

Chapter 1

Jungle Fugitives

A frightened band of fugitives huddled together on a beach on the island of Kurutarae in the Solomons. They were thankful for the dark, moonless night.

“We must work quickly before we are discovered,” whispered their leader. “Here’s my plan. The men will go out into the lagoon, but stay close to the reef. Try to catch enough fish to last several days. The women and children hunt for fallen coconuts and any other wild foods available. When daylight comes, we’ll hide our canoes and search the jungle for a place to live.” He pointed at the solid wall of vegetation not far from the beach, visible even in the darkness.

However, even as he spoke, Chief Tatangu knew that the comparative safety they enjoyed on the remote island of Kurutarae would last only as long as they were not discovered by the warriors from the villages around Marovo Lagoon on New Georgia Island.

Immediately each member of the clan followed Chief Tatangu’s instructions, listening intently while they worked. Would their keen ears be able to detect the sound of approaching canoes above the pounding of the surf on the coral reef?

Crouching on the sand, the chief’s little son, barely five years old, watched his father and the other men go out to fish in the darkness. What was that awful feeling that clutched at his heart? Why had they left their village, their homes, and their gardens? he wondered. Why couldn’t he play under the coconut tree his father had planted for him the day he was born? And worst of all, why did he have to leave the little canoe his father had made for him?

The child’s older cousin, Pana nudged him. “Come, Kata Rangoso,” he said. “We must hurry before the daylight comes. Here, let me hold your hand. We can find coconuts together.”

Just a touch from the cousin he loved as his own brother took some of the fear from the little boy’s heart.

Out on the reef, Kata Rangoso’s strong father faced very real fears that his little son did not yet understand. As he fished, Chief Tatangu thought of the tribal skull houses adorned with their gruesome relics of victory. Would his skull be the next prize of some enemy warrior in a new excursion of murder and plunder? Why, he wondered, did the

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devil priests and witch doctors of the lagoon villages constantly receive messages from the spirits goading the headhunters on to fresh conquests?

The year was 1907, and as yet no missionary had brought the good news of Jesus and His love to the Solomon Islands. The chief wondered whether he would ever take his clan back to their prosperous village of Bambata on beautiful Marovo Lagoon - a reef-enclosed waterway that skirts the large islands of New Georgia and Vangunu?

The chief felt a tug on his line, tested it, but found that it was a false alarm. Perhaps it had caught on a piece of debris at the bottom of the lagoon.

He leaned back, and his thoughts raced back across the years to the time when the white traders first came to the Solomon Islands. Recognizing an opportunity to better his people's lot in life, he had encouraged them to cooperate with the white man, to make friends with him, and adopt his ways. He realized that just as the traders had things his villagers coveted, so did his people have things the traders wanted.

Tatangu taught his villagers how to make dried coconut, called copra. They split ripe coconuts in half, placed them face down on drying frames, covered them, and lighted a fire beneath them. Twelve hours later they removed the dried meat with a porpoise bone or a sharp stick. When the traders came, the people of Bambata Village had baskets loaded with copra to exchange for goods from the white man.

Tatangu learned that the traders valued trochus shells, from which they cut buttons for their clothes. He organized his people to collect the cone-shaped shells that washed into the shallow waters of the reef. Expert divers, the men and boys also found pearl oysters that contained sparkling little gems that greatly pleased the traders.

The enterprising chief discovered that the traders also valued the tropang, a sea slug, about a foot long and several inches thick, that abounded in the lagoon waters. Cleaned, boiled, and dried, this creature was a rare delicacy to the white man. The jungles of the Solomon Islands also abounded with hard woods that the traders could find nowhere else in the world. Tatangu taught his people how to find and cut these trees for trade.

With all these products, the Bambata villagers bargained easily for prized cloth, steel axes, and other articles of value to them, including many bright trinkets.

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However, the peace-loving chief had discouraged his people from obtaining muskets and ammunition from the unprincipled traders. Unfortunately, the chiefs of nearby villages did not share his high ideals. They saw in these weapons an increased ability to pay back old grudges or to avenge their jealousy against a fellow villager.

In due time they also began killing the white man. Evil slave hunters, called "blackbirders," posed as traders. They enticed the islanders into the holds of their ships to see pretty beads and trinkets, then slammed the hatches shut and sailed away to sell their hapless victims as slaves to plantation owners in far-off lands. Thus the island people grew to hate every white man, and wholesale killings of the traders occurred whenever possible.

Tatangu, weary of the constant bloodshed, became a peacemaker among his people. He refused to take part in the cold-blooded killing of the traders who came to Marovo Lagoon, or to loot and burn their ships. He concentrated instead on learning which white men he could trust and continued trading with them.

Rival chiefs grew jealous of Tatangu's wealth in pigs and shell money. Noting his successful dealings with the traders, they accused him of being too friendly with the white man and betraying ancient tribal customs. Neighboring villagers began sneaking into Bambata at night to kill pigs, ruin gardens, or steal coconuts.

Another jerk on the line interrupted Tatangu's thoughts. Ah, this time he had hooked a big one! Playing it skillfully, he soon landed a large tuna in his canoe. Glancing at the sky, he noticed the first streaks of dawn in the eastern sky. He quickly cast his line for one more fish. Only a few minutes remained before they must hide in the bush.

A short time later Tatangu signaled the other fishermen to follow him to the shore. Quickly they unloaded their catch and dragged their canoes to a secluded spot. With their bush knives they penetrated the wall of vegetation and hacked out branches, palm fronds, and ferns to conceal their canoes from anyone from another village who chanced to paddle near their reef.

The chief surveyed the small piles of coconuts, taro root, edible ferns, and clusters of bananas and papayas that the women and children had gathered in their search for food.

"Good, very good," he said with a smile. "Put them in baskets to carry on your heads and in bags for your backs. Take the rest in your hands. The children must carry all they can also. There's so little food

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in the jungle where we're going." The chief glanced at the sky. "But hurry! The sun will soon bring light, and we must not be seen here."

Leaving the sandy beach, the villagers from Bambatu brushed their footprints with palm fronds and followed their chief single file up a steep mountain slope and through an expanse of tiger grass that grew ten feet high. Directly they approached a jungle so thick that there seemed to be no opening into the solid mass of vegetation. Suddenly Chief Tatangu ducked forward and disappeared straight into the bush wall. Only an experienced woodsman could have found that trail - an opening overgrown with a thick curtain of leaves. Behind it stretched a dark tunnel the size of a man.

Still climbing, the hikers emerged from the tunnel into what seemed like a vast, black cave. They saw no underbrush now - not one sign of a green thing growing on the forest floor. Instead, gigantic tree trunks, spaced wide apart, rose straight up, branching out 80 to 100 feet overhead into a solid ceiling of leaves through which filtered only a glimmer of light. Below, knotting and twisting around the powerful roots of the trees, vines crawled like strangling pythons up and around the trunks. No wonder there were no low branches. Only the tops of the trees struggling toward the sun could hope to keep ahead of such a network of parasites!

The fleeing clan sloshed through black muck and around huge aerial roots. In spite of the cold air, their black bodies glistened with sweat as they climbed up the steep mountain slope. Each labored breath brought to their nostrils the pungent odor of rotting leaves and wood. Though many of the giant trees had fallen, there was no break in the leaf canopy overhead.

Suddenly Pana stopped and pointed up at a group of strange dark creatures in the trees. "Look at all the flying foxes!" he shouted. "Don't they look funny, hanging head down from the vines?" He tossed a stick, disturbing the whole mass. Instantly they circled and settled a few feet beyond. But one swooped close to Kata Rangoso. In fear he stepped back, slipped in the sticky mud, and fell onto a thorn-covered vine. The child cried out in pain, and blood oozed from several places where the thorns penetrated his skin.

His father, at the head of the line, heard his son's cry and turned to see how badly the child had been hurt. As he turned, he spotted a bit of yellow and green hidden in the vines overhead. Reaching up, he grasped a cluster of orchids. Then hurrying to his crying son, he picked him up and presented the lovely gift.

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At the sight of the flowers the little fellow stopped crying. His father placed them in his chubby little hand, smiled, and said, "You hold the flowers, and I'll hold you. How's that for a good idea?"

Then, striding back to the front of the line, he continued the difficult climb.

"Daddy, what makes that croaking, barking noise?" Kata Rangoso asked a few minutes later.

"Someday I shall teach you the sounds of the insects, birds, and animals," his father said. "The jungle is full of thumpings and screechings. Listen closely, and when we have more time I'll help you make many new friends."

But there was one sound that little Kata Rangoso knew well. A buzzing, singing noise surrounded him. It was the dreaded anopheles mosquito that lived on the blood of its victims and often transmitted the terrible malaria.

As they trudged up the hill, a new sound from far away rumbled over the treetops and drowned out all others. The sound became a roar, and the darkness deepened.

"A storm is coming!" Tatangu announced. Even on the forest floor he felt the first gusts of wind. Above them a whirlwind struck with an intense howl. Flashes of lightening seemed to split the canopy overhead, briefly illuminating the vines that slashed about in the fierce wind. Showers of leaves and dead limbs fell around the hikers.

Then came the rain! It fell from the high branches with a deafening roar, not in drops, but in streams. The tree trunks became upright rivers, drenching the hikers with bucketfuls of water. Their trail turned into a torrent, pouring fresh water onto the already saturated earth.

Kata Rangoso shouted into his father's ear: "Daddy, hold me close. I'm scared. Please take me home."