Chapter One

No Devil Strings

The crowing of cocks in the village awakened Chief Tatangu. As he opened his eyes, soft fingers of light filtered through the palm-leaf walls of the hut, announcing the break of dawn. Soon a pair of parakeets began a stream of lively chatter from the maria-nut tree that grew beside the hut. Tatangu turned his head to listen for sounds of stirring in the house.

His daughter Nomi breathed softly as she lay curled up and still asleep on her mat in the far corner. The childish gurgling of Peo, his two-year-old son, came from the doorway of the hut, and he could hear the noisy squawking of a hen. Tatangu rose from his bamboo bed and took a few steps toward the door. His son's naked body bounced happily in the low doorway as he scattered pieces of sweet potato to a hen and her brood of chicks. Several days before, the boy had cried for hours when his mother went away, but now he seemed content enough.

The chief walked past his son, nudging the boy gently with his bare toes until he giggled. Then, as Tatangu stepped into the coolness of the morning, he straightened his back and drew a deep breath. He caught the heavy scent of tropical flowers, and the damp earth smelled rich and good. He brushed by the maria-nut tree, and the parakeets fled in a streak of rainbow colors to the safety of the deep jungle.

Today Tatangu felt strangely happy. The dawn had chased away the fears and dangers of the night, and he knew that on this day the gods smiled upon him - a day suitable for new ventures.

He strolled along the shore of the lagoon. Its still waters mirrored a perfect reflection of the tall coconut palms which edged the curving shoreline. Already the rising sun had tinted gold the string of small islands that dotted the line of the distant reef. Beyond the reef surged the deep-blue sea where flying fish skimmed the surface and playful dolphins dived and rolled, and where makasi the big tuna fish lived.

Tatangu scanned the clear sky and saw belama birds flying out to sea for a day's fishing. He too would fish today in his new canoe, and the men of the village would accompany him; for during this season makasi swarmed in great numbers from their sea haunts to visit Marovo Lagoon.

The new canoe rested on poles under the trees near the coral beach. Tatangu had named it Divi-divi, the shining pearl oyster, and for a moment he paused to admire its long graceful lines. He ran his fingers over the smooth pearl-shell inlay on its high prow and thought with pride of the months of loving labor that he and his men had spent in shaping this craft of beauty.

They had felled a noble tree in the forest, a tree carefully selected for its strength and straightness, and then with the thin, arched blades of their adzes they had shaped it and hollowed it to a shell of perfect symmetry. Hand-hewn planks, carefully fitted, lashed, and caulked with native putty, were added to the proud hull for greater depth. Seven men could stretch out head to toe in the length of it, and its beam measured more than the width of a man's shoulders. They had designed it so well that they would need no outrigger for balance. An experienced crew could balance it with ease, even while paddling at great speed.

Tatangu glanced at Rutu's new canoe which rested nearby. He had to admit that his friend had also built a fine craft. Yes, today there would be keen competition to see which canoe would have the honor of catching the first fish. The men of Marovo Lagoon practiced fishing according to ancient tribal rules and always presented the first catch in a special ceremony to Inaru, the spirit-god of the makasi.

Now the chief hurried back to his palm-thatched house where a servant woman had already prepared the morning meal for him and his two children. As he strode past the village huts, the people greeted him with respect; for Tatangu's mature wisdom and his tall, muscular body with skin that shone like polished ebony commanded respect and admiration. His first wife had died with her two children when a strange disease came to the lagoon villages, wiping out many of the people. And after the great sickness had left the village, Tatangu remained wifeless for a time. A chief must take care in choosing a second wife, and he had to amass a chiefly bride-price-a large sum in hand-made shell money and many fat pigs.

When he did remarry, he chose Sambenaru, a pretty young girl from a village at the other end of the island. His new wife had borne him Nomi and Peo, and even now she had secluded herself in a small hut in the clump of buni trees outside the village to await the birth of their third child. Nosi, the sister-in-law of Sambenaru, had gone to the hut to attend her, and two other village women attended also; but they permitted no man to go near the place of birth, nor did any man desire

to do such a thing. Everyone knew that a man should never hear the first cry of a baby.

As Tatangu and the other men readied their canoes and prepared the lines and pearl-shell hooks for the day's fishing, a girl came running with the news that Sambenaru had borne a healthy baby boy. Tatangu felt pleased that his wife had given him another son, but he knew that he would not see him for twenty days. When his wife had finished her time of cleansing, she would bring the baby back to the village.

As the chief thought of his new son, he finished preparing his lines and hooks and joined his servant men in launching the new canoe. These servants belonged to him. He had taken them as slaves, trophies of war, when he had led his warriors on raiding parties to other islands. The men of the Solomon Islands were fierce warriors and skilled seafarers, taking their great war canoes long distances to harass other tribes. Headhunting, cannibalism, and human sacrifice had been a way of life for generations. A young brave collected the heads of his enemies to prove his manhood.

But for today, Tatangu and his men planned a peaceful foray. Muscles rippled beneath their dark skins, and paddles flashed in perfect rhythm as their canoes sped over smooth waters to the fishing grounds. Seabirds swooping for small fish showed them where makasi the tuna hunted. Attacked from above and below, the small fry had little chance, but now the canoe men moved in to take the big fish - fierce marauders of the sea.

As the men brought out their bamboo fish poles, they began to whisper among themselves and to glance slyly at Tatangu's canoe. They whispered to each other that the chief had failed to decorate his craft with the special charm strings, made from the rangoso vine, used to invoke the blessing of Inaru, devil-god of the fisherman. Why had he neglected this important rite? Everyone knew that a fishing trip could not be successful without the favor of Inaru. Perhaps the birth of his new son had so occupied his mind that he had forgotten. Or maybe he hoped to defy the devils, to prove that he did not need their help to catch fish. But the men kept their murmuring quiet, for it could mean a man's life to criticize the chief.

As the fishing got under way, the men trailed their unbaited hooks in the sea, waiting for the tuna to snap at the bright pearl-shell lures. Several men in each canoe paddled slowly as the lines trailed in the troubled waters. This type of fishing required special skill, for success

depended on matching the lures with the little fish that the tuna hunted.

Tatangu's men watched the other new canoe uneasily. They saw Rutu change his lure and cast again. They caught their breath when a tug came at his line. He raised his rod quickly, but the fish released its grip and slid back into the safety of the sea. Rutu tried again. The head man in each canoe hoped to make the first catch; and Rutu, like all the other head men except Tatangu, had taken care to hang many devil strings about his canoe.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Tatangu jerked his rod and hooked a big one. He played it skillfully and soon landed the tuna in his canoe. The men drew back to make room for the fish. It flopped on the floor, threshing its huge tail, flashing iridescent blue in the morning light - a most suitable offering for Inaru. The other men could barely conceal their amazement, but already Tatangu had cast his line for another fish.

Some other canoes began to have success; and when the tuna moved away, the fishermen followed the belama birds to new waters, for to take home a full catch meant a feast and celebrations for the whole village. The sun rose to its zenith and began to sink in the west, and the canoes started on the long journey home. They had wandered far that day in search of the swift makasi.

In the evening as they approached their seaside village, the weary but exultant fishermen beat their paddles against the canoes in a special rhythm to announce a good haul. And Chief Tatangu's new canoe held more fish than all the others.

The people of Bambata talked and raised their eyebrows and marveled, for the news had spread throughout the village that the chief had launched his new canoe without decorating it with devil charms.

Then Tatangu remembered his new son, still hidden in the hut in the clump of buni trees. "I shall name him Kata Rangoso," he announced, and the villagers looked at each other and shook their heads and whispered the name in awe, for it meant, "no devil strings."

As Tatangu pronounced the name of his helpless son, born under primitive jungle conditions in a low thatched hut, he could not know to what extent Kata Rangoso would indeed defy the devils, becoming a leader of his people, with his name spoken and honored around the world.