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THE
SILENT
ONE

Joy Cowley

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CONTENTS

This book is for John Bradley McCormick
and his parents, Anne and Ken.

1	A Gift from the Sea	7
2	The Story of Old Luisa	15
3	The Turtle Returns	22
4	Friends and Enemies	25
5	Some Make Plans for Jonasi	35
6	Others Plot against the Boy	41
7	A Trap Baited with Honey	46
8	The Fury of the Gods	56
9	Sad Journeys	61
10	Vueti Makes a Decision	71
11	The Arrival of the Redbeard	78
12	A Time of Farewell	83
	Conclusion	95

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CHAPTER 1

A GIFT FROM THE SEA

On the day of the pig hunt, Jonasi went out on the reef.

No one saw him leave the village. He ran through the trees to the beach where his bamboo raft lay, and as he dragged it along the white sand, water flooded his eyes. The sun melted and ran down the sky, and the coconut palms along the shore trembled as though in a strong wind.

Jonasi bent his head and wiped his face on his arm. He pushed the raft into the water, lying on top of it, kneeling, finally sitting with the paddle in his hand. He headed for the edge of the reef.

Beside him lay his new spear, a length of hardwood he'd cut from a raintree, carved, shaped, and polished until he'd come to know it as a friend. It was the best spear he'd ever made, and he knew from the way the other boys looked at it that they envied him. It was far better than the spear Samu had carved, better even than Aesake's, a weapon as delicately balanced as a leaf on water, yet as powerful as lightning.

Now Jonasi looked at it with hate.

He was twelve, he was strong, and he had made himself a spear fit for a chief. Why, then, had they refused him his first pig hunt?

He looked back at the shore and the thatched bures clustered under the palms. With the men away, the village was wrapped in stillness, the beach empty except for a scavenging dog.

Behind the village rose the steep dark mountains, slopes covered in a jungle that hid waterfalls and beasts and many strange birds. Somewhere on those mountains, the pig-hunters were spreading their nets.

All his life, Jonasi had waited for this day. Year after year he'd watched the young men prepare their spears and nets for

the long trek into the jungle. They would leave at sunrise with much energy and good humour and would return at the end of the day with their quarry, big pigs bleeding on poles, ready for the women's fires, and small pigs writhing and trussed with vines. He had watched the dances of welcome and later sat behind the hunters at the feasting, sharing leftovers with the other children.

Every pig hunt he had dreamed of the day when he, too, would go to the green darkness of the mountains.

This should have been his day, but the men had gone without him. They'd taken his thirteen-year-old foster brother Samu, even though Samu was too small to carry his share of the kill. They'd taken Aesake. They'd even taken that foolish Etika whose spear arm was so weak he couldn't hit a canoe at ten paces. But when Jonasi had rushed forward to join them, they'd pushed him back among the old men and women and children.

He didn't know why.

Aesake, who was the chief's son and more of a friend to Jonasi than the other boys of the village, had tried to explain. He'd put his hands over Jonasi's ears, then his mouth. He'd pointed to the mountains, shaken his head with a small smile, and patted Jonasi on the shoulder.

Was it because Jonasi didn't know the meaning of the mouth movements?

He hadn't watched the hunters leave the village. Instead, he had gone back to the bure where he'd lain curled up on his sleeping mat, his mind full of pictures of pain and revenge.

But out here on the reef, the pain was easing. There was no place on the sea for bad feelings of any kind. He knew that whatever his pain was, the sea could always heal it. His paddle guided the raft with hardly a ripple as he studied the shapes that passed beneath him.

He was moving past the village and near the next bay where the fresh water from the river cut a deep path through the coral. He could see ahead the dark blue of the channel and to his right, the brilliant green of the mangroves that crowded the river mouth. Above the mangroves, herons flapped lazily, looking for food.

Today Jonasi was not fishing. He was content to move slowly over the dark glass surface, watching the red and green of the underwater jungle and the fish that flickered through branches of coral like flocks of tiny birds, blue, yellow, glistening bands of black and silver. On the shadowed side of some brain coral, two cowrie shells, spotted brown and white, moved slowly with their occupants. Higher up, a pink starfish spread its many arms in a patch of pink sunlight. Jonasi reached down with the paddle, flicked the starfish over on its back, and laughed. Let them hunt for pigs, he thought. Let them trip over Samu and sit on Etika's spear and walk through thorny vines and nettles. One day he would go into the mountains by himself and bring back his own pig, but in the meantime he was still the best fisherman in the village. No one had his success with a line or a spear or a net. And not a man or a boy carried in his head such a detailed map of the reef. He knew all the shellfish beds, the holes that hid the largest crayfish, the places where fish fed at certain times of the moon, the currents, the tides, the changes that came with storms. The reef, rather than the village, was his home.

Jonasi had not discovered why he was alone in the village. Sometimes people had touched his ears or their own as though they were trying to make him understand something. But to Jonasi it seemed that the difference was with his mouth rather than his ears. He often watched as people moved their lips and jaws. They weren't eating. They were making mouth-signs to each other. He'd tried to do the same, but no one took any notice of him. Yet his reflection in the lagoon showed him a mouth that was the same as theirs.

The village could be a hostile place. Jonasi thought that if only he could breathe like a fish, then he would never go back to the land. It would be so easy to slide under the surface and for ever live in a clear, deep pool between two banks of coral. He smiled at the small things beneath his raft as though they were his family, fish like showers of blue sparks, fish as flat as yellow leaves, leather fish with purple snouts, black and white striped sea snakes with golden eyes, sea horses, parrot fish—he knew them all as well as he knew Samu and Aesake.

The sea was calm today, rising and falling gently as though it

were breathing in an untroubled sleep. Beyond the reef there was deep water marked by a line of white breakers. He paddled toward it.

The pools out here were deeper, so deep in places that the sun barely touched the bottom and the coral grew like giant trees. Jonasi saw a barracuda, brown and yellow and as thick as his thigh, hiding under a coral plate. He pulled in his paddle and reached for his spear. Then he changed his mind. No, not today. He left the barracuda and went on, satisfied with the sun on his back and the movement of the sea beneath him.

Then, over his shoulder, he glimpsed something white in the water. It was in a pool some distance away, pale and glowing, and he thought at first he was seeing some enormous clam shell washed white by the tide. The object was floating an arm's length below the surface, but clam shells didn't float. He turned and paddled toward it. It would have to be something from a ship, he decided. But before he could get close enough to see what it was, it moved. Jonasi stopped paddling. The thing was swimming away.

He stared after it. There was no sea creature of that size and colour, at least none that he knew of, and he was acquainted with the reef better than men five times his age.

It moved without a ripple, a moon-white circle beneath the surface, and in a few seconds it was as far away as it had been when he first sighted it. Then it broke the top of the water. Jonasi gasped.

It was a turtle.

Now he could see flippers, a pale grey head, and the huge circle of shell as white as the flesh of coconut.

Jonasi rubbed his eyes, thinking perhaps the sun had weakened them. It was not unusual to find turtles feeding near the edge of the reef. Sometimes he speared one. More often than not, he would swim swiftly behind it, grab it by the shell, and turn it upside down so that it was helpless. Then it was an easy matter to tie it to the raft and take it back to the village.

But this was not an ordinary turtle. Nor was it a mirage. It stayed there on the surface, large and persistent, as white as foam or bone or sun-dried coral, and shining like oyster shell.

The creature stayed still for some time. So did the boy.

Leaning forward, he stared without moving, disbelief giving way to a small fear. His skin went cold as it did when people gave him bad looks, or when something brushed against him in the dark. His heart flopped against his ribs like a dying fish.

There was no such thing as a white turtle!

His mind moved first. Tonight the men would return from the pig hunt and the women would dance in welcome. Samu and Aesake and Etika would be at the feast with the men, wreathed in flowers and drinking kava. He, Jonasi, would have to sit with the women and children. But what would happen if, at the height of the feasting, Jonasi brought forward a gift for Chief Vueti, something he had never seen before, a present that would make him the envy of every chief on the island?

His heart beat fast, but steady now, as he paddled closer, moving swiftly like a thief. He would leave his spear wedged under the lashings of the raft. That marvellous shell must not be pierced. The only way to catch the turtle was by stealth.

He got as close as he dared, then he placed the paddle with the spear and slipped over the side of the raft. Down he went, down through the blue-green sunlight, until he was swimming well below the turtle. He glided between outcrops of coral that rose in tall columns above him. Bars of light rippled over his body. His shadow slid across the bottom like a dark, flat fish. As he swam, he watched the turtle and counted each stroke between him and that priceless shell.

It had moved slightly and seemed to be feeding beside some coral a little below the surface. He could see the hovering motion of its rear flippers, the grey underside of its body. But it had not seen him.

Jonasi was amazed that he had got this close undetected. Because of the turtle's strange appearance, he had imagined it might be possessed of powers that would give it special awareness. But it had not sensed danger at all. The turtle nosed along the coral, sensing nothing but the small life there. Its flippers turned gently without alarm.

Jonasi kicked forward and reached out. His hands closed on either side of the shell. He had it. The turtle was as big and real and strong as any turtle he'd caught. Its shell was as hard as

a rock against his chest, not white as it had seemed from a distance but a mixture of pale colours, greys and creams and golds that formed a pattern on a blue-white background. The tough skin of its neck and flippers was of the palest grey. Its eyes were pink-rimmed, like those of a very old woman.

Another second and Jonasi would have turned the turtle on its back, but it moved before he did. Without warning, it plunged towards the bottom, the boy still clinging to its shell.

He had to let go. The pressure hurt his head, and he had run out of air. He saw the turtle beneath him, still going down like a sinking moon. Then his head broke the surface, and he was gulping to fill his lungs.

When he went down again, the turtle had gone.

Anger and disappointment grew in his chest, crowding his breath. It had been his own fault. He'd been far too slow in turning it over, too sure of himself. At the feast he would sit like a child with the women, remembering his failure.

The raft had drifted toward the shore. He swam to it, moving slowly, his arms made tired by his anger. He climbed up and lay face-down on the bamboo poles, resting, while the water washed back and forth under his cheek. When his breathing was calm again, he thought that perhaps it was right that the turtle had got away. It was a marvellous creature, a miracle. Surely there would be great evil in killing a beast so rare.

Then his mind brought him pictures of the morning, the men of the hunting party who had pushed him away with heavy blows, their moving mouths, the looks that touched him like poison.

If he'd caught the turtle, he could have placed it at Vueti's feet and then watched all those faces crack open with surprise like so many split mangoes.

The raft rocked as he stood up and grabbed the paddle. He dug deep and with new energy, turning in a great circle over the lagoon. There might yet be a chance of finding the turtle.

The sun was still well above the horizon but already the

air was clouded with smoke from the fires for the evening's feast. Jonasi looked toward the shore and the long line of coconut palms that marked the village.

And he saw the turtle again.

It had not gone. It was swimming between him and the beach, its shell like a mirror reflecting the sun.

Jonasi shaded his eyes and stared at the shape in the water. Then his hand dropped from his forehead. His mouth opened in a smile, and a great warmth went through him.

It was following him.

The turtle was swimming slowly, its head half submerged, small, fan-shaped ripples breaking against its shell. When the sun caught the ripples, they flashed and sparkled so that the shell looked like a great white torch dropping fire into the water.

Jonasi watched. The turtle, aware that the raft was no longer moving, stopped swimming. It nosed the surface and Jonasi saw clearly the sharp, parrot-like jaws and the darkness of the eye. It, too, was watching.

Jonasi gripped the paddle and gently turned the raft. He tried to get closer. The turtle turned, began to swim away. Jonasi stopped. The turtle stopped. Its dark eye seemed to look inside the boy and search out the pictures he'd been carrying in his head. It was suspicious. But it didn't dive.

If he threw his spear from this distance, he would likely get it, but Jonasi didn't look at the spear by his feet. He had been right earlier. It would be a great evil to kill the creature.

He paddled again, but this time away from the turtle, wondering if it would follow, afraid that it would disappear.

It followed. It put its head down and trailed the raft at a distance, the way a seabird followed a fishing canoe.

Land breezes brought the smoke from the cooking fires out across the water, a grey mist that hid the beach and reddened the sun. The turtle bobbed like some white beacon, and Jonasi watched it, head on shoulder, until his neck was stiff and aching.

All his life he'd fished in this lagoon. And always he'd taken his catch back to the village to share it with those same people who gave him bad looks and spat on him. But this he

would not share. The turtle was a gift from the sea and for him alone.

Its discovery was a far greater thing than the pig hunt or any honours from a chief, greater than Vueti himself. It filled Jonasi with a power that made him feel a head taller than any man in the village.

No one had seen what he'd seen today.

It was his turtle, and he would not kill it.

CHAPTER 2 THE STORY OF OLD LUISA

The old woman Luisa came into the bure looking for Jonasi. She carried a present for the Silent One, a leaf full of river prawns which had been caught that morning, pink and tender, still warm from her boiling pot, and so sweet that they would surely heal the bitterness inside the boy.

'Jonasi? Jonasi?' She knew he never had, and never would, hear the sound of her voice, but that did not prevent her from speaking to him. 'Jonasi? See what old Luisa has brought you.'

He wasn't there. As Luisa's eyes refocused in the dimness, she saw that the bure was empty, Jonasi's sleeping mat bare. She put down the prawns and sighed. It was no use looking for him. He'd be out on the reef. She'd have to hide the prawns in a cool place until he returned.

Outside, the afternoon heat had brought silence, a stillness everywhere as though air had set solid around the village. No bird rustled in the leaves, no wind lifted the dust. A heap of coconut husks, burning to heat the feast oven, crumbled without flame, and its smoke went straight up to the sky. Even the hens scratching in the shade seemed to move in a dream.

Luisa stood in her doorway thinking how quiet it was with the men away. 'And good riddance to them,' she muttered. 'All they do is sit under the trees filling themselves with food and foolish chatter. Work? Ha! The Silent One works harder than any of them.' She spat in the dust, still angry because of the bad thing they'd done to Jonasi that morning. She knew why they'd left him behind. It was not Jonasi's fault. The men had been afraid.

It was as well the boy couldn't hear the things they said about him. Because he could neither hear nor speak, they said a demon dwelled within him and held his tongue so that he

could never reveal its true identity. Such nonsense! And this from grown men! Sometimes she longed to be younger so that she could grab them by the hair and crack their idle skulls together.

Bulai and Tasiri would be behind this latest rumour. They always were. If the air was tainted, one knew to blame the rotten meat of the village, fat and lazy Bulai, and Tasiri whose eye flickered like a snake's tongue. It was they who had put fear into the minds of the men this morning, they who had turned Jonasi away.

Now he had gone out on the sea to be lonely, and this worried Luisa. When he was small, he'd come to her for comfort. She'd put her arms around him to protect him from the children who teased and threw stones. But that was years ago. He'd grown too big for her lap, and now he turned to the sea for understanding.

Luisa watched the small lizards that scuttled over the woven walls of the bure, after insects. That's all very well, she thought. Jonasi knows the reef better than he knows the paths on the island, but the sea has no heart. It can rise up and swallow a boy as a lizard swallows a fly.

The afternoon grew old, and still Jonasi did not return. A heavy shower of rain passed, cooling the air and reviving the noise of birds, and the village was scented with the flowers the women had gathered to make garlands for their men. Soon the hunting party would be back from the mountains. All was ready for them. The stones on the fire were hot, and heaped nearby were baskets of dalo root, tapioca, bananas, shellfish, and fat river crabs.

Luisa sat inside her bure, waiting for the Silent One. In her mind she saw his body drifting on the tide, lifeless, turning over and over like a log as the waves nudged it toward the shore. She shuddered with fear. She crawled over to the wooden crucifix that hung above her sleeping mat and eased herself back until she was sitting on her heels.

'Dear God and Jesus and Holy Mother, take care of the Silent One. Bring him back without harm.'

It wasn't until she stood up that she thought of her own flesh and blood, Samu, the youngest of her nine children, little

Samu out on his first pig hunt. She bowed her head. 'Samu, too,' she added.

She went out to the doorway and sat down again to wait. She didn't doubt that God would look after the Silent One, but all the same she cursed the affliction that stiffened her bones and prevented her from going out on the reef to look. What had happened to the boy? Never before had he been away as long as this.

Luisa had always loved children. It was more than the usual love of a mother for her offspring. When she was young, she was never so happy as when nursing a baby over a belly big with yet another. Eight children, she had, eight in as many years and then no more. She didn't know why they stopped. She and her man were still young and both healthy, but time passed and no more babies came.

When her family grew up and moved away to make new homes in other villages, Luisa's loneliness became unbearable. She pined and fretted and grew thin with longing for the days past. The older women gave her advice and made her mixtures of herbs, but no good ever came of them. Luisa remained empty, and her hunger for a child grew worse.

Then Luisa learnt about the church that had been built in the neighbouring village of Ramatau, and she saw yet a small hope. She insisted that her husband take her there every Sunday and help her pray for a baby. Within six months she was pregnant again. Her belly swelled proud and beautiful, and she gave birth to a fine son she called Samu.

But one baby wasn't enough. She wanted another, and soon. It was too difficult to walk to the church with Samu in her arms, so she prayed to another god. When no one was watching, she called on the ancient Snake God, Degei, who had created all the islands and the people on them. To Degei she offered sacrifices of chicken blood. To Degei she prayed for a child.

Again the miracle happened, and once more Luisa was pregnant. But the God of the church was angry with Luisa's faithlessness. He punished her with weeks of bad pain, and when the child was finally born it was dead.

It seemed to Luisa that she must die too, such was her grief.

She lay crying and holding the little corpse until it was taken away from her. She wouldn't eat anything, wasn't interested in the little one, Samu. She wouldn't let her husband comfort her. She lay on her mat moaning night and day.

After two days the God of the church heard her cries and his heart softened towards the wretched woman. He decided to replace her child with another.

The new baby came with the copra boat. The captain brought it into the village and told a story too strange to be believed. It was lying in the bottom of a canoe, he said. No one else. Just a newborn boy in an empty canoe adrift in the middle of the ocean. He took it aboard and headed for the nearest island.

The people of the village didn't want the child. It was not human, they said. It would bring evil in their midst.

Luisa knew better. Happy beyond words, she got up from her mat, cured instantly of sickness in body and soul, and within minutes the foundling boy was in her arms, being nursed as her own child.

The great God had forgiven her.

But not quite. Lest she forget the wrong she had done, the baby's ears had been sealed so that he would never know her voice. Jonasi grew plump and strong and soon was bigger than Samu, but he didn't learn to talk, and Luisa could never tell him why.

The sun was near the horizon, glowing red through smoke and rainclouds, and the small moths of evening fluttered like dried leaves. Soon it would be dark.

Luisa knew that doubt was a sin, but her fear had grown so great, that when Jonasi suddenly appeared in front of her, she shrieked as though he were a ghost.

The Silent One smiled and put a handful of shells in her lap.

Luisa staggered to her feet, scattering the shells on the floor. 'You dog with no heart!' she shrieked. 'Is this how you repay me for all I've done, eh? Worthless one! Even if you could speak, your tongue would die of shame for letting an old woman grow sick with worry. Ah, if my husband were still alive, he would sort you out. A big stick, that's what you need.'

Seeing her anger, Jonasi tried to put his hand on her arm.

'Get away from me,' she cried. 'Go back to the water, you fish of the cold blood. See if I care what becomes of you.' She limped away to fetch the prawns and some slices of dalo. 'Now I suppose you want food. That's why you come back to old Luisa, eh? You think she's useful after all, when your belly is crying.'

She stood, arms folded, and watched him. She knew from the hunger in his eyes and the way he filled his mouth that he hadn't eaten all day. She grew suspicious. 'And why look so pleased with yourself? You don't need to talk to tell me you've been up to something. You stay away from morning to dark and forget to eat, and now you sit grinning like a crazy man.'

Jonasi looked at her, his face alive with some secret. He had caught no fish. What had he been doing all day?

Luisa would have gone on scolding, but at that moment the air began to tremble with the distant beat of drums. The sound came thin but fast and triumphant, wood on wood calling from the lower slopes of the mountain. *We are coming, was the message. The hunt has been successful and we bring a feast for all. Prepare your ovens, bring out the kava bowl, be glad for our return. Boom-boom-ba, boom-ba. To our chief, Taruga Vueti, we bring honour and pride and the best of our kill. Let him order that the ceremony begin.*

Luisa knew well the voice of the drum and how different it sounded when the hunters were coming home empty-handed, or worse, when one of them was hurt. She thought of Samu, and felt younger with relief. Now both her boys, the Silent One and the little bag of chatter, were safe. She could relax and look forward to the feasting.

Boom-boom-ba. The village drum was answering. Heavy sticks brought the hollow log to life and drowned the talk of the old men, the children's laughter. Half a dozen hens, roosting in the breadfruit tree, fled squawking. Dogs ran in circles, barking, leaping at each other, their eyes red in the firelight. A party of women, bearing flowers, ran to meet their men.

Jonasi came to the doorway to watch the return of the hunters. There was no look of hurt or bad feeling on his face. Whatever the day had brought him, it had changed his mood

completely so that there was laughter instead of anger in his eyes.

Jonasi touched her on the shoulder and pointed. The men were in sight.

The drumbeats grew frantic, and the air was full of wild noises—dogs yapping, children shrieking, men laughing and shouting.

Aesake came first as the carrier of the torch that had guided them through the darkness. He stuck the burning stick in the ground in front of his father, Chief Vueti, and bowed low, his head almost touching the dust. Behind him came the rest of the group, more than twenty men and boys, who brought with them the smells of a successful hunt, the warm odours of sweat and animal blood. Six of the men carried the carcasses of three pigs, each pig trussed to a pole that was held on the shoulders of two hunters.

The tallest of the village elders marched in front—Tasiri who boasted his strength by wearing two half-grown pigs round his neck like a garland of flowers. The pigs were still alive and had their feet tied together. When Tasiri halted, they woke from a stupor and writhed and squealed like angry children, but Tasiri paid no attention to the kicking against his neck and shoulders. He stood in front of the chief for much longer than was respectful. His back was straight with pride. The firelight flickered orange on the muscles of his spear-throwing arm. Very slowly he bowed, and as he did so, he slung the struggling pigs on the ground in front of the chief.

The people waited in silence for Taruga Vueti to accept the gift.

The chief smiled. He took a whale's tooth necklace from his own neck and placed it around Tasiri's. Then the chief clapped three times.

A shout went up from the people and again the air was full of excitement and laughter. The women ran forward to throw wreaths of frangipani and ginger blossoms around the necks of their men and to help hang the dead pigs over the cooking fires.

Luisa, whose vision was poor at night, peered this way and that through the crowd. Suddenly she cried, 'There's Samu!

There he is!' She put her hands on her hips and laughed scornfully. Then she said in a loud voice so that the other women could hear, 'Look at them! Such great hunters! Ha! Half this village would go hungry without the fish of the Silent One!'

She turned to look at Jonasi, but he had gone. He was running to meet Samu and Aesake.

CHAPTER 3

THE TURTLE RETURNS

On the morning after the feast, Jonasi went out on the reef while the sun was still sleeping behind the mist. He took his raft to the place where he had last seen the turtle. There was no sign of it. The water bubbled and rippled as thousands of fish answered the call of dawn and searched for food—small fish seeking the dust-sized creatures, big fish chasing the small fish, the whole reef seething with a struggle for life.

Along the shore the seabirds flew over the water, so low that their wings almost broke their own reflections. They, too, were hungry.

Jonasi caught a large fish for old Luisa, but he did so without interest, his thoughts still in yesterday and full of pictures of the turtle.

It must have been a dream brought on by sadness. There were green turtles and brown turtles, but who ever heard of a white one? Jonasi felt foolish that his imagination could have so tricked him; but all the same, he kept searching.

Then the turtle came back.

It was late in the morning, and the sun was so bright on the water that Jonasi didn't see the turtle until it was near his raft. It appeared suddenly in a pool between two ridges of rocks and coral, swimming idly as though it had been there all the time.

Jonasi's heart stopped, and then began to hammer at such a pace he thought his head would burst. His throat swelled and he couldn't swallow. He sat absolutely still.

The turtle was much more beautiful than he'd remembered.

It swam slowly almost beneath him, the plates of its shell shimmering through the water like pale fire, its head held high and alert. Its eyes held more wisdom than Jonasi could ever measure in a lifetime. Its shell seemed newborn, a fragile thing

spawned by the morning sun; but its eyes looked as though they'd seen a forever of yesterdays and tomorrows. They were eyes that spoke of a time when earth and sky were one and the gods lived in caves of eternal night, eyes that could read the pictures in Jonasi's mind.

He leaned over the side of the raft, beckoning with both hands, hoping the turtle would come to him as it had the previous afternoon. But it stayed where it was, beneath the surface. Long branches of stag coral threw shadows across its back, and small fish rose and fell above it like petals in a wind. It was still and watchful.

Jonasi had saved some scraps from the feast, pieces of pork that he'd kept from the village dogs and wrapped in a banana leaf. He tore the meat to shreds and spread some of them on the water. Before they could sink far, the surface was swarming with little fish that snatched, fought, gulped, then disappeared again, leaving nothing behind but a slick of grease.

The turtle watched, motionless.

Jonasi took the rest of the pork and slid with it into the water. Swimming very slowly, he moved nearer the turtle. It edged away. He stopped. It stopped too, looking at him with knowing eyes. He swam a little farther, and the turtle backed away again. And now Jonasi needed to breathe. He dropped the meat on the bottom of the pool among the sand and broken coral, then he went back to the raft.

It was a game of waiting, the turtle watching Jonasi, Jonasi holding the edge of the raft, treading water, watching the turtle. The handful of meat opened in the current and attracted the coral fish. Streaking the pool with colour, they crowded in on the shreds. The turtle moved. A quick twist of its flippers and it was in the middle of the struggling mass, its jaws snapping. The fish darted away, and the turtle was left with a few fragments of meat that settled slowly on the bottom.

To Jonasi's delight the turtle ate them, snatching each piece as it drifted near. When the meat was all gone, it paddled in small circles, looking for more.

Jonasi climbed on his raft. He would go back to the village and get her more food. It wouldn't take long. Would the turtle wait for him?

It was following. It was behind his raft and following him like a pet dog. Jonasi paddled faster, and the turtle increased its speed. He slowed. It slowed too.

Jonasi felt giddy with pride as he paddled toward the shore with the creature behind him. Half a dozen women were gathering shellfish in the shallows and he wanted to stand on the raft and wave to them. But suddenly his heart, heavy with warning, realised he was leading the turtle to danger.

He turned the raft as quickly as he could and headed back toward deep water and the edge of the reef, looking behind him every now and then to make sure the turtle was still with him.

He had sought the white turtle's friendship, and the turtle had given it to him. Its trust had made him happier than he'd ever been. But if he tamed the turtle to stay in these waters, then it would be killed by those who would see only a white shell of great value.

In sadness he sat on the raft and watched the turtle. He wanted it to go away, over the reef and into the deep ocean it had come from. He also wanted it to stay. In truth, he didn't know what he wanted. All sorts of questions were making pictures in his mind.

The turtle swam near his raft, its head out of the water, its face that of an old woman.

Jonasi stared at it.

Why had it chosen him?

CHAPTER 4 FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

Samu and Aesake had spent most of the morning helping at the copra sheds.

This, they discovered, was the other side of growing up. If they were old enough to hunt, they were old enough to share the adult work—to gather coconuts with the men, split them on pointed stakes, and scoop out the meat for drying. The husks went on one heap to feed the fire of the kilns, the flesh went on another. When the copra boat came back, the boys would have to carry the bags of dried coconut down the beach instead of watching with the children while others worked.

It was exhausting work, all of it.

Aesake said nothing, although his skin was shining and his muscles ached with effort. He tried to keep pace with the men, for he knew it would not be right to show weakness. He was the chief's son, the only male child of Taruga Vueti, and he must not let the pain of his arms and back show in his face. Nut after nut he cracked down on a sharp stick, yet the pile beside him never seemed to grow less.

Samu didn't bother to pretend. He opened one coconut to every four of Aesake's and used the rest of his energy to grumble. 'Where's that Jonasi? Lazy rat. Makes out he doesn't understand and then goes off swimming. Why doesn't someone make him help?'

'His turn will come,' said Aesake.

'He should be here,' said Samu. 'It's my mother's fault—she spoils him. It makes me sick to see the way she fusses, and all because his head doesn't work right.'

'There's nothing wrong with his head,' said Aesake. 'He's deaf, that's all. A lot of people are like that.'

'You tell me.' Samu split a coconut as though it were Jonasi's

skull. 'Go on, you show me a boy like him, and I'll eat the dust under my feet.'

'I saw such people at Sevu,' said Aesake. 'There is a school in Sevu for the deaf.'

There was no answer to that. Aesake had spent four years in Sevu and had seen things that the others of the village had never dreamed of. He could write, he could read English books, and in his bure he had a tin trunk full of wonders from the Sevu trading stores.

Samu couldn't argue. He couldn't even call Aesake a liar because that would mean disrespect to Aesake's father, and in the old days men had had their fingers cut off for being disrespectful to a chief.

But Samu wasn't finished by any means. 'It's my mother's fault,' he said. 'She treats him as though he is still a baby. She won't let him grow up to do a man's work.'

Aesake straightened up slowly. 'Perhaps the men don't want him working here,' he said.

Samu looked at his friend, then glanced at the men around them. Strong, all of them, tall and strong, with muscles like the roots of trees and grey hairs showing knowledge and wisdom. These were men who feared nothing. Yet when Jonasi walked near them they became silent and moved away lest his shadow touch them.

'Why?' whispered Samu. 'Do they really think he can hurt them?'

'They're ignorant,' said Aesake. 'They have no understanding of such matters. I tell you, if they went to Sevu they'd see sights that would make their eyes drop right out.'

'Oh, you and your Sevu,' muttered Samu as he stooped to pick up another nut.

Bulai, the man nearest him, saw the pain in the movement, and laughed. 'Aha, little spider, so your arms and legs are too thin for hard work, eh? Watch out, or they'll snap in half. There, that's enough now. Go. Scuttle back to your web.'

Samu was so pleased to leave the heap of coconuts that he ignored the insults.

'You too, Aesake,' Bulai said.

The boys went over to the stream, drank, splashed water over themselves and each other, then went to Luisa's bure.

A breeze wandered through the village, raising small clouds of dust and rustling the palms, leaf against leaf, with a sound like the sharpening of knives. It was a hot wind, a colourless flame that brought no smell, only dryness that did nothing to cool the earth.

'No rain today,' Luisa said.

'That's good,' said Aesake, thinking of the copra.

'No rain for a long time,' said Luisa.

'What makes you say that?'

'I feel it in here,' said Luisa, patting her head.

'Never mind about the weather,' said Samu. 'I'm dying of hunger.'

They sat in the shade of the bure while Luisa brought them raw fish sweet with coconut milk, and bananas. 'Work, work, work, I do nothing but fill ungrateful mouths,' she grumbled. 'Why do women have sons? I'll tell you. It is a punishment to a woman, a curse because she stole the fruit from the garden. The angel said, "Woman, this day and for ever it will be your task to fill the bottomless stomachs of men."'

'What fruit?' said Samu with his mouth full.

'You see?' Luisa turned to Aesake. 'He doesn't know. My own son doesn't know because he hides when it's time to go to church.'

'The fruit of good and evil,' Aesake said to Samu. 'I learnt about it at the mission school.'

But Samu had heard quite enough talk about Sevu and the mission school. He quickly changed the subject. 'Where's Jonasi?' he asked.

'He's out on the reef,' Luisa said.

'I know that. But doing what? Fishing? Catching fish from morning to night for a whole week?'

'Let him be,' snapped Luisa. 'Just you leave him alone.'

'But he stays out there all day!' Samu insisted.

'What if he does?' said Luisa. 'Is there anything better here in the village where the children tease him and their parents shun him? You too. I've seen both of you laugh at him—you his brother, and you, his friend. You think I haven't noticed? You

sit there filling your belly with Jonasi's fish and ask why he isn't here? *You* tell me why he should be here. Eh? Give me one good reason.'

It was no use talking to Luisa about Jonasi. She always flared up like an angry old hen. The two boys finished eating and left, the sound of her voice trailing behind them. They walked down the beach to look for the Silent One.

'He's out there all right,' said Aesake, shading his eyes toward the edge of the reef. 'I can see him.'

'He comes in at night,' said Samu, 'and he is tired. He doesn't play games like he used to. He eats and goes to sleep and in the morning he's gone again. Do you think he's gone crazy?'

Aesake looked worried. 'Perhaps he's found a new fishing ground.'

'He doesn't bring home any more fish than usual.'

'Well, there must be something—'

'You tell me.'

Aesake was silent for a while, then he smiled. 'It could be a wreck.'

'A what?'

'An old ship wrecked on the reef. I've heard of such ships being found. They have treasures on board, gold and silver and Englishman's money. For years they lie in some deep pool, then along comes a fisherman—'

'Why has no one else found it?' asked Samu.

'I don't know. But, Samu, Jonasi must have found something. Remember the night we came back from the mountain? At the feast he was trying to show me. He put a shell on the ground and scratched some lines around it with a stick. He got annoyed because I didn't understand. That was seven days ago. He hasn't come near me since.'

'There's only one way to find out,' said Samu.

They pushed Aesake's canoe down the beach and into the water. It was not a big canoe, nothing like the great outrigger that belonged to Aesake's father, but it rode the water without effort. They picked up the paddles and headed toward the dark speck on the sea, which was Jonasi.

After a long silence, Samu said in a small voice, 'Are you sure

Jonasi doesn't have a demon in his head?'

'Of course he hasn't!' said Aesake. 'Samu, I thought you had some sense.'

'Oh, I know he's all right,' Samu said quickly. 'And my mother says it's just talk. But there are some who think he wasn't born like an ordinary child. Bulai reckons he was found floating in the water. The captain of the boat felt sorry for him and took him aboard, but when he found that Jonasi brought bad luck, he threw him back into the sea. Jonasi wouldn't drown. The boat went on from one island to the next, and every time the captain looked over the side, there was the baby following like a fish.'

'That's the most foolish tale I've ever heard!' said Aesake.

'I know. But Bulai doesn't think so. He said that when the boat came here, the captain gave the baby to my mother so he'd be rid of it. That's what Bulai said.'

'Then Bulai is a liar,' said Aesake. 'He drinks too much kava.'

'Well, Bulai's not the only one!' muttered Samu. 'Everyone asks how a baby came to be in a canoe all by itself.'

'You know that can happen in bad times,' said Aesake. 'The village might have been starving and the baby set adrift. My father says it's even happened here when things were hard.'

'But the canoe wasn't adrift,' Samu insisted. 'The men on the boat said it came right at them, on a perfectly calm day. So quickly they thought at first a strong man was guiding it.'

'I suppose it was a demon!' said Aesake scornfully.

'Well, one of the men swore he saw something, a spirit shape just beneath the water. When he looked again it was gone, and there was only the baby, lying in the canoe, all alone.'

'I wouldn't believe the copra crew,' said Aesake, 'any more than I'd believe Bulai. Their captain cheats our men every chance he gets. I believe nothing they say.'

Samu sighed. He was still uneasy. He wished he had never listened to Bulai, or the talk of the men on the boat.

The tide was going out and the breeze was behind them to lend them speed, but Samu's arms were still stiff from the morning's work. He wanted to go back to the bure to rest. He nearly said so to Aesake. But Aesake might think that he was afraid. He sighed and went on paddling.

They were close enough to see Jonasi's face before the Silent One caught sight of them. He was lying in the raft and leaning over the side, his hands in the water. As the canoe came up to him, he sat back so quickly he almost tipped his raft over. He grabbed his paddle and dug it into the water.

The canoe was much faster. As the gap between them closed, Aesake held up his hand and waved to tell Jonasi to stop. The Silent One only paddled harder—as though he were trying to escape from them.

'What's he doing?' said Aesake, and gave chase.

Then a curious thing happened. As the canoe came level with the bamboo raft, Jonasi looked at them—a look of fear as though they were strangers bearing weapons—then he dived into the sea.

'He's trying to swim away!' said Samu. 'He is crazy! He is!'

Aesake didn't answer. He sat still, his paddle poised, waiting for Jonasi's head to break the surface. He waited—and there was the Silent One on the surface some distance from his raft, swimming fast, hardly causing a ripple.

But no, Jonasi wasn't swimming. He was being pulled along by some large fish, by—

'It's a turtle!' shouted Aesake. 'He's caught a turtle! Come on, let's help him bring it in.'

The boys leaned forward on their paddles and the canoe leaped over the water like a low-flying bird. They yelled at Jonasi, forgetting he couldn't hear.

'Turn it over! Quick! Before it dives!'

'We're coming! We're coming!'

Now they were near and could see Jonasi's arms and shoulders, the shell beneath him. They stopped paddling. Words left them, and their mouths hung open without sound.

At length Samu gave a small, shrill cry of fear and turned his head away so that he couldn't see the thing.

'It can't be!' said Aesake. 'It—'

'It's white!' whimpered Samu.

'And it is a turtle, isn't it? You saw it too?'

'Yes.'

'White,' Aesake repeated. 'White, white, a white turtle.'

'Let's go back,' pleaded Samu.

But Aesake had recovered and was plunging his paddle into the water, shouting even louder than before. 'Hurry up!' he yelled at Samu. 'Quick, you feeble old man, do you want it to get away?'

Samu obeyed but his body felt as if he'd received a blow in the stomach. It was not work which made his muscles quiver with exhaustion; it was a cold and dreadful fear.

Aesake had grown strong with excitement and he was paddling fast to catch up with Jonasi. A white turtle, eh? So this was Jonasi's secret, why he spent his days on the reef, what he'd tried to explain on the night of the feast. A white shell with head and flippers scratched in the dust. Of course, he'd been hunting a great white turtle!

The canoe was close now. Aesake shipped his paddle. 'I'm going to give him a hand,' he said, and he leaped into the sea.

His timing was good. As he went down he brushed against Jonasi's leg, reached out, caught his ankle and held on. But as he came up to grab the turtle, Jonasi's hand closed over his face. The fingers were hard, wooden, and they forced Aesake's head back into the water. Aesake struggled, he tried to twist away. The grip was as strong as that of a clam. He couldn't breathe. Air, he needed air. He let go of the turtle shell and kicked backward, coughing and gasping, numb with surprise. He saw the brilliance of the white shell and above it, Jonasi's eyes full of hate and anger.

So that was it! He wanted to keep the turtle all to himself, did he? Wasn't going to share the catch with his friends.

Aesake became angry. He swam in front of Jonasi and his turtle and reached out. Jonasi let the turtle go and held Aesake by the wrists, and then the two boys went down struggling.

Samu watched them go under, and as the seconds passed he wondered if they had both drowned. But they came up again some distance from each other, unhurt, gasping, treading water while they fed their bodies with air. Then Samu saw the knife in Jonasi's hand.

The Silent One had truly gone crazy. He'd drawn his fish knife and was holding it above the surface, threatening Aesake.

Aesake didn't move, and in the moment of stillness, Samu

saw that the turtle was still with Jonasi. It hadn't swum away and was now so close it almost brushed Jonasi's back.

It was too much for Samu. He shuddered and cried like a young baby. The white turtle was a demon.

'Aesake, Aesake!' Samu wailed. 'Come back.'

Aesake and Jonasi were treading water, watching each other like a couple of cockerels. Aesake brought his legs up and kicked, widening the distance between them until he was beyond range of that knife. Then he swam back to the canoe.

'Leave him,' cried Samu. 'Let's go!'

'Did you see that?' gasped Aesake. 'He's tamed the thing. He's made a pet of it.'

'Let's get out of here!' begged Samu.

Aesake held on to the edge of the canoe until his breath was again steady, then he heaved himself over the side. 'How did he find it?'

'I don't know, I don't care. Paddle, Aesake. Quick, before something happens.'

Aesake picked up his paddle but seemed in no hurry to move. 'Look at it, will you? Look at the way Jonasi rests his arm on it as though it were a dog.'

'It doesn't belong to this world,' said Samu, turning the canoe and paddling toward the shore with as much strength as he could find.

'What do you mean by that?'

'It's a spirit.'

'It's as real as you or me.'

'No, it's not. It's white.'

'So?'

'No turtle is ever white.'

'It can happen,' said Aesake. 'I've seen white dogs and white goats, white rats. I've seen a man like that.'

'We've all seen white men,' said Samu.

'No, not English, but one of us, an Islander. He had white skin and pink eyes and his hair was paler than the sun. I did. I speak the truth.'

Samu said nothing.

'Sometimes creatures are born without colour. They're called albinos. And that, Samu, is not a spirit. It's an albino turtle.'

Samu was paddling so hard that the canoe was turning in circles. 'You can't tell me you saw a white turtle in Sevu.'

'No,' admitted Aesake. 'But then I didn't see everything.'

'No one's seen a white turtle.'

'We have. Just now.'

Samu shook his head. 'It's a spirit. You are blind, Aesake. Look at the way it has Jonasi in its power. Did you see him draw a knife at you? At Aesake his friend, Aesake the son of our chief? Isn't that madness?'

'He was right to protect the turtle. It is his pet.'

'But you are his friend.'

Aesake shrugged. 'Remember what happened when your dog died?'

'That was different.'

'You moaned and rubbed your eyes. You told everyone in the village your dog had been poisoned and you were going to kill the person who did it.'

'That was a brown dog, not a white turtle.'

'It was your pet,' said Aesake.

Now that they could clearly see the beach, the white sand, the children playing at the water's edge, Samu felt safe. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw that Jonasi was back on his raft, as small as an insect on the wide ocean.

'No one is going to believe us,' Samu said.

'We won't tell anyone,' said Aesake. 'Only my father.'

'You'll say—you'll tell him—everything?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because I think he'd want to know.'

'Ah!' said Samu. 'So you do think it's a spirit, after all. It's important. You have to warn the chief.'

Aesake looked at Samu, and his eyes were cold. 'I'm concerned for Jonasi. I've been concerned for a long time, but now something must be done.'

'I knew he was crazy,' said Samu.

'No, he isn't! It is the foolish stories about him that are crazy. And one day soon, someone else will see him out there. Do you know what will happen? People will talk as you have been talking. The time will come when Jonasi will no longer be safe.'

Aesake looked so fierce that Samu's boldness left him. 'I won't tell anyone,' he said. 'I promise you.'

'You'd better not,' said Aesake. 'One word and I'll knock your teeth through the back of your neck. But my father must know, for Jonasi's sake. I have a plan to suggest to him.'

'What?' said Samu. 'What plan?'

'It doesn't concern you,' said Aesake.

'Please tell me. I can keep a secret. Aesake?'

But Aesake would say no more about his plan, about Jonasi or about the turtle. They paddled the canoe over the shallows and, in silence, hauled it up the beach.

CHAPTER 5 SOME MAKE PLANS FOR JONASI

Taruga Vueti was in council with the elders of the tribe. Around him the men sat with shoulders bowed so that their heads should not be raised above that of their chief, and they kept their eyes down as they made their complaints or requests.

Tasiri of the bold voice now spoke in a small whine. 'We are being cheated, O Ratu,' he said, making the title of respect sound like the whimper of a puppy. 'The captain of the copra boat is stealing what is ours.'

Vueti sighed. 'Speak clearly, Tasiri. Tell me what happened.'

'Ratu, it is like this. Our copra is dry, of the finest quality, but always when he comes back to pay us, he says it was heavy with moisture. It was poor grade, he says. It got a bad price, he says. We know this is false, O Ratu.'

Vueti was saddened by the words, not so much because his tribe was being cheated by the white man, but because the Islanders, like the captain, had become greedy for money. Times had changed. Vueti's people were no longer content with the goodness of the land and sea. At first they'd wanted the small things, metal pots, fishhooks and lines, kerosene lamps and rolls of bright material for the women. Now it was more. They dreamed of houses like those of the white men, of boats with engines and of bottles of burning water that made wise men crazy and turned strong men into helpless infants.

'Is it so important?' Vueti asked.

'Yes, it is!' Tasiri forgot himself for a moment. He quickly lowered his voice again. 'Great Ratu,' he whined. 'It is you the man cheats. When he steals from your people, he is stealing from Taruga Vueti.'

'Listen to me, Tasiri,' said Vueti. 'Listen, all of you. It will be a dark day when Vueti's eyes see nothing but the white man's

money, when I have to fill my stomach with his silver and shelter beneath his pieces of paper. When that day comes, the sun will not rise for shame. But if it will please you, I'll send to Sevu for a weighing machine. Then you can weigh the copra in front of the captain, and he will have to see that the copra is dry and light, of the highest quality—and all will be understood before the bags leave the village. Is that all?

The men murmured and nodded and asked permission to leave. Yes, they were satisfied. Thank you, Ratu. There never was a village with a wiser chief or more grateful servants, O Ratu. May your days be as many as the stars.

When they had gone, Vueti lay back on his mat and closed his eyes. It was not the meeting that had taken his strength, not the complaints of greedy men like Tasiri. The pain in his chest had come back again, as sharp as a spear wound.

Some days it wasn't bad. He could walk in the village, talk and laugh without coughing, imagine that he'd never known this weakness. But at other times the hollow behind his ribs was filled with the sound of dead leaves, and when he coughed there was a taste of blood in his mouth.

Taruga Vueti, the great Ratu. How much longer would the people hail him as their chief?

A movement in the bure opened his eyes. He turned his head and saw his son Aesake bowing backwards through the door.

'Come in, boy.'

'I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean to disturb your rest.'

'No, no, it's all right.'

'I'll return later.'

'Aesake, come and sit down. I want to talk to you.'

'Yes, Father?' Aesake sat at a respectful distance.

'I need your advice, my son. I've told the elders that I'll get them a weighing machine for their copra from the trading stores at Sevu. But how do I get such a machine? For anything else, I make an order with the captain of the copra boat, and he delivers it on his next visit. But not this. He would find some way of losing it at the bottom of the ocean, you can be sure.'

'There are other boats, Father.'

'They do not come here.'

'No, but they go to the village of Ramatau. Father, there is a post office at Ramatau where mail for Sevu is collected, put in a sack, and delivered by mail launch once a week. If it please you, Father, I could write a letter for you to one of the big trading stores at Sevu. Then I could take it over to Ramatau. It's only half a day's walk.'

'Good, good,' said Vueti. 'And you can collect the weighing machine when it arrives.'

Aesake hesitated. 'How big will this machine be, Father?'

'In truth I don't know,' said Vueti. 'You have seen more of these things than I. Advise me.'

'There are good machines that are quite small and do not require a great sum of money. They hang on a tree and have a hook at the other end to take the bag of copra. Shall I request one of those?'

'Yes, yes, I'll leave it all to you,' said Vueti. 'Write the letter tonight and go to Ramatau tomorrow. The sooner, the better to silence the unrest.'

'Yes, Father, in the morning,' Aesake bowed lower. 'Father, there is another matter—'

'Speak.'

'It's about Jonasi.'

'Luisa's boy?'

'Yes, the Silent One. He's a good boy, Father. I feel sorry for him—'

'You said you had something to say,' interrupted Vueti.

Aesake nodded. Then, in a rush of words, he told his father about the turtle. 'White,' he said, 'as white as dried coral but gleaming like pearl.'

Vueti frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'I touched it, Father. And Samu was there. He saw it also. It was tame. It followed Jonasi as a dog follows its master.'

'If another had told this, I would not have believed it,' said the chief. 'White!' He moved uneasily. 'No turtle is ever white.'

'It's not unnatural, Father. Such creatures happen all the time. They are called albinos.' And Aesake explained, as he had to Samu, how sometimes even men are born without colour in their skin.

'You learnt all this at the mission school?' said the chief with doubt in his voice.

'Among other things, Father. But it's not the turtle I care about. It's Jonasi. You know what the men say about him—'

'Oh, they tease him a little.'

'No, not just teasing. It's got much worse since—' Aesake stopped.

'What?'

'Nothing, Father.'

'Since I've had this sickness?' said the chief.

Aesake was silent.

'Come, boy, you must tell me,' said Vueti. 'I didn't bring you home from the mission school because I thought you were wasting your time there. I needed you. The illness was taking my strength and making me a prisoner to my mat. I sent for you, Aesake, so that you could be my eyes and ears in the village, so you could tell me all that happened without my knowledge.' The chief coughed and shut his eyes for a moment. 'All right, what is it about Jonasi?'

'The people are afraid of him,' said Aesake.

'Afraid? Of a harmless boy? Why?'

'Because he doesn't speak or hear. Oh, they are not wise like you, Father. They have small heads full of worms that keep them from thinking like men. And they have grown a great hatred for the Silent One.'

'I did not know of this.'

'They'd be too ashamed to tell you, Father. You would think they were cowards. Besides, they are well aware that it was you who accepted Jonasi into the village and gave him your protection.'

'But what has the boy done?'

'Nothing, Father. He does nothing. It's because of the silence—they say he has a demon, and they're afraid. It's worse now. There has always been whispering, but lately the talk has grown so strong that every time something goes wrong in the village, Jonasi is blamed. If a man catches no fish, he says Jonasi has cursed the water. If a woman spills her cooking pot, it is because the Silent One has looked at her. Now the people are even avoiding Samu and Luisa—because they are supposed to

have a demon under their roof. I'm sure they would turn away from me, too, if I were not your son. As it is they try to warn me. They keep hinting about the evil that will come if I continue to show Jonasi my friendship.'

Vueti sat still for a while, thinking. 'I'll have to speak to them,' he said.

'You have great understanding, Father. But I fear it will be wasted on minds as small as theirs. You know what will happen when they discover Jonasi with that turtle?'

The chief nodded slowly. He also understood that Aesake's concern was not merely for Jonasi. If he, Vueti, went against the wishes of the people at this time, they could use his illness as an excuse to elect another chief.

'You and I both know what is true,' said Aesake. 'Jonasi is lonely. He tames a turtle to be his pet, a turtle that happens to look different from the rest of its kind. But when people hear of it—'

'Then you must act quickly,' said his father. 'Kill the turtle!'

'What?'

'Get rid of it! And say nothing in the village.'

Aesake bowed his head again. 'Yes, Father. Yes—yes, of course. I'll—I'll get rid of it. But please, Father, couldn't we first send Jonasi away?'

'What do you mean?'

'An idea I have, Father. Near Sevu there is a school for people who are deaf and cannot speak, like Jonasi. I'm sure they'd take him. He'd be safe there, among friends, and they'd teach him how to speak.'

'How?'

'I don't know, Father. I only know that the boys there learn to talk like other people. It's a good place. For a long time I've thought it would be right for Jonasi. Now I'm positive.'

'This school—have you seen it?'

'Oh yes, and I've seen the people who go there. Without any doubt, Jonasi would be happy with them.'

'How can it be arranged?'

Aesake grinned. 'I'll write another letter, Father. Since I'm going to Ramatau tomorrow, I can mail two letters, one for the weighing machine and one for the school. It will be all right,

Father. They'll take him. When they see the letter comes from you, they won't be able to refuse. I'm sure it's the best—'

'All right, all right,' said the chief. 'Do that. Come in here when you've finished both letters, and read the words to me. Then we will go and talk to Luisa.'

'Yes, Father. And—and the turtle?'

The chief smiled at the concern in Aesake's face. In some ways, he thought, the mission school had made a softness in his son. Then again, it was no bad thing for a strong man to feel pity.

'For now, the turtle is safe,' he said.

CHAPTER 6 OTHERS PLOT AGAINST THE BOY

Jonasi no longer left his raft on the beach with the other boats, nor did he allow himself to be seen leaving the village. Since the meeting with Aesake and Samu, he'd lived with a fear for the white turtle's life, and although he still went out to see the turtle each day, he made sure no one followed.

His raft was hidden in the next bay, drawn up under the mangrove trees, and each time he went there, it was by a different route. Today he walked past the watchful eyes of the women who sat in the shade, plaiting reeds for baskets, past the big bure of Taruga Vueti, past the place where the pigs were tethered, out of the village and into the jungle behind it. Then, when he was swallowed by the darkness of the trees, he stopped and looked behind him. Jonasi's eyes and nose were keen. He was quick to notice the unusual, a leaf stirring where there was no wind, the smell of man among decaying wood, a stone turned damp side up. And his fingertips helped him to hear. He touched them to the ground, then pressed against the earth, feeling for the tremors of footsteps. Nothing, today. No one. Toads under the leaves, lizards flickering after insects, and the distant thump of a falling coconut. That was all. He stood up and changed direction, moving quickly around the back of the village and then on a path parallel to the beach.

As well as fear, Jonasi carried a small shame for the bad thing he'd done to Aesake. He shouldn't have drawn his knife on his friend like that. But what else could he have done at the time? Aesake had intended to kill the white turtle.

That same evening Aesake had brought his father to the bure of old Luisa.

Jonasi had been afraid. He'd waited with bowed head for the punishment that must come to one who'd attacked the son of a

chief. But instead Aesake had put his hands on him in friendship and smiled, and Taruga Vueti had nodded with kind eyes. Tears ran down Luisa's cheeks, but she too had shown him warmth.

Jonasi didn't know what had happened between them, but he'd been greatly relieved, and pleased to know that Aesake bore him no ill will.

Samu did, though. Which seemed odd. Jonasi had fought with Aesake, yet it was Samu who avoided him whenever possible. Samu now turned away like the others in the village, and he'd shifted his sleeping mat to the far corner of the bure.

Poor little Samu. Was he afraid of Jonasi's knife?

Jonasi shrugged and walked faster. The village was well behind him, and all the things he didn't understand were falling away like shadows. He changed direction again, heading for the mangrove swamp.

The tide had left the raft in the mud, almost submerged. Jonasi struggled to drag it through the ankle-deep ooze, around the roots and branches that caught it on either side, down to the thin rim of water. It took much time and effort but at least it was a safe hiding place. When he finally had the raft afloat, he pushed it out a few yards from the trees and waited.

Close to the shore was best, he'd decided. Farther out he could be seen from the bays on either side, but no one was going to wade through the swamp, so there was little chance of being discovered in this particular place.

The white turtle came late in the morning, appearing as it always did, suddenly. It was now a game, this late arrival, as though the turtle wanted him to believe it wasn't coming so that it could take him by surprise.

Today Jonasi was almost sure he'd lost it, when he felt a deliberate bump under the raft. So, the turtle was teasing him, was it? Well, two could play the game of No One There. Instead of diving over the side, he sat absolutely still, barely breathing. The white turtle nudged the raft for a second time. Jonasi didn't move. Small waves were sucked into the mangroves, bubbles floated out again. The sea was as flat as green oil.

Jonasi waited and sure enough, the turtle came out from

under the raft, its bird-like head arched with curiosity, those deep-set eyes glittering and alert. He slapped his hand on the water.

Ah, but it was too quick for him. Its head turned, it nipped his fingers, then it swam away, pretending to ignore him.

Jonasi grinned and unwrapped the usual parcel of chopped meat.

For almost a week now the turtle had been eating out of his hand. Sometimes he fed it from the side of the raft, sometimes from the water, and he'd learnt those foods it preferred, those it rejected. Often while feeding the turtle, he touched its head and neck with the fingers of the other hand, telling the creature in its own language that it mustn't fear him. It seemed to understand everything. Like him the white turtle lived in a world where the movements of lips had no meaning and a mouth was used to receive food. He could speak to it by touch, ride on its back and with gentle pressure say, go here, go there, faster, slower, turn back to the raft. In return the turtle would nudge him in ways that told him many different things. *I'm hungry*, it would say, or, *Follow me*, or, *I am tired—let's rest*.

Now the turtle was simply saying, thank you. It had eaten the meat and was exploring his hand, the palm, the fingers, the way a dog licks the hand of its master.

Jonasi sensed that, running one finger over the surface of the pearl-white shell that was like nothing he had ever seen. He had never dreamed of anything so beautiful. Yet the white turtle had chosen him. And again he asked himself: Why?

He leaned over the side of the raft and scratched the creature's neck with one finger. It was then, looking up, that he saw the canoes.

There was no doubt as to where they were going and what they wanted. Nor were they here by accident. Samu and Aesake must have spread the news of the turtle.

Jonasi shaded his eyes. There were three, no, four canoes coming around the point. As yet they were too distant for him to know how many men they carried, but they were approaching fast.

It was this that he'd dreaded. One man, he could fight. Two, perhaps. But not half a dozen. He knew that as long as he was

on the sea, the turtle would stay with him and would, most certainly, meet someone's spear. There was only one thing to do. He'd have to go ashore and leave the turtle so that it would swim away to deep water. Could he make the creature understand this?

He put his hand in the water and when the turtle came to him, he pushed it away. Hard. It swam back, and again he pushed it. It playfully bumped the raft. What was wrong with it? Didn't it understand the urgency in his hand?

He picked up the paddle and headed for the shore as fast as he could. The canoes were coming closer. In the haze of sun and water they trembled like dark, angry insects.

Jonasi didn't dare look back for the turtle. He steered his raft through the gap in the mangroves, head bent to avoid the overhanging leaves, and went as far as he could through the dim cavern of twisted roots and branches. Then he leaped into the water. Mud swallowed his legs to the knees. It was difficult to move. Dragging the raft behind him, he struggled inland, one step at a time, panting with fear and anger.

What a fool he'd been to imagine they might be safe in this bay. The men would find the white turtle. They'd make a circle around it and close in with their nets and spears. In his mind Jonasi pictured the turtle's death and his heart ached as though he too had been speared.

He could take the raft no farther. He left it in the mud and floundered on to higher ground.

Where were the canoes now?

He lay close to the earth and peered through the cage of branches. Yes, he could see them, yes, yes; but they hadn't found the turtle. He breathed deeply. The men were paddling slowly out in the bay, looking this way and that and pointing in many directions. There was disagreement among them. Tasiri stood in the front of the first canoe, waving his spear, his mouth opening and shutting in anger.

Jonasi hoped that they would grow tired of the search and go away, but they stayed, paddling in circles, staring at the water. Then suddenly Tasiri pointed to the mangroves and the four canoes turned to the shore.

Once more Jonasi felt fear. Had the white turtle followed

him? Was it now waiting in the shallows? In a few feet of water, that shell would be a target for a child.

But it wasn't the turtle the men were now seeking. One by one their canoes slid under the overhanging branches of the mangrove trees as they followed Jonasi's path to the shore. When they saw Jonasi's raft, they paddled faster, beached their canoes and jumped out into the mud, their weapons held high.

Jonasi lay flat on the ground, hidden by leaves. He knew what they were going to do. He saw Tasiri's machete, its blade as long as a man's arm and nearly as thick. He saw the knives and clubs and spears.

Helplessly, he lay close to the earth and watched as they hacked his raft to pieces.

CHAPTER 7

A TRAP BAITED WITH HONEY

Luisa wondered if the boy knew of the plan to send him to the special school. Had he guessed he was going away? If not, then what was wrong with the Silent One?

Yesterday he'd come back to the village while the sun was still high above the earth; and as soon as Luisa saw him, she knew he was upset. The smile of greeting was missing, his face was troubled. All afternoon he lay on his mat as though he'd been taken with some strange sickness. He didn't eat, didn't sleep, hardly moved. He stared at the walls of the bure with shut-in eyes and seemed unaware of the old woman who tried to offer him food and comfort.

Luisa watched him anxiously through the night, and when morning came, she was relieved to see him leave his bed and walk outside on strong legs. At least he didn't have a fever.

But she was surprised to discover that he hadn't gone to the reef. Instead, he wandered through the village as though he didn't know where he was going. Eventually he rested under a tree, arms folded on his knees, head down, sitting so still that he could have been part of the tree trunk.

Luisa was bewildered. How could he possibly know about the school? Or was something else upsetting him? She picked up her cooking pot and limped off to the stream for water, deliberately passing under the tree where he sat. She paused for a moment, but he didn't see her. His face was hidden between his arms.

Luisa shrugged. Well, anyway, she hadn't made the decision. It wasn't her idea to send him to a strange place where he would grow thin from foreign food. That was the will of Taruga Vueti, and she could do nothing but bow her head to the words of the chief.

But what would her life be like without the Silent One? Ah. She shook her head as the tears came back to her eyes, and she tried to remember what Aesake had said. *When Jonasi comes back from the school, he'll be able to talk like anyone else in the village.* Talk? The Silent One? Luisa didn't believe it. She wiped her face with the back of her hand and then loudly scolded some children who were playing in her path.

The stream beside the village was seldom deep, but now, after weeks of heat, the water had shrunk from the banks, leaving a small trickle between two wide strips of mud. Luisa had to dig a hole with a stick and wait for it to fill before she could dip her pot.

'Three more days and it'll be dry,' said a voice behind her.

She looked up and saw Bulai's wife, also collecting water. 'Yes, it's bad,' Luisa agreed. 'I've never seen it like this before.'

'You know why, don't you?' said the woman.

Luisa stood up at the accusing tone, and put her hands on her hips. 'Why?'

'The reason is living under your own roof,' snorted Bulai's wife.

Luisa spat in the mud. 'You're a fool!' she said. 'Your words make the noise of a broken drum.' She picked up her pot and began to walk away.

'We'll see who's the fool!' yelled Bulai's wife. 'You stupid old bag of bones, you're bringing disaster to us all. Why are you so stubborn? Everyone else knows the rain won't come until the boy and his white turtle have gone.'

'What?' Luisa turned back.

'They've put a curse on us!'

'What did you say about a turtle?'

'Don't tell me you didn't know,' said Bulai's wife. 'The turtle that follows him around the reef. It's white, I tell you, as white as a full moon and many times as big. It shines through the water with a light that makes men blind. It brings evil to all who go near it. The Silent One is its master. He called it out of the depths of the ocean, and it does exactly what he says.'

Luisa stared at the woman. 'You're more than a fool. The sun has withered your brain.'

'You don't believe me, eh?' said Bulai's wife.

'What? Believe a story like that? A white turtle! Huh! You must think I'm as stupid as you are!'

Bulai's wife bared her teeth in a smile. 'It's not my story,' she said. 'Yesterday ten men saw him with the turtle. Ten of them. They were out fishing, and there it was, as close as I am to you. But as they came up to it, it disappeared. One moment it was there, next moment—gone! Nowhere. Like an evil spirit.'

Luisa hesitated. Bulai's wife sounded too sure, too pleased with herself. A white turtle? White? No, no, that was nothing but crazy talk.

'And Jonasi, did he also vanish like a spirit?' Luisa sneered.

'When the men came, he ran away.'

'Oh he did, did he?' Luisa gave a hard laugh. 'Jonasi runs away, and the turtle disappears under the noses of ten big men.'

'That's what happened. My husband was there. He saw it all.'

Luisa nodded slowly. 'He saw it, a turtle that shines with a blinding light. Well, answer me this, you idle one. These ten men—your husband and his friends—are they now blind?'

Bulai's wife was silent.

'I thought not,' said Luisa, and with a final laugh, she walked away.

'Go on then,' screamed Bulai's wife. 'If you don't believe me, ask Samu.'

Luisa kept on walking.

'Ask your own son, you old bag of bones! He's seen it! He knows!'

The words stayed inside Luisa's head all the way back to the village. Samu? Ask Samu? Surely her own flesh and blood hadn't joined the people in their crazy stories about his foster brother.

But now other thoughts bit Luisa like small insects. Why had Jonasi spent such long days on the reef? What made him come home early yesterday with a deep trouble inside him?

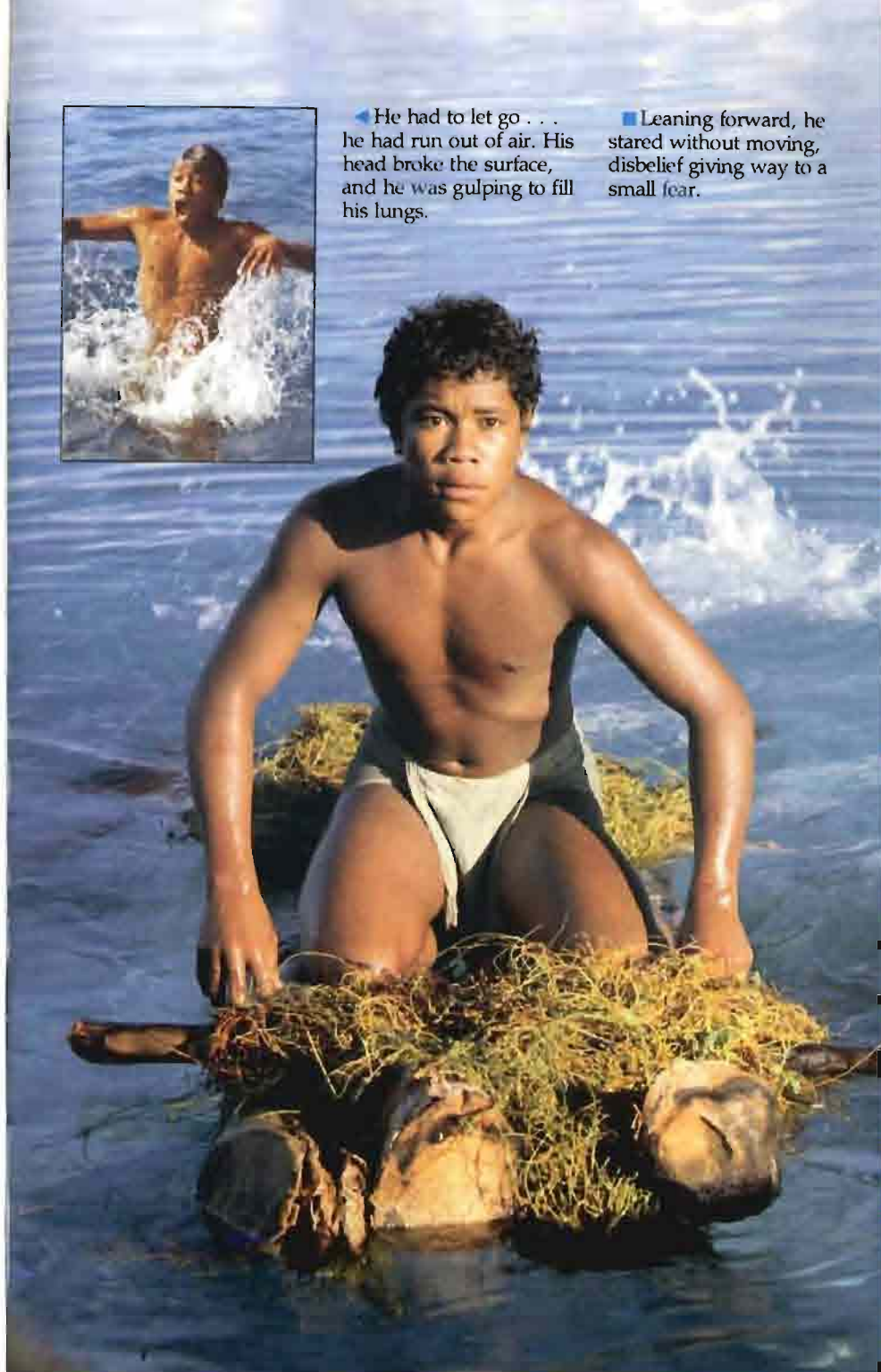
As quickly as she could, Luisa sought out Samu and took him into the bure. 'What's all this about Jonasi and a white turtle?' she demanded.

Samu looked at the floor and shook his head.



◀ He had to let go . . . he had run out of air. His head broke the surface, and he was gulping to fill his lungs.

■ Leaning forward, he stared without moving, disbelief giving way to a small fear.





▲ Happy beyond words, within minutes the foundling boy was in her arms.



▲ Jonasi saved some scraps from the feast.



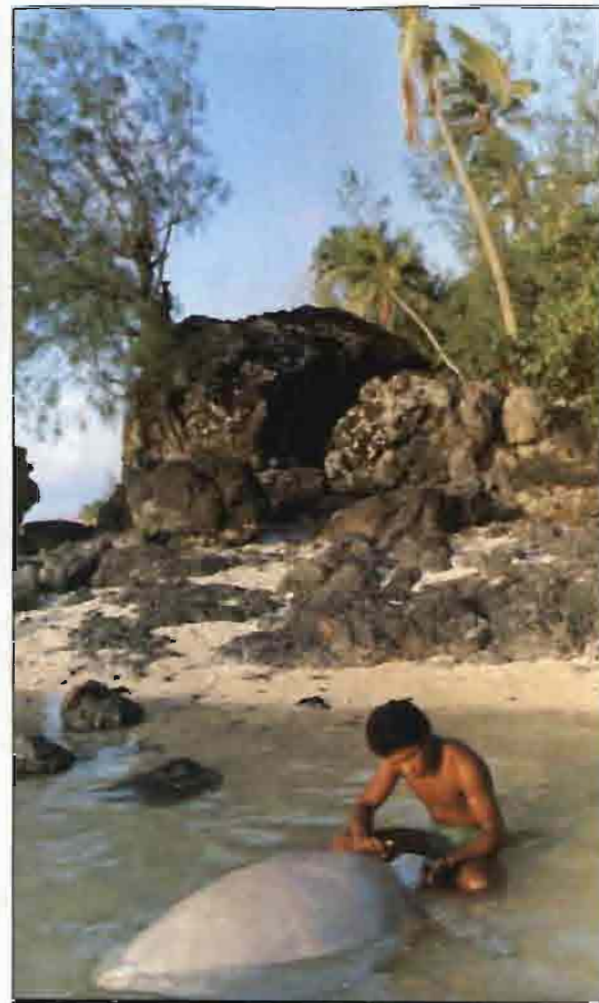
◀ The turtle swam near his raft, its head out of the water, its face that of an old woman. Jonasi stared at it. Why had it chosen him?



▲▲ 'Then you must act quickly,' said his father. 'Kill the turtle!'

▲ That same evening Aesake brought his father to the bure of old Luisa.

▲ Jonasi had been afraid of the punishment that must come to one who'd attacked the son of a chief.



◀ For almost a week now the turtle had been eating out of his hand.

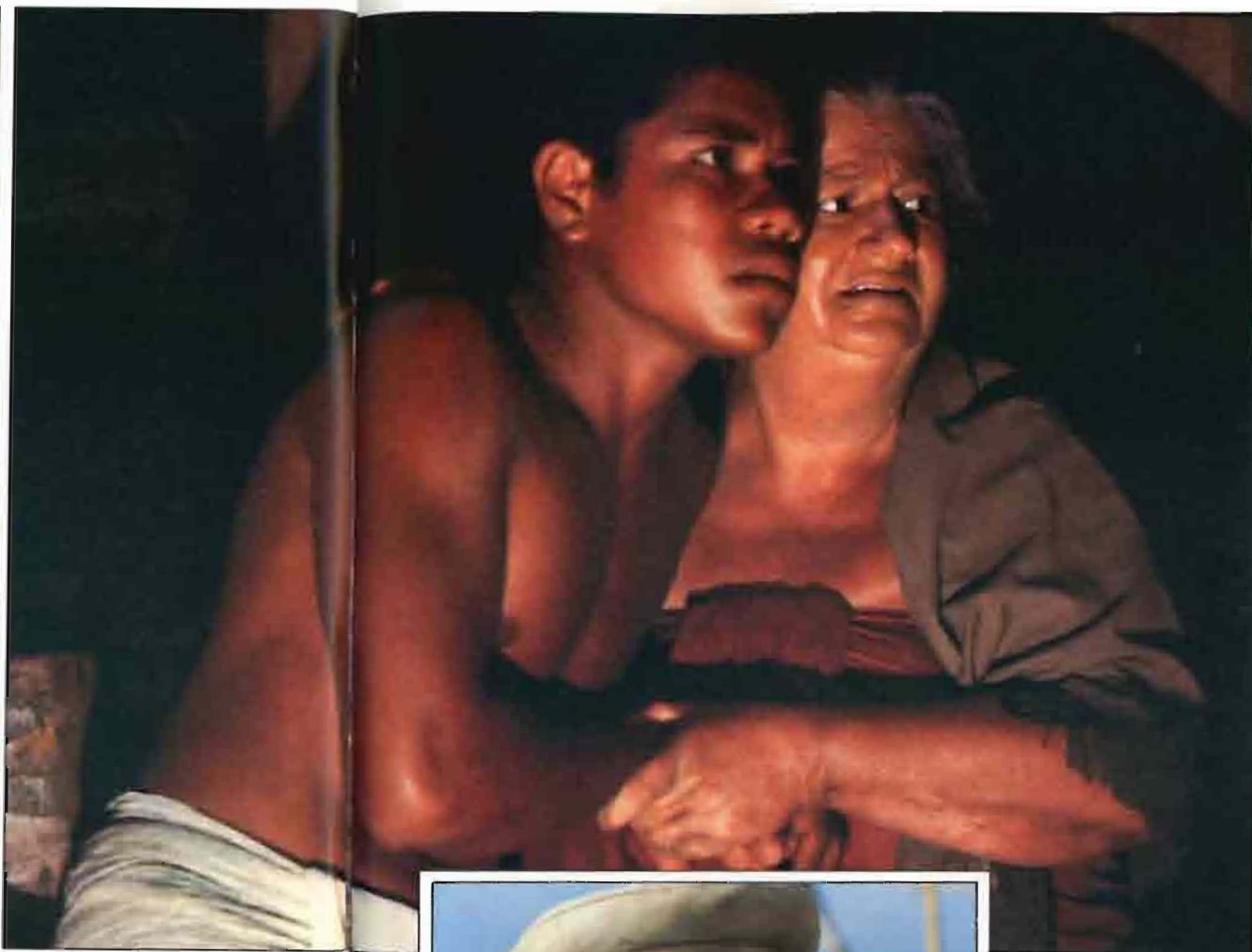


▲ The men were paddling slowly out in the bay, looking this way and that and pointing in many directions.

◀ The canoes were coming closer.



▲ 'A white turtle! Huh! You must think I'm as stupid as you are!'



▲ They huddled against the strongest wall, waiting for death.



◀ An English stranger with a red beard, red hair, red skin and red-rimmed blue eyes.



▲‘Of course he’ll come up!’ said Aesake, as he searched the sea for some sign, a dark head, a patch of white . . .

▶The Redbeard had raised the rifle and was sighting it down the side of the boat.



▲The boy and the turtle dived . . .

Luisa grabbed him by the shoulder, her fingers hooked like the talons of a bird. ‘Those fools—they’re saying Jonasi sent away the rain. Did you know that? They’ve made up a story about a white turtle.’

‘Let me go,’ said Samu, squirming.

Luisa would not release him. ‘Did you tell the wife of Bulai you’d seen this turtle?’

‘No! No, I never, I swear it!’

‘Then why did she tell me to ask Samu?’

There was a pause and he said in a whisper, ‘It was Etika I told.’

‘Why?’ Luisa stared at him. ‘What came into your head to tell such a story?’

‘Because it’s true. Aesake and I saw it one day, a white turtle, and—and Jonasi had tamed it.’

Luisa let him go. ‘White?’

‘Yes.’

‘Truly white?’

‘Aesake and I were there. We both saw—’ Samu’s voice shook like a small flame, then went out. If only he’d kept his promise to Aesake, none of this would have happened. That Etika! He’d never trust him again.

Luisa had recovered her anger. ‘So! Everyone else knew, did they? Why is it that I’m the last to hear of this thing? Well? Answer me!’

‘It’s—it’s just an ordinary turtle,’ said Samu. ‘What they call an albino or something. Not a spirit, nothing like that.’

‘It shines with a great light?’ said Luisa.

‘No, no, there’s no light, no strange power. Only an ordinary turtle—like other turtles, except it’s white. Go and ask Aesake. He knows all about it.’

‘Ask this one, ask that one,’ said Luisa. ‘Why should I have to ask? My son has told all the people in the village and yet his own mother doesn’t—’

‘I told no one but Etika!’ insisted Samu.

‘Why did you tell him at all, eh? Why tell him and not me?’

‘I didn’t want to worry you,’ Samu said.

‘And you think I’m not worried now. You think it makes me

happy not to know what they're all saying?' She looked hard at Samu. 'It's a real turtle like other turtles?'

'Yes.'

'And on the body of our Saviour you'll tell me you saw it with your own two eyes—'

'Yes, yes, I did. Aesake even touched it. He'll tell you—'

'All right.' She ruffled his hair and for a brief moment drew his head against her shoulder, then pushed him away. 'Leave me to myself a while,' she said.

Samu ran out quickly. Luisa went over to her sleeping mat, then stood still, caught suddenly by the memory of something long forgotten, best forgotten. Something half remembered from the day the Silent One had first come to the village—not the silly stories of Bulai. It was the talk of the men on the copra boat, chattering as the copra was loaded. On a perfectly calm day they had seen a canoe in the water. Something, they said, almost seemed to be pushing it toward the boat, aiming it so true and direct, as though a strong man were guiding it. Some thought they saw a flash of pearl white just beyond the bow.

But when they looked again the white light was gone and in the canoe they saw only a baby, alone and whimpering.

Luisa shivered. She knelt, head bowed. These days her knees were bad, and she didn't kneel unless the prayer was extremely important. Surely, she thought, the groaning of her bones would add extra voice to her plea.

She prayed for so long that all feeling left her legs, and she had to rub them back to life before she could stand again. But she was satisfied. She'd told the God of the church everything, and now the matter was out of her hands. Today, tomorrow, soon, the rain would come, the turtle would go. Life would settle again, and the mutterings in the village would cease.

She was still trying to make the blood move in her legs when a shadow fell across her doorway. Instantly she forgot both her prayer and her pain. The man Tasiri was watching her.

He leaned against the side of her doorway, smiling, and said in a loud voice, 'Good health to you, Luisa my old friend.'

She frowned. 'What is it?'

'I came to see how you were,' Tasiri said. 'That's all.'

'I'm well enough. Be gone with you.'

'Ah, Luisa.' Tasiri shook his head. 'These are sad times. Strange things happen in this village of ours. The sun shines hot, and people talk as though they have a fever, words that bring unhappiness to your door.'

'You come to tell me that!' snorted Luisa. She peered closer and saw two men standing behind Tasiri, farther back, waiting. Her suspicions became stronger, her face hardened.

Tasiri went on smiling. 'I come as an elder of the tribe and your friend, Luisa. I'm not one of those who speak ill of you—or your son Jonasi. He's a fine boy. He's a good boy just like Samu. Ah, Luisa, what a great mother you have been!'

Luisa scowled, but Tasiri's face was glowing with good humour and kindness. He rubbed his hands together. 'I remember the day Jonasi came here. What a tiny one he was! Small, like a young seabird crying for food. Was that so long ago? To look at him now, so tall and strong, one would never think that you'd snatched him from the arms of death.'

'What do you want?' snapped Luisa.

'Nothing,' Tasiri spread his hands. 'I've said what I came to say. I wanted you to know that you have friends in the village.' He tapped his head with his finger. 'Not everyone's been touched by the sun.'

Luisa sensed that something was wrong. Tasiri was not given to sentimental speeches, and it had been many months since he had even spoken to Luisa at all. Was this a trick, or was he really concerned for her? She nodded stiffly. 'I am grateful,' she said.

Tasiri was about to walk away. He stopped and turned as though remembering something. 'Is the boy lonely? Would he like to come fishing with us?'

'No! Ah—I don't know.'

'Bring him out,' said Tasiri, and his eyes were soft with kindness. 'I think I can make him understand.'

Luisa shook her head. 'He's not here.'

'Oh?'

'The last time I saw him, he was under the big breadfruit tree.'

'Ah, well,' Tasiri smiled. 'Some other day, perhaps.' And with a friendly nod he walked away, followed by the two men who'd been standing near by.

Luisa went back into the bure and stood still, hands to her mouth, thinking. Tasiri could be trusted as much as a snake. He was a man who'd sell his mother for a basket full of fish, his wife for even less. What was he trying to do? Or did it happen that even snakes repented of their ways?

She didn't have to wonder long. Suddenly there was a commotion outside, shouts and cries, and before she could reach the door, Samu burst in. His eyes showed fear, he was panting.

'Jonasi! They've got him! They're taking him away!'

'Who?'

'Tasiri's got him. They've tied his hands together!'

Then Luisa saw for herself. The three men were hurrying to the beach, and they were dragging Jonasi, like a dead pig, behind them.

'They came and took him!' gasped Samu. 'He fought, but they tied a line around his wrists.'

Luisa stumbled out of the bure, screaming after the men.

'They're after the turtle,' Samu said. 'They're going to take Jonasi out in a canoe. They'll use him as bait. He'll bring the turtle to their spears.'

Luisa was weak with fury. She wanted to run after them, kill them, bite and scratch them to pieces. But she could barely walk. She turned back to Samu. 'The chief! Get Taruga Vueti and tell him! At once, do you hear? Run, run!'

At another time Samu would have been paralysed at the thought of approaching the great Ratu, but now he was so frightened about Jonasi that he ran like the wind.

Luisa limped after the men. 'Cowards!' she yelled as they dragged Jonasi through the sand. 'Demons! Monsters! May lightning strike you to the ground! May your bellies swell and burst! May all your children be born with the heads of frogs! I curse you! Vile worms of men, I curse you for ever, do you hear me?'

But they were beyond hearing and almost out of sight. Luisa hobbled on, shrieking and sobbing. By now, almost everyone in the village was watching. Those who hadn't been roused by the sound of the struggle had come outside at Luisa's screaming. Groups of people stood silent and still, waiting for

something to happen. No one offered to help the old woman. No one moved until Aesake came running.

With swift strides, the chief's son came out of the village, past the people, past Luisa, and toward the beach. 'Stop!' Aesake shouted. 'Tasiri, stop! My father orders it! He is coming!'

Luisa looked back. Yes, the chief was indeed coming. He walked fast, his face was stern.

The people drew back into the shadows and bowed their heads. It was a long time since they'd seen the chief walk like this, with war in his step and a spear in his hand, but their curiosity was greater than their awe, and as soon as he had passed they followed him to the beach.

Two men had a canoe half in the water, half on the sand. A third man had dragged Jonasi to it. Now all three were standing with the waves swelling around their knees, waiting for the words of Taruga Vueti.

Tasiri's smile had tightened to a thin line of fury. He deliberately twisted the rope around Jonasi's wrists so that it cut into the flesh. The boy shuddered with pain, but Tasiri took good care to stand behind him where the chief could not see what was happening.

The men holding the canoe kept their eyes down and said nothing.

Chief Vueti walked to the water's edge and set his spear in the sand. 'Let him go, Tasiri!' he called.

Tasiri pretended to bow, at the same time twisting the rope again. Then, as Jonasi stumbled, he released him.

The boy came out of the water and stood, head down, in front of the chief. He swayed as though he might fall and his breathing was uneven and heavy.

Taruga Vueti cut the tie that held Jonasi's hands behind his back, and when he saw the red marks on the boy's wrists, his eyes grew fierce. 'Tasiri!' he said. 'What is your reason for this?'

Bent almost double, Tasiri waded to the beach and dropped to his knees at the chief's feet, pressing his forehead to the sand. 'Great Ratu,' he whined. 'It was to have been in your honour.'

'Why did you tie this boy and take him by force?'

'I wanted to present the great Ratu with a gift that was worthy of the name Taruga Vueti, so people from many islands would hear and say—'

'I lose patience, Tasiri!

'The white turtle, O Ratu. It has a shell that glows like moonlight on water, a shell most beautiful to behold. But only the Silent One knows where it hides on the reef. Without him we cannot find it. And if the turtle is not found, then your servant Tasiri cannot bring you this great honour—'

'You took him against his will!' said the chief, and his voice was so strong that the people behind him drew back and made a noise like a small, moaning wind.

Luisa came forward. 'They hurt him, Ratu,' she cried. 'They dragged him like a string of dead fish. See? Look at the blood on his arms.'

'Silence, woman!' said Vueti. He turned back to the men and said, 'Well, Tasiri?'

'But who knows what his will is?' whined Tasiri. 'He doesn't speak, doesn't hear. How could I make him understand that this was for our great chief? There was no other way, I swear it. He wouldn't come, great Ratu. He fought us.'

'Listen to this!' Vueti turned so that he could also see the people behind him. He held up his hand. 'If any man harms this boy or the white turtle, he will be brought before the council and punished. No one will harm either of them—' He stopped, his hand came to his mouth and he began to cough. 'No one—' But the strong voice had gone and he was struggling for breath. 'Stay—stay away—'

Another murmur went through the crowd.

'Leave the boy alone. The boy and the turtle.' Taruga Vueti looked tired. 'That is all,' he said, turning away. 'I have spoken.'

The crowd stood back, bowed and silent, until the chief had gone. Then a babble of noise broke out.

Tasiri was up off his knees and running like a crab along the sand. He disappeared beneath the coconut palms. The other two men dragged the canoe back up the beach, sullen and silent.

Luisa looked at the excited crowd and knew in her heart that nothing had changed. 'Cowards!' she screamed.

They took no notice of her.

She turned to the men who were hauling the canoe. 'Traacherous, double-tongued snakes!'

They, too, ignored her.

Jonasi was standing by himself, rubbing his wrists. Samu saw the smears of blood on his foster brother's arms and he felt in himself another pain because he, Samu, had been partly responsible. He walked away from the crowd and stood in front of Jonasi, waiting.

Jonasi smiled and put his hand on Samu's shoulder.

Samu's heart grew light. This was good. And now that both Jonasi and the turtle had the protection of Chief Vueti, it didn't matter what the people said. Aesake was right. The turtle wasn't a demon, and Jonasi didn't have an evil spirit in his head. All that was crazy talk.

Samu smiled back at Jonasi in front of everyone. Then Samu beckoned to the Silent One, and they walked down the beach together.

The watching crowd broke up, and people returned in small groups to the village. Luisa hobbled slowly after them, pausing every now and then to rest and think.

They wouldn't dare touch the Silent One now. No one would be foolish enough to go against the will of Taruga Vueti.

All the same, she thought, the chief had left a bad feeling behind him and, if anything, the fears about Jonasi had increased. From now on, no one would be seen to raise a hand against him. But what if he were to have an accident when none was looking?

Luisa leaned against a palm and watched the people return to their work. A group of men sat together mending their nets. Some women stirred their cooking pots at the fire. Other women were pounding mulberry bark to make tapa cloth. It was as it always had been, except that today there was more talk than usual. Their mouths moved faster, their heads were close.

Luisa watched, nodding to herself. Yes, she had changed her mind about the school for deaf boys in Sevu. She was sure now that it was right for Jonasi to go there. And the sooner he left, the more right it would be.

CHAPTER 8 THE FURY OF THE GODS

For over a month there had been no rain.

Day after day, the sun hung in a white hot sky, a terrible fire that burned grass brown and scorched the earth to ash. The terraces where the men had planted the dalo and yams had dried out. Instead of swelling to thick, fleshy tubers, the roots withered, and the large green leaves drooped toward the dust and turned yellow at the edges.

The people of the village could do nothing but watch the failure of their crops. Without dalo, cooking pots would be as empty as bellies. Children would cry while their mothers became thin and their fathers grew tired with hunger.

Every morning they saw the sun suck up the thin mist of evening and rise higher, hotter, to feed on the juices of leaves. Every afternoon they looked at the sky for rainclouds, but those that appeared moved away to some other island, to the crops of some other tribe.

Throughout those searing days, a line of men and women moved like ants to the hills to get drinking water from a spring. Their own river had dried to a bed of cracked mud, not a drop of moisture in it. Even the sea seemed to have shrunk from its shore. It lay quiet and still, pressed flat by the heat.

On those days when Tasiri had to go to the hills for water, Jonasi would spend as much time as he could with the turtle. No one attempted to follow. No one interrupted him. The fishermen out with their spears and nets avoided the bay of mangroves, and even Aesake and Samu left him alone.

Jonasi didn't know what Chief Vueti had said to the people, but he'd read enough from their faces and hands to realise that they would no longer try to capture the white turtle. But he still

feared Tasiri, and he would never go to the mangroves when Tasiri was in the village.

Sometimes the turtle waited for Jonasi under the mangroves, the top of its shell above the water, milk white and mottled with green shade. Or sometimes he'd look out in the middle of the bay and see arrow-shaped ripples as the turtle chased a school of small fish, and he'd plunge into the water after it.

When he reached the turtle, he'd grip its shell and rest against it, letting it carry him out toward the reef. His weight seemed to make no difference to the creature's speed. Its flippers turned on either side of him like the blades of powerful paddles, parting the water under his chin in two clean waves.

Since the destruction of his raft, this was the way Jonasi rode the sea.

Occasionally he'd let the turtle go, to swim on his own or dive or search the coral for hidden sea trout. And always the white turtle floated near by, watching, waiting with the patience of a dog.

Was that all the turtle was—a playmate, a pet of the sea? Somehow, Jonasi couldn't believe it. The creature's eyes looked so ancient, so knowing. At times he imagined it could share everything in his mind. Once he was so sure of it that he had cupped his hand over the turtle's head, hoping to touch the pictures of its thinking. The head had flashed back and the turtle had bitten him on the finger, hard, drawing blood. He, too, had drawn back, hurt and angry. For the rest of the afternoon they had kept their distance, eyeing each other warily.

Was it a reminder, he had wondered later, of the gulf between them—between man and animal, land and sea? Or was the white turtle, like some ancient tribal god, guarding its own mystery?

As the drought progressed, the people of the village became increasingly dependent on the fish that Jonasi caught. They didn't want to accept them, but their superstitious fears could not argue with hunger. They made good-luck signs over the fish to ward away evil spirits, cooked it and then, with full mouths, cursed the Silent One because their own nets had been empty.

On the morning of the thirty-fifth day of drought, the sun rose red over a great bank of black cloud, and a wind blew in from the sea, smelling of rain. People staggered half-asleep from their bures and stood facing the wind, laughing like small children. Such clouds they'd never seen before. They were higher than mountains and as wide as the island, dark as the depths of night. At last the sun was returning all the water it had stolen.

But as they watched, the wind grew stronger. Within minutes the sea was swept into white-peaked waves that burst into foam on the beach. Palms creaked, groaned, and bent their leaves. The village was shrouded in dust and flying leaves.

The people hurried back to their bures. The wind had whipped the smiles from their faces, and their voices were shrill with alarm. This was the beginning of a hurricane.

Even as they tried to close the thatched shutters, the wind hit with full force and tore the fastenings from their hands. The air screamed into their bures as though it were full of attacking demons, which choked and blinded them with dust.

Families crouched in fear and held on to one another, heads bowed, while walls bent toward them and the thatch of roofs peeled away. Outside they could hear the death sounds of trees, shrieks of splintered wood, then thumps, as the green giants of their village were ripped from the ground.

The rain came with the same murderous fury, not rain at all but a torrent of dark water, which burst against the village like a tidal wave, soaking the bures in seconds and pouring down the inside walls. It climbed cold around the ankles of terrified men and women who tried to hold their children beyond its reach. They screamed and prayed but couldn't hear the sounds of their own voices. Their ears were full of the noise of wind and water and terrible thunder. White fire lit the fear on their faces, flash after flash of lightning. The forked tongue of the Snake God Degei brought punishment to his people. His voice called for their destruction.

In the darkness of Luisa's bure, three people huddled

against the strongest wall, waiting for death. Samu was as speechless as Jonasi, and Luisa by now was so frightened she could neither cry nor pray. The black water rose around their legs and was flowing so fast that the bure would have been swept away had it not been built against a strong tree, which in turn was protected by other trees.

It was not the wind and rain that Luisa dreaded, but the water they stood in. It was salt. That could mean only one thing: the sea was rising to cover the land.

Because of the turtle. She was sure of it now. Everything because of that turtle.

But the sea rose no higher than their ankles. As time passed, so did the hurricane. Late in the afternoon the wind lessened and gradually died until the rain fell straight to earth. The sea retreated.

It was nearly over.

Tired, silent people waded through the water that flowed across their village and looked at the desolation. Everywhere there was wreckage. The torrent had swept banks of debris against uprooted trees, forming dams, and against one of these was the body of a pig. The other pigs, still tethered by their legs, were also dead. The goats and hens had disappeared.

It would be a long time before they would have more copra. Those palms that hadn't fallen were stripped of nuts and most of their leaves. One canoe lay on its side in the middle of the village where the cooking fire had been; the others had been swept away.

Everything was choked with thick yellow mud.

The people had been delivered from one fear to another. Now they had water, plenty of water, but hunger was much closer than it had been the day before.

They splashed around their bures trying to rescue their few possessions, sleeping mats, a little food, a wooden bowl here, a cooking pot there—doing what they could to repair damage before nightfall. Some of the bures were still intact, some required more work than could be done in a day. But only one had been completely destroyed.

The home of Bulai had been swept away.

Bulai and his wife were safe. At the height of the storm the wind had lifted their roof, first a corner, then the whole thing. Bulai had dragged his wife out into the screaming darkness to the next bure, and only just in time. Another great gust and the walls twisted and collapsed. When the hurricane died, there wasn't a trace of the house they'd lived in. It had all been swept out to sea.

CHAPTER 9 SAD JOURNEYS

Jonasi had been as afraid as anyone of the hurricane. Nor could he relax when it was over. The wind had died and the rain was no more than a steady shower, but his heart still beat fast with fear for the turtle. He knew that heavy rains swept mud into the sea, poisoning the water of the reef and the creatures in it. If the turtle had come to the shore to wait for him, then surely it would have been killed, caught by the currents or choked by the mud.

The night after the hurricane, he slept very little. The bure was cold and wet, and he was hungry. His discomfort filled his head with bad pictures of the turtle. And so, at an early hour when everything was grey with rain, he left the village and headed toward the bay of mangroves.

Most of the paths had gone, hidden under water, while others were blocked with trees and broken branches. Jonasi's familiar track was now as hostile as untouched jungle. He had no machete to clear vines and branches, and as he forced his way through, they broke against his skin, making scratches that bled in the rain.

The tide was very high. It flowed up through the mangroves and formed a line of foam where it met the flood waters running from the land. Out in the bay the waves were restless and coloured brown as far as the horizon.

Jonasi was beyond his depth long before he reached open water. He held on to the mangrove branches and went hand over hand through the dark channels between trees, inspecting the rubbish that had been washed against them. At every turn he expected to see the white shell, battered and unmoving.

He saw many dead fish. They floated belly upwards, stiff

and already swollen. But although he searched the bay all morning, he could find no sign of the turtle.

Cold and weak with hunger, he hooked his arms over a branch and rested his head against the trunk of a tree. Even if he did have the strength to swim out into the bay, he would see nothing in this thick brown water. Besides, the turtle could not live on a poisoned reef. Either it was dead, or else it had gone far away to the deep ocean beyond the reaches of the hurricane. One way or the other, he had lost it.

At last Jonasi turned inland and waded through the mud in the direction of the village. Hunger filled his chest like a wound, and his eyes were so full of rain, that he seemed to be looking through a waterfall. He paused to push aside a nest of fallen branches. The muscles on his back quivered and stiffened. A sense of danger touched his spine. He quickly turned. There was no one behind him. But a short distance away, the leaves of one bush trembled, splashing heavy drops of water.

Jonasi breathed slowly, his eyes and nose searching, but the rain dissolved any scent in the air and washed the ground that might have shown him tracks. He shrugged deliberately, then turned and went on. He came to a large clump of reeds where he knew he'd be out of sight to anyone following. He turned left. A few quick and careful steps, and he was crouching low behind a tree.

The rain fell steadily. For a while there was no other movement, only water, the drops on his skin and hair, the swamp against his ankles, the distant pulse of the sea. He waited, knowing that someone else was also waiting. Minutes passed, then he felt new vibrations, footsteps softened by mud. The clump of reeds shook. A figure emerged. It was Tasiri.

As Jonasi had suspected, Tasiri had been waiting for the right opportunity. The storm had given it to him. With everyone in the village too busy to notice his absence, he had followed Jonasi.

Tasiri was walking cautiously, crouched over, spear in hand as though he were stalking a pig. But it was the turtle he was seeking. Jonasi shivered with cold when he realised that Tasiri

had been watching him all morning, waiting for the turtle to appear.

If the turtle had come . . .

Jonasi pressed his fingers against his eyes to erase the picture in his head of the turtle dying on the end of Tasiri's spear. There'd be no way of making Chief Vueti understand. Tasiri would probably hide the shell until he could sell it to a passing trader, and even if it were discovered, he could claim that the turtle had been killed by the storm.

When he was sure the man had gone, Jonasi left his hiding place and hurried towards Luisa's bure. He was covered with mud and scratches and stumbling with hunger when he came to the clearing at the edge of the village.

There was no sign of Tasiri. Men and women were working in the rain, trying to repair their bures. Someone had put a shelter over the fire so they could cook a drowned pig before it spoiled. The smell of rich roasting meat was too much for Jonasi's pinched stomach, and a cold sickness broke over him like a wave.

Where the home of Bulai had been, a group of women poked in the mud with sticks. Bulai's wife turned and saw Jonasi. She stepped away from him. Her mouth opened wide, showing tongue and broken teeth, and the whites of her eyes grew big. She pointed in his direction.

Jonasi stopped and stared at her.

The women who'd been helping Bulai's wife crowded around her. They looked at Jonasi with the same kind of fear, and they took the shivering woman into the nearest bure.

Jonasi thought the storm had made Bulai's wife mad, but he couldn't understand why she had pointed at him. He looked to the people behind him for some kind of explanation.

They had gone too.

The women who tended the fire, the men who'd been binding the roof poles, even the children, they'd all disappeared. But they still looked at him. He could feel their eyes behind the walls and windows.

He continued on his way to Luisa's bure. The rain fell on him straight and cold, and again he began to shiver. He glanced at

the walls on either side. Nothing. No one. The whole village seemed deserted.

It was as though the hurricane had plucked the people away, leaving only their eyes to watch every movement he made.

Ten days after the hurricane, the flood waters had left the land, and the road to Ramatau was no longer part of an enormous swamp. Taruga Vueti sent for his son and ordered him on the journey to the neighbouring village.

The chief was barely concerned with the weighing machine that was waiting to be picked up at the post office. The hurricane had stripped the palms. What now did they have to weigh? Nor was he worried about the letter from the special school in Sevu. His mind was occupied by thoughts far more important, more immediate. He asked Aesake to find out how the winds had affected Ramatau, what damage lay in that village.

'Ask questions with your eyes and ears, Aesake,' he said. 'If you think there's food to spare, go to their Ratu on my behalf. Say that I, Taruga Vueti, would speak with him.'

'You wish him to come here, Father?'

'No, no, I will go to Ramatau.'

Aesake looked up quickly, then bowed his head again. 'Father, you're not strong yet. The road to Ramatau is difficult in the best of times—'

'I will go by sea,' said the chief.

'But your canoe—'

'It can be repaired.' Vueti closed his eyes. These days even talk made him tired. 'Something must be done,' he whispered. 'At nights I lie awake and hear the black birds of famine beating their wings over our village. It is a fearful sound, Aesake, and it makes me afraid of the days to come.'

'We have some food, Father,' said Aesake. 'And there will be more now that we've got water. The crops will grow again, and the trees will bear fruit.'

'When?' said Vueti. 'Many months, I tell you. The moon will come and go nine times before we have dalo, and the coconut takes longer. There is no meat. The sea has become barren.'

Floods have fouled the waters, and as I lie here my head is full of the smell of rotting fish. Is that not true?'

Aesake was silent.

'We must ask for help,' said his father. 'I can have no pride when my people are suffering from hunger.'

And so it was that Aesake set out on the long journey for Ramatau, carrying his father's spear as a symbol of authority.

As he passed Luisa's bure, the old woman called to him, 'You there! Aesake! So you go to Ramatau for the letter, eh?'

Aesake stopped. 'Who told you where I was going?'

'You don't take the ceremonial spear for hunting,' said Luisa. She grabbed his arm. 'Aesake, I beg you. Take the Silent One with you.'

Aesake shook his head.

'With you he's safe,' she said. 'Aesake, please, today they will kill him.'

Aesake lifted her hand off his arm. 'He can't come with me, Luisa. But don't worry. He's in no danger here. No one will touch him while he has my father's protection.'

'I tell you they will kill him!' Luisa's voice was shrill. 'I know it. Early this morning I saw the sign of death. I did. Across the moon, a cloud the colour of blood.'

'Oh, nonsense, old woman,' said Aesake, trying to edge past her. 'Your thoughts are always full of blood and death. You are a miserable old woman, and you make me miserable listening to you. No harm will come to Jonasi. But if it makes you feel better, why don't *you* look after him. Stay in the bure all day and keep him with you. But don't delay me when I am on an errand for my father.'

He hurried away, angry with himself because he'd lost respect for her age and talked sharply to her.

The road to Ramatau was worse than he feared, and the streams he'd waded several weeks before had changed their courses to become dangerous rivers, wide, swift, and brown with mud.

Everywhere he saw disorder and destruction. It was mid-afternoon before he reached Ramatau, and by then he knew that his father's hopes were useless. The hurricane had crushed this village too, leaving it as desolate as his own. Trees

had been pulled from the earth as though they were weeds and strewn across the roadway. A banana plantation had been flattened, then submerged in mud. Bures hung askew as though they were made of wet paper. Even the post office, built of wood and iron, had lost part of its roof. Only the small stone church seemed undamaged.

When the people saw Aesake, they crowded around him, eager for news. He told them that his village had also suffered, and they exchanged stories of the hurricane.

'You have food over there?' asked one old man, peering into Aesake's face.

'Not enough,' said Aesake.

The old man jabbed at him with a thin finger. 'Tell the government man,' he said. 'Make sure you tell the government man.'

Aesake thought him a little crazy, but in the post office he discovered that the old grandfather had indeed spoken wise words. There was a stranger sitting at the table beside the postmaster, an English stranger with a red beard, red hair, red skin, and red-rimmed blue eyes. He wore a shirt patched with sweat and open half way down the front, showing hair as thick as red moss. There was a pencil behind his ear. When he wasn't wiping his face with his handkerchief or slapping at flies, he wrote notes on paper and passed them across to the postmaster, who sat at the wireless with earphones on his head, tapping out messages.

The Redbeard looked hot, uncomfortable, and busy, but he stopped to talk to Aesake and asked him questions about his village.

'Haven't got around to visiting your people yet. I'm afraid you're pretty well last on the list.' He opened a large book full of close writing and ran his pencil down a page. 'Let's see. Yes, I'll be calling on you in a couple of days. Any casualties in your village? Dead? Injured?'

'No,' said Aesake. 'No one.'

'You're lucky.' The Redbeard looked surprised. 'What's the damage like down there?'

'Well, it's—like here, I suppose.'

'And no deaths? Two were killed in Ramatau, and half a

dozen injuries needed treatment. Five families had their homes demolished.'

'I didn't know it was as bad as that,' said Aesake.

'It's flattened half the island,' said the man. 'It's a national disaster, at least seventy people killed, hundreds hurt, thousands homeless, and goodness knows how many living with inadequate food and tainted water. What did you think, boy? That this little storm designed itself for your village alone? I tell you, it's cut a path right across the South Pacific. In Sevu alone, six people died.' He tapped his pencil on the book. 'The whole world has heard about this hurricane. Do you realise that? Even the King of England knows about it. And that, young man, is why I'm here.'

'King George sent you?' said Aesake in amazement.

'No, no.' The Redbeard wiped his face. 'Not directly. Through the Colonial Office, you understand. I'm the senior native affairs officer for this island, and when something like this happens I have to file a full report. I've been going right around the island, assessing the hurricane damage in each area and sending reports through to Sevu. I work out how much relief is needed. Later, my boys will supervise its delivery to each of your villages.'

Suddenly Aesake saw the importance of this man, of his questions and his pieces of paper. 'The government is sending us food!'

'There'll be enough to tide you over until you're self-sufficient again. Milk powder, flour, chickens, a couple of pigs, it all depends on the needs of the village.'

Aesake smiled. 'This news will gladden my father.'

'At least you won't starve,' said the Redbeard, and he became busy again with his pencil.

Aesake watched him for a while, then had a disturbing thought. 'But Sevu was also hit by the hurricane,' he said. 'Where will the food come from?'

The Redbeard slapped his hand on the table, scattering his papers. 'You lot are all the same,' he said. 'You think Sevu is the beginning and end of the universe. Ships, boy. From other islands, from countries you've never heard of. Two days ago a boatload of food and medical supplies left Sydney, Australia,

and it's on its way here this very minute. There's more to the world than a few clumps of coconuts, you know.'

Aesake felt he'd probably learnt more at school about other countries than this fat Englishman would ever know, but now was not the time to speak back. He stood straight and bowed his head slightly. 'Thank you. I will tell my father.'

'Two days, remember,' said the Redbeard. 'I'll be coming by launch on my way back to Sevu.'

'I'll remember,' Aesake said.

The postmaster had left the radio and was now pouring himself a glass of water from a cracked jug. 'Don't go without the chief's parcel,' he said.

Aesake had forgotten about the weighing machine. He waited while the postmaster sorted through a bin for a small brown package.

'Is that all?' Aesake asked. 'There should be a letter too.'

'No, only the parcel.'

'But isn't there a letter to my father from Sevu?'

'I would have remembered,' said the postmaster. 'No, nothing. Never mind, perhaps it'll come in next week's mail.' He hesitated. 'You'll be hungry,' he said. 'I'd ask you to eat with my family only there isn't—there's not even—'

'It's all right. I know,' said Aesake. 'Our village is the same. Anyway, I must get back as soon as I can to tell my father the news.'

The Redbeard looked up. 'Goodbye, young fellow. Take care of yourself. I'll see you the morning after tomorrow.'

Aesake hardly noticed the difficulties of his return journey, the washed-out paths, the flooded streams. His feet were swift with good tidings. He walked with speed, the package tied around his neck, Vueti's spear resting on his shoulder. His father would be well pleased. He would not be forced to beg at the feet of the chief of Ramatau. Instead he'd been offered the help of King George of England. What a good thing this was, that his father could keep his pride and at the same time feed his people. The ships were already on their way.

Evening came while Aesake was still some miles from home. A soft warm darkness hid the earth's wounds and filled the air with the singing of frogs and cicadas. The air was so calm it was

difficult to believe that there'd been a hurricane or that the island had known anything but peace.

Then, as Aesake came down the hills towards the village, another noise rose to meet him, thin and faint through the night. It was not the trill of insects or the call of a bird. It came in waves, gradually growing louder, a high-pitched sound of torment.

Aesake knew. He'd heard the sound before. Human voices joined in an animal cry so shrill that it shaved the hair on the back of his neck and ran a knife blade down his spine.

It was the wail of death.

Aesake stood still. They've done it, he thought. They've killed the Silent One.

But even as the thought came to him, he realised that the wailing was not for a boy, and certainly not for Jonasi. It was the cry of mourning for a man of status in the tribe.

Aesake ran like a hunted animal. He stumbled, fell, ran again, fought aside branches, and tripped over things unseen. Panic gave him strength. He set his bearings by the small point of orange light that marked the village, and plunged through the bush. Each step increased his certainty.

Something had happened to his father, Taruga Vueti.

As he came to the clearing, the cry of mourning reached out to embrace him with a sound more terrible than the wind of the hurricane. He raced to his father's bure, pushed past the people who stood outside, and burst through the doorway.

He stopped.

His father was not dead.

Taruga Vueti stood in front of three of the village elders. All four heads were turned toward Aesake and all wore the same expression, a waiting stillness. The orange light of the torches spread the chief's shadow across the far wall and ceiling and made his presence a fearful thing.

Aesake fell face forward on the floor, panting, bleeding from scratches, too exhausted to speak.

No one moved. They watched him with wooden faces until he was able to pick himself up and back away on his hands and knees towards the door. 'I'm—I'm sorry, Father. Forgive me, I thought—'

Vueti held up his hand. 'You had no way of knowing, Aesake,' he said. 'You are forgiven.'

'I was sure—' Aesake couldn't say it. 'I heard cries of mourning.'

His father nodded, then motioned him to stand. 'Death has been here in your absence. One of us has been taken from his place in the tribe.'

On his feet, Aesake could see, behind his father, the funeral mat and the body of a man covered in tapa cloth.

'Killed by a shark this morning,' said his father, and he lifted back the cloth.

Aesake had seen death before, but never anything as violent as this. Somewhere below the man's waist there was a mass of torn flesh, a red gaping mouth that proclaimed the loss of the right leg. It had completely gone, been wrenched away from the hip. The wound was enormous. Blood had congealed around the blue-whiteness of the bone and already the shreds of flesh were seething with maggots.

Chief Vueti dropped the cloth as Aesake saw the man's face. It was Tasiri.

CHAPTER 10 VUETI MAKES A DECISION

They said that Tasiri had been fishing in the bay of mangroves when the shark attacked. A shark twice as long as a man, some said, with a fin that split the water like a sail. But others said no, it wasn't a shark but a turtle, a great white turtle that had changed its shape when it saw Tasiri.

There was even some disagreement among the men who were there when it happened. Some claimed this, others said that. But one thing was sure: the attack was so sudden that Tasiri had had no time to draw his knife. There had been a great churning of foam, a scream, and then the muddy water had been stained with the darker brown of blood. The men had pulled the twitching remains of Tasiri's body ashore. He was dead, some said, the whole of his right leg torn away. No, no, said others, not dead but dying fast and with only enough strength to shriek, '*Vakavulavula*—the white one, the white one!' before his spirit left him.

And did not Bulai, first to reach the village with the news, claim to have actually seen the shark turn back into a white turtle and swim away with Tasiri's leg?

Now a new rumour reached Luisa's ears. People were saying that Jonasi had ordered Tasiri's death. The Silent One had been there, they said, and when he'd seen Tasiri, he'd come riding on the back of the turtle as though it were a canoe. It was at Jonasi's command that the creature had changed its shape and attacked, they said.

As the talk swept around her like a breeze, Luisa trembled. 'It's not true!' she cried to whoever was near. 'The boy was with me. He was here all day.'

The people turned away from her and ignored her words. They were still mourning for Tasiri, but once he was laid to rest,

their grief would demand some action. It would be only a matter of time before they demanded Jonasi's life.

On the afternoon of the day following the accident, Aesake went to Luisa. 'My father would speak with you,' he said.

'With me?' she gasped. 'But why? I've done nothing.'

'It concerns Jonasi,' Aesake said.

'Jonasi has done nothing either,' said Luisa. 'It's all wicked talk—'

'Hush, old woman,' said Aesake. 'I know that. So does my father. He wants to help the Silent One. Where is he?'

Luisa nodded toward the doorway of her bure.

'Bring him with you,' said Aesake.

Luisa and Jonasi followed Aesake to the house of Taruga Vueti. All three bowed low in the doorway and then crept forward, heads down, into a darkened room.

The voice of Taruga Vueti said, 'I didn't ask to see the boy.'

'Forgive me, Father,' said Aesake. 'But it was not safe to leave him on his own.'

There was a short silence. 'Have him wait over there,' said the chief.

Aesake led Jonasi to the other side of the room and the voice of Taruga Vueti spoke again. 'Be seated, Luisa.'

Luisa promptly took the weight off her stiff old knees. As she sank back on the mat, she lifted her eyes a little. She had never been here before. As her sight opened to the dimness, she saw walls covered with fine tapa cloth, each piece ornate with tribal patterns, and hung with the spears and clubs of many ancestors. She saw in the shadow before her the figure of Taruga Vueti, so still and forbidding that she could no longer remember what he was like as a small boy. He was the chief, all powerful, and his stern manner made her feel that it was she who was now the child. She lowered her head again. 'Yes, Ratu,' she said.

Taruga Vueti turned to his son. 'Aesake, did you tell this woman why I sent for her?'

'No, Father,' said Aesake. 'I said only that it concerned Jonasi.'

The chief nodded, his eyes distant with thought. 'The unrest

in the village has become an ugly thing,' he said to Luisa. 'You have heard the talk?'

'They are mad!' Luisa's voice found strength again. 'It's not Jonasi who has the evil spirit. It's the people. They talk in sickness like crazy dogs.'

'I know what they say,' said Vueti. 'And they don't talk in sickness but in fear. Who can blame them? No one, not even the leader of their tribe, can explain the strange things that have happened in the village since the boy found the white turtle.'

'If I may speak, Father,' said Aesake. 'I can prove it to be coincidence, all of it. Tasiri died because he was a fool. No man fishes from the water at dawn when the sharks are feeding, but Tasiri did just that—and worse. They say he had two little fish hung from his waist on the side where the shark attacked.'

'It's true, it was an accident,' Luisa said.

Taruga Vueti looked at the far corner where Jonasi sat cross-legged, eyes down, unmoving. 'There have been other accidents,' the chief said.

'The hurricane?' Aesake laughed. 'Father, tell the people what I saw and heard at Ramatau yesterday. They'll know that the turtle had nothing to do with the hurricane. Or, if it did, then it must have protected this village because here no one was hurt.'

'Bulai's house was blown away.'

'But of course,' said Aesake. 'That man's as lazy as a sea slug. His bure would have fallen down anyway.'

The chief shook his head. 'Bulai spoke ill of the boy. Tasiri hunted his turtle. They were his enemies.'

'He has no enemies!' shouted Luisa. Then she threw herself face-down on the floor. 'Forgive me, Ratu, I meant no disrespect. You are right, Ratu, right as you must always be. I only beg to point out that the Silent One thinks evil of nobody. He's a good boy, Ratu, such a good and generous—'

'That does not change what happened,' said Taruga Vueti.

'There's a reason for everything, Father,' said Aesake. 'The colour of the turtle, the shark, the hurricane, even Jonasi's silence—they all have ordinary explanations.'

'And the weeks before the hurricane?' said the chief. 'The

clouds that passed by our village while our crops turned to dust? Tell me, my learned son, can you explain the drought?

Aesake was silent for a while. 'No,' he said.

'Your school didn't teach you everything,' said the chief.

'I know, Father. But there'll be an explanation for the drought too, if you ask in the right place. At Sevu there's a weather office where you can find out about these things.'

The chief smiled as though Aesake had made some small joke. 'I am not concerned about isolated events with ordinary explanations, my son. What concerns me is the extraordinary way these events have come together. Ah yes, you talk of coincidence and superstition. I've even heard you call these people ignorant. A man has to be very young to be so sure. When you have less knowledge and more wisdom, Aesake, you'll understand that superstition is not the child of ignorance and coincidence. The teachers at your school spoke only of things seen and heard. What about the life that's unseen and silent and that has been with us since the beginning of time?'

'It was a mission school, Father,' said Aesake. 'We did learn about God too.'

'That God knew nothing of these islands,' said the chief. 'Does he speak of them in his book? Does he?'

Aesake didn't answer.

'Let me tell you why the people are afraid,' said his father. 'It's not the fear of a deaf and speechless foundling, nor do they shrink from a white sea creature, a turtle with no colour. What they feel is what I feel—an evil that hangs over this village like a cold, dark cloud even on the warmest days. They can't see it, but it chills their skin more surely than rain, and it smells worse than all the death there ever was. Where did it come from? they ask. And then they look at the Silent One.'

The chief turned to Luisa. 'Be in peace, old woman. I don't accept their judgment. It's not the boy. I'm as convinced of his innocence as you are, but for his safety and for the sake of the people, he must leave here as soon as possible. Last night three elders came to me, men who had witnessed Tasiri's death. They wanted a promise. Jonasi must go at once, they said. And I agreed. I told them I'd give an answer this evening.'

Luisa began to cry. She imagined the Silent One stoned out

of the village, sheltering in the mountains, dying alone and uncared for. 'Where will he go?' she wailed.

'To the special school for the deaf children at Sevu.'

'But, Ratu, they didn't send a letter.'

'I am sure they will take him,' said the chief.

'He has no way of getting there. The copra boat doesn't come for many days. It mightn't come at all—'

'Hush, woman, there's no need for alarm. Last night was not all sadness. Aesake brought good news from Ramatau. Food is coming to the village. A government man follows the hurricane and writes letters about the damage to King George in England. The King sends ships to the island.'

'England is far away,' said Luisa. 'By the time the ships arrive, Jonasi will be dead.'

'No, Luisa, not on those ships. He'll go tomorrow morning in the boat of the government man. As soon as the government man is finished here, he leaves for Sevu. Jonasi will be with him.'

'Tomorrow!'

'Keep him safe until then,' said the chief.

Luisa didn't answer. She was crying again.

'Isn't it true that you have a married daughter in Sevu?' said Vueti.

She nodded.

'Then you will go with Jonasi. Take your son Samu and stay with your daughter until you can come back on the copra boat. It's best that you, too, be out of the village for a while.' The chief turned to Aesake. 'And you,' he said.

'The people wouldn't dare hurt me!' said Aesake.

'I don't send you for that reason,' said his father. 'We've had no word from the deaf school, so you will need to speak to them for me. You know Sevu, and you know the school.'

'Yes Father.' Aesake grinned. 'It will be good to see Sevu again.'

'Until you leave, you will help Luisa look after the boy. See that he comes to no harm.' The chief looked towards Jonasi who sat so still he could have been a carved figure in the corner of the room. 'What's wrong with him?' he said. 'Is he sick?'

'He is heavy of heart,' said Luisa. 'The poor boy, the madness of the people gives him sorrow.'

Aesake looked at Jonasi. 'I think it's because the turtle has gone. No one's seen it since the hurricane—unless you believe what they say about Tasiri's death. Jonasi's been looking. I've watched him. And I know from his face he hasn't found it.'

'I am glad,' said the chief.

'He no longer searches,' said Aesake. 'He does nothing. He lies on his sleeping mat, staring at the wall. Or he sits on the beach, running sand through his fingers.'

'Perhaps the creature is satisfied and will now leave us in peace,' said the chief. 'Aesake, the boy will wonder why he is here. Take him away and try to make him understand where he is to go tomorrow. But stay with him at all times, do you understand? I would talk with Luisa alone.'

Aesake bowed and moved backwards on his knees until he was beside Jonasi. Then, together with the Silent One, he crawled out of his father's house.

The chief spoke with gentleness to Luisa. 'Wipe your eyes, old woman. It is only caution that makes me speak of the worst. Don't worry. For your peace of mind I'll see that nothing happens to the boy. I've not forgotten, Luisa. You've given life to many foundlings in your time. When my mother died, you nourished me as though I were your own son. I often remember that the Silent One was fed on the same breast that once nurtured Taruga Vueti. By giving Jonasi his life, I pay you back for my own.'

Luisa rubbed her hand over her face. 'Do we have to go so soon?'

'If Jonasi stayed here, I could do nothing to help him. The people must have their will. Do you know what would happen if I opposed them in this? They'd elect another chief, and Jonasi would die.'

Luisa was silent. Then she said, 'The government man may refuse to take us.'

'Aesake says the man has a big mouth above his red beard, but his head and his heart are good. I don't ask for his charity. I'll make him many gifts for the promise of a safe journey for the four of you.'

'The people will forget,' Luisa said hopefully. 'When the food arrives, they'll say the evil spell is broken. They'll be glad. They'll laugh again. They'll stop talking about the Silent One, and I can bring him home.'

Taruga Vueti shook his head.

'But the special school didn't send a letter,' said Luisa. 'Perhaps there's no room for Jonasi there—'

'Luisa!' interrupted the chief. 'You must not bring the boy back here. If the school can't take him, he'll have to stay with your married daughter in Sevu. Not here. Be sure he does not return to this village.'

Luisa took a deep breath and let it out with a heavy sound.

'Yes, Ratu,' she said.

As usual, she was left with a feeling of helplessness. Her efforts always seemed futile and did no more than exhaust her. She was like a foolish bird that flapped frail wings at the sun in an attempt to move it off its course. She was old. She was tired. She had struggled long and hard to keep the boy, but now, after it all, she was losing him.

She bowed as low as she could. 'I'll prepare for the journey,' she said.

CHAPTER 11

THE ARRIVAL OF THE REDBEARD

At the top of the beach, Jonasi stopped and looked toward the hill of death, which stood to one side of the village. A group of people were decorating a new burial mound with shells and flowers that they carried in green palm baskets. As they placed their offerings on the mound of white sand, they swayed against each other, opening and shutting their mouths in such a manner that the air seemed alive. Jonasi could feel it throbbing like a pulse-beat against his skin.

He would have stood watching but Aesake took him by the arm and dragged him away.

It was Tasiri's burial mound. Jonasi knew that much, although he didn't know how Tasiri had died. It had been too sudden for illness. An accident of some sort. Whatever it was, he was sorry. Several times he had dreamed in anger of killing Tasiri, but these pictures had gone quickly from his mind, and now that the man was dead, he could wish him alive again.

He let Aesake lead him along the beach.

For some days now, Jonasi had given up all hope of seeing the white turtle. It had gone. He had hunted for miles around the coast, swum in all the usual places, but there had been no sign of the turtle since the hurricane. Perhaps the storm killed it. Perhaps a shark, perhaps a man. Thoughts of its death brought a pain too great to bear, and Jonasi would change them quickly to a picture of the turtle swimming safely in some far-away ocean.

He shaded his eyes and looked across the flat, grey sea. But Aesake was at his side again, closer than a shadow, urging him back to work.

Since early morning they had been trying to repair an old canoe made of two sheets of iron. The hurricane had left it

twisted in the branches of a mango tree. They'd got it down, carried it to the beach, and were trying to straighten it, beating out the dents with wooden clubs. It was slow work. Each time Jonasi's club fell against the iron, the air trembled and small hermit crabs scuttled down the sand to the sea. His hands were blistered. His back ached. But he was glad to be working with Aesake, grateful for the friendship Aesake was offering.

Yesterday, when they'd been admitted to the presence of Taruga Vueti, Aesake had deliberately made a distance between them, setting Jonasi in the corner like a prisoner or a slave. Since then, however, Aesake had been closer than a brother—too close, at times. It was a nuisance having Aesake go with him everywhere, but it was also a comfort.

They hammered at the canoe until the sun was in the middle of the sky, shining like flame on the water. It was much too hot to work. Aesake threw down his club and pointed out to sea. Jonasi looked up quickly, thinking of the turtle, but Aesake was watching a boat.

It was a launch, smaller than the copra boat, painted red and white. It came toward them through the sun-struck sea, a strange and sudden thing that trembled in the heat as though it were unreal. Jonasi had never seen a launch before.

He looked again at Aesake and realised that his friend was not surprised. Then he understood why Aesake had insisted they repair the old canoe at the beach instead of in the village. Aesake had actually been waiting for the boat, and from the smile of pleasure on his face, it was clear that the launch carried good tidings.

Jonasi looked along the beach at the people who ran down to the water's edge, laughing and pointing. Some of them had been at Tasiri's death mound only a short time before. Whoever or whatever the launch had on board, it had to be of great importance.

Jonasi sat in the sand with Aesake, watching while the boat came in like a swimming seabird, swiftly, smoothly, to an anchorage offshore. He could see three men on the deck. One, an Islander in a bright blue shirt, stood by the anchor chain. Two others, one dark and one white with a hairy face, were getting into the boat's dinghy.

In spite of all the good feeling on the beach, Jonasi felt uneasy. Something about that red and white launch threw a chill over him. He didn't know why. He watched the two men row into the shore. They had no weapons. Their faces returned the smiles of the people, and the one with the beard was waving.

Jonasi shrugged and pushed aside his suspicions. In his separate world there were so many unfamiliar happenings that he had learnt to accept events quickly and without too much concern.

The dinghy scraped on the sand, and the white man got out. Half a dozen people rushed forward to help the other man pull the small boat up on the beach.

Taruga Vueti was there, holding out his hand in friendship.

Jonasi had never seen such a big Englishman, nor one with so much hair on his face. He was almost as wide as he was tall, and when he moved his mouth, his beard bobbed like red seaweed in the tide. The man behind him was an Islander but not from these parts. He wore a shirt, blue printed with white flowers, and like the man still on the boat, his hair was clipped short against his head.

Aesake's hand was under Jonasi's elbow, urging him to his feet. Jonasi stood, but as he soon realised what was intended, he pulled away. He stared at Aesake. His friend smiled back; and there was nothing but good in his eyes. Jonasi relaxed. He let Aesake take him by the arm and lead him to the Englishman.

As the boys approached, a shudder went through the crowd. Children who'd been playing in the sand drew back against their mothers, and in a moment all smiles had disappeared. People no longer looked at the Englishman but at Jonasi, and their faces were full of fear and loathing.

Jonasi had seen it often before, the way people backed away from him. If he'd been on his own, he'd have retreated, gone off somewhere by himself. But Aesake was holding his arm and walking fast, almost dragging him across the sand.

When they came close, the people panicked and ran. Like a flock of birds they scattered, stumbling, bumping into one another in their haste to get as far away from Jonasi as possible.

By the time the two boys were standing in front of the strangers, only Taruga Vueti remained with them. The others were back from the beach, watching from the shelter of the palms.

The Englishman greeted Aesake as though he'd known him for a long time; but while he was shaking Aesake's hand in the English way, his face was worried. He glanced several times at the now distant crowd. Then his blue eyes, like the eyes of a pig, slid slyly to Jonasi, and his red eyebrows came together in a frown. His mouth opened and closed above the beard. His hands made shapes in the air. He and Taruga Vueti were arguing about something.

Jonasi was glad when it was all over and the chief was leading the visitors back to the village. Aesake stayed behind, but the rest of the tribe followed Taruga Vueti and the strangers. In a short time the beach was peaceful again. A breeze blurred the footprints on the sand, while out across the water the boat lay at anchor, rising and falling gently on the tide, like an insect on the chest of a sleeping man.

Jonasi nudged Aesake and pointed toward the canoe, which still needed many hours of work before it could be used. But Aesake shook his head and put his hand to his mouth.

Hunger. That was something Jonasi understood. Grinning, he rubbed his stomach as answer, and together they walked back to Luisa's bure.

He could smell the food before he reached the doorway, but he wasn't prepared for the feast the old woman had laid out. There were shrimps boiled in dalo leaves, sweet raw fish in coconut milk, corned beef, freshwater crayfish, yams, tapioca and bananas.

These dishes were special even in times of plenty. How had Luisa managed to prepare them when food was so scarce? Bananas. And he was sure there wasn't a dalo leaf left this side of the mountain. Was all this to do with the strange Englishman?

Jonasi stared at the bowl Luisa had pushed into his hands, then looked at Aesake, who was eating so fast that his cheeks were blown out like the sides of a puffing fish. What did it matter where the food had come from? It was good, and he was

hungry. He sat beside Aesake and ate quickly, holding the bowl out to Luisa every time he emptied it. Juice ran out of his mouth and dripped on his stomach. He wiped his fingers in his hair. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten so well.

It wasn't until his stomach was swollen with contentment that he realised that Luisa wasn't eating. She sat on her sleeping mat with her arms folded, her head down.

Ashamed of his greed, Jonasi gave her his bowl. She wouldn't take it. He took her hands and tried to close her fingers about the dish, and he thought how old and thin she had become.

She turned away from him. The bowl dropped, spilling across the floor, as she threw herself face downward on her mat. She covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook.

Jonasi felt in the air the same trembling he'd experienced that morning, a rising and falling, like the breathing of the sea against his skin.

He stood still in amazement.

Luisa was mourning for him.

CHAPTER 12 A TIME OF FAREWELL

Luisa's wailing brought Samu running to the bure. He saw Aesake leaning over the old woman and saying, 'Hush, hush!' and Jonasi standing beside them.

'What's wrong?' Samu said.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Aesake. 'If we're not careful, she's going to spoil everything. Look. You take Jonasi outside, will you? Try to make him understand that we're going to Sevu.'

Samu led Jonasi out into the sunshine.

Aesake knelt and spoke to the sobbing Luisa. 'Stop it, old woman. Hush now, do you hear? You frighten him. When you make a fuss, he thinks something is wrong.'

Luisa rocked her head in her hands. '*Aaiiee!*' she moaned. 'My little Silent One!'

'If you don't stop that noise, I'll send for my father!'

At once there was a silence. Then came a long, wet sniff as she turned her head toward him. 'When I leave him in Sevu I'll never see him again,' she croaked.

'Don't speak such foolishness!' said Aesake. 'He's only going to school. Come. Dry your face and put on a smile for him, or you'll undo all my father's plans.' He helped her to sit up, soothing her as though she were a fretful infant. 'The boat leaves at sunset. We haven't much time to get ready.'

Luisa looked at him with tearful eyes. 'I had a dream last night, an omen—'

'That's enough!' said Aesake.

'I did,' she insisted. 'Aesake, something's going to happen to him.'

Aesake sighed. Poor old woman. Two months ago she'd been full of life, stout and strong of mind, a sharp tongue in her head. Now she was a mere shadow, all skin and bone and fear.

'Do you know what's ailing you?' he said. 'Your brain has grown thin from starvation. Why don't you eat? You've lost so much weight you rattle like a handful of shells every time you move.' He set the rest of the meal before her. 'Here, this food was a present from my father to all of us—and that includes you. You insult him if you don't eat it. Fill your mouth and put happiness in your stomach, then perhaps your face will learn how to smile again.'

Without another word, Luisa began to eat. Aesake, when he was satisfied that she wasn't hiding the food away for Jonasi or Samu or her married daughter in Sevu, went outside.

Samu was squatting on the ground, drawing pictures for Jonasi with a sharp stick. Now he wiped his hand over the outlines and said to Aesake, 'I can't explain it to him. He doesn't understand.'

'Did you draw the boat?'

'Of course I did. But how do I explain that he's going on it to Sevu?'

Aesake looked at Jonasi's frown of concentration. 'Wait here a moment,' he said to Samu.

Within seconds Aesake was in his bure, kneeling in front of the old tin trunk he'd brought back with him from the mission school. The lid had rusted and most of the contents were powdered with red dust or mildew, but he found what he wanted. He ran back and spread a faded picture in front of Jonasi. It was a large photo of the main street in Sevu, of trading stores and many people, horses, and bicycles and, in the lower right corner, a motor car. He knew Jonasi had seen the picture before and he watched for recognition.

Jonasi smiled and put his finger on the car, that strange land canoe that moved without paddle or sail.

With a black pencil, Aesake wrote four letters across the bottom of the photograph—SEVU—and then he started from the beginning, using the butt of the pencil to scratch in the dust. He drew the government man's launch, and three people at the bow, and in front of them an arrow pointing to the photograph. He looked at Jonasi.

Yes, yes, the boy understood. He stretched his arm over Aesake's head toward the beach.

Aesake added four figures to the launch. Jonasi frowned.

'That's you.' Aesake pointed to one figure and then to Jonasi. 'That's me. There's Samu. And there's Luisa.'

But the Silent One only stared at him, puzzled.

Aesake thought for a minute, then called into the bure, 'Luisa, will you help us?'

'What is it?' The old woman came out.

'Just stay there,' said Aesake. 'Now—' He underlined the four people on the launch, stood up, and made a wide sweep with his hand.

The cloud passed from Jonasi's face, and his eyes widened. His open mouth trembled as he made rapid gestures—Aesake, Luisa, Samu, himself, the boat and the photograph.

'Yes, yes, that's it!' Samu leaped to his feet and danced around the boy. 'He knows! Look at him, he understands!'

'Does he know we're coming back without him?' said Luisa.

Aesake glanced at the grinning Jonasi. 'No,' he said. 'We can't explain that.' He reached for the other thing he'd brought from his trunk, a small reed mat folded and tied around a shirt he'd worn at the mission school. He untied the parcel, then shook out the contents. It was a white shirt, creased and mildew spotted, frayed at the collar, and with only one button left on it. But it was the best he had to offer. He gave it to Jonasi and helped him put it on.

Luisa smiled with pleasure. 'Ah, you are kind, Aesake,' she said. 'How good that he has you for a friend.'

Jonasi was delighted with the gift. He paraded before them, turning in circles, flapping the long sleeves like wings. He'd never worn a shirt before.

Aesake whispered to Samu. 'Stay beside him, will you? I'm going to see my father and the government man.'

Aesake's concern for Jonasi was now confined to the few hours left before the boat removed the boy from danger. He expected to stay with Jonasi for the rest of the afternoon, but when he reached his father's bure, he learnt that the Englishman was ready to leave at once.

'I've finished here,' he said.

'What about the tide?' said Aesake. 'It's only just turned, and with four extra people on board—'

The Redbeard dismissed the warning with a flick of his hand. 'My boys'll see us over the reef, don't worry about that. I want to get to Sevu before nightfall. No sense hanging around here, waiting for a full tide. Is your party ready?'

'Yes.' Aesake nodded.

'Good. Get them down to the beach right away.'

'Wait a minute,' said Taruga Vueti. 'Aesake, does the boy know where he's going?'

'He knows about Sevu, Father,' said Aesake. 'I think he imagines it's a short trip to see the sights of the city.'

'Now look here'—the Englishman was rubbing his hand over his beard—'you're not trying to put one across me, are you, Vueti? Why are you so anxious to get rid of the boy? Are you sure he hasn't got leprosy or some infectious disease?'

'I gave you my word,' said Vueti. 'The boy cannot hear or speak, and it's no disease. He was born with silence.'

'Then why is it these people won't touch him with a barge pole?'

'I have explained all that,' said the chief. 'It's because he is different.'

'All right, then, but you'd better be telling the truth. If I take a case of leprosy or typhoid into Sevu, there'll be all hell to pay.'

Aesake glanced at his father's face, saw the narrowed eyes, the tightened mouth, and said quickly, 'Father, if I may leave now—I'll tell them to wait on the beach.'

'Yes, do that,' said his father.

The Redbeard shifted his bag to the left hand and held out his right. 'Goodbye for the present, Vueti. I'll see you in a couple of weeks when the supplies are through. Don't worry. I'll attend to this village myself, and I give you my word, here and now, your people won't starve.'

'You'll see the boy has a safe passage?' said the chief.

'I guarantee it. And your son and the other two—'

Aesake heard no more. He ran swiftly back and herded the startled Luisa, Samu, and Jonasi down to the dinghy.

Luisa fussed because she didn't have time to finish her packing. 'What about the presents for my daughter? I can't go with empty hands? And what do we eat tonight, eh?'

There was no time for argument. The Englishman and his

assistant were coming down the beach, followed by Taruga Vueti. Aesake stood by, ready to help drag the dinghy down to the water's edge.

How quiet it all was, he thought. No one from the village had come out to bid them farewell, although he knew they'd been watched. The strip of coral sand was deserted. Ragged palms rested their heads against a grey sky, and the sea was so flat that the boat seemed anchored to its own reflection. There were no canoes. No child played at the edge of the water. The women who usually gathered shells at low tide were all in their bures.

But at least Jonasi was without care. He was too excited to stand still. He strutted about like a young rooster, his chest so far out that the single button on his shirt threatened to come off.

It's just an old shirt, Aesake thought. If I'd known he'd be so pleased, I'd have given it to him ages ago.

'Come on,' said the Redbeard, sitting in the bow of the dinghy. 'Room for two of you, and we'll come back for the others.'

Aesake looked at his father.

'You and the boy first,' said Taruga Vueti.

'I won't fail, Father,' Aesake said.

'I know that,' said Vueti.

'He'll like it at the school. He'll learn to speak.'

The chief put his hand on Aesake's shoulder. 'If they can't take him, leave him in Sevu,' he said in a low voice.

'Are you coming, or aren't you?' shouted the Redbeard.

'Goodbye, Father,' said Aesake.

He took Jonasi's arm, gently. Suddenly, the boy no longer seemed eager to depart. He looked around anxiously for Luisa. Aesake tried to make him understand that she would follow, but he sat stiffly in the stern, looking back at the water's edge where the old woman waited fearfully. Taruga Vueti was already walking back to the village.

Samu, standing by Luisa's side, waved to them. Aesake waved back. Jonasi sat unmoving, his eyes fixed on Luisa. Only when the two boys had boarded the launch and Jonasi saw the dinghy go back, did he smile again, fingering the buttonholes of his white shirt.

If they can't take him, leave him in Sevu. Those had been the last words of Taruga Vueti to his son. Only Aesake had heard them. Aesake looked toward the railing where the old woman was being half pushed, half pulled on to the boat, Samu behind her.

What else can we do? Aesake thought.

One of the men took Luisa to the cabin where she sat meekly, awed by the unfamiliar boat. She peered about her nervously, craning her neck this way and that. She held her bundle on her lap with both hands.

'All right, all right,' the Englishman called to his assistants. 'Get that anchor up and let's move out of here. Keep her dead slow until we're in the channel, understand?'

Aesake and Samu left Jonasi at the stern and went up to see the engine started. Samu pointed to the beach where the people were now gathering, waiting, watchful.

Aesake shook his head. 'Their lives are haunted by make-believe monsters. It's not their fault. Tell me, Samu, how do you make such people open their eyes and see the world as it really is?'

The engine coughed twice, and black smoke trailed across the water. Then it opened to a shuddering roar that settled to a rumble. They were moving very slowly toward the river mouth where the fresh water had made a deep channel in the reef.

One of the Islanders was doing something to the engine. The other stood out on the bow, watching the reef and signalling directions.

The beach became smaller, and the people on it were no more than ants.

Aesake was watching the shore and thinking of his father when Samu grabbed his arm. This time he was pointing to the stern of the launch. Jonasi leaned over the railing, his shirt flapping against his back.

'What's he looking at?' Samu said.

Aesake said, 'It can't be. Not that.'

But they both knew it was the white turtle.

As soon as Jonasi sensed their attention, he turned away from the stern and walked aimlessly across the deck, pretending an interest in some coils of rope. Aesake wasn't

fooled. He went to the place where Jonasi had been standing, leaned over the side, and caught sight of the white turtle.

Jonasi rushed back. The Silent One leaped at Aesake, pushing him out of the way. Aesake spun around. He crouched, ready to defend himself. But Jonasi didn't attack again. Instead, he jumped over the rail. If Aesake hadn't grabbed his wrist, he'd have gone overboard.

'Help me!' Aesake shouted at Samu.

Jonasi kicked and struggled with a man's strength. He was half over the rail, pushing against Aesake's grip, trying to get to the water. Samu grabbed his other arm, and he and Aesake pulled Jonasi on to the deck where he thrashed about like a hooked shark.

It took the two of them to pin Jonasi down. He fought as though they were strangers. He was panting with a strange sobbing noise that bubbled in his throat and was almost a sound. Aesake had never before heard a noise from the mouth of the Silent One.

'We're not going to harm your turtle,' Aesake kept saying. 'We're not going to do anything.'

'The others will see it,' said Samu.

'Maybe not,' said Aesake.

'But it shines like a fire.'

'They're too busy watching the reef up front. In a while we'll reach the channel and deep water. Then they'll go fast. We'll leave it behind.'

Jonasi must have understood that Aesake meant the turtle no harm, for he stopped struggling and lay limp on the deck. Samu and Aesake helped him to his feet but didn't let go of him. One at each arm, they kept him in a firm hold. The Silent One leaned forward to watch the turtle. He didn't try to break away again, but simply stood there staring at the creature. His throat bubbled, his chest heaved, and he breathed like someone in great pain.

The boat creaked slowly over the calm grey water. Beside it swam the turtle, its shell half out of the water, its head held high. The eyes were dark and all-knowing, and its sharp, bird-like mouth seemed to hold a world of unspoken wisdom. Aesake could see every line of its shell, the pale colours that

blended to no colour at all, and beneath it, the flippers turning easily, keeping it always ahead of the launch's wake.

'It must be tired by now,' said Samu. 'Why doesn't it lose speed?'

'Keep your voice down,' warned Aesake.

He looked over his shoulder and saw the men still occupied up forward, the Redbeard at the wheel, staring ahead. Inside the cabin, Luisa was asleep.

'Why doesn't it go away?' insisted Samu.

'It will, it will,' said Aesake.

'No, it won't. You're wrong, Aesake. I always knew you were wrong. That thing is no turtle.'

'You're afraid,' sneered Aesake.

'Look at him.' Samu nodded sideways at Jonasi. 'It's cast a spell on him. It's calling him, that's what it's doing. He understands its demon language—'

He could say no more. One of the Islanders had screamed like a knifed pig. Now he stood on the bow, waving his arms in the air and shouting, 'The white demon! Look!'

At once everyone was moving. Jonasi writhed desperately and fell to the deck, Aesake and Samu on top of him. The Redbeard's two assistants rushed to the stern, pointing and yelling. Luisa, wakened by the noise, stood shrieking in the cabin doorway.

The engine stopped, and the Englishman came to the stern. 'What do you think you're doing—' His eyes and mouth opened wide. 'A white turtle! A snow-white turtle! I don't believe it!'

'They told the truth,' stammered one of his men. 'There is an evil turtle spirit. Look, look, it follows the boat.'

The Redbeard laughed. 'That shell must be worth a fortune.' He turned to his men. 'Don't just stand there. You—get up forward, the anchor, quickly! And you—well go on, over you go. What are you waiting for?'

The man backed away, shaking his head. 'No—no sir, it's evil.'

'Rubbish! Do as you're told and hurry!'

The man took a couple of steps back. 'That's not a turtle, sir. That's a demon. I tell you, we catch that and we all die.'

'I said—get it!'

'Not me, sir.'

The Englishman's face was as red as his beard. He looked about to hit the man, but at that moment the other Islander came back. 'You! Get that turtle,' shouted the Englishman.

But this man's eyes were also full of fear. He shook his head.

Luisa rushed across the deck, trying to reach Jonasi. The Redbeard roughly pushed her back into the cabin and closed the door on her. He said to Aesake, 'You boy, dive overboard, will you? Turn it on its back until I can get a rope around it.'

'I can't,' said Aesake.

'Don't you dare tell me you can't!' Then his voice changed and he said coaxingly, 'Forget their mumbo jumbo. It's no more a demon than I am.'

'No,' said Aesake.

'You then—'

And Samu looked away.

The Redbeard pointed at Jonasi. 'What about him?'

'It's his pet,' said Aesake. 'He tamed it. That's why it's following us.'

'Pet! Demon! If only I could swim!' The Redbeard looked as though he were going to cry. Then he opened the cabin door, pushed past Luisa, and went inside, shouting, 'I'll get the thing myself!' He came out carrying a gun.

'No!' yelled Aesake.

But the Redbeard had raised the rifle and was sighting it down the side of the boat.

Aesake flung himself at the man.

It was impossible to hurt or even move such a mountain of flesh, but the Redbeard was surprised enough to hold his fire. He shifted the rifle, swung his left hand and hit Aesake on the head.

Aesake went down on the deck. Light and dark burst against his eyes. His ears were full of thunder. He didn't see Jonasi dive overboard. As he sat up, shaking his head, he heard Samu's cry, then a high-pitched wail from Luisa. After that, there was a silence.

The Englishman had lowered his rifle, and a great smile cracked his beard. 'That's it, boy!' he called towards the water.

'Hold on, hold on. Now quick, turn it over. Boy? I said, turn it over!'

Still giddy from the blow, Aesake stumbled the few steps to the side of the boat and saw Jonasi with the turtle. The Silent One was clinging to its back, gripping its shell with both hands. His head was bent toward the turtle's and his shirt, almost transparent in the water, billowed around him. The boy was steering the turtle away from the launch.

'Engine!' the Redbeard yelled. 'Move, you idiots! I said, power! It's getting away on him.'

As the terrified men ran to obey, the Redbeard turned to Samu and Aesake. 'Get over the side and give him a hand. Quick! Go on.'

Samu ducked and ran to Luisa.

Aesake stood still. 'He isn't catching it!' he shouted at the man. 'He's saving it!'

The Redbeard spun round, his face slack with surprise, then he realised what was happening. Jonasi was making no attempt either to turn the turtle over or to return to the launch. If anything, the white turtle had increased its speed. Now it was too far away for its head to be visible. All that could be seen was Jonasi's head and shoulders raised high out of the water, and a small fan of ripples behind him.

Not once had the boy looked back.

The engine started. The Redbeard ran to take the wheel. Luisa came out, crying, clinging to Samu.

'Where's he going?' Samu said.

Aesake shook his head and watched the widening gap between the boat and the Silent One.

Then the boy and the turtle dived.

It happened without warning. One moment they were there, in the next they'd disappeared, leaving hardly a ripple behind them.

Once more the engines were cut. The two men on the bow stared down at the water as though their own blood had been spilled in it.

One said, 'They won't come up!'

'Of course he'll come up!' said Aesake to Samu, as he searched the sea for some sign, a dark head, a patch of white, a shirt—

'The demon took him down!' said the man.

The Redbeard came back to the stern, shading his eyes. 'He'll be here somewhere. Maybe in a different spot. Maybe he'll surface farther back—' He wasn't shouting now. He sounded anxious.

They watched and waited, but there was no trace of the Silent One or the white turtle.

'He's been taken to the spirit world at the bottom of the ocean,' said one of the men.

'Will you stop that rubbish?' snapped the Redbeard. 'Look how shallow it is. One, two—three fathoms at the most. They can't disappear!'

He was right. The sea was calm and patched with the different colours of coral—green, brown and red, blue in the deeper pools, pale grey in the sandy shallows. The turtle couldn't have reached the channel, and there was nowhere for it to hide. Its shell was so conspicuous that, even at three fathoms, it would be seen from the surface.

'You did say the boy could swim,' said the Redbeard.

'Better than any of us,' said Aesake.

Again there was the long quiet of waiting.

The Redbeard turned to Aesake. 'What did that idiot boy think he was doing, anyway?' he asked. 'I didn't tell *him* to dive over. He couldn't hear me if I did. He was up and over the side of his own free will.'

Aesake said nothing.

Then the Redbeard put his hand on Aesake's shoulder. 'We'll find him. If he's as good a swimmer as you say, he'll be safe. Probably making monkeys out of us.' He waved at the men. 'All right, start her up, and we'll go around a couple of times. Dead slow in circles where he went down.'

Aesake stood staring at the sea.

Luisa was sitting in the cabin again. She, too, was still, making no sound, her eyes fixed on nothing, like the eyes of the blind.

Samu left her and came out on deck. 'She won't speak to me,' he said to Aesake.

'It's shock. There's nothing you can do.'

Samu was quiet for a while, then he said, 'Do you think we'll find him?'

Aesake shook his head. In the distance the green mountains propped up a sagging heap of cloud. Somewhere in front of these peaks was the village—and his father, Taruga Vueti, to whom he'd made a promise.

Now, more than at any other time in his life, Aesake needed his father's assistance, but the chief was far away, too far even for remembered advice. The vast calm of the sea was unbroken for miles. There was nothing on it, not as much as a stray bobbing coconut.

'No, we won't find him,' Aesake said.

CONCLUSION

Jonasi and the white turtle were never found. The sun came and went many times, but the sea did not return the Silent One to the shore. It was as though the reef had completely swallowed them.

The government man returned with generous supplies of food to the village, so that there was enough to keep hunger away until crops were ready. And it wasn't long before the gentle balance of sun and rain restored the earth. The dalo shoots uncurled to broad green leaves, and clusters of tiny coconuts swelled, changing colour from orange to green to brown. Gradually the promise of fruit was fulfilled, while the sea gave a never-ending harvest. After two years, no one would have known there had been such a hurricane.

People chose to forget about Jonasi and the white turtle. But beyond the village, as far away as Sevu and the outer islands, stories of the white turtle multiplied like fire. There were men who said it was truly a demon, but others claimed it to be a spirit of light. Each person, it seemed, had a different story. And each believed his story to be the only truth.

In Sevu, the crew of a Norwegian cargo ship claimed there were two white turtles. They'd seen them, they said. In the deep ocean, days out from port, two turtles swimming together. They were both white, they said, and they gleamed like stars in all that dark blue water.

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AN YVONNE MACKAY FILM

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AND INTRODUCING TELO MALESE AS

THE SILENT ONE

SCREENPLAY BY IAN MUNE FROM THE NOVEL BY JOY COWLEY

Director of Photography IAN PAUL. *Music* JENNY MCLEOD.

Underwater Photography RON AND VALERIE TAYLOR.

Designer TONY RABBIT. *Film Editor* JAMIE SELKIRK.

Executive Producer DAVID COMPTON.

PRODUCER DAVE GIBSON DIRECTOR YVONNE MACKAY

Produced with the assistance of the New Zealand Film Commission
and South Pacific Merchant Finance Limited.

Winner of the New Zealand Children's
Book of the Year Award — now a major
motion picture.

The Silent One is Jonasi, a uniquely gifted boy
sent from the sea as a baby to grow up in an
isolated Pacific village.

Separated from the villagers by his silence and
their prejudices, Jonasi finds solace in his
underwater world where he develops a special
relationship with a huge white turtle. However,
both Jonasi and the turtle are seen as evil spirits
by the superstitious villagers.

A series of natural disasters and a struggle for
leadership within the village sweep Jonasi
towards his strange destiny.



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