

Mata Utu

(An excerpt from Seandon's upcoming novel "The Trip")

This morning Lance and I sat on the beach with the two Nui's after an awesome dawn patrol surf session right in our back yard in Rahiti. The four of us had enjoyed a great Rahitian beach break surf session for over three hours. Copious amounts of clean, barreling waves had given us our exercise as well as our fill of surfing for the day. We all had our asses handed to us on at least one wave each as the punishing waves barreled hard right onto the beach. The name of the game this morning was fast takeoffs, quick drops and quicker bottom turns. Hoanui and Arenui were impressed with how well Lance and I adapted to the Rahitian surf. After all, it was a far cry from what we were accustomed to back home on the east coast of the U.S. I hated to even think about the little bullshit ripples that we called waves back home. I think the waves in Rahiti on a bad day are better than the best day back in Virginia Beach – at least it seems that way. I was feeling very confident in my abilities to ride the big surf that the South Pacific offered up and I got braver and braver every day - charger larger and carving harder.

As we sat there watching the tide roll in and flatten out the waves, the Nui brothers got a big smile on their faces and began speaking between themselves in Rahitian. I was curious as to what they were talking about, but I figured I would find out soon enough. I could tell that Arenui was the protagonist in the conversation and it seemed like he was trying to convince Hoanui of something as if he were a used car salesman trying to get him to take a test drive. They carried on their conversation in Rahitian a while until Arenui suddenly stopped and addressed us directly with a devilish smile on his face.

"So are you brahs ready to see some real South Pacific surf?" He asked as he raised his eyebrows.

Lance was all ears. "So what have we been surfing here? I do believe we are in the South Pacific, man."

Arenui answered my brother sarcastically. "These little ripples, they are starter waves bro. I was just telling Hoanui that you guys are ready for the big ones."

Lance's intrigue grew. "Dude, these waves are ripples? You should come back to Virginia Beach with us if you want to see ripples! So where are these "big ones" you have been holding out on us?"

Arenui's one word response was intriguing. "Mata". He repeated it again only slower and more exaggerated. "Mah-tah."

Then Hoanui chimed in "Ooo-too" as if he were chanting some tribal verse or mocking Arenui.

Arenui responded "Mah-tah" and again Hoanui answered "Ooo-too".

“So what is this Mata Utu?” Lance asked.

“Not what, but where...” Arenui chuckled as he pointed to the horizon in an easterly direction. “Brah, right out there... lies the most beautiful island in all of the South Pacific. Mata Utu is her name. She is so beautiful that she is said to have been kissed by the Gods. The same kiss that blessed the island with beauty also reserved her only for the Gods. Are you guys feeling Godly?”

I had no idea what to think of Arenui’s statement. I didn’t want to offend him. Religion is a very touchy subject for many and I respect that fact. Even though I am not religious, I am very spiritual. So I responded “I strive to be Godly in all of my actions.”

Arenui followed up my statement with his own dissertation. “Godly or not, once you see this island, you will think you have been to heaven, man. Not only is it the most picturesque place you will ever lay your eyes on, but there is a reef break so perfect that it may be the best wave in the world – and it is perfectly hidden from the rest of the world too - not so much in location as in mystery.” Arenui pointed to the east again. “About 12 kilometers or a good hour of kayaking if the current is right in that direction will take you to Mata-Utu.”

“Mah-tah ooo-too.” Hoanui interjected and chanted as Arenui continued his story. “Mata is the easternmost island in the Rahitian Sea and has the best right break in the entire South Pacific. Dudes, even when there is very little swell elsewhere, the wave on Mata jacks up out of nowhere. The break originates at the point on the hip of Mount Mata and breaks the entire length of the three mile long island. Mount Mata is the tallest volcano in all of the islands and acts as a beacon to the oasis. The volcano itself makes up over a third of Mata Utu’s real estate. It is said that Mount Mata guards and protects the island by summoning waves from the sea to crash hard on her outer reef to keep ships and visitors off of the eastern shore. The wave is both elegant and brutal as it barrels perfectly along the curvature of the outer reef. The face of the wave is always so clean and glassy that you can part your hair in the reflection while you are getting shacked in a double overhead tube, dude. The wave thunders and booms as its thick veil of water pitches and rolls before crashing onto the shallow reef below. The sound of the break can be heard all over the island and is said to be the ‘heartbeat of the Gods’.”

Hoanui interrupted again “Or the drumbeat of the Matains”.

Arenui shrugged off the comment. “Dude, don’t scare the crap out of them yet. Let them enjoy the vision of the wave.”

“Scare the crap out of us?” Lance asked.

Arenui non-chalantly disregarded the question and continued. “So this wave goes on and on for minutes. It’s not a wave that you can carve up and pull tricks on though – if you try, the trick will be on you as you are thrown over the falls and dashed into the reef. One wrong move on this wave can cost you your life, brah. I’m not joking dude. It is an easy launch and drop at the

point and then very little work as you make your bottom turn – the wave does the rest as it propels you down her face and into the depths of her barrel. Just ride and enjoy as you surf parallel to the most beautiful beach in the world.”

Hoanui nodded his head in agreement as Arenui kept the tale going. “The hard part of surfing Mata’s perfect wave is getting to it. The venture is long, but the ride is so worth it. It takes about an hour or so to kayak there and then add another hour to stroke back home. As you approach the island from the west, you are greeted by the calm, teal waters of Mata’s lagoon. The sand on the beach of the lagoon is so white and pure that it will almost blind you if you don’t have your shades on. The only relief from the blinding sun on the sand is the occasional patch of shade cast by one of the tall palm trees that grow scattered on the sandy spit between the leeward lagoon and the beach on the windward side of the island. To the right of the lagoon the southern end of the island is encompassed by a dense tropical rainforest. The rainforest is very forbidding from the southern coast as it ends abruptly on the jagged obsidian rock that makes up the shoreline on that end of the island. The rainforest extends from the southern shore all the way to Mount Mata’s hip on the eastern boundary and the sandy spit on the northern side of the island. From the spit side the rainforest is very welcoming. The dense vegetation seems to part in one spot where there is a thousand year old trail that leads into the jungle. This trail winds through the forest past fresh water springs that collect and form small ponds throughout the jungle. You can’t imagine the sights you will see as the sun pierces through the tree canopy high above your head. Some of the largest trees known to exist in the South Pacific are on Mata and these trees and plants bear some of the largest leaves and fruits ever seen. You will see mangoes, coconuts, papaya, lemons, limes, hibiscus, rose hips, kava kava, pomello fruit, figs and dozens of other fruits and herbs. Mata is home to just about every type of plant, fruit and herb found in the entire South Pacific. The plants thrive in Mata Utu because they have no predators. You will not see a single mosquito, bird, mouse, snake, lizard, monkey, fish, or any living creatures. Not so much as one insect lives on the island. Mata Utu is the most beautiful place you will ever lay eyes on and she is also one of the most interesting stories you will ever hear. Rest up tonight, boys – tomorrow we will introduce you to Mata Utu.”

Hoanui shook his head in disapproval of Arenui’s statement. “I don’t know if you guys are ready yet. I mean you hold your own on the beach breaks just fine, but Mata has a fierce reef break. One bad drop, a missed bottom turn or a careless move will send you flailing over the double-overhead falls and into the most treacherous reef you never want to meet. Worst of all, if you are lucky enough to survive being dashed into the reef, you will surely bleed to death before swimming over a half mile into shore through treacherous secondary swell. Mata is no joke in more ways than one. Arenui is a little gung-ho guys. Plus we must consult Matahi and get his blessings before taking you there. Mata is not an open invitation for everyone. In fact, when was the last time you were there Arenui?”

“It’s been a while bro, but I am totally ready to go. And so are these guys. Lighten up. If you are scared, you can stay home.” Arenui lashed back at Hoanui.

Hoanui seemed concerned over Arenui's proposal. This concern fueled interest in Lance. I was perfectly content surfing the safe and convenient beach break right here in Rahiti, but I knew that Lance was eager to discover more challenging surf – no matter what the consequence. We got up from our sandy seat, dusted off and headed in to the village. Hoanui and Arenui became quiet in silent opposition. What was the big deal? A reef break – no problem! Lance and I had surfed numerous reef breaks in our lives including Teahpoo. How bad could this one really be? I was intrigued and eager to discover what the hype was about. I couldn't help but wonder why no animals lived on the island. I also wondered why we had to get Matahi's blessing before visiting the island. I sensed there was more to Mata than just the reef break.

That night at dinner everything seemed commonplace. We had a delicious fare of fresh salad, fish, and roasted vegetables. Everyone was almost finished eating when Hoanui made a comment in Tahitian that got everyone's attention. All eyes fell on Arenui. "What?" he said. Matahi addressed Arenui in Tahitian as if to reprimand him. Arenui responded back in an apologetic tone that had a slight air of sarcasm.

Hoanui then spoke to us directly. "Arenui has made an offer to you that must be granted by the elder. As I said earlier, no one visits Mata without consent from Matahi."

I couldn't take the suspense and tension so I asked "So what is the big deal about Mata? We have canoed to other islands and Motus – what makes Mata Utu so special?"

Tania spoke up quickly "It's a bad place. Mata Utu is haunted by the spirits of our ancestors and many others too. Bad things happened there."

Fetia backed her up and chimed in with her cute and innocent voice "Yeah it is a bad place. It's haunted and evil."

I felt a sense of uneasiness set in over the tribe. I wondered who would elaborate on Tania and Fetia's comments. Everyone remained silent. I looked at Maruia who busied herself with the food on her plate. I looked at Matahi whose eyes were fixated on Arenui. "Ok, go ahead and tell them. Scare the pants off of them if you wish." Arenui defiantly directed at Hoanui.

Hoanui got serious and turned to address us. "There is a lot about our culture and history that you do not know. The peaceful serenity you see in the islands today wasn't always that way. Arenui doesn't have the same respect for tribal tradition that others may have. This lack of respect has enabled him to make an offer to you that violates tradition. Matahi is not happy about the idea and may not grant his blessing for us to go to Mata." I cut my eyes to Matahi who sat at the head of the table and had a serious demeanor about him as he looked at Arenui.

Hoanui cut the tension by elaborating. "First, let me say that Mata Utu is the most beautiful place in all of the South Pacific. I have not traveled outside of the islands, but I cannot imagine a more beautiful place in the world. As Arenui stated earlier, the island is as beautiful as if it were kissed by the gods, but it was also cursed by them at the same time. Mata is home to the most

dense and lush rainforest vegetation which bears the most amazing fruits and herbs because there is no one or nothing there to eat them. The island has many fresh water springs that are as cold as ice and mineral rich, but no one or nothing there to drink from them. The perfect conditions for life are there. Mata is an oasis of life for everything 'non-living' so to speak."

I looked over at Arenui who rolled his eyes in sarcasm, but a calm seriousness came over the rest of the entire group as Hoanui continued. "To understand the gravity of the situation, you must understand the history and folklore about Mata Utu and its former inhabitants. For hundreds (maybe even thousands) of years a tribe of cannibalistic head-hunters known as the Matains (Ma-tay-ins) inhabited the island of Mata Utu. The Matains were fierce cannibalistic hunters who would quietly paddle out in their outriggers at night to surrounding islands and kidnap the inhabitants of the other islands and bring them back as dinner. No other tribe had the ability or the courage to challenge the fierce Matain warriors - for this tribe was ruthless and feared nothing. Death was a way of life to them - hunting was how they ate - and humans were their prey. The skin of the Matains was stained with the blood of their victims and their teeth were pointed and sharp for tearing flesh from the bone. It is rumored that they looked so fierce that they could scare their prey to death even if their poison darts missed the targeted prey. The tribe was so ruthless that, when killed in battle, it was an honor for the dead Matain to feed his own people for dinner that night. Needless to say, everyone feared the Matains. Tribal committees and lookouts were formed to stand sentry on the other islands to protect their inhabitants; however, lookouts were futile against the stealth tactics of the Matains. Plus, with so many other islands to choose from, the Matains would vary up their diet and their attacks over so many different islands that no one ever knew where or when their village would be attacked."

I could see both interest and fear in the faces of all of us at the table. Even the Rahitians who had surely heard the story dozens of times were enthralled. Lance and I turned to each other at the same time and gave each other a slight head nod and wink as if to silently say "Screw those Matains. We are gonna conquer that surf and ride the mighty Mata. And, oh yeah, I'm gonna eat you if you die!" We quickly returned our attention to Hoanui's story.

"Many tribes tried to fight the Matains unsuccessfully over history. Launching an attack against the Matains on their home turf was almost impossible and catching them at sea or on the prowl was even more elusive and difficult. The island of Mata itself was the best defense for the Matains. The island offered up the perfect refuge for its cannibalistic inhabitants. Mata was approachable only from the western leeward side. The other three sides were heavily guarded by nature and Mata herself. The outermost reef in the Rahitian Sea started virtually at the easternmost point on Mount Mata and then wrapped around the island on the east and then curved to the north. This outer reef was a great shelter to the island from some of the heaviest surf in the entire south Pacific."

Arenui broke his silence and interjected. "Ironically, the same reef and surf break that kept visitors off of the island is the very thing that has lured many surfers there. The heavy surf wrecked many a ship, broke many a surfboard and dashed passengers and surfers into the

shallow, jagged reef. A collision with this reef surely means an ugly mess and a long swim back to shore. So don't wipe out, brah."

Not to disregard the warning, but Lance and I had no intention of coming in contact with the reef. We planned to dominate that surf and ride it with grace and respect while keeping our bodies above water and off of the reef.

Our excitement and interest grew as Hoanui continued. "Clockwise from the point on Mount Mata, the south side of Mata is a steep, rocky, volcanic ridge that juts abruptly from the sea and rises skyward to form the steep outer wall of Mount Mata. Mount Mata seems to stand sentry on the island and protects her from both nature and man. The base of Mount Mata ends just as abruptly as it starts on that side of the island. A lush, dense tropical rainforest grows right to the rocky ledge of the volcano and all the way to the edge of the sea. Entry to the island from the north, east and south is virtually impossible. Many people have tried – and died. As uninviting as the other three sides of the island are, the western leeward side is surprisingly welcoming. A gorgeous lagoon flanked by a soft, sandy white beach lies nestled from the heavy surf and trade winds by Mount Mata and the rainforest. The fact that the lagoon is the only approach to the island meant that the Matains only had to be concerned about guarding and protecting one side of the island while nature handled the rest of the defense. To past visitors, the lagoon must have seemed welcoming and inviting. Legend states that the lagoon seems to pull you right into her calm, warm, teal green waters – and straight into a trap. The Matains would hide in the rainforest or climb high into the palm trees and surprise their visitors with poisoned darts or spears as they were helplessly trapped in the lagoon. The lagoon was a Venus fly-trap of sorts. It would lure you in and then wham – you never knew what hit you. Legend has it that the Matains had laser accuracy with their darts and spears from hundreds of feet away. They could hit you in a moving kayak in spite of a breeze. The poison from their darts acted so rapidly that the target would fall into slumber and immediate death before they could even pull the dart out of their neck. Poison tipped darts were the Matains weapon of choice. Legend says that, amazingly, the Matains were immune to the poison in their own darts because they had built up a tolerance to it from eating the flesh of their prey which was tainted with the poison."

I was amazed at the fact that you could actually build up an immunity to poison if you ingested it in small quantities over time... as a vegetarian, I was also amazed that people could eat human flesh – revolting thoughts entered my mind.

Hoanui got more serious and leaned forward across the table as his story continued. "The Matains utilized all of the victim's body. The heads were ritualistically severed from the body and shrunk before the flesh of the body could be consumed." This tribal ritual was eerie and repulsive to me. How could you shrink a head anyway? "The Matains believed that if the head was not handled and blessed properly then the flesh would bring illness to those who ate the raw meat." I found it unbelievable that so much care was put into the ritualistic handling of the head which would be retained as a trophy, but that the cannibals would savagely tear the raw meat from the bones with their hands and teeth and devour every last piece of flesh off of

every bone. “The bones were then thrown into Mount Mata as a sacrifice to the Gods. The shrunken heads were placed on bamboo poles as trophies along the path to Mount Mata. The shrinking process preserved the heads remarkably well and formed doll-sized head replicas of the former owners“. I wondered if the Matains would walk by someone’s shrunken head on a pole and relish the thought of eating that person... “wow, I remember eating Bob – he had great tenderloin and a slightly salty finish!”... even in my jest, I struggled to hold down my dinner at the nauseating thought of cannibalism.

“We Rahitians and other peaceful, mostly vegetarian and fish-eating South Pacific islanders constantly and helplessly grieved the loss of our loved ones. Rahitians and our neighbors would eat dinner and then participate in tribal dances and peaceful socialization before retiring to bed – never knowing whether we would be darted and abducted in the middle of the night. In some cases, wives or husbands would awake in the morning to find their loved ones gone from their arms. Sometimes the only trace of them would be a feather tipped poison dart lying on the ground. Often though, they disappeared without a trace. You see, the stealthy Matain cannibals had perfected the art of the sneak attack. They would invade an island, dart a few villagers while they slept and then carry them to their kayaks and strap their bodies to the outrigger as if they were a piece of cargo. No matter how prepared we thought we were, every abduction went unnoticed until the following morning when frantic family members awoke to find their loved ones missing. “

Chills crawled up my spine at the thought of being darted and captured in my sleep. It had to be a helpless feeling for those who were attacked by the cannibalistic hunters. I just hoped that the poison was strong enough to kill them so that they would not wake up later while being eaten alive.

Hoanui kept up his tale as animated the story more vividly with body language and emotion. “There was no point in a retaliatory attack or invasion of Mata Utu to retrieve the captured. They were dead shortly after the point of abduction thanks to the poisonous venom in the dart. The Matains wasted no time in killing, beheading and eating their prey – they liked to eat the flesh while it was still fresh. Tribal folklore claimed that the Matains were the fiercest and most efficient hunters and warriors to ever inhabit the South Pacific. They held this reputation for two reasons – first, they tactfully eliminated the strongest, healthiest and most able bodied competitors - and second, according to their religion, the souls of their prey became part of the strength and soul of the Matains since their bodies were ingested into theirs. The Matains were very good predators who chose to eliminate and eat mostly male victims who could potentially be their strongest possible challengers. The cannibals were also smart – they often left the women alive to breed more victims for them to eat later and the children were left alone so they could grow larger to provide more flesh when they were ultimately eaten as full grown adults. The Matains were savage cannibals, but had no interest in enslaving, raping or robbing their victims. Their prey simply provided food for their survival. Their weird head-shrinking habit was part of a long tribal ritual of their religion. The strength and success of the Matains was largely due to the fact that they stayed aloof and reclusive from the rest of the islands. Taking living prey or slaves back to their island increased the chance of invasion of their

secretive and secure island world. The Rahitians repeatedly attempted to join forces with other island tribes to plan an attack on the Matains, but our efforts went unsupported. It was almost as if the other islanders had accepted the occasional cannibalistic abductions as a natural cause of death. Since there was virtually no disease or other predators to kill people, the Matains were one of the natural causes of death. Death by cannibalism was an accepted way to die.”

This was an interesting concept to me – people preying on people to feed and strengthen their bodies and souls and control the population. It was not survival of the fittest though. Instead it was feast on the fittest and the strongest, healthiest men were the meal of choice. Wow.

“The thought of attacking the Matains on their home turf at Mata Utu seemed daunting especially since we could not even defend ourselves in our own homes, let alone protect our own islands or even detect or anticipate the secretive Matain attacks. No one knew the layout of the terrain on Mata Utu because no one had ever seen the island. No one knew how many Matains existed because they only traveled in small packs of two or four while they were out on the hunt. No one had ever challenged the Matains; however, the Rahitians seemed like the most likely tribe to challenge them. For that reason the Rahitians were a more likely target for the Matain attacks. The Matain philosophy seemed to be the best way to increase your own strength and chance of survival is to eliminate your competitors – especially since their religion gave them the opportunity to gain the strength of the souls of those they ate. The Matains must have loved some Rahitian flesh and soul. Countless Matain abductions went unanswered, yet heavily grieved until one day when they chose to take the wrong victim. One kidnapping led to the ultimate defeat and downfall of the entire Matain culture. One brave Rahitian single-handedly challenged and fought the Matains and changed the course of history in our culture. I will give Matahi the honor of telling you the story tonight after we finish evening chores.” Hoanui said as he concluded his tale for now.

Talk about a cliff-hanger. I was totally engrossed in the story and was not ready for the unexpected intermission. Lance and I hurriedly finished up our chores and even helped the girls with theirs in an attempt to expedite the evening tribal gathering. We built a fire on the beach and boiled up some Kava-Kava tea. We lit the torches and packed up the peace pipes with herbs as the sunset illuminated the sky with hues of red and pink. My haste with the chores had caused me to work up a sweat. I excused myself momentarily and walked down to the water where I took a cool, relaxing dip. I was so eager to hear Matahi’s story that I couldn’t stand the suspense. As I came out of the water from my dip, I saw the tribe gathering around the campfire on the beach. I didn’t even go back to the hut to dry off or change clothes, just straight to the fire where I took my seat in the sand next to Lance and Maruia. Matahi took his seat on the driftwood throne next to the fire as the glow from the flames illuminated his weathered old face. He was in full tribal garb with his headpiece on. Matahi loved his rituals and loved to tell stories. I loved to absorb the culture and listen. Even though this was a thousand year old ritual, I felt as if they were doing it only for Lance and I.

Matahi began his story in Rahitian as his elderly voice echoed with experience and wisdom. Matahi would slowly and deliberately talk while animating the tale with his hand and facial

gestures, pausing long enough for Hoanui to translate between every few sentences. His tale unfolded as we all sat in quiet and respectful attentiveness as Hoanui relayed every word in English.

“I was only a young boy. My mother Kania and father Hoku and I lived a very happy family life in this very same village we live in today. In fact, three generations ago, me and my father fished from this very beach and climbed these very palm trees. My father was an excellent fisherman and was the best swimmer in Rahiti. He was well known and liked by all of the Rahitians and he was often the sole provider of fish to the whole island. He seemed to be able to catch fish when no one else could making him a champion fisherman and hero. More importantly he was a family man and loved my mother and I with all of his huge heart. In fact, he loved our family so much that he and my mother were expecting a second child soon as well. It was a big deal to me as I was preparing and expecting to be a big brother soon. I had become very attached and attentive to my mother and had taken over many of her chores as she neared childbirth. One day while my father was out fishing, my mother and I walked through the forest gathering fruits. All of a sudden, she collapsed and turned pale and blue. I frantically tried to revive her – thinking that she had become ill or that the heat had gotten the best of her. Her skin began to quickly turn pale and deeper blue. Then I noticed the dart in her neck. I immediately removed the dart and attempted to suck the poison from the gaping hole in her neck. I scanned the forest, but saw no one. I took the dart and ran lightning fast back to the village to seek help – all the while screaming for anyone who could hear me. Father was out to sea, but I was able to gather some Rahitians who followed me back to the spot where I had left my mother. Needless to say, she was gone. We quickly followed several tracks of footprints in the soil down to the beach where we saw two outrigger canoes several hundred yards off shore and already heading out to sea in the direction of Mata Utu. I screamed at the top of my lungs for my mother. I ran to the water and fell to my knees and wept. I wanted to swim, I wanted to fly, I wanted to walk on water to rescue my mother, but I knew my efforts would be fruitless. I screamed in agony and cursed the Matains and the Gods too. The tribe subdued me and comforted me. We returned to the village where I impatiently awaited the return of my father from his day at sea.”

Emotion and sorrow filled Matahi’s fire-lit face as he recounted the ordeal that day. Tears seemed to well up in his ancient eyes and his voice cracked with the painful words. He paused and took the peace pipe into his mouth and smoked.

“When my father Hoku returned from his day fishing at sea, he was happy and proud as he carried the many fish he had caught that day. But instead of being greeted by the usual happy and appreciative villagers who were pleased to see him come back with fish for them to cook and clean, he was greeted by the entire village as they sat somber and silent on the beach eagerly awaiting his return. Immediately he sensed something was wrong by the look on everyone’s face and the attitude in the air. I was terrified to confront my father for fear he would blame me for not protecting my mother. I was afraid he would not think I was enough of a man to protect her. I was young, but I was proud and very scared at that moment. It was the most critical moment of my life. I approached Hoku from the crowd gathered on the beach. Before I could say a word, he dropped his fish and ran to embrace me. I whispered in his ear

“Mommy is gone. I am so sorry, Dad.” He fell to his knees and screamed to the heavens. He wailed so loud that I am sure the Gods and the Matains heard his roar. I will never forget that sound – his cries still ring in my ears after all of the years.” Matahi took a long pause as he toked on his peace pipe again and stared off into the distance in deep reflection. Hoanui finished translating the last sentence and then waited in silence for Matahi’s next words. No one said a word. We all sat in silent suspense as we waited for Matahi to continue.

Seconds turned into minutes before Matahi spoke again. His voice sounded hoarse and wavering - as if he was choking on emotion when he started the story where he left off. “My father was never the same again. In one instant his life changed. One Matain dart destroyed our family. One dart would change the course of history. Hoku sent me to live with relatives in the village. I didn’t fully understand why, but I knew I couldn’t blame him – he needed to be alone. I needed his support and love, but he needed something different at the time. I didn’t understand why I had lost my mother to the Matains and then lost my father to solitude. I was too young to understand. I was too young to lose both parents.”

Matahi paused again to smoke the pipe. The campfire crackled and spit some fiery ash into the sky and the fire grew brighter. Matahi began to speak again and Hoanui resumed his translation. “In his anger, Hoku tried to rally support from other Rahitian men to lead an attack on the Matains. His attack plan went unsupported as the Rahitians offered up sympathy and condolences, but no support for retaliation. Hoku became angry and unstable and the villagers began to talk amongst themselves about how to handle Hoku rather than how to handle the Matains. Hoku was smart and sensitive enough to sense the growing tension on the island. His hatred was directed at the Matains and not his fellow Rahitians even though they were not supporting him. He made a decision on his own to leave Rahiti. He left without even saying goodbye to me or anyone else. There was great speculation and rumors as to where he went and what he was doing. The assumption was that he had gone to Mata Utu to exact revenge on the cannibals, but no one could imagine the plan that he was concocting. Hoku was a great fisherman, sailor, swimmer and father – but a warrior he was not. He was strong, healthy and well built by Rahitian standards, but was no match for a Matain cannibal. Everyone knew that except Hoku.”

Matahi adjusted his headpiece and cleared his throat. “For months after he left, my father kayaked from island to island trying to gain support from other tribes and convince them to attack Mata Utu with him. He told of the countless abductions that happened in Rahiti and how their loved ones were killed, beheaded and eaten. The other tribes would all sympathize and share similar stories with him. Every island had experienced at least one visit from the cannibals and had lost their own loved ones; however, no one was angry or motivated enough to retaliate. No one offered up any support for fighting them. No one knew anything about Mata or the Matain civilization. Everyone was scared and content simply praying to the Gods for their safety. No one did anything – until Hoku met a medicine man in Moorea.”

Nanihi leaned toward the fire and tossed a handful of powder into it which made it blaze brighter for a moment. “Praise to the medicine man.” She said in Rahitian.

Matahi toked the pipe and exhausted the smoke from his lungs to the heavens and then continued his tale. "This wise old medicine man claimed to have dreams and visions of the Matains and their civilization and rituals on Mata Utu. Although he had never been there, he knew the layout of Mata well and recounted it to my father in great detail. The medicine man had also come into possession of a Matain dart that had taken the life of a Moorean tribe member. He had studied the dart and determined the origin and ingredients in the Matain poison. Not only did he claim to have an antidote for the poison, but he also concocted a poison of his own that was equally as potent as the poison in the Matain dart. He claimed that the Matains should not be immune to this poison because they had not been exposed to it. This medicine man intrigued Hoku and gave him some brilliant ideas. Hoku believed the medicine man's tales; although, apparently the other Moorean villagers dismissed the medicine man as crazy and didn't take his stories or his medicines seriously. They would only come to him when they had injuries or illness and would ignore and disregard his stories about the Matains and Mata Utu. Hoku was the first person to listen to him."

Matahi paused to hit the pipe at the exact time a stiff breeze came out of nowhere and ignited the fire hotter sending smoke and ashes into the sky. The smoke from Matahi's pipe joined the smoke of the campfire on its journey skyward. The ambiance was perfectly captivating for his tale. Lance and I turned to look at each other in partial disbelief, but we both had a look of curiosity and interest painted on our faces. We couldn't decide whether this folklore was fact or fiction. The fact that the isolated breeze had come out of nowhere showed us that a natural mystic was playing in concert with the story and Matahi's pipe smoking. The smoke trail dissipated into the air and the fire calmed down as the breeze subsided and the story resumed.

"The medicine man gave Hoku the knowledge he needed to infiltrate Mata Utu and he also promised to provide Hoku with his special poison. The rest was going to have to be up to Hoku himself. According to the Mooreans, Hoku went into isolation and took up residence in the rain forest on their island. No one saw him in the village for months. Occasionally he was spotted scaling the side of the volcano on Moorea or swimming in Opanahu bay. He went into intense physical and mental training for the plan he was concocting. He began crafting darts from bamboo shoots and making other weapons and daggers from jagged volcanic rocks. After months of isolation he revisited the medicine man and picked up the poison potion as well as some additional advice. The medicine man had visions of Hoku while he was training. He saw the anguish in his eyes and felt the sorrow and hatred in his heart, but he knew that Hoku was not a warrior. He knew that underneath all of the rage Hoku was a peace-loving fisherman and family man. His advice to my father was that if he went to Mata Utu, he better be prepared to "kill or be killed". Hoku was prepared and was ready to sacrifice his life for his cause, but not before ending the Matain cannibal attacks on Rahiti. Hoku took the medicine man's potion and his advice and quietly left Moorea."

Tania interrupted the story by bringing a serving of Kava Kava tea to the campfire gathering. Suffice to say that the timing was impeccable as Matahi was just speaking of a poison potion. I took the tea anyway and wrote it off as coincidence.

Hoanui took a sip from the Kava Kava and the translation resumed. "Hoku left Moorea in the same kayak he came in. He rowed back to Rahiti to pay me a brief visit. I remember the day distinctly. I had been living with my aunt for the last few months and she had taken me down to the beach to bathe that day. I was sitting at the edge of the water looking out to sea when I saw the familiar outrigger kayak appear on the horizon. I thought I was dreaming. It was just like old times when I would wait for my father to return from his daily fishing expedition. I stood up in disbelief, but became confident that it was him as he stroked closer. It was definitely him. No one else had the ability to row an outrigger kayak with such speed and ease. He beached the kayak and we ran to embrace each other. I was overjoyed that my father was finally home, but my joy quickly turned to sadness as he informed me he was not going to stay. He told me that he had missed me dearly and that he loved me with all of his heart. He told me that his love for me and his fellow Rahitians was sending him on a mission that he may not return from. He told me that he had come to say what would possibly be his final farewell. I begged and pleaded with him to stay, but he kissed me on the cheek and boarded his kayak and rowed away just as quickly as he had come. He did not visit or say a word to anyone else - just me. I was devastated all over again at the departure of my father. I wanted to keep him with me. I missed my mother so dearly and I didn't want to miss my father another day too. I knew I had to be strong though. I knew by the seriousness and determination in Hoku's eyes that he had changed. He was a different man. He was a Rahitian on a mission. The best I could do for him was pray. I still pray for him every day."

Matahi stopped to smoke again and this time when he exhaled he let out a chant. "ooooohhhhhmmmmmm." The Rahitians answered with the same chant. And then Matahi broke into tribal verse in Rahitian. Hoanui leaned over to us and told us that he could not translate this chant and prayer into English because it wouldn't make sense to us. He told us to just "feel" what Matahi was saying. Tane began to tap the congo drums and Matahi burst into a loud but lyrical cry to the heavens. "Ouwwwwah-hauewwwwah-solawaaaaaaaah-Rahitiiiiiih....." The tribe responded in unison. The breeze returned and stoked the fire. Smoke and burning embers rose into the dark, starry sky. A chill came over me and goosebumps formed on my skin. I would like to think that it was the breeze that invoked the chill, but I knew the warm breeze had little to do with my chilling sensation. I was captivated by story and the ritual. I loved it and my emotions overflowed. I couldn't wait to hear what happened to Hoku next.

Lance and I sipped our Kava Kava tea as the chant and congo drums continued. The sound of the drums and Rahitian verse echoed in the distance. This story and ritual was different than the rest of the tribal ceremonies we had experienced here and it may be the most interesting story I had experienced to date. As the chant reached its crescendo, I noticed a full harvest moon rising over the water. I pointed it out to Lance who was equally as awestruck. It was as if the Rahitians had summoned the moon to rise with their chant. I sat there taking in the sights and sounds and felt as if I were totally connected to Rahiti. I felt as if I was learning a great tribal secret. I was honored to be here. The chant ended abruptly with a final tap of the drum and another long "ooooohhhhhmmmmmm." The Rahitians all remained still and focused on Matahi.

Hoanui turned to address Lance and I. “So, you guys want to know what happens next?”

Lance and I both answered simultaneously “Yeah!”

Hoanui picked a prime time to be sarcastic as he answered “So do I, but nobody knows.” The tribe erupted in laughter – even Matahi cracked a smile. It was the perfect ice breaker after the long prayer and chant. I sincerely hoped he was joking because I was enthralled in the story. I was already skeptical as to the validity of the folklore and ending it now would only cause serious doubt in my mind. I was relieved when Matahi spoke again and continued the story. I still couldn’t get over the spectacle of the moon rising over the water. The timing was impeccable.

Matahi’s voice spouted Rahitian again fresh after his lung and throat-clearing chant. “So Hoku rowed out of Rahiti and I shed many tears. I knew where he was going and what he was going to attempt. I knew the only thing I could do was pray – so I did – every day. And it is a practice that I still do. We are all fortunate that we are alive today to pray. We owe a lot of thanks and prayers to my father.” With that statement, many of the tribe shouted Maruru – meaning “thanks” in Rahitian.

“Hoku left Rahiti with a purpose. He rowed toward Mata Utu and stopped halfway there. He knew that if he was to gain access to the forbidden island he was going to have to employ the same stealthy tactics that the Matains used to infiltrate our island on their attacks. He strapped his potion and some belongings to his waist and jumped from his kayak leaving it to drift at sea. He used his excellent swimming skills to swim the rest of the way to Mata to remain as inconspicuous as possible. He waited until sunset before finally approaching the lagoon. The island appeared to be just as the medicine man had magically described. The current seemed to push him effortlessly right into the lagoon. He swam quietly and partially submerged to stay out of sight and out of the way of incoming darts. He surveyed the scene and saw no one. He listened quietly but heard nothing. He stayed close to the beach on the lagoon, but made his way to the south and into the cover of the rainforest. He exited the water and entered the dense forest in the dark of the night. He was partially relieved as he knew he had successfully done something that no other Rahitian or any other islander had ever done – he had stepped foot on Mata Utu. To our society it was as great a feat as man stepping onto the moon. His accomplishment fueled his ambition and courage to complete the task he had set out to do. He wasted no time familiarizing himself with the island. He quietly made his way through the forest stopping only to drink some spring water to hydrate after the long swim. He came to a well-beaten path in the forest, but shunned it and stayed in the thicket to avoid being seen. He knew he had to make the best of his time and find shelter before the cover of darkness gave way to dawn. As he wandered through the jungle, he began to hear sounds of the Matains. He heard drum beats and tribal chanting. He smelt smoke and herbs burning. He knew he was close to their village. He kept going barefooted through the densest plant growth he had ever seen until he ultimately came to a clearing by the beach on the other side of the island. He saw dozens of grass huts and hundreds of Matains. They were in the middle of a cannibalistic ritual. It was dinner time. Hoku was hungry. He had not eaten in days, but the sight he saw enabled him to

go many more days without eating. He witnessed the beheading of four men. The Matains danced wildly and whooped and hollered as they took turns running around with the bloody heads. He saw the four headless bodies lying on stone tables around the fire. The heads were placed into some sort of large stone cauldron and the Matains continued their tribal dance around the cauldron as they threw some sort of sand-like substance into the fire below the pot. Each handful of sand they tossed caused the fire to ignite wildly and sent flames and sparks into the air. The putrid scent of burning flesh and hair wafted in the breeze until it reached Hoku's nose. The smell was nauseating and, had he eaten, Hoku would have vomited instantly. The dance continued for what seemed like hours until it was halted by the tribal leader. He was presented four bamboo stalks by another Matain warrior. He jabbed the bamboo into the cauldron and skewered each skull raising each one out of the cauldron and handing it to a warrior. Each time a head came out on a stick, the Matains would erupt into tribal chant and a warrior would take off running down a trail toward the volcano with the bamboo stick which held the head like a flag. When the last head had departed, the Matains began their feast. The men surrounded the bodies and began to feast like lions tearing the flesh from the bones. The men would eat first and then throw scraps and entrails to the women and children. It was the most horrific sight ever witnessed by anyone. The feast enraged Hoku as he knew his wife and unborn child had met the same fate. He wanted to run into the village and immediately kill as many Matains as he could, but he was smart. He knew that he had to be very patient and remain hidden unless he wanted to become the next Matain meal. He surveyed his surroundings and knew that he was well hidden at the moment as the cannibals were focused on their feast, but he feared that sunrise would expose him. He watched the village closely as the four warriors who ran off with the heads earlier emerged from the trail and joined the feast. The village was in the exact location that the medicine man had described – in a clearing by the sea between the forest and Mount Mata. If the medicine man was right about everything, then he knew the trail he crossed earlier would lead him to the volcano. The volcano could offer up a good vantage point as well as shelter so that he could further study the Matains in the daylight. He knew now was the time to make a move while the Matains were feasting. He crept back into the depths of the jungle and made his way back to the trail. When he reached the trail, he followed it, but remained in the cover of the thicket next to the trail. He knew he could not risk being seen and give up the element of surprise. Surprise would be his best weapon. He skirted the trail until he was well past the clearing and the sound of the tribe had waned in the distance. He felt it was safe to exit the forest and make a dash down the trail toward Mount Mata. He ran as swiftly and as quietly as the wind through the darkness. He ran with ease and breathed deeply and efficiently as if he were swimming. He ran until his breath was stifled by the smell of rotting flesh. He stopped mid-stride on the trail as he realized that he was amidst a row of bamboo poles flanking the trail. He stopped to observe the heads which were proudly skewered on top of each one. He could vaguely see the silhouette of each face as he held his breath and walked with disgust. He feared the inevitable encounter with his wife's head, but he did not see any women. He gagged and wretched at the sight and smell of the grotesque display. He wanted to remove the heads and give them a proper burial, but knew that he could not afford to do anything that may alert the Matains as to his presence there. So he held his breath and kept on running until he reached Mount Mata. He must have passed a thousand heads along the way. Each head he passed fueled his anger more and more. He

touched his neck in appreciation for it and vowed that his head would stay attached to his body. The trail led him out of the forest and into the open air. He looked up at the peak of Mount Mata which seemed to reach up to the heavens and stars above. The soft, moist soil in the forest had turned into hard, jagged volcanic rock. The painful stepping stone didn't faze Hoku as he began to climb the volcano. The climb was long and treacherous especially at night, but his training in Moorea had paid off and he ascended the steep mountain to its peak. He reached the peak just as the sun had begun to rise in the east. He scanned the island below in the light of the fresh dawn. Mount Mata cast its shadow over the rainforest and the clearing where the village was. All was quiet below. The nocturnal cannibals had retired for the time being."

I looked skyward as the moon had climbed higher on the horizon. A chill came over my body again in spite of the warmth of the night. I imagined the story vividly. Hearing the same story back in the comfort of my home in Virginia definitely would not have had the same effect. I was here. I was only miles from this "Mata" place. I was hearing the story translated from the native tongue of the legend's own son. Wow. I looked over at Lance who was staring intently at Matahi. He was captivated by the story. I couldn't resist the temptation to scare the crap out of him at this point in the story so I was very sneaky as I slid my hand over and grabbed his side and whispered "Boo." His reaction was more than I had anticipated. He sprung up a few feet off of the ground and let out a whoop in surprised shock. I got him good and I also gave the tribe a laugh. Matahi paused the story long enough to give Lance and I a look. Then he too cracked a smile before hitting the pipe and continuing. The chuckles continued from the rest of the tribe for a few minutes. Lance socked me on the arm and then held up one finger to signify that he "owed me one" now. I snickered at him and then returned my attention to Matahi and Hoanui.

"Hoku made his way around the top of the volcano and back down the windward side out of sight of the rest of the island. As the sun rose in the east, he descended the steep volcano's side. The waves smacked the base of the mountain far below where it met the sea. Hoku did not fear the height. He knew he would find shelter and be safe. The Moorean medicine man had spoken of a cave on the sea-side of the volcano. Sure enough, Hoku discovered a cave on a rocky ledge halfway down the mountain facing the sea just as the Moorean had described. He took refuge there and got some rest. He awoke hours later and climbed around the side of the mountain until he could peer around its side down to the village and forest below. He knew he had found the perfect hidden lookout spot to keep a close watch on the Matains. For days he stayed in the cave watching and learning the ways of the cannibals. He would watch in the early evening as several kayaks would leave in different directions carrying two Matain warriors each. Later after dark, the warriors would return with dinner strapped to their outriggers. The women would enter the rainforest and return to the village with pails of water and fruits and herbs. The clouds also had their daily ritual as they would surround the top of the volcano like a halo in the morning and then migrate out to sea as the heat of the sun rose only to return to the top of the volcano at sunset and resume their halo position on Mount Mata. Hoku fought through exhaustion, hunger and thirst for days during his vigilant observation. When he reached the brink of dehydration, he contemplated leaving the safety of his position to retrieve a drink from one of the streams in the rainforest. He feared leaving the cave and being discovered. He

prayed to the Gods to relieve his thirst. He waited patiently as long as he could until his mouth was so dry he could not swallow. The thought of the cool, fresh streams in the rainforest below were too tempting. He decided to emerge from the cave and descend to the jungle, but before he could leave – it rained. The rain poured down and ponded on the rocky floor of his cave. He fell to his knees and prayed thanks to the Gods. He drank on his knees like a dog and worshiped the Gods as he did in appreciation for the water.”

I leaned over to Lance and whispered “down dog” in jest. I couldn’t resist interjecting the yoga reference as an innuendo to lighten the mood.

Matahi kept going as if he didn’t hear me. “Hoku accepted and appreciated the gift of the water and it relieved his thirst, but hunger still gripped him. His empty stomach churned in agony. He once again prayed to the Gods to relieve his hunger. He held out, watched and waited. When Hoku reached his maximum hunger and contemplated going into the rainforest to retrieve food, something amazing happened. A bird flew into the cave carrying a large fish that he had just plucked from the water below. The bird had probably perched and eaten his fish there many times prior, but the sight of Hoku startled him and he flew away – leaving the fish behind. Hoku ate the fish and thought it ironic how many times he had fished, but never caught one in this fashion. He appreciated the catch and the nourishment and prayed to the Gods in thanks. His good fortune gave him strength and confidence that he was in the right place doing the right thing. He got brave and comfortable with the terrain and after learning the Matains’ schedule and rituals. Hydrated and nourished, he began to venture down the volcano at opportune times and enter into the rainforest. He got a chance to study the Matains closely. He kept his fears at bay and his senses keen as he prowled through the jungle dangerously close to the unsuspecting cannibals. He watched them as they drank and collected water from the springs and ponds. He watched them as they picked fruits and berries and herbs. He watched them with hatred and disgust as they had their nightly cannibal feasts. He watched them as they danced and skewered the heads of their victims. And he watched them when they slept. He counted over 200 cannibals. He knew his task was daunting, but he knew the first thing he had to do. While in the forest, he collected fruits and water to sustain him at his hideout on Mount Mata. He couldn’t rely on the kindness of the Gods to bring him rain and deliver fish every day. The Gods had now blessed him with something more important - they had given him the strength, courage and stamina to fend for himself. He stockpiled his own supplies and relied only on himself at this point. He collected bamboo and tree branches from the rainforest and picked up feathers that birds had shed while in the trees. He spent hours in his cave wildling perfectly formed darts and spears from the bamboo and wood to add to the collection that he brought from Moorea. He carefully placed a ration of his poison potion on each one and stowed it away in the back of the cave for later use. When he felt he had enough weapons in his arsenal, he took the remaining poison to the rainforest and dumped it into the spring and let it feed into the pond where the Matains collected water. He repeated the words of the Moorean medicine man as he poisoned the water – “kill or be killed” he said to himself. He watched the next day as the women filled their pails with the water. That night the tribal feast was quieter and only half of the cannibals attended. The next day, Hoku was awakened at sunrise – not by the light of the sun, but by the screams of the cannibals as they awoke to find their loved ones

dead. The poison had worked and effectively wiped out over half of the tribe. That evening no warriors left the island in kayaks to go hunt. The feast was already at home. The remaining cannibals had a grand feast and devoured their own dead. They handled their heads in the same ritualistic fashion. They seemed to have no remorse or guilt as they ate their own dead families and tribal members. Dozens and dozens of heads were placed into the cauldron, cooked and then skewered. Warrior after warrior ran down the trail and planted the bamboo pole and head trophy into the lineup. Each head that emerged from the pot made Hoku smile wider with satisfaction of his success. The ritual continued almost all night until all of the dead had been beheaded and devoured. The tribe concluded their feast late into the night and retired for sleep. But the remainder of the night and early morning was not as quiet and peaceful as usual. Hoku was kept awake by the groans, moans and vomiting of the Matains who were experiencing the mild effects of the poison from the flesh they had devoured. The next day started with the same loud cries of the Matains as they awoke to find many more dead cannibals. No kayaks left that day either. That night the same ritual took place in the same manner. Dozens more of the dead cannibals were devoured by the remaining cannibals. Hoku couldn't figure whether it was pure stupidity or the insatiable desire to devour flesh at any cost that drove the Matains to once again eat their own dead. They obviously had no clue he was there and responsible for the massacre. The effects were not as profound this time around as the poison had been diluted past its potency. Hoku went in for close observation from the forest and counted only 20 or so remaining Matains. The smell of the rotting heads tainted the air with their pungent odor, but it was the sweet smell of victory to Hoku. The remaining Matains had finally figured it out and had become aware that something was very wrong. They drank from a different stream and ventured into areas of the rainforest that they didn't normally frequent. Hoku knew they were on the prowl. He knew that he had to act on the offensive again before he was discovered. The windward side of the volcano offered up perfect refuge, but it would only take one curious Matain to spoil his hideout. Hoku carried his poison tipped weapons into the forest and began to systematically dart the Matains one by one as they were alone in the forest. "Kill or be killed" he would say before he darted each cannibal. When they fell unconscious and into immediate death from his darts, he would then hoist their bodies on his shoulder and carry them back to the hip of Mount Mata where he would throw them into the sea so their bodies would not be discovered. He knew the Matains couldn't figure out how the majority of their tribe had been poisoned, but they would surely recognize a dart wound to the neck and know that they were being hunted by an intruder. For days Hoku darted and tossed over a dozen Matains into the water undetected. He returned to the hidden safety of his cave each night. He knew the island and the forest like the back of his hand now. He calculated there were less than 10 remaining Matains. They strongest men had seemed to be the only survivors. They would be the most challenging to defeat especially since he was out of poison and darts. Hoku emerged from the forest carrying his last kill back to Mount Mata for disposal as he saw four of the remaining cannibals climbing around hip of the volcano toward his lair. He knew it would be discovered. He was happy he was not there for their visit, but he knew he could no longer return to his safe haven. His mind raced as he formulated his next plan. He sprinted down the trail to the lagoon. Dozens of Matain kayaks were beached there. He knew what he had to do. He pushed each kayak into the water with enough force to set it adrift into the sea. No one was leaving the island by boat. It was him and the remaining

warriors. Hoku vowed to finish the job. He reentered the forest on the trail with no regard to being seen. He ran like the wind down the trail in the open daylight. He hurried through the forest with speed toward the volcano again. He stopped in awe as he entered the section of the trail where the bamboo head trophies were. He hadn't been through this spot since his first night on the island. He hadn't seen the spectacle in the daylight. He walked past hundreds of heads of both cannibalized Matains and other islanders. He froze in his tracks as he saw the distorted face he once kissed. My mother's head was familiar and relatively well preserved. He wept a moment, but his eyes quickly ran dry."

Matahi stopped a moment and hung his head in sorrow. He too wept a moment, but righted his face and wiped his eyes to continue the tale.

"He removed her head from the pointed bamboo pole, kissed it and then gently placed it under a shrub and covered it with soil and leaves to temporarily bury it. He then grabbed the bamboo spear that his wife's head had rested on. He pulled it from the ground and wielded it like a sword. He took off down the trail in a rage – determined to finish the Matains. He didn't miss a step as he exited the forest at the volcano. He had taken that section of the path dozens and dozens of times in the last few weeks and he knew every rock on the trail like the back of his hand. He knew every nook and cranny on the face of Mount Mata. He quickly ascended the volcano along the same path that the warriors had taken in route to his hiding place. As he rounded the hip of the volcano, the warriors came in to sight. They were emerging from his cave. He charged up the steep, narrow slope toward them. They spotted him and began to rapidly descend in his direction as well. Enraged by the sight of his wife's head, he was determined to kill the cannibals. He met them in a fierce clash on the edge of the volcano. The width of the ledge on which they stood caused the Matains to line up single file. The advantage was to Hoku as he stabbed and pushed the cannibals off of the ledge one at a time until they had all fallen into the sea below. He didn't have time to celebrate his momentary victory as he saw four more Matains scaling the volcano behind him. He was trapped and he knew it. There was nowhere to go. He hurriedly climbed the rest of the distance to his cave. He entered it cautiously - not knowing whether a Matain had stayed there to ambush him. When he found it empty, he entered and retrieved the antidote to the Matain poison that the Moorean medicine man had given him from a hiding place in the cave. He quickly drank it down and exited the cave to the ledge. The cannibals were approaching quickly with their spears drawn. Without hesitation, Hoku jumped from the ledge and into the air where he plummeted into the water far below. The Matains watched in amazement as he fell hundreds of feet and into the water below. The fall would have killed any ordinary man – even a mighty Matain – but Hoku was no ordinary man – and certainly no Matain. Hoku was unaffected by the fall and quickly began to swim like the fish that he was. He rounded the hip of the volcano well out of the range of the Matain darts and spears. He swam around the southern side of the island with the rainforest as cover and separation between him and the four Matains. The lagoon was his destination. He knew the Matains would head there to board their kayaks and come after him. He got there first and waited in the middle of the lagoon. Before he could catch his breath, a dart whizzed by his head – followed by another and another until one lodged into his shoulder. He quickly pulled it out and squeezed the blood from the wound. He waited and hoped the poison

wouldn't affect him – and it didn't. As more darts flew, he submerged deep under the crystal clear water. Darts and spears plunged into the water, but harmless at his depth. He reemerged to the surface for air and to taunt the Matains. He beckoned them to come into the water and fight like men. Two of them obliged. The two biggest men he had ever seen reluctantly dove into the water and swam toward him. He could tell by their hesitance and their motion in the water that they were not proficient swimmers. They may be the fiercest hunters and warriors, but their swimming skills paled in comparison to Hoku's. He let them get very close before he dove and submerged beneath them. He grabbed both of them by the feet and pulled them under. He used his strong swimming kick to pull them deep into the water. They thrashed and kicked wildly, but Hoku did not let go. He kept pulling them deeper and deeper. Even out of breath from his day of fighting, his leap from the volcano and the long swim to the lagoon, he was still able to hold his breath longer than the Matains. He pulled them down and held their feet tight as they struggled. He didn't release them and resurface until their lifeless bodies stopped moving. When he resurfaced he saw two more Matains running down the beach to enter the water. He invited them to join the fight by taunting them with the dead bodies of the two cannibals he just killed. "Here is your lunch – come and get it guys" he shouted. The Matains shot their remaining darts at him from a distance, but Hoku avoided another strike. The anger and fear in the Matains had evidently affected their accuracy. Either that or all of the good darters had perished already. The two Matains cautiously entered the water with spears in their hands and waded waist deep toward Hoku as he stayed just out of their range. The Matains took aim and hurled their last two spears toward Hoku with all of their strength. One spear missed and the other grazed his arm as it flew by. He quickly grabbed the spear as it plunged into the water. Hoku emerged from the water with spear in hand and thrust himself like a dolphin toward the Matains. He plunged the spear deep into the chest of one of the cannibals as the other turned to run back onto the beach. Hoku gave chase and ran the Matain down and wrestled him to the ground. Hoku's rage was strong and enabled him to subdue the bigger Matain. He choked the cannibal with all of his might until his face turned redder than his blood stained hands and mouth. The mighty Matain warrior was helpless as he pleaded with his eyes for his life to be spared. Hoku looked deep into his eyes and cannibal soul and said "kill or be killed." Then he snapped the neck of the Matain. The ordeal had exhausted him. The struggle and swim had dehydrated him. The poison of the dart and spear was finally affecting him. His blood coursed through his veins and his breath got deep and heavy as he fell into slumber. He hoped and prayed to the Gods with his last bit of energy and awareness that he had killed the last Matain. He knew he would be easy prey now as he passed out in the sand on the beach. Time melted away. No one knows how long he slept there. No one knows how much poison was in his body. He had come close to death, but cheated it thus far. The sun rose and set multiple times as he lay there unconscious on the beach. Ultimately, Hoku awoke to find that he was alive and well rested. He was amazed to discover that the current and tide had reversed at some point and brought one of the Matain kayaks back into the lagoon and onto the beach next to him. He gained his senses and checked his surroundings – not knowing whether he was safe or not. He rose to his feet and pulled the spear from the dead Matain who was lying face down on the beach by the water. Hoku proudly, but cautiously entered the forest. He went straight to a spring by the trail that he had not poisoned and he drank until he had his fill. He plucked some fruit from some trees and ate until he had his fill. He walked with confidence as

he made his way back onto the trail toward the Matain village. By his count, he had killed them all. The very fact that he had survived lying on the beach for so long was testament to that. He searched the village and found no one. He searched the forest and saw no Matains. He climbed Mount Mata and observed the island from the high peak – and saw no one. He raised his head to the sky and let out a loud “oooohhhhhmmmm” and then began the same tribal verse that Matahi and the Rahitians had just done earlier in the story. He prayed to the gods and thanked them for his victory. His mission was complete and he was now ready to leave Mata. But he had one final task to complete. He descended the volcano and walked back down the path through the head trophies. He began removing all of the Rahitian heads that he recognized and carried them back to the lagoon and placed them in the outrigger on the kayak. He wanted to return them to Rahiti for proper burial. His wife’s head was the last one to go into the kayak. When the cargo was loaded and secured with palm thatching, he shoved off and said goodbye to Mata Utu for good. He stroked out of the lagoon and into the open sea on his way back to Rahiti. He hadn’t gotten far before a terrible storm developed in the sky around him. The wind howled and woke up the seas. Dark clouds formed above him and Mata Utu. Thunder boomed and lightning struck all around him. He turned back to look at Mata as she was struck multiple times by lightning. Fires erupted on the island as the lightning had ignited parts of the rain forest and the Matain village. Hoku kept rowing, but his progress away from the island halted. The current was pulling him back toward Mata. He fought hard to maintain his position, but couldn’t distance himself from the island. He struggled until his kayak was ultimately overrun by waves and capsized. The Rahitian skulls spilled into the water as the kayak sank. Hoku tried to grab my mother’s head as it sank just out of his reach. Lightning struck in the water all around him, but Hoku remained fearless as he turned his head to the heavens and prayed. He begged for survival so that he may be able to relay his story to the Rahitians and see me once again. He prayed that he could tell me and the rest of Rahiti that we were free from the cannibals. His prayers were granted as the storm quickly subsided just as rapidly as it had formed. Smoke filled the air and the glow of the fires on Mata Utu filled the sky behind him. Hoku floated on his back and rested until he had enough strength to swim in the direction of Rahiti. No ordinary man could have made the swim especially after the days of fighting tirelessly. But once again Hoku reminded us that he was no ordinary man.”

Matahi smiled with satisfaction and pride in his father.

“Hoku returned to Rahiti a hero, but a very different man and father. He shared his story with the island and they celebrated their liberation. Hoku, however, could not celebrate with them as returning to Rahiti only reminded him of the loss of his wife. Hoku single handedly wiped out the Matains, but could not conquer the pain and suffering of losing his wife. Within days of his return, Hoku fell ill and died. Some say it was the Matain poison in his system that finally got the best of him. I say that he died of a broken heart. Some say that it was the curse of Mata Utu that killed him. I say it was the pain in his heart. At least I got to see my father the hero again.”

Matahi paused in reflection and deep thought as he toked on his pipe. Tane began to tap the drums again as the tribe began to chant “Hoku, Hoku, Hoku...” in rhythm with the drum beats.

The chant of appreciation and remembrance lasted a few minutes before Matahi concluded his story.

“Hoku profoundly changed the way of life here in Rahiti. No longer did we have to fear the cannibals. No longer did we have to sleep with one eye open. Hoku’s bravery was honored by all of the islands and he is now heralded as a legend. He eliminated the only natural predator and leading cause of death in the islands – and he did it singlehandedly except for the help of the medicine man. Had it not been for the poison and knowledge that the Moorean shared with him, he would not have been able to successfully conquer the Matains. Had it not been for his strong faith and belief in himself and the Gods, he surely would have perished and met a cannibalistic fate as well. Hoku proved that wisdom and faith combined with a burning desire can conquer even the strongest, most fierce civilizations. Not only did Hoku singlehandedly conquer the mighty Matains, but he conquered mysterious Mata Utu as well. By the way, Hoku was a master fire-handler as well. It was said that he once extinguished a burning coal in his hand.” Hoanui said as he looked directly at me.

“Wow” I thought as I took the comment and Hoanui’s eye contact as a huge compliment to me for having handled the coal as well.

Hoanui continued. “Weeks after Hoku’s passing, some Rahitians formed a posse and set out for Mata Utu to explore the uncharted territory. They set out on an expedition to see the mighty Mata for the first time. They were all a little timid and feared that some Matains may have remained hidden or returned from sea after Hoku left. They armed themselves in just in case. Upon approaching Mata, they knew Hoku’s tale was true. Everything about the island was just as Hoku had described. They entered the lagoon and were on the lookout for poison darts, but none came. They discovered the dead Matains that Hoku had slain on the beach. They cautiously entered the rainforest at the trail and made their way past the crystal clear springs, but they didn’t dare drink from them for fear that the water was still poisoned. They noticed the abundant fruits and herbs, but didn’t dare partake of them for fear of angering the Gods. They reached the Matain village at the clearing and discovered that it had burned to the ground when it was ignited by lightning during the storm when Hoku left. They made their way down the path to Mount Mata and were repulsed by the sight of the head trophies lining the trail. They were spared the trauma of seeing their fellow Rahitians’ heads due to the fact that Hoku had removed them and the storm then put them to rest at sea. They ascended the volcano and rounded the hip to the cave where Hoku had sought refuge in hiding. The wooden viles that once held the Moorean poison and antidote still lie on the floor of the cave. The Rahitians took in the full beauty of the island from the top of the volcano. All was quiet on Mata – in fact, too quiet. The Rahitians noticed that they didn’t hear the familiar sounds of life that they were accustomed to back home in Rahiti. No birds flew or sang, no insects buzzed about, no monkeys called out from the tree tops – there was no sound. The eerie and quiet calm on the island sent chills up their spines, but also gave them the courage to explore the island more. They found every type of plant and fruit know to exist in the South Pacific, but they did not find one living animal. They did not know why there was no life other than plants on the island. It is very lush and inviting and a perfect home, but no birds fly overhead, no fish swim inside the reef and no

animals inhabit the soil. Nothing ever lived on that island again after Hoku left. The Rahitians assumed that the island must be possessed by the curse of the dead Matains. In an attempt to rid the island of the curse, they began removing the heads and dead Matain bodies and dumped them into the volcano as they prayed to the Gods to restore friendly life to the island. The Rahitians fell in love with Mata that day and decided to stay the night. The next day half of the Rahitian posse remained on the island to continue the cleanup of the dead. The other half rowed back to Rahiti to gather more of the tribe to return and help. The entire time on Mata had been peaceful – until they left. Half way back to Rahiti another fierce storm erupted and nearly sank their kayaks. They watched Mata in the distance as the storm seemed to encompass the island. They prayed for their safe return home and for the safety of those who remained behind on Mata. The kayaks survived the storm and returned to Rahiti in spite of a strong current that tried to draw them back to Mata Utu. Exhausted from the ordeal, the Rahitian expedition told their story to the village upon their return. They then retired to get rest and planned to go back to Mata Utu with reinforcements the next day. The next day never came for them as every one of the Rahitians that returned from the island fell ill and died. This terrified the Rahitians and everyone feared that the Matain curse had been brought to Rahiti. Reluctantly a group of four Rahitians returned to Mata the next day to retrieve the Rahitians that remained. When they got to Mata all was quiet and peaceful. There was no storm on the island as there was no life either. They searched the island from side to side and from the peak on Mount Mata to the tip of the spit at the lagoon. They found nothing – no Rahitians, no heads or no dead bodies. There was absolutely no sign of life whatsoever. Scared and bewildered by the situation, they immediately returned to Rahiti before sunset. The four that returned prayed that they would not fall ill and perish. They prayed that the curse be contained to Mata Utu. Their prayers were answered and they safely returned and survived to tell of their puzzling discovery.”

Lance and I looked at each other with a look of intrigue on our faces. Lance raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

Hoanui continued the translation. “Hoku’s story was told to all of the islands and word of the curse spread through all of the South Pacific. Everyone avoided Mata Utu like the plague and left the island alone in solitude. For a hundred years nothing has lived on Mata, but ultimately the curse was forgotten and islanders ventured back to Mata to experience her beauty. The visitors found no life on the island on any of their visits. It took bravery to go to Mata, but no one had enough courage to spend the night there. No one had stayed on the island past sunset that we were aware of – until two years ago. A sailor found himself shipwrecked on the outer reef of Mata. He managed to survive the wreck and struggled through the heavy surf to the beach. He was not aware of the history and the curse of the island and he thought he had stumbled into an oasis of paradise. He took up refuge for the night and made himself comfortable in the rain forest. He was so enthralled by the beauty of the island that he did not notice the lack of life there at first. The next day his attitude changed and the quiet solitude turned from pleasure to fear and began to drive him mad. He knew he had to leave the island immediately and feared for his safety. He had no boat, but his desire to leave was so strong that he decided to swim for freedom. As he began to swim away from Mata, a fierce storm blew up

and the current began to pull him back to the island. He fought and struggled all day until he finally distanced himself from the island. Later that night, he washed ashore in Rahiti – exhausted and dehydrated from his ordeal. He barely had enough life left in him to tell his tale. That night he fell ill and died. His story renewed the fact that the curse of Mata Utu was still alive and well.”

“Mah-tah - ooooo-toooo.” Arenui chanted as he tapped the congo drums lightly.

Hoanui relayed more of Matahi’s Rahitian words. “So now that you know the story of Mata Utu, I have one question for you guys.”

Matahi’s attention and focus turned to Lance and I. All eyes of the rest of the tribe fell on us as well. I knew what he was going to ask before the words came out of his mouth.

“Do you still desire to visit the mysterious island of Mata Utu?” Lance and I turned to each other as if to see what the other was thinking. I knew Lance was imagining the story of that perfect wave that Arenui had initially shared with us. I knew that the surf would outweigh the curse in Lance’s mind. The adventure and mystery was my chief motivation to visit the island and I had slight concern, but little fear for the curse. I had not been raised religiously and both Lance and I rarely subscribed to folklore. In my mind, I could easily dismiss this story as a great legend but a fictitious legend nonetheless.

Lance nodded his head at me in approval and we both answered Matahi with a resounding “Yes!” at the exact same time.

Matahi raised his hand to the sky and blessed our trip with his words. “I hereby grant you access and permission to travel to Mata with one condition. You must leave the island before sunset. I will pray for your safe return.”

Arenui was the first to rise from his seated position around fire. “Well there you have it dudes - the tale of Mata Utu. Get some rest tonight. Tomorrow we will surf the mighty Mata Utu.”

We agreed with his statement and thanked Matahi for the story and his permission. We thanked Hoanui for translating before we retired to our huts. I asked Lance what he thought about the story and he winked at me and said “I’m ready.”

I was enthralled by the story and how it animated and enhanced the history of the culture we were visiting.

Lance and I didn’t know what to make of the folklore. Neither of us were religious and we could hardly comprehend the religious references and significance of prayer in the story. Hoku had prayed and received rain. Hoku prayed and received a fish delivered by a bird. Hoku prayed to defeat the Matains - and he did! I contemplated the Moorean medicine man’s prophecy and connection to Mata Utu even though he had never been there. We wondered how much of the story was true and how much had been embellished into a fable. Certainly the passionate storytelling and the environment in which it was told made us believe. I believed in Hoku. I

believed in the human spirit - regardless of religion. Belief and knowledge were powerful themes to me. The moral of the story to me was to have faith and believe in something. I also believe that determination, planning and follow through can bring profound results.

I was thankful I had taken an extra couple of shots of Kava Kava last night during the story, but even so – I still had some crazy nightmares of head-hunting cannibals. In spite of my dreams, the next morning Lance and I woke with excitement. The stories of Mata had not deterred our will and desire to see this mysterious place. In fact, we were both so intrigued that we hardly slept. I couldn't wait to discover a new place. Lance couldn't wait to see this perfect wave. I was a little concerned about Matahi's reluctance to grant passage to Mata Utu, but was glad that he had conceded. We may be doing something against tradition, but at least we had permission. The forbidden nature of the island added to the excitement. We ate our breakfast and finished our chores quickly. Lance was the first to head down to the beach. I was almost done with my water replenishment, when Maruia approached me.

"Be careful today. Mata can change you. I don't want you to get hurt." She warned as she grabbed my arm.

"It's okay, I'm a big boy. And I'm sure if I do get hurt, you can nurse me back to health." I answered.

"Yes, but Mata Utu can hurt you in ways that I cannot nurse. Be careful." She held my arm tightly in an urgent plea.

I was unsure how to take her concern. I didn't want to seem less than brave and bold in the face of a new adventure, yet I didn't want to seem to callous in regards to her feelings.

"Look, Maruia, would it make you feel better if you accompanied us as well? That way you can look out for us and bless us with your kind heart?"

"Absolutely not, I will stay here and bless you from afar. I have not been to Mata Utu in years and don't plan to return any time soon."

"So be it. I will see you this afternoon and you will see that everything will be okay." I kissed her hand and turned to walk away. I passed Tane on my way to the beach. I was pretty positive that he had been watching my conversation with Maruia from afar.

"Break a leg" he said as I passed him. His comment went without response. I would like to break his leg sometimes. Jealousy is a wicked emotion.

I made my way on down to the beach where I found Lance and Arenui already waiting. They had dragged two outrigger canoes down to the water and had three boards already strapped to the outriggers. I jumped right in and handed them the fourth board which happened to be my

own. We went over the short check list of shit we needed to take for the day trip. Wax – check! Water – check! Lighter – check! Suntan lotion – check! Balls – double check! Hoanui – missing!

“Dude, did Hoanui chicken out?” I sarcastically asked.

“Nah, bro – he was here – I think he went to drop a ‘morning deuce’. It’s a long paddle in the kayak. I suggest you do the same. Plus, I don’t want you guys to shit yourself when you see Mata’s wicked right.” Arenui loved to talk shit – especially about shitting!

“I’m all good to go on that bro. I’m ready to roll.” I answered.

“Me too - Let’s do it.” Lance was always ready to surf – regardless of anything else.

I decided to start a little yoga session while we patiently waited for Hoanui. Maruia and Tania saw the three of us guys in the down-dog position and decided to run down to the beach and join us. We did a few Vinyassa flows and some deep breathing followed by some sun-salutations and some core stretching to get us relaxed and limbered up for what seemed like it was going to be a long paddle and a long voyage. I loved yoga in the morning. In my opinion there is no better way to start the day than with a sunrise yoga practice on the beach followed by a dawn patrol surf session. Whenever my day started with yoga, it seemed that I was a little more positive, productive and prepared. I had the notion for some reason that today Lance and I would need all of the preparation and strength we could get.

We were on our second sun-salutation series posing in a reverse triangle when I heard Hoanui approaching in a hurry. “Ok, guys – finish up your synchronized gayness and lets’ paddle.”

I looked over at Maruia and Tania as they both cracked a big smile at Hoanui’s comment. I admit the scene would have appeared a lot ‘gayer’ had the two girls not been there with us. Gay or not, I loved the way yoga made me feel. Getting teased by the guys for doing it was nothing new either. I didn’t care – it was my thing and I was happy to share it with all who cared to learn. The five of us wrapped up our series as Hoanui pulled the kayaks into the water. I said goodbye to the girls as I waded into the water and jumped into the two man kayak behind Lance.

“Race ya to Mata guys.” Arenui and Hoanui challenged from their kayak.

“Easy for you to say – we don’t even know where we are going!” Lance splashed back the challenge with his words and a stroke of the oar.

“Follow the rising sun in the east. It’s like a beacon to Mata Utu. That’s why we always go to Mata first thing in the morning – the rising sun seems to rise from Mount Mata. And also it gives us plenty of time to exit the island before nightfall. Keep the sun in your sights and Mata will magically appear. Or just follow us as we leave you in the dust.” Arenui laughed.

As much as Lance and I loved a challenge – especially in the sport and fitness arena, we felt it might be wise to conserve our energy for the return trip home – and for the surfing too. Plus, it is hard to pace yourself and know how much energy to exert when you really have no concept of how far you are going to have to go. Lance and I were no strangers to the two man outrigger kayak, but we felt as if we were going into uncharted territory. Certainly paddling in the open water outside the protection of barrier reefs was much more daunting than the short-range island hopping we were accustomed to. Nonetheless, we set out on the trek and established a good alternating stroke and found ourselves at a good pace that kept us side by side with the Nuis.

A school of porpoise joined us on the venture and entertained us with their frolicking and undulating movements as they occasionally surfaced next to us as if to check us out and taunt us with their graceful swimming ability. I told the guys that we should figure out a way to lasso them and have them tow us all the way to Mata. At best guess, I figured there were about 8 porpoise around us and under us. Having porpoise close by is a comforting feeling since apparently they ward off sharks. It is hard to believe that such a peaceful and seemingly harmless animal could defeat such ferocious hunters as sharks. It made me think of how Hoku, a peaceful fisherman, had wiped out the fierce Matains.

Hoanui explained that it was the porpoises' speed, agility and intelligence that enabled it to defeat the sharks – much like the same characteristics that Hoku possessed in defeating the Matains. I hoped that Lance and I possessed enough of those same traits to conquer Mata's surf – and any sharks we happened to encounter along the way.

I took a couple of short breaks from the paddling to snap several digital pictures of our new fish friends as they were kind enough to model for me by breaking the water's surface and splash down next to us. No zooming was required with the camera since they were almost close enough to us to reach out and touch. They swam close, but just far enough to remain clear of our oars as we methodically stroked through the water. The water was so crystal clear that I was able to reach over the side of the kayak and place the camera under water and snap some amazing pictures of them swimming under us. Lance got on my case for not pulling my weight in the paddling as I looked at the pictures on the camera's display screen. I told him to chill because he was not going to believe how cool the pics looked. I knew my Facebook friends would love to see them later too.

We remained relatively quiet during the paddle - partly to conserve our breath during the physical exertion but mostly to just take in the beauty of nature around us. I glanced at my watch in between strokes and realized that we had been paddling for over 30 minutes, but Mata was still not in sight. I had to ask in a sarcastic kid-in-the-backseat tone "Are we there yet?"

Arenui replied back almost as sarcastically "Do you see a freakin' island yet man? Quit your whining and keep stroking!" Everyone laughed and dug in deeper with our oars. Not more than a couple of minutes after the sarcasm, I saw something appear on the horizon out of nowhere.

It looked like the clouds were connecting with the water. Minutes later, I could see more clearly as a defined mountain rose from the water to meet the clouds. It almost appeared to be an optical illusion or maybe an oasis at sea.

“There she is guys. Meet Mata Utu!” Hoanui was the first to make the introduction. The directions were right on point as the sun seemed to rise directly from the top of Mount Mata. The direct sunlight glaring off of the water had kept the island backlit, but hidden from our eyes. The island now came into focus and seemed deceptively close in proximity. My pulse raced and I felt an adrenaline rush surge through my body. We picked up our stroking pace. Every stroke seemed to get easier. Every stroke seemed to bring us there faster and faster. Every stroke brought the island into focus more vividly right before our eyes. The island seemed to draw us in like magic. I stopped stroking for a second and Lance followed suit. I pulled out my camera again and began snapping picture after picture. This time I didn’t take the time to view the pictures on the camera. The image in front of me was pure and absolute perfection in every way – just as had been described.

When I first laid eyes on Mata Utu, a sense of euphoria came over me. Imagine the most beautiful place in the world – and then multiply it by ten. That’s how I felt when I saw Mata magically come into focus on the horizon. The island appeared enchanted by rays of sunlight that seemed to rain down through the clouds from heaven above. A giant volcano crowned with a halo of puffy white clouds rose from the sea skyward on the east end of the island and was a beacon to us as we continued to stroke across the sea. Mata appeared to be larger than the size of Rahiti and the volcano looked huge in comparison to the older, weathered volcano on Rahiti. As we drew nearer to the island we became sheltered from the wind. The sea turned into glass as we paddled across crystal clear teal green and blue waters which revealed an incredible view of the world’s largest and most beautiful aquarium.

Our paddling became less laborious as the island seemed to pull us in to its sheltered waters on the leeward side. The water became so calm and glassy that the only disturbance on the surface was the ripples from our kayaks and paddles. My excitement grew with every stroke. A beautiful lagoon flanked by a c-shaped beach came into our sights. The scene was so picturesque that it took my breath away. I immediately pulled out my camera again and began snapping dozens of photos from every angle possible. I couldn’t wait to post these pictures on Facebook later. I knew pictures wouldn’t do it justice, but no one could imagine the beauty of this place without seeing it in person. Not only was the sight unbelievable, but the smell of tropical flora filled the air. There was a sweet, organic scent wafting from the island in the gentle leeward breeze. I became so enthralled by the island that I didn’t even notice that our porpoise friends had departed.

“What happened to our flipped friends?” I asked.

Arenui answered quickly “They split a while ago, bro. They won’t come near Mata. Neither will sharks or anything else either.”

His comment invoked thoughts of the tales from last night. It put more believability and truth to the outrageous Mata tales that I had partially dismissed as folklore. At this point I didn't care. We were here and I was ready to meet Mata.

We glided into the lagoon with very little effort. I have to admit that I was still a little paranoid and was on the lookout for poisoned darts and spears. Hoanui and Matahi had portrayed the island perfectly in their stories last night. It was only natural that I would have some residual fears based on the tales we heard last night.

When we reached the beach, we disembarked the kayaks and dragged them up onto the bright white sand. Hoanui and Arenui began unstrapping the longboards from the outriggers while Lance and I stood in amazement as we took in the full beauty of the island. The beach at the lagoon had the whitest sand I had ever seen in my life. The granules of sand were so fine and soft that it felt like we were walking on cashmere. I reached down and grabbed a handful of sand and let it run through my fingers. It was so fine that it seemed to evaporate into the air before it hit the ground. I had walked on dozens, if not hundreds of beaches in my life and had never seen or felt anything like this. The beach started as a narrow spit to our left on the far western side of the island and then gently curved around the lagoon for close to a mile until it met a mangrove and tropical rain forest that extended all the way to the water. The beach was narrow at the spit and then narrowed at the forest end, but was very wide and flat in the middle with tall palms scattered randomly across the sandy paradise. I turned away from the island and admired the lagoon - it looked too perfect to be real. Blue and green are my favorite colors and the waters in the lagoon displayed the most natural, colorful, clean and clear shades of blue/green that I had ever seen.

Mount Mata cast a shadow from the rising sun that extended all the way across the island and into the lagoon. An occasional light breeze from the east managed to find its way around the volcano across the island and to the beach where we stood. This light breeze began what I perceived to be a "floral dance". The thousands of flowers and leaves began to sway and flutter in the breeze and then went back to perfect rest as the breeze stopped. The breeze came and went with almost predictable regularity. It was as if Mount Mata was breathing a gentle breath and then exhaling it down across the island to us.

The beach was peacefully quiet with one exception. Our pulses increased with the sound of loud booming sounds in the distance. The source of the sound came from the other side of the island. To a non-surfer it may have been interpreted as an approaching thunderstorm or the drums of a cannibal tribe, but we all knew the source of the sound. Our pulses raced and the adrenaline flowed. Lance made a dash across the beach and I followed him to the other side of the flat, sandy spit. The island was very narrow on this end and was mostly sand and tall palm trees. The spit probably looked like a tail on the island from above.

Lance and I had left the Nui brothers behind with the kayaks as we sprinted through the powdery sand. We couldn't wait one more second to see the surf. Lance was the first to reach the beach on the other side and he stopped dead in his tracks. I stopped next to him and we

both stood in silence. Our eyes fixated on the panoramic landscape in front of us. Our ear drums reverberated with the booming sounds of the waves crashing in the distance and the echoes they sent off of Mount Mata. The sound reminded me of Mista Beat and how his beat-boxing had echoed in the terminal yard at the party. “Boom, boom, boooooom. Boom chalak, boom, tat tat ta, boooooom.” Lance and I broke out into a momentary beat-box session in jubilation.

“Hey - you ‘mista beat’.” I said to Lance.

“I never miss a beat, man.” He responded as we continued our beat-boxing. “Boom, bam, boom-boom-boooooooom.”

The emerald green and teal blue water of the vast sea gave rise to walls of water which grew until they peaked and then, as if pushed down from heaven above, the top of the wall collapsed and thrust forward forming the most perfectly hollow barreling wave. The barrels formed from the initial break at the point on Mount Mata which was barely visible to the far right from our vantage point on the beach. The barrels peeled down the reef parallel to the beach thundering their mighty bass tone as tens of thousands of tons of water horizontally spiraled for what was definitely the longest right point break we had ever seen. Each thundering collapse and close-out yielded a white frothy foam and spray that formed rainbows in the clear blue sky. We were awestruck. We stood speechless for minutes as we watched the perfect sheet glass faces of the waves break and become cloaked by barrel after barrel. As we watched in amazement, we began to count the seconds from the first visible break at the point on Mount Mata to the final closeout directly in front of us at the spit. I turned to Lance with a big smile and said only “ninety-two”. He smiled back and said “I counted one-o-four”. Either count meant a perfect ride for over a minute and a half!

My brother and I immediately exempted ourselves from the curse of Mata Utu. We dismissed the past and focused on one small aspect of its present. However, one rumor was true – Mata certainly had the longest right surf break in the entire South Pacific and possibly the world. Off in the distance, we could see the rocky reef outcropping that Mount Mata formed as her giant base plunged deep into the sea forming a point which was rightly named Point Mata. This point was strategically placed in perfect concert with the forces of nature to form the perfect conditions for the perfect wave. The prevailing winds in conjunction with the water currents traveled for over a thousand miles unimpeded - building up momentum and creating a long, powerful and forceful wave. This right break unleashed its wrath of the windward side of Mata Utu repeatedly – wave after wave. The first contact point the wave encounters after its thousand mile journey is Point Mata. The point initiates the break and the underwater barrier reef perpetuates the break forming of one of the most hollow, pitching barrels I’ve ever seen. The wave just peels along the length of the windward side of the island from Point Mata all the way to the sand spit adjacent to the lagoon. Wow. We stood there for minutes staring in disbelief. My fear of the Matains and the curse quickly turned into the fear of breaking my neck or drowning on the reef. My mind grappled with the notion of wiping out on the reef break, but

my sense of adventure kicked in. It was a bold move for me, but I came here to surf Mata and I was going to do just that.

We returned to the lagoon where Arenui and Hoanui were waxing down their boards and waiting for us. Arenui was eager to hear what we thought of the break. “Dude, did I tell you or what? Isn’t it incredible?” Arenui excitedly asked.

Lance wasted no time in concurring with him. We all grabbed our boards and followed the Nuis onto the island.

We walked down the sandy spit toward the jungle that separated us from Mount Mata. It was hard to believe we were about to follow the same trail that Hoku had once walked. I began to get flashbacks from the story last night. I couldn’t help but scan the treetops and look over my shoulder for Matains hiding and waiting to attack. Hoanui noticed my paranoia and teased me a little bit. “Stan, the Matains have been dead for almost a century. Relax. As long as we are off the island by dark we will have no worries.” He said as I laughed and shrugged off my fear.

The sandy spit ended abruptly and the sporadic palm trees turned into dense jungle with the exception of one opening where the trail started. When we entered the rainforest, I imagined it was like entering the Garden of Eden but with no serpents. Fruit was abundant on almost every tree. The temperature seemed to drop about ten to twenty degrees as soon as the tropical canopy’s shade engulfed us. Dew drops the size of quarters were puddle in the leaves. I would venture to say that this was the most fertile place on earth – at least that I had ever seen. It should be a haven for life of all types, but I felt quite fortunate that we were the only living things on the island. With no mosquitoes or spiders to bite us or sharks or other wildlife to attack us, this paradise felt secure. It was heaven on earth. I wanted to capture this moment in my brain forever. I was in the most perfect place with the three greatest guys in my life. Nothing else mattered as we walked through the forest. I was totally enthralled in the moment, the environment and the company. I snapped some more pictures.

I commented on my feelings about the place. “Dude, this place is awesome. It is exactly as you described it. It is total paradise. No offense intended - because I love Rahiti, but I want to live here.”

Arenui reminded us “No animals can live here on the island at all. No snakes, no birds, no lizards, no nothing – not even a mosquito – especially not a Rahitian. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever even caught a fish near this island. Don’t get too comfortable - we are leaving when the surfing is done.”

Lance chimed in “Good, because I don’t want any sharks or bugs eating on me while I surf.”

Hoanui added “The only thing that seems to “live” here is plants. These plants bear some of the best fruits you have ever seen or tasted in your life. Seems like the plants and fruit were the only things the Matains managed not to eat and totally destroy.”

Good thing for me I am a vegetarian. My mouth watered at the thought of a paradise of nothing but fruits with no bugs or critters to spoil them.

Why was there no animal life of Mata? It was eerie and strange, but more confusing than anything else. It was such a lush, tropical paradise – a vegetarian’s dream come true. I dismissed any negative thoughts about the situation and looked at it as a sign – it was a place I was supposed to be. Hoanui veered off of the trail and shimmied up a tree and began tossing down fruit. You name it – it grew here. There were mangoes, bananas, limes and lemons, pomello fruit, avocado, figs, and of course, coconuts all ripe for the picking. One thing that amazed me was that you could pull a fruit off of a tree on a 100 degree day and when you peeled it and bit into it, it was cool. Somehow the rainforest acted as nature’s refrigerator. We sat on the cool, soft, mossy ground in the jungle and feasted on the most delicious fruit I had ever eaten. I couldn’t wait for my garden project in Rahiti to come to fruition.

I was in absolute heaven as I sat in the jungle among my friends. Mata Utu was such a cool place and added a whole new adventure and dimension to our trip. It was a pristine island with a perfectly hidden and safe lagoon. There was lush rainforest vegetation rich with fruits and edible plants on the majority of the island except for the rocky volcanic reef outcropping and Mount Mata on the windward side. The island was about a mile and a half long and the width varied from a couple hundred feet to almost a mile on the volcanic end. The island was a perfect oasis, seemingly untouched by man. It had a lure and an enchantment. I would have never known that such a brutal tribe once practiced such atrocities here. However, the absence of life and all of the landmarks and sights we have seen so far totally validated Matahi’s story. That fact and the subsequent myths and stories spread throughout the other islands was more than ominous enough to keep anyone from inhabiting this island. Even the most die-hard surfers and island hoppers were kept away from this paradise by their fears of its past. I was determined to not let the myth ruin my day here and I was equally as determined to not let the curse follow me home. Mata was awesome, but not worth dying for.

We wrapped up our snacking and hit the trail again with our boards under our arms. We were facing about an hour long hike to the point. The booming of the waves echoed through the forest and resonated in my chest – causing my heart to beat more rapidly with excitement. I put fear out of my mind and imagined how awesome the ride on Mata’s right break would be. After today I would be able to say that I surfed the longest, most barreling wave in the whole world. Probably less than a few thousand people world-wide had ever heard of this place and probably less than 10 had surfed it. Incredible!

As we made our way through the forest, I pulled out the digital camera and began snapping photos of the wilderness around me. Rays of sunlight pierced the canopy of the forest high above and shone down on the leaves glistening their dew drops as if they were diamonds. The place seemed magical. I was absorbed into the nature around me. I could stay here forever – the only catch is that I have to leave by sunset.

Soon the dense jungle parted and we came to a clearing by the beach. Hoanui pointed it out first. "Guys, that is where the Matain village was for over a thousand years. Not a trace of it is left. It is crazy to think how many people – how many of our ancestors were eaten there in that spot. If it had not been for Hoku we may have made a fine Matain meal as well."

"If it had not been for Hoku, we certainly wouldn't be standing here right now on this island" Arenui added.

"What happened to the remains of the village?" I asked.

"Well, the lightning from the storm that blew up as Hoku kayaked away from the island with an outrigger full of Rahitian heads struck the village and then burned it to the ground. The ashen remains deteriorated with weather and washed away in storms. In fact, there is no apparent trace that anyone ever lived here." Hoanui answered.

"Well, I bet if you looked hard enough you could find something." Lance commented.

"Yeah, if you crawled down into the mouth of the volcano you would probably find 100 year old skeletons from human remains." Arenui answered.

"No thanks." I said.

We passed the clearing and entered the trail that led to Mount Mata. I got the eerie sensation that this is the trail that was flanked by the skull trophies. I also got the sensation that something, if nothing more than the trees was watching us. I got the same chill down my spine that I had experienced last night as I listened to the story. It wasn't a good feeling in spite of how happy I was to be there. I kept on walking and focused my attention on the gigantic volcano ahead. It was definitely the tallest volcano that I had ever seen firsthand. I wondered when it had last erupted. I wondered if the island would get mad at us for being here and spew hot lava down onto us. It would be one more chapter to add to the mystery of Mata.

The trail ended abruptly and the jungle opened up to the sky when we reached the base of Mount Mata. No longer did we have soft mossy soil to walk on. The ground turned into hard jagged rock. It was a little painful on my feet, but I thought of Hoku and how he had scaled the mountain barefooted with Matains chasing him. I sucked up the pain and carried on. Climbing with a long board under our arms was a bit challenging, but we did it. We climbed about a quarter of the way up the side of Mount Mata to the "hip" and then headed left to the point. The view from the volcano was spectacular. The island looked even more beautiful from above. We could see all the way back to the kayaks in the lagoon by the spit. We had a great vantage point of the waves as they rolled in from the east. The crashing of the waves echoed off of the volcano and carried across the island. I put down my board and took another amazing series of photos.

Our trek finally culminated at the point. The point was a narrow, rocky ledge that jutted out into the water on the easternmost point of Mount Mata's hip. We had to descend down the backside of the volcano to get to it. Gravity seemed to be obsolete as climbing downhill proved to be harder than going up. It had been well over an hour of hiking since we finished lunch by the spit. What a journey to ride only one wave. I knew it was going to be good because walking back for a second would be a time consuming and calorie burning event. As I stood on the point watching the waves roll in and crash on the point, I felt like I was on top of the world. I also felt a few butterflies welling up in my stomach as the waves were more than slightly intimidating.

I listened intently as Arenui spouted out some final instructions and words of wisdom. "First of all, time your jump just right or you could risk being dashed into the rocks on the point. Secondly, you have to jump and launch on your board off of the ledge which is about 10 feet above the water – depending on the tide. Third, you have to paddle hard and quick as the wave jacks up behind you. And fourth you have to make the drop and pull off a perfect bottom turn tight into the barrel. If you get out ahead of the wave you are sure to get tossed into the reef by the lip as it pitches into you. Stay high in the tube in case you need to drop more and pick up some momentum. Feel free to lag deep in the barrel, but no more than about 6 board lengths or so. If you feel the tube closing too quickly behind you, pump the board and drop a little to gain some momentum. You do not want to get caught in a closeout and get thrown over the falls and into the reef. Stay cool and in control. Don't get too crazy and pull any tricks yet. I want you guys to be around to do this again. When the wave starts to bend around the spit and subside, be ready to get spit out of the tube and prepare to launch off of the backside. The water is deep there and there is no reef so feel free to get some air. Just don't let your board hit you on the way down. We will all meet back on the beach at the spit. Any questions?"

"Nope" Lance quickly responded.

it sounded easy enough, but looked much more difficult in reality. Arenui insisted that Lance or I go first, but we both refused. I wanted one of them to launch off the point first so I could see exactly how they pulled the stunt off first.

Arenui was hesitant to go first and he expressed his concerns. "Dude, if I go first and Hoanui goes next there is no one left to make sure you guys launch. If you chicken out it's a long walk back to the spit. Basically there are three ways to get back to the spit. You can walk, surf or swim. You don't want to swim. And if you walk back, we will make it a walk of shame as we harass you for being a wimp. As for me, I'm gonna surf." Without further ado Arenui grabbed his board by the rails and pulled it tight to his chest as he bent over and jumped off of the point. "Watch and learn, boys." He said as he went airborne.

He hit the water perfectly and immediately turned and began stroking. A huge wave jacked up behind him and the white water started to form on the peak of the wave at the point. The wave looked to be well over twice as tall as Arenui. He let out a whoop as he popped up and made the drop. I saw him scream down the face until he was shacked by the breaking tube. We watched the wave break and roll along the reef from behind. I could barely make out Arenui's

body through the crystal clear wall of water on the back of the wave. We watched until distance distorted our view. Hoanui told us to pay close attention to the end of the wave at the spit as we would see him get spit out of the tube in a moment. The distance was over a mile or so and from our perspective he would look like a speck. But sure enough we saw him come flying out of the end of the tube and launch airborne as a mist of water and foam sprayed into the air behind him. What an awesome sight.

Lance was ready and was already making his way to the edge of the point. It was obvious he was eager, but I sensed that even he was a little nervous too. This would be one of the most daring things I had ever done in my life. It was certainly the most awesome, yet most dangerous wave I had ever surfed. Hoanui counted the sets as the waves rolled by.

“Get ready Lance. This one is yours.” Hoanui said. “Okay... now!” He instructed as he pointed to the spot where Lance should land.

Lance turned his head briefly and gave me a head nod as he launched into the air off of the point. I stepped forward to the edge in time to see him splash into the water below. He had landed perfectly and maintained his grip on his board. He turned to face the beach quickly as the wave jacked up behind him. He pulled a couple of quick strokes to gain pace with the wave as it lifted him skyward. He angled the board, popped to his feet and let out a “whoooooaaa yeah!”

I watched him make the drop and the perfect double-overhead wave. He hit his bottom turn perfectly and pulled into the barrel. I could see him inside the tube through the back of the wave. I watched for over a minute until he was spit airborne at the end of the tube in the same fashion Arenui had exited his wave. I could see Arenui jumping in celebration on the edge of the beach at the spit.

“Ok, Stan - your turn. You ready?” Hoanui asked.

I wasn't so sure I was ready, but I summoned my courage and answered with certainty. “Right on dude!”

Hoanui counted and timed the sets for me. “I'm gonna find you the perfect ‘first wave’.” He said as he placed his hand on my shoulder.

My toes curled over the edge of the rocky point. My feet and legs crouched in preparation to launch my body and board from the edge. My hands gripped the rails of my board tightly and my arms bent to pull the board close to my chest. My heart pounded and my mind raced with excitement. Butterflies churned in my stomach. “I can do this.” I thought to myself.

Hoanui began to count. “Okay, go on seven.” He said.

Each count fueled my excitement and fear simultaneously. When he said “seven” my legs flexed and my toes straightened and propelled me from the rocky ledge. The free-fall into the water was brilliant. Although it was a short fall of only about eight to ten feet, it felt monumental. I splashed down into the water and gripped my board tightly. I submerged only briefly and popped to the surface. I instinctively paddled with one arm to turn myself toward the beach and achieve proper angle on the wave. Once my angle was right, I paddled several quick, powerful strokes. My arms pulled the board forward against the force of the rising wave behind. I felt the wave lifting me and I glanced back briefly to see the wall of water rising around me. In an instant I heard the sound of breaking water hitting the point and then felt the immediate thrust of the wave behind me. I sprung to my feet as gravity and the force of the mighty wave took over and propelled me. I dropped down the face of the wave quickly and smoothly. I hit the bottom of the trough and then shifted my weight and my feet slightly to the right to pull me back up the face of the wave and parallel to the wave. The wall of water to my right was easily twice my height. It looked like teal green glass. A rumble behind me intensified as the breaking wave sounded like a freight train chasing me. I crept my feet forward on the board toward the nose and leaned back slightly to slow my momentum. I felt the wind generated by the barreling tube behind me. I felt the spray from the veil of water that began to break over my head. The sunlight was drowned out by the shadow of the tube of water as it engulfed me. I was in the barrel - I was getting ‘shacked’ at Mata.

I maintained my balance well and leaned my head back slightly to see the awesome sight above me. My speed was intense as I raced with the breaking water. I purposefully leaned back a little more to slow my speed and let the tube engulf me a little deeper. The spiraling, pitching barrel pulled ahead of me and swallowed me into its cavernous recesses. I wanted to take a picture, but was afraid to fetch my waterproof digital camera from my pocket. I didn’t want to lose it and I didn’t want to lose my balance either. I decided to engrain the image into my head instead. There would be many more opportunities for pictures later.

I could feel the spray and the thunderous booms intensifying behind me. I knew I was nearing the end of the ride. I pumped the board and crouched to lean forward a bit. My speed rapidly increased and I emerged from the hollow tube and into the sunlight just as a tremendous blast of water and air hit me from behind. I turned my feet and shifted my weight hard right. The motion sent me up and over the remaining wall of water in front of me. In an instant I went from surfing to flying. The board dropped as my feet lost contact with the fiberglass deck. I snapped my head around to the right in time to see Lance and Arenui raise their arms in jubilant celebration. I estimated I was a good 15 to 20 feet in the air. I tucked and rolled my body into a ball as I plummeted and splashed into the water. I hoped I wouldn’t hit my board on the way down. I splashed down cannon-ball style and immediately emerged and reeled my board in to me. I began to paddle the short distance to the spit where Lance and Arenui eagerly awaited. I saw Lance and Arenui pointing behind me and I turned my head just in time to see Hoanui launce airborne on the very next wave. His launch must have been much more graceful than mine as he extended his arms and legs into a full swan dive. His dive landed him in the water not too far from me and he quickly recovered his board and caught up to me as I reached the beach.

The four of us high-fived each other and celebrated our victorious ride.

“Congratulations, brah.” Arenui said as he slapped my hand. “You did it - you rode the mighty Mata!”

“Right on! I conquered that wave!” I exclaimed.

“That was undoubtedly the best tube I’ve have in my life.” Lance added as he smiled ear to ear. “I’ve surfed a lot of waves too - that was the best ever!” Lance continued.

“No matter how many times I have surfed here, every time always gives the same sensational rush.” Hoanui said.

We stood on the beach talking surf lingo and celebrating for a while. We contemplated making the hour-long hike again and riding a second time. Lance was the only one who was gung-ho to do it again. I was content with my one successful ride for the day. Although it was exhilarating, I was happy with only one ride.

“Don’t get too greedy, brah.” Arenui said to Lance as he convinced him to leave it at one.

“There is always a wave here and plenty of days left to enjoy it.” He consoled as we headed to the outriggers in the lagoon on the other side of the spit.

“I can’t wait for tomorrow!” Lance said as we strapped our boards onto the kayaks and shoved off for the journey back to Rahiti.

The paddle back to Rahiti was easy. We stayed stroke for stroke alongside the Nuis as we joked and recounted stories of the emotional first ride at Mata. The dolphins appeared and escorted us all the way back to Rahiti. We thanked the Nuis for introducing us to what would become our new daily morning ritual. And I thanked God that I had experienced and survived such an awesome day.