

Ritual

Mike crouches behind a bush and watches intently, spying on a particular spot in the forest. This particular spot has played host to a few drunken parties that leave a big mess lately, and Mike is determined to stop it. The chief ranger has given Mike a blank check to stop these parties. Mike doesn't have to wait long, as soon after he gets settled in his overwatch position, he can hear twigs snapping and leaves crunching as a group approaches. Mike shifts around in anticipation, and one of the teens looks in his direction. Mike freezes, and holds his breath. Another one approaches the bush where Mike is hiding and starts rustling around, and this causes Mike to jump in surprise and pop out of the bush.

Mike yelps in surprise as soon as he comes out and stammers, "Wh-what are you kids doing out here?"

"We're just..." One of the younger teens looks to an older one, unsure of himself, and then the oldest one of the group chimes in.

"We're just checking out the forest. We aren't doing anything."

"I know you kids are up to something, you've been having parties here at night!"

"What are you talking about?" There's a tinge of uneasiness in the oldest one's voice, but he keeps his composure. "We're just enjoying nature."

"I..." Mike starts and then realizes he has no real proof these are the kids who are having parties, as all he's found in the past is the trash that was left

behind. He sighs, then tips his hat to them. "Sorry, I had just assumed. Be on your way, just make sure you don't leave anything behind, aye?"

"Yeah, we won't." The oldest one smiles a knowing smile, and then they continue on.

Mike walks back to the ranger station and heads back inside, frustrated. He was *sure* those were the kids who have been partying all night, but he can't really stop them without any proof. He sits at his desk, thinking long and hard about what to do. He eyes a book that he's been reading about Native American rituals, and picks it up. One section he had bookmarked covered a particular stealth ritual that he found interest in. He reads more into it, the ritual promising to give the heightened senses and the reflexes of a feline predator, though it's a bit vague on what exactly it means. Frustrated, he studies the ritual closely, planning to perform it tonight and hoping to catch those teens in the act.

Later that night, Mike heads out of the ranger station, with the book. He finds a nice, secluded spot in the forest and opens the book, flipping to the section with the ritual. He reads it over a few more times, memorizing everything, then puts the book down. He gets into the starting position, crouching down with his hands in front of him and shifts around to get comfortable. He closes his eyes and focuses on shutting everything out. Soon, he can visualize himself in a void, nothing around him, no sounds. Only himself. He absentmindedly begins humming softly as his meditation intensifies.

Within a few minutes, sandy brown fur slowly begins sprouting around Mike's body. His fingers and toes start by cramping, and then becoming stockier as his thumbs and big toes become much smaller and slide up. His nails turn a

solid black color, thicken, and sink deep into his digits as new muscles grow in to allow the new claws to retract. Fur spreads up his arms and legs, as his feet begin to grow longer, while thinning out, and heels pop and crick as his feet become digitigrade.

Mike's jaw stretches forward and his teeth sharpen. His eyes sting slightly as they turn a golden brown color and his brown hair becomes shorter, but thicker as it merges with the fur growing around his head. His ears slide up to the top of his head and stretch up, becoming rounded triangles.

This movement snaps Mike out of his meditation, and he looks down at his hands and feet. "What the hell?" The changes stop as he comes out of meditation, and he looks at the book again, and everything clicks.

"I'm...becoming a mountain lion?" Several things run through his head, but soon he realizes that this would be the ultimate disguise. He could sneak up on them easily and give them a good scare that would keep them from coming back and causing trouble anymore like this. He'd figure out how to change back later. He gets back into the crouching position and closes his eyes, shutting everything out and continuing the meditation.

A ropey, long tail snakes out from his pants and Mike shifts around again to make room for the new tail. As he shifts, his back pops and he hunches forward, just as his shoulders merge inward. His body slims out, but also bulks with more muscle than he had before. Soon, his hips slide inward as well, and a set of whiskers slowly push out from the sides of his new feline muzzle. Mike, even deep in his meditative state, can sense the changes have finished, leaving him as a

mountain lion that would not look out of place at all among the others that live in the forest.

He opens his eyes and looks around, and smiles, revealing his sharp, feline predatory teeth. It isn't long before he has a chance to test out his new senses, as he can hear people approaching. He quickly runs behind a bush, stumbling on his new legs, and crouches, watching and waiting to pounce. The dark night lit only by the moon hides him quite well this time. Coming into view are the teens from earlier that day, clearly drunk as they are very rowdy. One of them tosses an empty bottle and it smashes against a tree, leaving broken glass everywhere around it. Mike growls, and the teens stop and look around frantically.

“You hear that?”

“...Yeah...probably nothing, though, I mean there's lots of things out here. Let's keep going.”

The teens continue to a small clearing in the forest and one of them fumbles together a campfire that looks rather dangerous. Another pours vodka all over the campfire, recklessly getting some onto the ground surrounding it. One of them takes out a lighter and is about to light the fire when Mike pounces forward from the bushes, landing just by the fire between it and one of the younger teens. He looks around at them and growls at them, pacing around the small makeshift camp, low to the ground, ready to pounce again if anyone tries anything. The teens all freeze, and then soon scatter.

Mike sits down and smiles, his job done, these kids won't be back anytime soon, and certainly won't be causing any more trouble. He saunters back over to the bush where he performed the ritual and looks through the book, clumsily

pawing at it to turn the pages. He flips back and forth through the book, each time looking more and more desperate. Finally, he gives up. He can't find a way to reverse the ritual. Mike sighs, and then paces around, contemplating what to do now.

"I can't go back to the ranger station...they'll just think I'm a wild mountain lion and tag me or something...I can't go home or really anywhere else, otherwise I might get shot...what the hell am I gonna do now?" He ponders his options, every one of them getting shot down quickly. He soon realizes he's stuck like this, and his best bet is to make the most of it.

Mike paces around the forest, getting adjusted to walking on four legs. He also takes some time to practice pouncing and sneaking. Soon, he feels he's got everything down and he makes his decision, he's going to continue to live out the rest of his life as a wild mountain lion, guarding the forest from those who wish to desecrate it like those teens from that night. He sleeps on top of the book so it doesn't get lost and then, the next morning, gets up and calmly walks to the ranger station. He sits down and hollars a couple of times, which gets the attention of one of the other rangers inside.

The ranger comes out of the station, and looks around and stops when he sees Mike. He calmly goes back inside, and Mike continues to wait. He knows that nothing bad is happening, he's just getting things ready. Soon, the other ranger comes back out with a tool, and a tag. He slowly approaches Mike and Mike simply sits still, and allows his ear to be tagged with a tracker, and with that he's just another mountain lion among the rest. The ranger goes back inside with

a sigh of relief that the strange lion didn't give any trouble, and Mike wanders off to patrol the forest, watching for any further troublemakers.