce me to your woman.”

My face gets hot, and I turn and push him. He’s all wet.

“Go set the table for dinner,” he says with his mother’s voice inflections.

“Yes, mother,” I say and walk over to the fire to inspect the small pig.

 “Kana, bring over three philly leaves,” Canyon continues the game. “Kekoa, you can set the table with our ‘plates.’”

Kana brings over three leaves and Canyon uses a stick to pull meat off the skewer onto the “plates.” We eat like cave dwellers, then go downstream where Canyon saw a mango tree and have a fight with the rotted fruits. Canyon can throw farther than me or Kana, so we team up against him. The orange-red mangoes are just the right size in our palms to throw, but they splatter when they land. We laugh and throw until we’re covered. Sticky and stinking, we play keep-away with a green mango in the water.

“The big sow should be done by now,” Canyon says.

The sky is darkening.

“You set the table this time,” I say to Canyon.

He laughs and pulls three huge philodendron leaves off a plant winding around a eucalyptus tree. Back at the fire, we work together to uncover the imu. We scrape meat onto our leaves and move away from the “oven” to cool both ourselves and our pork. My mouth waters. Canyon burns lips trying to eat it too soon.

“When will it ever be cool?” he asks, blowing on his “plate.”

After we eat, the three of us scout out something to sit on. Canyon finds a big rock and carries it over. Kana weaves a mat and sits on it. I use the machete to hack down a small tree and slice it in half. By placing the bigger half in front of the other, I can use vines to weave them together, making a sort of chair in the middle. At least I’m off the ground. It bends down close to the ground but holds my weight.

We sit around the fire and take turns leading a song we like. When we finish school, I think our parents will let us go to college somewhere. I can’t wait. But I’ll miss times like this, singing around a campfire, not a care in the world. Mango fights. Surfing. Spit contests. I doubt many colleges approve of spit contests.

We drag ourselves into the “bedroom” way after dark. No one knows what time it is. Canyon wants to stay up and tell stories, but I just want to go to sleep. The hammocks hold.

In the morning, I stir the coals and find dry kindling to get a fire going again. We reheat some of the pork from the sow. It has a smoky flavor. All it needs is a bit of soy sauce, shoyu, which we don’t have. But it’s still yummy. Today is play day. We have our shelter and food.

Canyon tries out some vines hanging down and tries to swing on them, but they break.   
“I can’t wait to go home and jump on our zipline,” Canyon says, picking himself up after a broken vine landed him on the ground. “Dad says nobody has a zipline in their backyard as we do,” he says. “But I’d trade it all to go to school with girls.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” I say.

“Mango fight!” Canyon says and tears downhill toward the mango tree. We spend the morning throwing and gorging ourselves on the sweet fruit. Canyon climbs up in the tree, picks off fruit, and throws at us as we pick up our ammo underneath.

“No fair,” Kana says. “You’re throwing green fruit. It hurts.”

I run under the tree to grab a couple of mangoes before Canyon can nail me, and I slip on a composting mango. A downed limb breaks my fall. It moves as I push against it to sit up. A dozen centipedes crawl out from under it and run toward my arms and legs. One rises on its hind legs and twirls its antenna as if it’s sending an attack signal to the other centipedes.

 “Oh! Ow!” I scream and jump to my feet. The inch-wide, foot-long beasts are all over me. “Owww!” More stings. I try to flick them off, but one crawls to the hand I’m using to flick. They move so fast. Shaking my arms, I pick one off, but it stings my hand, curling around for attack. One is on my arm. It crawls up to my neck and stings my throat. I yank it off yelling like a banshee. One is crawling up my pant leg. I grab a stick from the ground and flick off the one on my arm, then try to get off the one racing up my thigh. Nausea storms my stomach. Pain hit all over my body like buckshot. I shake and yell at my brothers to help. Again and again, the stick prods the foot-long centipede, but he recovers. I swipe down. He hangs onto the stick and runs up to get to my hand. I throw the stick just in time. Dizziness floods over me. My legs are mush. Falling.

Someone is carrying me. My legs, fingers, throat, and arms are on fire, way worse than when I burned the side of my leg on the exhaust pipe of Dad’s motorcycle. My throat swells, making it hard to breathe. I smell vomit. It must be mine.

“Kekoa, wake up, bro. Come on.” Kana sounds tender for once.

Someone is slapping my face.

My head throbs, matching the rest of my stinging body. It’s harder and harder to breathe. I wheeze. But the world sways like seaweed in the ocean. Sound gets farther and farther away.

Voices arouse me again. Air, I need air. I can’t breathe. A wheezy sound whistles as I take in a breath. Worse than the stings, I can’t breathe! My open mouth tries to suck up air.

“You’re killing him, and it’s all your fault,” Canyons says with anguish and fear in his voice.

“Would you just shut up!” Kana says, “We can’t carry him fifteen miles home. Moving him would just make all the poison go to his heart.”

“You think you know it all? If Kekoa dies because of you, I’m never going to forgive you. Ever.” Canyon swears. “Look, he’s turning blue! Do something!”

I feel Kana’s hand down my throat, making me throw up. Air! I need air. Please, God, I don’t want to die yet. I want to fall in love with a girl and know what it’s like to hug, and kiss, and have my own PodPlane to fly. I want to have kids someday, and graduate from college with my classmates admiring how well I’ve done.

“Hold his arms and don’t let go no matter what,” Kana says.

I thrash, clutching at my throat until Canyon grabs my arms above my head and holds them fast. Kana sits on me. I can’t see. Someone has covered my eyes and is holding my head still. My throat has stabbing pain. Someone is cutting my throat. I writhe. Kana pokes something in my neck and sucks out fluid that he spits onto the ground. Air. I can breathe. But not through my mouth or nose. My chest rises and falls. I’m not desperate for air anymore.

Kana rips cloth and dabs my throat. “It’s not bleeding too bad. I think he’ll be okay.”

“You just cut him open!” shouts Canyon, releasing my arms.

“And how else is he supposed to breathe?” Kana asks.

“I don’t know, but you cut his throat,” Canyon sounds incredulous.

“Let’s carry him up to where Dad dropped us off. He should be here in an hour or two.” Kana says.

“Why couldn’t you wait?” Canyon sounds angry.

“Because he can’t wait an hour or two to breathe.” Kana puts his head next to mine on the ground. His breathing is ragged.

The flesh around my stings hurt worse than anything I’ve ever experienced. I roll and moan. Kana packs my body with mud.

“Mud has a million germs in it. You’re going to make his whole body swell with infection. You know that don’t you? It’s Canyon’s voice.

“Shut up,” Kana says. “When it dries, it will suck out the poison.”

“When it dries? Like next spring?”

Stop fighting! Usually, I’m the one bringing Canyon’s bluster and Kana’s brilliance together. I raise my hand, and they stop, but my arm falls and the sounds melt away like ice cream in the sun.

“Kekoa, wake up. Talk to me.” Despair threads Canyon’s voice.

I moan. My mouth opens and words form on my lips, but no sound comes. Gurgles bubble in my neck.

“He can’t talk, Canyon. His trachea was completely closed off. No air could get through. He would have died if I hadn’t cut it open,” Kana says.

Will I ever be able to talk again? Then my head spins and I fall back. The world goes black.

Have I been drugged? I don’t remember taking any pills. I can’t think.

“What’s your pain level?” Kana walks over to me. “Hold up your fingers.”

I hold up ten fingers.

Canyon feels my forehead. “He’s got a fever, Kana. I still say we carry him back.”

“Canyon, if we start back, Dad won’t know where we are. We won’t make it in time. We’re better off just. . .”

“You always think you’re right!” Canyon yells.

I raise my hand again, but I can’t talk. I’m thirsty, but I don’t know if I can drink.

A truck rumbles from down the mountain, getting louder and louder. A door slams on the pickup, and a moment later, Mischief licks my face.

“What’s wrong?” Dad sounds as worried as I’ve ever heard him. He bends down to examine me.

“Centipede stings. Twenty of them. Ten double stings. We were under a mango tree,” Canyon says.

“His throat. You cut his throat open?” Dad kneels next to me to examine my body.

Kana’s voice quakes. “He couldn’t breathe. His face was blue.”

Was Kana about to cry? It sounded like it.

“Then, son, you saved his life. If his throat closed, he would have died,” Dad says.

I sit up and put my hand on the ground. My head is only dizzy for a moment. The mud must have helped. Pain only makes me a little crazy now. When I glance over my body, I see mosquito bites covering my belly and chest, but there are twenty welts in sets of two on my arms, hands, and legs. You beasts are double trouble with two stingers. I hope you die. Squawks of the mynah birds and the tinkling of the brook sounds as my brothers carry me to the pickup. I sit diagonally, half on Kana’s lap, with my head on Dad’s shoulder, my feet in the cab's corner.

Dad is eighty-five now. My heart aches. Kana said the other day that the average lifespan of the American man is eighty-four years. Yet, all three of us boys are angry. Our parents won’t let us hang out with teens in Lihue. I don’t understand why we’re confined to a Kauaiian back canyon all our lives. For what reason? And why do none of us look like our parents? How is it that all three of us boys were born in the same month? I have so many questions Dad won’t answer. My head wobbles as we blaze a trail down the mountain. I melt into the seat and sleep.

Heated voices awaken me. Conflict destroys my tranquility.

“Uncle, take him to the hospital!” Canyon yells.

“Calm down, Canyon,” Kana says. “Uncle, you don’t realize how serious this is. He could die. Twenty centipedes pack more poison than the average person can handle. Kekoa needs heavy-duty steroids and antihistamines.” He is pleading.

“Let’s get this boy home,” Dad whispers. “We have an EpiPen at home. I wish I would had sent it with you.” His voice sounds far away.

Dad prays for me. “Dear Lord, save our boy. Save our sweet Kekoa. Lord, he’s such a wonderful young man. Let him live and show the world how wonderful he is.” He sounds like he’s crying.

“Go to the hospital!” Canyon says. “Dad never took me when I broke my leg. Uncle never took him when Kana dislocated his shoulder. I don’t know what the deal is. But this is it. He may die if you don’t take Kekoa to a hospital.”

“Yes!” Kana says.

Dad sighs. He waits a long time to speak. Even if I didn’t see the tears sliding down his face, the grief in his voice melts me. He says, “We can’t take him to the hospital. Maybe we can find a friend who could drive out here and treat him. That’s all we can do.”