

my fire. He stood up and came towards me, now out of the smoke. He was not an orang-utan at all. He was a man.



## Chapter 5

# I, Kensuke

He was diminutive, no taller than me, and as old a man as I had ever seen. He wore nothing but a pair of tattered breeches bunched at the waist, and there was a large knife in his belt. He was thin, too. In places – under his arms, round his neck and his midriff – his copper brown skin lay in folds about him, almost as if

he'd shrunk inside it. What little hair he had on his head and his chin was long and wispy and white.

I could see at once that he was very agitated, his chin trembling, his heavily hooded eyes accusing and angry. '*Dameda! Dameda!*' he screeched at me. This whole body was shaking with fury. I backed away as he scuttled up the beach towards me, gesticulating wildly with his stick, and haranguing me as he came. Ancient and skeletal he may have been, but he was moving fast, running almost. '*Dameda! Dameda!*' I had no idea what he was saying. It sounded Chinese or Japanese, maybe.

I was about to turn and run when Stella, who, strangely, had not barked at him at all, suddenly left my side and went bounding off towards him. Her hackles were not up. She was not growling. To my astonishment she greeted him like a long lost friend.

He was no more than a few feet away from me when he stopped. We stood looking at each other in silence for a few moments. He was leaning on his stick, trying to catch his breath. 'Americajin? Americajin? American? *Eikokujin*? British?'

'Yes,' I said, relieved to have understood

something at last. 'English, I'm English.'

It seemed a struggle for him to get the words out. 'No good. Fire, no good. You understand? No fire.' He seemed less angry now.

'But my mother, my father, they might see it, see the smoke.' It was plain he didn't understand me. So I pointed out to sea, by way of explanation. 'Out there. They're out there. They'll see the fire. They'll come and fetch me.'

Instantly he became aggressive again. '*Dameda!*' he shrieked, waving his stick at me. 'No fire!' I thought for a moment he was going to attack me, but he did not. Instead he began to rake through the sand at my feet with his stick. He was drawing the outline of something, jabbering incomprehensibly all the time. It looked like some kind of a fruit at first, a nut perhaps, a peanut. Now I understood. It was a map of the island. When it was done he fell on his knees beside it, and piled up mounds of sand, one at each end – the two hills. Then, very deliberately, he etched out a straight line, top to bottom, cutting the smaller end of the island off from the larger one.

'You, boy. You here,' he said, pointing back

towards my cave at the end of the beach. 'You.' And he stabbed his finger in the mound of sand that was my hill. Then across the whole of the sand map he began to write something. The lettering was not letters at all, but symbols – all kinds of ticks and pyramids and crosses and horizontal lines and slashes and squiggles – and he wrote it all backwards, in columns, from right to left.

He sat back on his haunches and tapped his chest. 'Kensuke. I, Kensuke. My island.' And he brought his hand down sharply like a chopper, separating the island in two. 'I, Kensuke. Here. You, boy. Here.' I was already in no doubt as to what he meant. Suddenly he was on his feet again waving me away with his stick. 'Go, boy. No fire. *Damedá*. No fire. You understand?'

I did not argue, but walked away at once. When, after a while, I dared to look back, he was kneeling down beside what was left of my fire, and scooping still more sand on to it.

Stella had stayed with him. I whistled for her. She came, but not at once. I could see she was reluctant to leave him. She was behaving very oddly. Stella Artois had never taken kindly to strangers, never.

I felt disappointed in her, a bit betrayed, even.

When I next looked back, the fire was not smoking at all. It had been completely smothered, and the old man was nowhere to be seen.

For the rest of that day I stayed in my cave. For some reason I felt safe there. I suppose I had already begun to think of it as home. I had no other. I felt as an orphan must feel, abandoned and alone in the world. I was frightened, I was angry, I was completely bewildered.

I sat there trying to gather my thoughts. So far as I could tell – though I couldn't be sure of it – there were only the two of us on this island, the old man and me. In which case, it stood to reason that only he could have left me the fish and the bananas and the water. Surely that had been an act of kindness, a sign of friendship, of welcome? And yet, now, this same man had banished me to one end of the island as if I was a leper, and had made it quite clear that he never wanted us to meet ever again. And all because I had lit a fire? None of it made any sense at all, unless he was out of his head and completely mad.

I took a long hard look at my situation. I was



marooned on an island in the middle of nowhere, very probably with a madman for company, and a bunch of howling monkeys (at least one orang-utan amongst them) – and God knows what else might be hidden in the forest – and millions of mosquitoes that would eat me alive every night. I knew only one thing. I had to get away. But how? How was I ever going to get off the island unless I could attract the attention of some passing ship? I could be here for the rest of my life. The thought didn't bear dwelling on.

I wondered how long the old man had been on the island, and what might have brought him here in the first place. Who was he? And who was he, anyway, to tell me what I could and could not do? And why had he put out my fire?

I curled up in my cave, closed my eyes and just wished myself back home, or back on the *Peggy Sue* with my mother and father. Such wonderful dreaming almost lulled me to sleep, but the mosquitoes and the howling from the forest soon dragged me back to consciousness, to face once again all the appalling implications of my wretched predicament.

It came to me suddenly that I had seen the old

man's face somewhere before. I had no idea how that could be. As I lay there pondering this, I felt the piece of glass in my pocket pressing into my hip. My spirits were suddenly lifted. I still had my fireglass. I would build my fire again, but this time somewhere he wouldn't discover it. I would wait for a ship to come, and until then I would survive. The old man had survived in this place. If he could, I could. And I could do it alone too. I didn't need him.

I felt hungry again and thirsty, too. Tomorrow I would go into the forest and find food for myself. I would find water. Somehow or other I would catch fish too. I was good at fishing. If I could catch them in the reservoir back home and off the *Peggy Sue*, then I could catch them here.

I spent that night cursing the hordes of whirring insects that were homing in on me, and the chattering forest that would not be silent, that would not let me be. I kept seeing the reservoir in my mind's eye, and my mother laughing in her skipper's cap. I felt tears coming and tried not to think of her. I thought of the old man. I was still trying to remember what he had said his name was when I fell asleep.

I awoke and knew at once that he had been. It was as if I had dreamed it. Stella seemed to have dreamed the same dream for at once she was bounding up on to the rocks above the cave. She found what she clearly expected to be there – her bowl of water full again. And there, too, high on the shelf of rock beyond her, was the same upturned tin, my water bowl beside it, just as it had been the morning before. I knew it would be full, and I knew as I lifted aside the tin that the food would be there again.

As I sat there cross-legged on the rock, chewing ravenously on my fish and throwing pieces down for Stella to catch, I realised exactly what he meant to imply by this. We were not friends. We would not be friends. He would keep me alive, keep Stella alive, but only so long as I lived by his rules. I had to keep to my end of the island, and I must never light fires. It was all quite clear.

With any real hope of immediate rescue diminishing day by day, I became more and more resigned. I knew I had no choice but to accept his terms and go along with his regime, for the moment. He had now marked out a frontier, a boundary line in the sand

from the forest down to the sea on both sides of the island – and he renewed it frequently, as often as it needed to be. Stella strayed over it of course – I couldn't prevent her – but I did not. It wasn't worth it. In spite of the animosity I had seen in his eyes and that huge knife in his belt, I didn't really think he would ever hurt me. But I was frightened by him, and because of that, and because I had too much to lose, I did not want to confront him. After all, he was providing us every day with all the food and water we needed.

I was beginning to find some edible fruit for myself – in particular a prickly shelled fruit (rambutan, I later discovered). It was delicious, but I could never find enough and, besides, Stella would not eat it. I found the occasional coconut still intact, but often both the milk and flesh were foul. Once or twice I even tried climbing for them, but they were always too high and I very soon gave up.

I tried fishing in the shallows, fashioning a crude spear, a long stick I had sharpened on a rock, but I was always too slow in my strike. There was often plenty of fish but they were too small and too fast. So, like it or not, we still very much needed the daily ration of fish

and fruit and water the old man was bringing us.

I had searched my end of the island for fresh water, but could find none. I thought often of trespassing into the old man's part of the forest to look for it, but I dared not. For the most part, I kept close to the forest tracks.

It wasn't only the old man's laws nor the howling of the monkeys — which I came to understand as a warning — that prevented me from venturing into his side of the island, it was the orang-utan, too. He had seemed placid enough, but I had no idea how he or his friends might react if they found me in their territory. I kept wondering too what other creatures might lurk unseen, waiting to ambush me in the dark damp of the forest. If the constant jungle talk was anything to go by, the place was crawling with all sorts of dreadful creatures.

Just the thought of the orang-utan and the terrors of the unknown in the forest were quite enough to deter me, enough to stifle both my curiosity and my courage. So I kept largely to my beach, my cave and the forest track up to my hilltop.

From high on my hill I did catch distant

glimpses of the old man. Often in the mornings I would see him spear-fishing in the shallows, sometimes alone, but often accompanied by a group of orang-utans, who sat on the beach and watched him, fourteen or fifteen of them I counted once. Occasionally he would be carrying one of the young ones on his back. When he moved amongst them, it seemed almost as if he was one of them.

Time and again I tried to stay awake until the old man came with the food at night, but I never managed it. I never even heard him, not once. But every morning the water would be there, the fish too (it often tasted smoky these days, which I liked better). The fruit would not always be the same. Much of it was strangely scented, and not at all to my liking. I ate it anyway. Besides bananas and coconut and berries, he would leave me breadfruit or jackfruit (at the time, of course, I had no idea what they were). I ate everything, but not so greedily now. I would try to save some of the fruit for an evening meal. But I could never bring myself to save the red bananas, they were just too delicious not to eat all at once.

My recurring nightmare was the mosquitoes at



night. From dusk onwards they searched me out, buzzed in on me and ate me alive. There was no hiding-place. My nights were one long torture, and in the morning I would scratch myself raw in places. Some of the bites, particularly on my legs, had now swelled up and become suppurating red sores. I found relief from them only by dunking myself often in the cool of the sea.

I tried sleeping in another cave, deeper and darker, but it smelled dreadful. Once I had discovered it was full of bats, I left at once. Wherever I slept the mosquitoes found me out soon enough. It got so that I dreaded the coming of every night. I cried out aloud in my misery as I swiped and flailed at them. I longed for the mornings, for the cool of the sea and the cool of the wind on my hilltop.

Here I would spend the greater part of my day, sitting on the very summit, looking out to sea and hoping, sometimes even praying too, for the sight of a ship. I would close my eyes tight shut and pray for as long as I could, and then open them again. Every time I did it, I really felt, really believed, there was a chance my prayers would be answered, that this time I would

open my eyes and see the *Peggy Sue* sailing back to rescue me, but always the great wide ocean was empty, the line of the horizon quite uninterrupted. I was always disappointed of course, often dejected, but not yet completely despondent, not in those early weeks.

I had severe problems, too, with sunburn. I had learned rather late that I should keep all my clothes on all the time, and I made myself a hat to keep the sun off my face and my neck. It was very broad and Chinese-looking, made of palm leaves, the edges folded into one another. I was quite pleased with my handiwork.

Sunburn, I discovered, was a discomfort I could help to prevent, and that seawater could soothe. At noon I would go down the hill to shelter in my cave from the burning heat of the afternoon sun, and then afterwards I would go swimming. This was the moment Stella longed for each day. I spent long hours throwing a stick for her. She loved it and, to be truthful, so did I. It was the highlight of our day. We'd stop only when the darkness came down – it always came down surprisingly quickly too – and drove us back once more to our cave, back to my nightly battle with my bloodsucking tormentors.

One day, after yet another fruitless morning of watching on the hill, Stella and I were coming out of the forest when I spotted something lying on the sand just outside our cave. At a distance it looked like a piece of driftwood. Stella got there before me and was sniffing it over excitedly. I could see it now for what it was. It was not driftwood at all, but a roll of rush matting. I unrolled it. Inside, and neatly folded, was a sheet, a white sheet. He knew! The old man knew my miseries, my discomforts, my every need. He had been watching me all the time, and closely too. He must have seen me scratching myself, seen the red weals on my legs, on my arms, seen me sitting in the sea every morning to soothe away my sores. Surely this must mean that he had forgiven me now for lighting the fire?

I carried the matting inside the cave, unrolled it, wound myself in the sheet, and just lay there giggling with joy. I could pull the sheet right up over my face. Tonight there would be no way in for those cursed mosquitoes. Tonight they would go hungry.

I went racing along the beach to the boundary line where I stopped, cupped my hands to my mouth

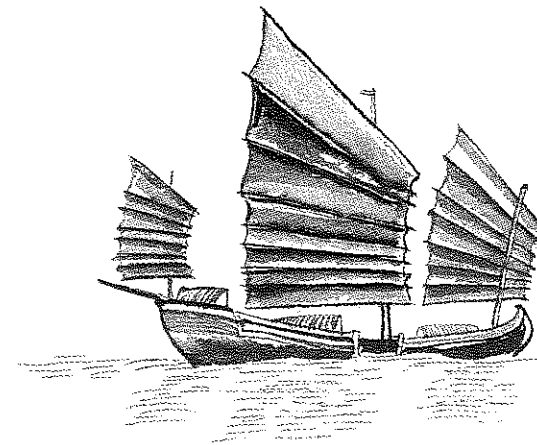
and shouted, 'Thank you! Thank you for my bed! Thank you! Thank you!' I didn't really expect an answer, and none came. I hoped he might come himself, but he didn't. So I wrote my thanks in the sand right by the boundary line and signed it. I wanted so much to see him again, to talk to him, to hear a human voice. Stella Artois had been a wonderful companion to me, good for confiding in, good for a cuddle, good for a game, but I so missed human company – my mother, my father, lost to me now, perhaps forever. I longed to see the old man, to speak to him, even if he was a bit mad, even if I couldn't understand much of what he was saying.

That night I was determined to stay awake for him but, comfortable on my new matting bed, protected and swaddled in my sheet, I went to sleep quickly and never woke once.

The next morning, after a breakfast of fish and jackfruit and coconut, Stella and I made our way back up to the top of my hill, or 'Watch Hill' as I now called it – the other one I had named 'His Hill'. I was repairing my Chinese hat, replacing some of the palm leaves – it never seemed to hold together



for very long – when I looked up and saw a ship on the horizon. There was no mistake. It was the long bulky profile of a supertanker.



## Chapter 6

# *Abunai!*

In an instant I was on my feet, shouting at the top of my voice and waving frantically. I leaped up and down screaming for them to stop, to hear me, to see me. 'I'm here! Here! I'm here!' Only when my throat was raw and I could shout no longer did I stop. The tanker crept tantalisingly slowly along the horizon.