

Chapter 1

Intrigue at the Garden House

The city of Jayapura blazed with the glow of the late afternoon sun. Its brilliant light reflected in the shop windows so that workers returning home squinted as they hurried to catch their buses. The harbor, like a smooth orange mirror, was specked with phantomlike ships; and an outboard-motored, hollowed-out log canoe put-putted out to sea, its wake cracking the glassy surface. Along the shore, coconut palms stood like tall, gently swaying sentinels, silhouetted against the orange inferno. Tourists darted about, snapping photos and inquiring from one another about light and exposure time and marveled at the beauty of the city.

Unimpressed by the spectacle, young Juno Eremur trudged up the hill toward his father's garden. He had only one thought in mind - food! Barefoot, he strode up the path, his eyes fixed on the thatched garden house just a few meters above him. Suddenly he stumbled, having stubbed his toe on a stone. With a howl, he dropped his bush knife and hopped about for a moment; then he sat down by the roadside and examined his bleeding toe.

"I'm so hungry," he mumbled, "my legs won't even hold me up properly. My toe hurts, but I think the pain in my stomach is worse." He looked about him; then reaching over, he picked a tuft of moss and a broad leaf from a nearby plant and used them to bind up his toe. Once more he clutched his bush knife firmly in his hand and hobbled on up the hill.

Juno attended a boarding school in the country, but this was one of his infrequent free weekends. Although he enjoyed school, he always looked forward to coming home to see his father on his free time. It had been so long since his last leave that, this Friday, he had decided to miss lunch at school and catch an earlier bus to the city. At home, he found his father had just returned from work and had not had time to go to the garden to get the food for the weekend.

"Don't worry, Dad, I'll go," Juno had said. "It's ages since I've walked up to the garden. I should be back in an hour. You get the fire going and I'll get the food."

"That's fine, Son." Eremur, his father, smiled his approval. "I dug the taro last week and cut the bananas. You'll find them in the garden

WHEN THE FUSE IS LIT

house. There should be some ripe bananas. I have to pick them before the flying foxes get them. They're really bad at the moment."

And so Juno set out up the hill to the garden.

"That's funny," he thought, approaching the garden house. "The door's ajar. Dad must not have shut it properly when he put the food away last week. And yet he is always giving me lectures about bolting the door to keep the animals out. Unless -"

He stepped forward and gently pushed the door open wider. There was a rustle of movement inside. Juno's stomach contracted, and his heart began to beat rapidly.

"Who's there?" he asked in almost a whisper.

No one replied. There was silence except for the sighing of the wind in the bamboo at the edge of the garden, and down in the harbor a boat siren sounded.

Juno took another step forward. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the garden house, he could see the taro stacked against the bamboo wall and the outline of three bunches of bananas hanging from the rafters. He pushed the door open wider, and then, starting back, he raised his bush knife.

"What are you doing here!" he shouted. "You thieves! Stealing my father's food."

"Ssh. Don't shout." The command came from one who seemed to have authority. "We're not thieves. We are waiting for Eremur. This is his garden house, isn't it?"

"That's right. I am his son, Juno."

"Where is your father?"

"He is back at the house. I have come to get the food for our meal."

Juno could see quite clearly now the outline of two men sitting with their backs against the wall of the house. The whites of their eyes reflected the light from the door.

"We want to see your father," the man who seemed to be the leader said.

"Who are you?" Juno asked. "Old friends of your father."

"Just let me collect this taro and some bananas, and I'll take you to him," Juno said.

"We can't go yet. Wait till it gets dark. We don't want to be seen," the leader stated.

Juno forgot about his hunger and his aching toe. His mind teemed with a thousand questions that he was too afraid to ask. Was his father

WHEN THE FUSE IS LIT

in some kind of trouble? What did these men want with him? What had been happening while he was away at school?

He hardly recognized his own voice as he hesitatingly agreed, “OK. If that’s what you want.” He went inside and gently kicked aside some taro to make room for himself and then sat opposite the two men.

“It won’t be long now. The sun has almost gone.” He said it more to reassure himself than to enlighten his companions.

In silence the three waited for the darkness to come.