

CTHULHU RISING



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‘Kapu is one bad place, *Haole*,’ Alaka’i said, translating for the old man whose face was lined with wisdom. ‘Ass why no mo’ nobody goes foa no moa.’

Na’ouao, the old man, was hunched over a cup of some viscous liquid. When he raised his head, he watched me with eyes that missed nothing, dancing flames highlighting his face. Alaka’i and I had been trekking for two days, following shepherds’ paths, from Kailau-Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii. We passed through a dense bamboo forest before we reached the mountain’s dead zone. This small village, miles from anywhere, was the first sign of civilisation. The mountain, Mauna Loa, had risen to a sharp point, and clouds of smoke – evidence the volcano was still active – lingered across the trails, disorientating us. The village was positioned inside the lip of a crater, the micro-climate was warm and crops were thriving in the fertile land.

Alaka’i, my guide, had called the village *Ma’iu’iu*. We had arrived after the sun had dipped behind the mountains – the night had drawn in quickly and the temperature had dropped by about ten degrees from 80. There was a low wooden fence

around the village of around twenty huts, more to mark the territory than to act as protection against invaders or predators. At the gates was a pair of eight foot high figurines, one seeming to depict a theatrical comic face, the other a tragic face. Alaka'i had referred to them as *na'aumakua* – maybe some sort of totem? Ignoring the stares of the villagers, Alaka'i strode to the biggest hut in the centre. He'd known where he was going. He'd spoken to Na'ouao in his native Hawaiian, and while the old man had shown us into his thatched hut, I had a feeling we weren't at all welcome. Alaka'i explained that Na'ouao was a kupuna, a kind of village elder. We sat cross-legged on woven mats. As I'd explained I wanted to find Kapu. Na'ouao's face darkened.

'It's important,' I continued. Alaka'i started to translate, but the gnarled old man slapped his bony fingers down onto the stone with a shout: *a'ole*. He wasn't going to be drawn. I looked over at Alaka'i who was scrutinising Na'ouao. When I drew breath to speak again, he raised his hand, almost unnoticeably, and the words stopped in my throat. 'Try wait,' he whispered. For a while, there was only the sound of the crackling fire and the stridulations of insects outside the hut. I waited.

Na'ouao settled back. His face was unreadable. Then he made a signal to one of his retainers. We were brought halved gourds with a clear almond colour liquid in it. '*Okolehao*,' Na'ouao explained – the name of the drink. Alaka'i waited until all had received theirs and then sipped, so did Na'ouao and so did I. It was fiery; it burned my throat tasting of coffee and coconut and spiced rum. During the day we had crossed an arid, volcanic land-scape made up of rusty coloured rocks and boulders and shingle. We carried a small amount of fresh water in the skins around our necks. Alaka'i had warned we needed to conserve it,

and even in March, the days had been warm and unspoiled by anything other than a light cloud.

The drink filled my body with a warm glow. Then Na'ouao signalled again and food was brought in wooden bowls: pork wrapped in banana leaves, with a salty relish and a root vegetable with some flat bread. Na'ouao said something in Hawaiian. Alaka'i pointed to the vegetable. 'Da kupuna say tell yo' dis is *poi*. We no make beef wen da *poi* is on da table, *Haole*.' In the days I'd been travelling with Alaka'i, and the time I'd spent filming in Hawaii, I'd picked up some of his Pidgin: *make beef, to fight*. Alaka'i had a serious glint in his eyes. 'Is da kine of offering, yeah?'

I nodded to Na'ouao, wondering if Alaka'i was using this term, *Haole* – 'foreigner' or perhaps as 'Caucasian', because he couldn't bring himself to use my given name. Or perhaps it was a way of differentiating me from the natives. We ate in silence. There were other natives here now. Some of them peered at me, eyes hooded, mouth pursed. Not because of who I was, though. I was certain that this indigenous village had no contact with anyone other than Hawaiians. But I don't think I imagined the haunted look in their eyes, like they were frightened of the mention of Kapu. It had been the case when I had first asked about the village. Almost everyone I spoke to had denied its existence, but terror had flashed across their eyes. Their faces told me all I needed to know. One man, a sallow-faced native, had spat at my feet. That, for me, was sufficient confirmation of Kapu's existence.

Eventually, once the meal was finished and the bowls taken away, the villagers dispersed and once again it was the three of us. Na'ouao sat back and muttered something to Alaka'i. Alaka'i

turned to me. ‘Kupuna wanna know why yo’ need seek Kapu.’

I took a deep breath: ‘I was drafted into the army in March of ‘58 – three years ago – stationed in Germany from September. When I was on manoeuvres there, I met a man who told me of Kapu. He said there was a place of great power ...’

I’d thought Na’ouao spat ‘Power!’ as Alaka’i translated. In fact, it sounded more like *pupule*.

I held up my hands. ‘Power to overcome evil.’

Now Na’ouao made a *tsk* sound as he shook his head. He spoke to Alaka’i who then turned to me. ‘Na’ouao wunners wat yo’ Government wud do wid dat kine power?’ The kupuna was speaking at the same time. ‘Revenge foa Pearl Harbour?’

I shook my head, even though Pearl Harbour meant a lot to me and I would do my thing, my way. But that wasn’t it. ‘Just me.’

Na’ouao considered this for a while. I wondered whether it was my imagination, or whether the fire was beginning to die down, but his face seemed to become more buried in the shadows. He spoke to Alaka’i who translated: ‘Why you come foa Hawaii? Was ‘um foa search foa Kapu? It ‘um long way foa travel.’

‘I was working in Oahu. On a film.’ I wondered if that needed explaining, but Alaka’i’s description appeased Na’ouao. I kept eye contact with the elder as I continued. ‘And then came to the Big Island to search for Kapu. I asked around. Alaka’i brought me to you.’

I waited while Alaka’i translated. Again there was an interminable silence as Na’ouao reflected on what had been said. I looked at him, and then at Alaka’i. Both of them were expressionless, but I wondered if I saw something in their eyes, the tiniest hint of communication between them. Without

warning, Na'ouao stood up and strode out of the hut.

'Do we follow?' I asked.

Alaka'i shook his head. 'We leave. Jus' foa tonight. Kupuna no can rush decisions. He talk story bumbye.'

I paused at his last expression, repeating it in my head, *bumbye* ... by-and-by ... eventually. We gathered our things, hoisting our knapsacks and water skins onto our backs. Alaka'i led the way outside. The village was illuminated by fifteen or twenty flaming torches to guide us out, but they cast more shadows than they dispelled and, marching between the guardian totems, I felt they were no longer comic or tragic, but ghastly and terrible.

We unrolled our blankets near a rocky outcrop and some thick brush. I lay down feeling the warm night breeze caressing my skin, staring up at the patterns of stars above. The air was so much clearer here, the skies seemed more vivid. A shooting star trailed overhead with a faint whoosh! In the distance, there was a low throb. (*Drums of the island are beating in my heart.*) Insects, I thought, but I asked Alaka'i what it was.

'Those, *Haole*, are da *huaka'i po*, da night marchers or da spirit ranks, da ghosts o' ancient warriors. On top da nights of da gods 'um said dat dey leave dare burial sites an' march foa avenge dare deaths. Or even foa fight again one battle dat wen' wrong. Or tek one dying relative foa the spirit world.' A shiver went down my back. I tried to convince myself it could be waves beating in an underground passage, or perhaps bats' wings distorted and amplified through a cave. But with the sulphurous and ashy smells of the top of the volcano, it was easy to believe the legions of the dead were walking again. I must have raised my head a little because Alaka'i placed a hand on my arm. 'Don't look,

Haole. Is bad luck yo' foa look upon da spirit ranks as dey march.'

I knew it was superstition, but that was what had brought me to the Big Island in the first place. In a place like this, the imagination was a wide ground, fertile to any seeds scattered across it. Every screech of birds in the night, or the scurrying of an animal, became twisted and discordant by the night. The Hawaiians were an ancient culture, and were privy to many secrets to which we *haole* were permitted a fleeting glimpse. And that's what had happened to me in Germany. There was a hint of another world: indescribable, unspeakable, beguiling.

As if reading my mind, Alaka'i spoke again. 'Why is Kapu so important foa yo'?' Then more curious. 'Few *haole* wen hear of 'um.'

'Someone told me about it when I was in the army.'

'You' soldier?'

I was then. Every healthy American is expected to serve active duty for two years. I was drafted like everyone else. I did some of my service in West Germany. I opened my eyes, staring into the darkness, and a dozen faces stared back at me, G.I.s and pretty girls, and parties in the hotel ... 'My unit were sent to Grafenwöhr for manoeuvres, near the Czechoslovakian border ...' I stopped. Would Alaka'i even know where Germany was? 'When I was there, I got talking with one of the Captains, a man called Carter.' Even now, I can hear the shouts in the bar: mostly G.I.s, voices slurred by beer, over-excited, macho. There are calls in the harsh, guttural German dialect, signalling an imminent fight. The Captain has procured a bottle of *Becherovka* from Czechoslovakia and is pouring it unsteadily into shot glasses. Sometime he misses the glass altogether. His eyes are rheumy and unfocused. He tells me he'd been stationed in Pearl Harbour

when it had been hit. He spent a long time getting to know the Hawaiians, and they told him about Kapu. Told him it was a place that was the source of great power to overcome evil, and he had come to the Big Island to try and find it. I tried to see Alaka'i's eyes in the shadows. 'Why's it so important?'

Alaka'i laughed. 'Yo' wen come so far an' no can tell wat yo' is lookin' foa? No wonder Kupuna don' know whedder foa show yo'.'

'So it *does* exist?'

There was a snort from Alaka'i. 'Mebee da *Kama'āina* da Captain spoke foa was jus' talk ghost stories.' *Kama'āina*, children of the land: Alaka'i's people. 'Mebee 'um no mo' dan one story?'

'Is it?' I asked. 'Because Captain Carter was pretty clear in his descriptions. He told of temples hidden within a sea of lava, giant edifices, temples containing petroglyphs in the hardened lava, subterranean chambers leading to a limitless abyss.'

More silence. 'De Captain told yo' dat?'

'And more.' I closed my eyes and the words Carter had spoken played through images in my mind: of oily and syrupy tentacles coiling around some crystalline catacombs, something tellurian and, at the same time, strange and unknowable. Carter had spilled some of his drink and used the liquid to draw symbols across the table as some kind of wards of protection. 'Some parts of his story were unbelievable,' I added. But I remembered a promise – a drunken promise, but a promise nonetheless – that if I ever found Kapu, I would research it further. Because to Captain Carter it had been *urgent*. And even in the mists of alcohol, he was still a superior officer. So I was here to TCB – Take Care of Business.

A waning gibbous moon had started to rise, casting a faint

silvery light across our makeshift camp. I could see Alaka'i now. I saw the seriousness linking his face. 'One ting yo' like know about *Kapu, Haole*. 'Um no jus' a place. It is law. In da old tongue, *Kapu* wen mean 'forbidden' as well as 'sacred'. Yo' no walk in da shadow of da king or foa grind an wron' kine food.'

My brow furrowed. 'What does that mean, to grind?'

Alaka'i gave me a disparaging look. He started to chew, an exaggerated gesture. Then he continued: 'If yo' do, yo' wen kill'd. Even foa da *Kama'āina*.' But, da story of *Kapu* is no' one we talk of after dark.' I wondered if I had heard a shudder in his voice. 'But dere are odda legends.' He shivered. 'And dey are no stories for moonlight.'

'Once a person is marked, can nothing be done?'

Alaka'i shook his head. 'Dere is da *pu'ubonua*. Dat um place foa safety. *If* da guilty coul' get foa sacred place, da kupuna coul' pray an' make talk foa the gods.'

Reach the place of safety. Like a cosmic game of 'tag'.

Alaka'i fumbled around in the darkness, then produced a small bottle which he uncorked, took a swig and then passed it over to me. Even before I brought it to my mouth, I could smell it was the same drink – *okolehao* – that Na'ouao had given us. 'Dere is an old story, yeah? Do yo' know da tale of Ku-ala?'

I confessed I had not.

'It 'um old story, foa da times wen da gods were being found. Ku-ala lived wid his wife. An' wen he fish'd, he caught whatever he wanted, an' so he always kept a well-stocked pond which wen used to feed da king. Dere was also a *pubi* – an eel-god – named Koonā. Dere was also a great shark dat make beef wid da eel. It was long battle, but da eel caused part of da cliff face to fall onto da shark dat wen kill'd 'um. But it also opened an underwater

cave where da eel den lived.’

My muscles were unwinding, relaxed by his soporific voice.

‘Now, it happ’n dat Ku-ala noticed dat fish was missing foa his pond. He watched foa da day an’ foa da night and bumbye saw dat Koonā come foa da underwater cave. So Ku-ala gaddered da villagers an’ dey set out in two canoes wid *ili hau* ropes, any fathoms long, an’ a hook, an’ two big stones. When dey come foa da place, Ku-ala took da rock in his hands an’ jumpt over. Da weight carried him foa da bottom of da ocean when dat he saw da mout’ of da cave. He den wen come back an’ baited da hook wid coconut an’ fixt ‘um to da *ili hau* rope. Den he wen take da second stone an’ jumpt over again, taking da hook an’ rope wid him. An’ he hooked da *pubi* and wen he surface, he signal da people of da canoes foa paddle across da ‘Alenuihāhā Channel foa da island of Maui where the *pubi* was dragged on top da pahoehoe stones an’ den Ku-ala’s son killed it wid three ala stones.’

Alaka’i fell silent. I waited for him to continue, but there was nothing.

‘What happened next?’

‘Dat’s anodder tale,’ Alaka’i said. He shifted on his blanket. ‘It’s foa anodder time. But it end bad foa Ku-ala an’ his wife.’ He turned onto his side, away from me. He wasn’t going to say any more and I wasn’t going to push it. Soon Alaka’i’s breathing became low and rhythmic, and I was left staring at the swirls of the stars – so many millions, and so bright it was almost impossible to pick out the familiar constellations. And, drifting towards sleep, all I could hear was the distant throbbing that Alaka’i had said was the beat of the nightmarchers.

The night had seemed long, one of those nights where I felt I

hadn't slept, but I suppose I must have drifted in and out. I sensed the change in the east long before the birds began to call and before the dawn broke. The stars had begun to fade and lavender started to spill across the sky, followed by a spread of peach shimmering across the mist that rose as the earth's vapours started to warm. The tropical birds began their noisy calling. And then the sun broke through, spilling light across the hillside, and spreading warmth to where Alaka'i and I had camped, dragging the day with it. It was a day which, looking back, I wish I could have avoided.