



NO EXIT

QREADS

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Kimo looked around. Earlier, he'd seen someone who looked like a security guard. But now the guy was out of sight. Kimo stared at the rack of cool, expensive belts in front of him. He reached for one as he pulled out the elastic waistband of his sweat pants. He let the length of the belt drop down the inside of his pantleg. The belt buckle stuck out, held up by the elastic, but it was hidden by his jacket.

He looked around again. Now the security guard was there—right there—staring at him. Kimo froze. But what was this? Instead of moving in on him, the security guy *smiled*.

Kimo couldn't believe it. He walked away

quickly, before the guy changed his mind. Besides the belt, Kimo had a ring, a wallet, and a watch hidden in his jacket. It was time to leave the mall.

He walked toward the south exit of Lane's department store, the one nearest the bus stop. Another security guard was there, standing right next to the exit. He turned back into the mall. He walked past Computer Planet, Touchstone Books, Candy Land, and Electronics Unlimited. He paused in front of a new SUV, which was first prize in a drawing. Frowning, he pretended to read the contest rules. A crowd of people were streaming out the main exit. As he tried to blend in, he saw two security guards, a man and woman, stationed at both sides of the exit.

Tension tightened the back of Kimo's neck. He went back into Lane's, weaving in and out of the clothing displays. It was nearly dinnertime; the crowd of shoppers was thinning out.

When no one was watching, he headed

to another exit from Lane's and joined the crowd leaving the store. He heaved a sigh of relief as he pushed open the door. Outside, he felt a heavy blast of heat from the humid summer night.



Then suddenly, a hand fell on his shoulder—a strong, hard hand.

“Security,” a man said quietly as he gripped Kimo’s arm.

“Come with us, please.” Kimo looked around. Another guard was on his left.

Anger and frustration rose in his chest—but he knew better than to run. One time he’d done that at another mall. Three security guards had chased him into a dumpster. When they caught him, they’d broken two of his fingers before dragging him back to the store.

These two guys were smooth. The people around them didn’t notice what was going on when Kimo was led back into Lane’s. The men took him to the top floor. All around the

huge room, rolls of carpet lay in neat stacks. The guards walked Kimo up to what looked like a blank, white wall. Then one of them turned a white handle, and a door opened inward.

Kimo was led down a dim hallway to a large office. A thick carpet with intricate patterns was spread out on the floor. Soft yellow lights made the walls glow as if the room was lit by candles. A handsome man sat behind an enormous desk. His expression was kind and mild. When he spoke, Kimo felt a shiver run down his spine. The man's voice was deep and dark and full. It seemed to vibrate through Kimo's head.

"Come in, son. My name is Dieous," he said. "Security says you have a belt, a ring, a wallet, and a watch. Let me see them, please."

As if hypnotized, Kimo obeyed, laying the stolen goods on the polished surface of the desktop.

Dieous fingered the ring. "That's quite a diamond," he said. "How did you manage this? Tell me your secret."

“I asked the clerk to show me the rings,” Kimo mumbled. “When he put them on the counter, I asked about another item—so he’d have to look away. That’s when I switched the fake diamond ring for the real one.”

“I imagine you’re very fast,” said Dieous. “And this watch—it’s the most expensive one we sell. You used the same method?”

Kimo nodded.

Dieous pushed the items across the desktop. He smiled at Kimo and said, “They’re yours.”

Kimo gaped at him. Dieous smiled and turned to a young guy about Kimo’s age who was standing nearby. Kimo hadn’t noticed him before.

“Bobby,” Dieous said, “take this boy shopping.”



Nodding, Bobby took Kimo downstairs to the men’s department. “What is this?” Kimo asked him. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bobby said. “Dieous

likes you. You're set."

"Set for what?" Kimo asked.

"You like these jackets?" Bobby asked.

Kimo nodded. He'd never even tried to steal a jacket as nice as these!

"Why don't you try one on?" Bobby suggested. "Go ahead."

Forty minutes later, Kimo was wearing all new clothes. "Tight threads," Bobby said. "You got good taste, buddy."

"I can't believe I get to keep these," Kimo said uncertainly.

"Dieous owns this mall," Bobby said with a shrug. "He's generous."

"But what does he want from me?" Kimo asked suspiciously.

"He just wants you to stick around. You getting hungry yet?" Bobby asked, as he headed toward the food court.

Kimo frowned. "What do you mean 'stick around'? Maybe I don't want to."

Bobby raised an eyebrow. "You got some place you'd rather be?" he said.

Kimo thought of the streets where he

usually hung out. Just last week a guy there had held a knife to his neck and robbed him. No—right now there was no place he'd rather be.

At the food court, Bobby told Kimo to order anything he wanted. Kimo had a steak. Two young women walked by, and Kimo could tell they were checking him out. He felt great. "Can I have another steak?" he asked.

Bobby laughed. "Pretty soon you'll stop asking," he said. "Come on, let's go. He'll be waiting for us."



Dieous smiled as Kimo came into his office. He motioned for Kimo to sit down next to his large desk.

"Uh—could you tell me what this is all about now?" Kimo asked nervously.

Dieous put his long fingers together and leaned close to Kimo. "Indeed I can. This place is about protection and belonging—happiness that you never thought was possible." His voice wasn't loud, but it filled