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**Opening Extract from...**

# Devil-Devil

Written by G. W. Kent

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# DEVIL-DEVIL

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0 50 100 150 200 250 miles
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ONTONG JAVA
BOUGAINVILLE
PACIFIC OCEAN
CHOISEUL
ISABEL
NEW GEORGIA
Solomon Sea
Lau Lagoon
Sulufou
SIKAIANA
Auki
MALAITA
RUSSELL ISLANDS
NGGELA
Honiara
ULAWA
GUADALCANAL
SAN CRISTOBAL
SANTA CRUZ
BELLONA
RENNELL
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SOLOMON ISLANDS
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0 500 1000 1500 km
PACIFIC OCEAN
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
SOLOMON ISLANDS
Coral Sea
VANUATU
NEW CALEDONIA
AUSTRALIA

# 1

# THE GLORY SHELL

Sister Conchita clung to the sides of the small dugout canoe as the waves pounded over the frail vessel, soaking its two occupants. In front of her the Malaitan scooped his paddle into the water, trying to keep the craft on an even balance. Sister Conchita could see the coastal village a hundred yards away. The beach was crowded with islanders. She wondered whether it had been worth the perilous sea journey just to see the shark-calling ceremony when all she wanted was a shower and a meal. Of course it was, she told herself severely. If she intended serving God in the Solomons then she had to get to know everything about the islands.

The half-naked islander in front of her suddenly gave a scream of terror. Turning, he thrust the paddle into the sister's hands and dived over the side of the canoe, disappearing into the frothing white foam. Sister Conchita sat rigid with apprehension, the pitted wooden blade clutched loosely in her hands. Bereft of the islander's control, the canoe started pitching and swinging wildly.

For a moment all that Sister Conchita wanted to do was to cower helplessly in the bucking wooden frame. Then her customary resourcefulness took over. Snap out of it, she thought grimly. You got yourself into this hole, better get out of it the

same way, girl. Muttering a fervent prayer, she tightened her grip on the paddle and thrust it with all her force into the water.

For the next five minutes the wiry young sister fought the sea. The momentum of the current was sending her at breakneck speed in the direction of the beach and the watching islanders, but the waves were crashing over the canoe at an angle, buffeting it from side to side. Several times the entire tree shell was submerged beneath the surface, but on each occasion it surfaced sufficiently for the sodden nun, coughing and gasping, to resume her paddling.

Doggedly she kept the prow of the canoe pointing at the beach. After an apparent eternity of choking, muscle-aching effort the shore actually seemed to be getting closer. One final shock of a wave descended on the canoe and hurled it sprawling up into the shallows off the beach.

Half a dozen brawny, cheering Melanesian men in skimpy loincloths splashed into the water and laughingly hauled the canoe up on to the sand. The crowd of assembled islanders broke into delighted applause. Dazedly Sister Conchita stood up and limped out of the beached craft.

Gradually her vision cleared. She blinked hard. Standing in front of her, joining vigorously in the acclamation among the large crowd, was the islander who had discarded his paddle and left her to fight the sea alone. Struggling for breath, Sister Conchita fought for the words adequately to express her opinion of him.

'They've just been pulling your leg, sister,' drawled a contemptuous voice from behind her. 'They wanted to see what you were made of. You didn't do so bad. Most sheilas just stay in the boat screaming bloody murder.'

The nun turned to see John Deacon, unshaven and clad in khaki shorts and shirt, regarding her coolly from the edge of the crowd.

'Mr Deacon,' said Sister Conchita, trying to keep her balance. Deacon was an Australian who managed a local copra plantation. She did not like him, suspecting him of ill-treating his labourers. However, she always tried, she suspected in vain, to conceal her feelings.

'Local custom,' explained the stocky, broad-shouldered Australian laconically. 'Any stranger approaching the beach, the guide jumps overboard. Actually the current is bound to bring the canoe up on to the shore, but if you don't know that, it can be a mite disconcerting.'

'You can say that again,' said Sister Conchita.

'At least you had a go,' acknowledged the plantation manager. 'The natives like guts.'

'Have you come for the ceremony?' asked Sister Conchita politely, trying to change the subject. She did not wish to be reminded too much of her undignified arrival.

The Australian snorted with derision. 'I don't believe in superstition,' he told her. His eyes scanned her tattered, once-white habit. '*Any* superstition,' he told her with emphasis. 'I'm here to pick up a cargo.'

Suddenly Deacon was swept aside by a phalanx of island women, offering the nun rough blankets with which to dry herself, together with a husk of coconut milk. In a chattering group they conducted her to a site at the water's edge and waited eagerly with her. An artificial lagoon about twenty yards in diameter had been constructed there with piles of stones marking its edges, and an aperture on the seaward side to allow fish to swim in and out.

As the nun watched, an old man in tattered shorts and singlet emerged from one of the huts and walked down towards the stones. A profusion of ancient bone charms rattled on a string around his neck. A naked small boy of about ten years of age accompanied him.

'*Fa'atabu*,' muttered an awed woman. She translated for the nun's benefit. 'This one is the shark-caller,' she said, indicating the old man.

Four islanders splashed out into the shallow waters of the shark area. They were carrying large flat stones, which they banged together under the water. Simultaneously the shark-caller started chanting in a high, tuneless voice. The crowd, which had swollen in numbers to several hundred, looked on in expectant silence.

For several minutes nothing happened. Then a reverent murmur went round the crowd. The fins of half a dozen sharks could be seen entering the enclosure.

The men, still clashing the stones together, fled from the water. Women picked up a few baskets of raw pork and placed them at the water's edge before withdrawing hastily. Completely unperturbed, the boy hoisted one of the baskets up on to his shoulder and staggered out with it into the water, to a depth of several feet. To the accompaniment of screams and shouts from the crowd on the shore the sharks began to swim steadily towards the boy.

Sister Conchita found herself clenching her fists at the sight. The boy stood still for a moment. Then he reached up into the basket and started feeding the sharks lumps of raw meat, dropping these into the water just in front of him. As the sharks approached, accepting the food, the boy began to caress them. Throughout, the shark-caller continued his keening.

Sister Conchita looked on, fascinated by the sight. Out of the corner of her eye she became aware of Deacon and two Melanesians carrying a bulky sack along the ramshackle wooden jetty protruding into the sea. A dinghy was tethered there, bobbing in the water. Farther out to sea she could see the Australian's trading vessel at anchor.

The sister did not want to leave the ceremony but she thought that it would only be courteous to say goodbye to the brusque

plantation manager. Reluctantly she slipped through the crowd and made her way along the wharf. Deacon and his helpers were trying to load the sack into the heaving dinghy. The islanders were struggling to lower the sack to Deacon, waiting impatiently below. As she approached, one of the Melanesians dropped his end of the bulging sack. It burst open, disgorging a cascade of seashells.

Sister Conchita increased her pace to see if she could help. Some of the shells rolled across the wooden platform and nestled at her feet. The nun stooped to pick them up.

'Leave that; we'll sort it!' ordered Deacon, scrambling up from the dinghy.

Sister Conchita ignored him. She had cradled three shells in her hands and was examining them with increasing excitement and anxiety. She would have recognized them anywhere. Before she had left Chicago she had attended a museum display of South Pacific seashells. The ones in her hands were a delicate golden brown in colour, with a round base tapering exquisitely to a point.

'Are you deaf? I said I'll take those!' shouted Deacon, lumbering towards her.

Sister Conchita was intimidated by the Australian's looming presence but stubbornly she clutched the beautiful shells to her.

'I think not, Mr Deacon,' she said, refusing to take a pace backwards, although every instinct warned her to get away from the plantation manager. 'I believe these are glory shells,' she went on. 'You have no right to be taking them off the island. They're a part of the culture of the Solomons.'

The *Conus gloriamaris*, or Glory of the Seas, was the rarest of all seashells to be found in the Solomons, sought after in vain by almost every islander. It fetched over a thousand dollars among collectors. Its export was expressly forbidden by the government.

'Mind your own business!' grunted Deacon. 'Or . . .'

'Or what, Mr Deacon?' asked Sister Conchita, still standing her ground, although she was conscious that she was trembling. It had been a long time since she had been exposed to an example of such apparently uncontrollable wrath. With relief she realized that a group of village men, attracted by the altercation between the two expatriates, had abandoned the shark-calling ceremony temporarily and were hurrying along the jetty behind them.

'This is a Catholic village, Mr Deacon,' said Sister Conchita clearly. 'I don't think its inhabitants would take kindly to seeing a sister being manhandled.'

Deacon looked at the dozen or so men getting closer. With an impressive display of strength he hurled the sack into the bottom of the dinghy, scattering its consignment of shells.

'I won't forget this,' he promised vehemently, glaring up as he cast off. 'I'm not having some bit of a kid who hasn't been in the islands five minutes telling me what to do.'

'And another thing,' the nun called after him. 'Just in case you have any more illegal shells in that sack, I shall be asking the Customs Department in the capital to examine it when you get there.'

Deacon was already rowing the dinghy with vicious strokes back towards his small trading vessel. Sister Conchita turned with a grateful and rather tremulous smile to face the approaching islanders. She realized that, as usual, she had just insisted on having the last word. It was a failing she was well aware of and would have to take to confession yet again.

# 2

# THE GHOST-CALLER

Sergeant Kella sat on the earthen floor of the *beu*, the men's meeting-house, patiently waiting for the ghost-caller to bring back the dead.

Most of the men of the coastal village had managed to cram into the long, thatched building with its smoke-blackened bamboo walls. According to custom, a small wooden gong had been struck with a thick length of creeper to summon the assembly.

Kella could hear the women and children of the remote saltwater hamlet talking excitedly outside as they waited for news of the proceedings to filter from the hut. Most of the men were eyeing him with suspicion as he sat impassively among them. A touring police officer would not normally have been allowed inside the hut, but he was present in his capacity of *aofia*, the hereditary peacemaker of the Lau people.

Kella hoped that Chief Superintendent Grice would not hear about the detour he had made to this village. Back in Honiara his superior had been explicit in his instructions.

'You're going to Malaita for one reason only,' he had told Kella. 'You are to make inquiries about Dr Mallory, nothing else. After your last little episode over there, I said I'd never send you back. But you speak the language. I take it that you can ask a few simple questions and come back with the answers?'

Hurriedly Kella had assured the police chief that he could. After six months sitting behind a desk in the capital he would have promised almost anything to get out on tour again. Now here he was, only two days into his journey, and already he was disobeying instructions.

The village headman entered the hut. He was a plump, self-satisfied man clad in new shorts and singlet and exuding the confidence of someone who owned good land. With a few exceptions, the Lau area chieftains were not hereditary but were chosen for their conspicuous distribution of wealth. This man would have achieved his position for the number of feasts he had hosted, not for any fighting prowess.

The headman cleared his throat. 'We are here to find out who killed Senda Iabuli,' he muttered grudgingly in the local dialect. Plainly he had not wanted the meeting to take place. 'To do this we have sent for the ghost-caller, the *ngwane inala*. He will tell us who the killer is.'

The ghost-caller was sitting with his back to the wall, facing the other men. He was in his sixties, small and emaciated, his meagre frame racked periodically with hacking coughs. He wore only a brief thong about his loins. His face and body were criss-crossed with gaudy and intricate patterns painted on with the magic lime. Barely visible beneath the decorations on his face were a number of vertical scars, slashed there long ago when he first set out to learn the calling incantations. Laid out on the ground before him were two stringed hunting bows, some leaves of the red dracaena plant, a few coconuts and a carved wooden bowl containing trochus shells.

According to the gossip Kella had managed to pick up since his arrival at the village, the ghost-caller had been summoned to investigate the sudden death of Senda Iabuli, a perfectly undistinguished villager, an elderly widower with no surviving children.

Iabuli's first and only claim to notoriety had occurred a month before. Early one morning he had been on his way to work in his garden on the side of a mountain just outside the village. He had, as always, crossed a ravine by way of a narrow swing bridge consisting of creepers and logs lashed together. As he had made his precarious way to the far side, a sudden gust of wind had caught the old man and sent him toppling helplessly hundreds of feet down into the valley below.

The event had been witnessed by a group of men hunting wild pigs. It had taken them most of the morning to descend the tree-covered slope into the ravine to recover the body of the old villager. To their amazement, they had discovered Senda Iabuli alive and well, if considerably shaken and winded. His fall had been broken by the leafy tops of the trees, from which he had slithered down to end up dazed and bruised on a pile of moss at the foot of a casuarina tree.

The old man had been helped back to the village, confused and shaking, but apparently none the worse for his experience. For several weeks he had resumed his customary innocuous existence. Then one morning he had been found dead in his hut.

Normally that would have been the end of the matter, but for some unfathomable reason a relative of Iabuli had demanded an investigation into his death. This was the family's right by custom and had caused the headman to send for the ghost-caller. Kella had heard of the events and had invited himself to the ceremony.

The ghost-caller picked up one of the red dracaena leaves and split it down the middle. He wrapped one half around the other to strengthen it. Then he placed the reinforced leaf in the carved bowl. Next, he shuffled the two stringed bows on the ground before him. Each was a little less than full size, fashioned of palm wood, with strings of twisted red and yellow vegetable fibres. The bows represented two Lau ghosts, the spirits of men who

had once walked the earth. The ghost-caller threw back his head and started to chant an incantation in a high-pitched, keening tone.

The calling went on for more than an hour as the caller begged the right spirits to enter the *beu*. They had a long way to come, for the souls of the dead resided on the island of Momulo, far away. Suddenly the chanting ended. The caller stiffened, his back rigid and his eyes closed.

'The ghosts ride,' murmured the headman, nodding sagely, as if these events were all his doing. Some of the elders nodded obsequious agreement. The custom man before them was now possessed of the spirits of the departed *agalo*.

'Who comes?' demanded the ghost-caller. Spasms racked his body. Voices began to emerge from his mouth. There were two of them, speaking in different pitches. Kella had been expecting them both. The ghost-caller had taken no chances, adhering to the main ancestral ghosts of the region, ones everyone present would know. He had selected Takilu, the war god, and Sina Kwao of the red hair, who had once killed the giant lizard which had threatened to devour all of Malaita. Only a ghost-caller was allowed to address these spirits by their names.

As each ghost spoke, the relevant bow quivered on the ground. The caller was good, thought Kella. The police sergeant had been watching the emaciated man closely, and was sure that there were no threads connecting the weapons to the ghost-caller, which could be twitched surreptitiously to make them flutter. He could only assume that the custom man was drumming on the ground with his iron-hard heels to set up the necessary vibrations.

'Oh Takilu, can you tell us anything about the passing of Senda Iabuli?' quavered the ghost-caller.

Neither bow moved. An audible sigh of relief went round the room. If the war god was not involved it probably meant that the

old man's death had been due to natural causes. Now there should be no internecine blood quarrels to divide the village.

'Sina Kwao,' resumed the ghost-caller in reverent tones, 'can you tell us what happened to Senda Iabuli?'

The bow on the right quivered fiercely. A gasp went up from the assembled villagers. The ghost-caller pounced.

'How did Senda Iabuli die?' he asked. 'Was he killed by a devil?'

The bow trembled once, a sign of assent. Awed and frightened cries filled the men's house. Kella relaxed. All in all it was quite a good performance, he thought. The headman must have briefed the ghost-caller cleverly. By attributing the death to a devil, the relatives of Senda Iabuli would be mollified.

But the ghost-caller had not finished. His weary eyes flicked lizard-like across the room, catching and engaging Kella's gaze. It was almost as if the old man could read the policeman's thoughts.

'Did the devil-devil use a man to carry out the murder?' he asked.

The bow flipped again briefly in assent and was still. Throughout the hut the men rose angrily to their feet, demanding to know who was the killer among them. The ghost-caller shuddered and slumped forward, his job done.

Kella hurried out of the *beu*. The ghost-caller most certainly had not kept to any pre-ordained script. As a result, there could now be a lot of trouble in the village, perhaps even the start of a blood feud.

# 3

# THE DEATH CURSE

Outside in the noon sun, the villagers gathered in animated and apprehensive knots, discussing what they had seen and heard inside the *beu*. Kella saw the headman complaining to the ghost-caller. He drifted over casually, in time to hear the headman refuse to pay the remainder of the custom man's fee.

'You've stirred up too much trouble,' howled the headman. 'You'll get no more from me.'

'I passed on the answers of the gods,' replied the other man stubbornly. 'A devil used a man from this village to kill Senda Iabuli.' He could not possibly have heard Kella approaching, but still turned to face the sergeant. 'It is not my fault if there are unbelievers present,' he said pointedly.

Kella realized that all eyes were on him. Get out fast, he told himself. You caused enough trouble on Malaita last time. Your record won't stand another court of inquiry. All the same he knew that he was not going to walk away while the village was still in such turmoil.

'*Aarai*,' he said quietly, using the Lau term of respect to the headman, 'you must pay this man what he is owed.'

'Who says that I must?' asked the headman.

'I do,' said Kella. 'I speak as the government's policeman.'

A large crowd was gathering to see how the headman would

deal with this threat to his authority. Several burly islanders began to shoulder their way through the throng towards the police sergeant. Kella knew that these were the headman's bodyguards, paid monthly in valuable porpoise teeth and cans of beer to do his bidding about the village.

'And', the police sergeant added, raising his voice, 'I speak as your *aofia*, directed by the spirits to keep the peace. If you shame the ghost-caller I shall call upon the shades for payback.'

Kella surveyed the crowd impassively. There were enough level-headed men and women present to accept what he said. Even the bodyguards looked uneasy and stopped pressing forward. The voice of tradition would often be heard when the white man's law was ignored. With the antenna of a politician, the headman sensed the change in the atmosphere and responded swiftly but with ill grace.

'I shall pay the fathom of shell money I promised the ghost-caller,' he growled. 'I am a true chief of my people and always keep my word. That is known among all the islands.'

The ghost-caller turned, satisfied, and walked towards the trees surrounding the village. Kella accompanied him, in case the bodyguards experienced a change of heart.

'You shamed me in your thoughts, *aofia*,' said the ghost-caller quietly as they walked. 'You believed I had been bought by the headman and would only give him news he wanted to hear.'

'I was wrong,' acknowledged Kella. 'I have been too long away overseas. Sometimes I lose touch with the old ways.'

The ghost-caller stopped and turned to face the sergeant. The old man's red-rimmed eyes searched Kella's face, as if looking for something. For a moment Kella sensed that the old man was going to confess something to him, but the moment passed.

'You use the ghosts but do not always believe in them,' said the ghost-caller. 'You tread a dangerous path, peacemaker. Dangerous for others, and for yourself.'

'Sometimes I don't know what to believe,' admitted Kella. 'As for my path, others chose it for me when I was a child and I must follow it for as long as I can.'

The ghost-caller sighed. 'Senda Iabuli and I were young together many years ago,' he said unexpectedly. 'We were friends. Like you, we did not always follow the appointed path. We did good things, but we also did bad things together. Now he is dead, and soon I shall follow him.' The ghost-caller walked through the outer fringe of trees without looking back at the policeman. 'Find your path, *aofia*,' he called. *'O lelea vasi amiua*. Go your way, as it has been appointed.'

The villagers were still milling restlessly as Kella walked back to the huts.

'Who is the closest living relative of Senda Iabuli?' he asked, determined to sort the matter as quickly as possible.

'I am,' said a youth, coming forward warily. 'I am Peter Oro. Senda Iabuli was my grandfather.'

Unlike the other men in their faded aprons or *lap-laps* he was wearing the black shorts and white shirt of the local mission senior primary school. Still to be in full-time education at the advanced age of sixteen meant that he was one of the potential high-flyers identified by the expatriate missionary priests to be processed quickly through the system. Soon he would be sent to King George VI Secondary School in the capital and then dispatched to Britain or Australia to gain a degree, and return to work in the government service in the long run-up to independence.

That meant that already the boy would be torn between the fading memories of his custom upbringing and the new and strange Western influences to which he was being subjected. Kella, who had been there, did not envy the youth what lay in store for him. He guessed that it was Peter Oro who had demanded the ghost-caller's investigation into the death of his grandfather. Kella wondered why.

'Show me your grandfather's house,' was all he said.

Peter Oro indicated one of the huts. It was fashioned like all the others in the village. The roof and walls consisted of layers of pandanus leaves sewn on to bamboo frames with vines. A series of bamboo uprights, each of exactly the same size, were bound to a betel-nut framework. Thatch eighteen inches thick on the roof was designed to keep out the heat of the day.

Peter accompanied the police sergeant to the door and started to follow him in. Kella raised a restraining hand. 'If you don't mind,' he said in English, 'I'd rather look round by myself.'

'What are you going to do about my grandfather's death?' demanded the youth hotly. 'You heard the ghost-caller say that he was murdered.'

'Ghosts cannot be produced as witnesses in the white man's court. But I shall investigate the matter, never fear!'

It was cool and dark in the single room of the hut. In the centre of the living space were a few blackened stones used as a fireplace on the earthen floor. Other fire-stones were scattered across the floor. This indoor fire would only be used for cooking in bad weather, but normally would be kept alight with damp wood all the year round to repel mosquitoes. A bamboo bunk had been built into one of the walls.

The dead man's personal belongings were kept in the thatching of the roof. Systematically Kella took down the spear, bow and arrows, wicker fish basket and paddle which were stored there. As far as he could see, there was nothing untoward about them.

He turned his attention to the rest of the room. There was a sleeping mat in a corner. Presumably it belonged to Peter Oro. Only the dead man's closest relative would be allowed to sleep in the hut during the six-month mourning period.

The hut was strangely untidy. As the home of a man whose spirit had not yet made the final journey to the far island, it

should have been maintained in an immaculate condition by Iabuli's next-of-kin. Kella walked round the interior of the hut several times. He frowned. This was not the neglect of a careless schoolboy. Peter Oro had been searching for something.

Kella went outside. The waiting youth regarded him with overt hostility. The villagers stopped milling around, and watched the police sergeant. Kella ignored them. Slowly he walked round the perimeter of the hut. On the far side he found what he had been looking for.

A pile of large round stones was balanced against one of the betel-nut supports. To a casual observer the cache was just a support used to keep a piece of timber in place. Kella was relying on Peter Oro's ignorance of local customs. It would have been some years since the youth had lived in the village. He might have no idea of the significance of the heap of round stones.

There was a horrified murmur from the villagers as Kella dislodged the pile with his foot and started separating the rocks from one another with his hands. They were comfort stones, used by the old and afflicted. Specially selected for their size and smoothness, they would be heated over a fire until they were too hot to touch, and then pushed with a log until they were under the bunk. The heat radiating through the slats would ease most aches and pains, of which Senda Iabuli assuredly would have had plenty since his fall. By also providing heat to drive out sick spirits, the stones were regarded as holy and must not be touched by outsiders.

Sullen growls of 'White blackfella!' emanated from the horrified crowd as Kella discarded the sacred stones. It was a phrase to which he had long grown accustomed and it did not deter him.

Nobody else in the village would have dared to approach the pile, while Peter Oro probably would not have remembered their significance. If Senda Iabuli, or anybody else, had wanted

to conceal something during the villager's last days, this would be as good a place as any in which to do it.

Kella found what he had been looking for towards the bottom of the pile. A hollowed-out bamboo container was secreted behind the largest boulder. Kella removed the wooden top and shook out the contents. He held up the package for all in the village to see. Then he unwrapped the large celeus leaf. Inside was a piece of dried ginger sprinkled with lime.

Kella saw the headman gaping at his discovery. 'You know what this is?' the police sergeant asked.

The headman nodded, all traces of pride wiped away. 'The death curse,' he whispered.

Kella nodded. 'Now we can be sure that someone intended to kill Senda Iabuli,' he said.

Carefully he replaced the contents of the container. He glanced at Peter Oro, wondering how the youth would react to the vindication of his belief that his grandfather had been murdered.

The boy was not even looking at him. He was staring aghast at the scattered sacred rocks. Kella followed his gaze. Something else had been hidden at the base of the pile. The sergeant stooped and picked it up. It was the bone of an animal, carved, polished and trimmed roughly into the shape of a quill, some six inches long.

Peter Oro backed away fearfully, breathing hard. Then he turned and raced off into the trees. Kella swore and hurried after him, ignoring the stinging branches whipping into his face as he tried to overtake the boy. He should have anticipated such a flight. He caught up with him a hundred yards along a track leading to the village gardens. Defiantly Peter faced him.

'I thought you wanted my help,' panted Kella.

'I've changed my mind,' spat the boy, almost in tears. 'You bring too much trouble. Go away!'

Kella was suddenly aware that they were not alone. Thirty yards away at a bend in the track stood a tall elderly islander with a helmet of grey hair. It had been years since they had last met but Kella recognized him at once. For a moment the two men stood with their eyes locked. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the old man lifted a short carved bone on to which he had impaled a bladder of a bonito fish glowing with phosphorous. The islander pointed the stick at Kella. At the same time, with his other hand, he lifted a bag made from a pandanus leaf and rattled the contents viciously. Abruptly he turned and was lost to sight among the trees.

Peter Oro looked at Kella. All traces of the youth's truculence had vanished. Suddenly he was just another frightened village boy brought against his will into contact with the ghosts.

'That magic man has cursed you, Sergeant Kella,' he said, his voice shaded by misery and despair. 'Now surely you will die!'

The schoolboy turned and ran.