

THE
SECRET CLUB
AND THE
LOST LEGEND

THE THIRD INSTALLMENT OF THE BE MANAFUL™ SERIES

DORIMALIA WAI AU
AND EASA MOHAMED

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For 'Ohana

PART 1

PROLOGUE

THE RIFT, CENTER OF THE MANAFUL WORLD

Hunger gnawed at the Spirit in the crater that summer of 2023.

Lapu was nothing but a shifting puddle of black energy, a mass of tar-like liquid forever bubbling and reforming. He could stiffen like iron, dissolve into mist, or slump into shapeless goo. With every thought his form quivered, like boiling water spilling over.

“So hungry,” he growled. His mind flashed with images of Manaful elders and their human allies. Each one glowed in his imagination like a meal waiting to be devoured.

For centuries he had fed on tainted Mana, the poisoned magic of this land. It thickened his body drop by drop, coalescing into a form unlike any Spirit before him. Most of his kind were still unborn cores drifting in the Rift like faint embers. Their whispers were nothing but a buzzing annoyance to his vast,

cruel mind. He had consumed many of them already, stripping their essence to fuel his own growth.

He ruled here. The Rift was his domain.

Once it had been Old Hill, the green center of the world. A sentient land that had hired Spirits like Lapu to serve it. A thousand years ago, he had orchestrated Old Hill's eruption, tearing its heart wide open. Now nothing remained but scarred rock, rivers of magma, and skies forever bruised with lightning. He saw it as a monument to his victory: a wound that would never heal.

The Rift killed Manafuls. Any dwarf who crossed the border had their magic drained from them, their force fields corroded by acid fumes, their eyes blinded by the searing air. Here, Lapu was supreme. He had even lured Elders to their deaths; laughed when Elder Alaka'i fell. One down. An entire council left to go.

A voice skittered through the wind. "What's so funny?"

Lapu shifted, rising into the hulking outline of a humanoid giant. "Pest?"

"Yes, Master," came the eager reply.

At a gesture, he scooped a handful of tainted essence from the crater. It writhed in his palm until a shape began to form. A featureless praying mantis, antennae quivering in mock reverence.

"You have so much fun," Pest said, clicking his claws together. "I want to go out into the world and destroy things too!"

Lapu almost smiled. His creation, the only Spirit he had nurtured to life. Quick to morph, quicker to please. A tool. "You are too young," he rumbled, flicking Pest aside. The little

one splattered against the rocks, then promptly reshaped into a snake, then a beetle, then a swarm of flies. Always restless. Always hungry for more.

“I need memory,” Pest whined. “Every time I explore, the Rift drags me back. I forget what I saw. Can you make me remember?”

“That is why form matters,” Lapu said. “A body stores what a drifting core cannot. Identity comes with permanence. You and I — we will have it.”

Pest wailed with longing. “Oh, to remember!”

“Yes,” Lapu chuckled, his surface rippling with dark pleasure. “And to feed. One day I will devour enough essence to manifest fully. Bone. Flesh. Teeth. A true body.” He bared a mouthful of gnashing bone-teeth that immediately dissolved back into sludge. The glimpse thrilled and infuriated him all at once.

Pest scampered closer. “May I borrow a little more essence, Master?”

Lapu tossed him a clump, watching as the smaller Spirit molded it into the form of a giant cat with glowing red eyes. It purred. The elegance stung Lapu’s pride. He refused to share too much. Pest would not outpace him.

“Go,” he ordered with a lash of his tentacles. “Search. Discover. Return to me soon.”

“Yes, Master! Thank you, Master!” Pest squealed, bursting into a spray of oily droplets that rode the crimson wind out of the Rift.

Alone again, Lapu sank back into the crater. His hunger throbbed, echoing with every pulse of the world’s molten core. Ejad Honua — his precious puppet — was out there, building

machines to help him harness more Mana. Slow, yes, but promising.

The Spirit gurgled with grim satisfaction. “With machines and essence, I will rise. Spirits will win all. Manafuls will lose all.”

He melted deeper into the bubbling pool, his voice a final mutter in the fumes:

“So very hungry.”

CHAPTER 1

ARI AND AUNTY



Papakōlea Hale, Hawai'i

In the summer of 2023, Ari brushed aside low branches and leaned over her neighbor's fence, scanning for a flicker of black fur. Maui had been missing for a week. The truth about fostering strays was cruel. Sometimes they didn't come back.

Her throat tightened, but she forced herself to breathe steady. Whoo... Whoo... Whoo. The sound in her mind reminded her of the Secret Club, the stories that carried her when things felt too heavy.

The unopened tin of wet food weighed in her hand. Useless, maybe. Or maybe not. There were always other strays who would come.

Sure enough, Curtis, the friendly calico, padded out from under Aunty Ellie's truck. He twined his tail around her legs until she crouched and scratched his ears.

“I’m glad you’re here, furry one,” Ari whispered. “Seen Maui? I miss him. Prayers he’s safe.” She set the food down. Curtis purred his thanks and dug in.

“Ari? You in the yard?” Aunty Ellie’s voice floated from the back porch.

With a last pat, Ari left Curtis and jogged to the house.

Ellie stood with a tray of cookies fresh from the oven. She handed one over with a spatula. Ari laughed, washing her hands before taking it.

“Aunty, you brighten my day.”

“Still no sign of Maui?” Ellie asked, frowning as Ari bit into the cookie.

Ari shook her head, chewing through the sweetness that made her eyes sting with memory. When her mom was home more, they used to bake gingerbread together. Now it was mostly just her and Ellie.

“Summer already,” Ellie said softly, sliding an arm around her niece.

Ari smiled through her sniffles, hugging her back.

In the kitchen, Ellie tidied while Ari leaned against the counter, brushing crumbs off her fingers. The kōlea bird on the Audubon clock sang the hour, a cheerful sound that couldn’t quite chase away the ache in her chest.

Ellie turned, her expression gentler now. “You know, you and I are a lot alike.”

Ari blinked, surprised.

“We both love making worlds and telling stories,” Ellie said. “I have a feeling you’ll be a great storyteller one day.”