

VENEZUELA

1697

CHAPTER ONE

Jabuti stood on the banks of the mighty Orinoco, leaning against a tree with a distant air, his keen eyes gazing across its vast expanse. A flock of toucans flying by interrupted his daydreaming and the deep, throaty calls of howler monkeys calling out to each other filled his ears with their cries. Soaking up the sights and sounds, he felt insignificant within the enormity of the forest's vista. He was a tall man with an aloof manner who appeared more mature than his seventeen years. Arriving at the same spot most evenings, he yearned for the solitude and peace it brought him. Standing proud and tall he breathed in the refreshing water vapour, which arose from the river, with its endless journey downstream to a destination he couldn't even imagine. Licking the water from his lips, he savoured the sweet taste as it refreshed his parched mouth. With the setting sun lighting up the forest with a fiery-red glow, he returned on the short walk back to the village. Negotiating a well-worn path, which had taken on a slight sheen from the footfalls over the years, he took in his surroundings. Many plants grew alongside the path, their uses many and varied amongst the villagers. He was still learning about their properties every day, but he already knew the type to cure a fever and which ones to dress a wound. With his musings and observations occupying his mind, he soon found himself back in the village. The acrid smell of smoke from a fire filled his nostrils, showing that the evening meal was ready. Several dogs came bounding up to greet him and rushed around his legs, sniffing him like faithful sentries. Bending down, he wrestled with them as they playfully gnawed his hands. He loved the dogs' boundless love for anyone who gave them any affection, for not much in return it seemed to him.

The sounds of children's laughter filled his ears as they squealed and yelped, playing in the bare earth with nothing more than a palm frond to amuse themselves. Walking past them, he ruffled their hair as they looked up at him with dirty faces and wide-eyed grins. Continuing into the village, he smiled at his fellow tribesmen and to the women busying themselves with the evening meal. He lived as one of the Piaroa Indians who were a peace-loving tribe, living in harmony with the forest's flora and fauna. They were a short-statured race with rounded faces and permanent smiles, in complete contrast to Jabuti's height and angular features. Their habit was to adorn themselves with necklaces and bracelets crafted from seeds and animal parts of snake vertebrae and tapir tusks, coloured with dye from forest vegetables.

Upon arrival at the hut in which he shared with the other young men of the village, he stooped to allow his tall frame to fit through the open doorway. At once the fresh forest air changed into a musty odour, coming from many men sharing such confined quarters. He nodded his greetings and walked over to his sleeping space, furnished with straw matting for a bed and various personal objects tucked into a corner. That was where he spent hours whittling away on pieces of wood, recreating the animals he'd seen out hunting or whilst standing by the riverbank. He found it therapeutic to carve out lifelike figures from nothing, to valued ornaments, which adorned the dwellings of the other villagers. Occupied with his task he looked towards his two lifelong friends, Wanadi and Mapi.

Wanadi was a happy person with a big wide grin lighting up his face. He had an inquisitive and playful glint in his eyes, his features accentuated by a large nose, a square chin and an ever present half-smile on his lips. Quick with a joke he was good company.

Jabuti was certain he had never been serious his whole life. Jabuti looked across as Wanadi's pet monkey scurried around him, which he treated with care, even though he had the strength of two men. He was a friend who could be relied on without question and Jabuti felt safe with him by his side. Mapi had more of an intense personality and was born a natural worrier. With a portly frame and wild, messy hair, which stuck out in every direction, he took the teasing from his friends with good humour.

What else could any man want? he wondered.

He had two good friends, a peaceful village to live in and food in his belly, but he could not shake off the gnawing feeling of loneliness and despair, which haunted his every waking moment. These worries shadowed him from the time he opened his eyes until the tender embrace of sleep soothed his troubled mind. Jabuti decided that he would visit with the shaman to talk over these emotions, but along with his resolve came trepidation over what he might find out. He liked the knowledgeable old shaman, who was a peaceful man of few words, but when he spoke it was with wisdom and careful consideration. He had inquisitive, alert eyes behind his weather-beaten face and walked with a shuffle and the aid of a cane. No one knew exactly how old the shaman was, but to Jabuti's eyes, he had always appeared old. As a child he recalled the times when he sat peeking through the walls of the shaman's hut, fascinated as he treated the people who sought relief for their ailments. He used to stare in wonder as the shaman entered a trance from inhaling snuff, singing and chanting words alien to Jabuti's ears. He was convinced that if discovered he would be cursed for life, such was the mystery and the power that the shaman held. With a rumbling stomach, his attention turned to thoughts of dinner and he suggested to Wanadi that they head off to eat. With Mapi still fast asleep, Wanadi took his monkey and placed it on Mapi's stomach, where he awoke to find it looking back at him.

'Very funny, Wanadi, you never tire of playing tricks on me, do you?' Mapi said, placing the monkey on the floor.

'I think we should go fishing tomorrow,' Wanadi mentioned to his friends as they walked. 'I'm getting bored eating monkey every night.'

'And I think you're beginning to look like one,' Mapi quipped.

Wanadi pretended to be a monkey and chased Mapi along the path, screeching and waving his arms. Jabuti followed with an amused grin on his face. Climbing the steps, they fell through the door giggling like little girls and were met by surprised looks.

'Three more monkeys for the pot then, we will eat well tonight,' said Maru, a girl in whom Jabuti was very much interested.

He untangled himself from his friends, feeling a little abashed. Wanadi and Mapi nudged each other and exchanged looks, knowing all too well how fond he was of her. Every time Jabuti saw her, he felt his breath catch in his throat as he gazed at her. He had known her since they were children, but back then he dismissed her casually as a nuisance, preferring to play with his friends instead. Since then, though, she had blossomed into an attractive woman and he noticed her blossoming curves, which he found alluring. Finding himself becoming more attracted to her every day, he could think of little else. He avoided looking at her, wondering what she must have thought of him acting so stupidly. After their noisy arrival, they sat down for dinner, where he cast furtive glances her way. The communal hut was lit by a blazing fire with the tribe gathered around it. An all pervasive smell of smoke had permeated into the walls over the years and the heat from the open fire added to the stifling atmosphere. They cooked and ate inside due to the frequency of the daily downpours. The nightly feast could be varied depending on the luck and skill of the hunters and supplemented with fresh produce from the communal gardens.

One of Jabuti's favourite foods was the peacock bass, which made for delicious eating, but did not give up its succulent flesh easily. With no nets in which to catch the fish it

took a patient and wily hunter. Once caught though, it could still catch out the unwary or uninitiated, as Wanadi found out to his cost. One day after catching one, he threw it into the bottom of the bongo, the name given to a dugout canoe. Forgetting about it he concentrated on trapping another as the fish bit into his foot and he hopped around the canoe on one leg, almost capsizing it. His friends laughed hysterically and offered him no help at all. Relief only came after he smashed the determined creature on the head and the stunned animal let go. These kinds of stories were the lifeblood of the tribe, which kept them a close-knit community. Jabuti smiled and laughed at these stories, but more often than not with a faraway look in his eyes. With their meal over the three friends walked back to their hut, with Jabuti looking back, trying to catch a glimpse of Maru.

‘So my bashful friend, why don’t you talk to her?’ Wanadi asked.

‘Talk to who?’

‘Do you hear that Mapi, talk to who he says?’ he replied, teasing him.

‘I would talk to her, but I’m not even sure she notices me,’ Mapi said.

‘I’m sure she sees our dreamy friend over here though.’

‘I am right next to you two fools you know. I’m just waiting for the right moment, that’s all,’ Jabuti replied, hoping they would change the subject.

‘If you don’t, then I will,’ Wanadi joked.

‘If you do that, you’re no friend of mine.’

‘Do you really think I’d do that to you?’

CHAPTER TWO

They walked back to their hut in silence after Jabuti's unusual outburst and he instantly regretted it. He tried to apologise though, but Wanadi offered his back as a way of response. It took Jabuti a while to settle after his falling out with Wanadi, but eventually sleep embraced him in its clutches as he drifted off into a deep slumber. In it, he experienced a dream so vivid, like no other he had before. He found himself at the edge of the village one morning, the tribe all gathered with their backs turned to him and standing in an eerie silence. He attempted calling out them, but they either couldn't hear him or they were ignoring him. He tried walking in their direction, but a force seemed to pull at him from the forest, beckoning him to enter its dark and foreboding embrace. Taking one last look at them and hoping to see their faces once more, he turned and walked towards the forest. It was at that point he felt himself being dragged backwards as the scene receded before his eyes.

'No!' he screamed, 'I'm not ready.'

'Not ready for what?'

With the dream fading, he lifted his sleep-laden eyelids to see Wanadi's concerned face.

'Must have been an interesting dream, you've been muttering and talking to yourself for a while.'

'I'm sorry, did I wake you?'

'I've been watching over you all morning, I've never seen you so restless.'

At once Jabuti felt guilty for the way he snapped at him last night.

'Thank you Wanadi, I shouldn't have spoken to you like that.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he replied, winking at his friend. 'Get up, let's have some breakfast.'

The three friends joined the rest of the community, where the shaman had prepared their daily ritual of drinking honey and water. The shaman chanted over the liquid to ward off the malevolent forces of the ancient Gods. When each member had drunk their fill, they drifted off to begin their usual chores and duties.

'Come on Jabuti, no sitting around for you,' Wanadi said.

'Just give me a moment, I'll find you later. I need to talk with the shaman.'

Wanadi and Mapi exchanged curious glances, but didn't press the matter so they bade him goodbye.

'That's fine, we'll be down by the river preparing the bongo for a day's fishing, join us when you're ready,' Wanadi told him.

Jabuti watched them amble off, took a deep breath to settle his nerves and walked towards the shaman. He looked up from the pile of utensils he was tying up and looked up at Jabuti.

'You've finally come to talk with me then?'

'How did you know I wanted to talk?'

'I've known you since you were a child, Jabuti. I know when something is troubling you. I've noticed that you have been even more distracted of late, it was just a matter of time,' he replied with an encouraging smile.

'You know me better than I know myself, that's why I stayed behind.'

'I always have time for you Jabuti.'

'Thank you, erm...' he paused. 'I don't really know where to start,' Jabuti said, staring at his feet.

'Take your time.'

‘It’s just that I have always had this feeling of being an outsider and I feel like something is missing in my life,’ he began. ‘I should feel grateful for the things I have, but it doesn’t seem enough. What’s wrong with me?’ he finished with a sigh...