

The Legend Is Born

The Legends of Lainjin

Book Three

(Prequel to the Prequel)

*A novel of historic literary fiction by Gerald R. Knight
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“Knowledge of the past gives us a rudder to navigate the present” — Herbert Kawainui Kane

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The legend is born

He cried, seeming to say, “Where is she? You don’t smell like her. You don’t hold me the same way. I want my mother!” He was in a panic now and showed it with every wrinkle of his screaming red face.

His nervous but determined surrogate mother held a polished coconut shell full of boiled *jekaro*¹ and placed its eye to his mouth to see if he would suckle the sweet nourishing juice, but he was obviously having a tantrum. He kept turning his head and would have none of it. “I want my mother now!” he seemed to insist.

The young, bare-breasted woman bounced him gently in her arms and then swayed him from side to side, knowing he wanted the familiar smell he was used to. He wanted his mother to cuddle him close and wrap him in her warmth and peace. He turned his head from side to side as though searching through the blur for her. But the girl held him nonetheless and, despite his incessant crying, continued to hold him in her arms until he cried himself back to sleep. Then, after carefully wrapping him in the worn pandanus half skirt his mother had brought him in earlier that evening, his surrogate mother left him under the watch of her sister. The thatched house had been creaking from the force of the persistently growing storm, and Helkena was frightened and wanted to talk to her father. She climbed down the ladder through the single exit in the middle of the pole-house floor to the open space below.

The storm outside raged. Coconuts wrenched from the trees fell about the pebbled, leaf-strewn courtyard. The rain blew slanted through the open space under the house, forming puddles amid the thick pandanus matting that covered the beach stones spread beneath them. She hunched as she walked to the lee side

of the home, where her father and the rest of the family had congregated to peer through the darkness at the bending coconut trunks with their nodding, rustling crowns. Leaves, and even limbs, had blown off the surrounding breadfruit trees. Luckily, there were no limbs above the house and no coconut trees next to it.

“Is this a typhoon, Father?”

“I think so.”

“How’s the boy?” her mother asked.

“Not good. He cried himself to sleep. Wouldn’t drink his jekaro.”

“He’ll get used to it. They all do. It just takes one taste,” she said.

Helkena spoke to her father again. “How did his mother know a typhoon was about to strike?”

“I saw her come back from the ocean side before she gave her command to set sail. She shouted, ‘*Emejjia wa ilometo!*’² I heard her myself.”

“But what did *Tarmālu*³ see that alerted her?” Helkena was curious.

“The tide there must have told her something. It’s the night of no moon, and you’d expect a high tide. But everyone this evening said they’d never seen a tide so high! It took the flotsam lining the shores up and over the strand.”

“The high tide caused the typhoon?”

“No, of course not,” her father said. “But maybe it’s a characteristic. Listen to the waves falling there on the lagoon shore.”

“They’re very loud!”

“Yes, but the tide is low there now. And the waves pound hard even though the wind isn’t coming from that direction. That tells me that, if the back side of this storm slaps us at high tide, the lagoon water might wash over the shore and flood the island,” he said, worried.

That was an eventuality old people talked about around fires in the evening.

He went on. “That same broad opening in the reef across the lagoon that allowed *Tarmālu*’s fleet to escape the atoll will allow a west wind to whip

*kāleptak*⁴ into a giant swell. It will pour through the passage and break upon our lagoon beach. It might even suck our house into its backwash.”

“*Jeej!*⁵ Where would we sleep then?”

“Let’s hope the storm holds off a bit and comes ashore a little later tomorrow, once the tide is low again. That’ll put more beach between our house and the shore. Better get back to the boy and hope for the best. But be prepared to tie yourself!”

Helkena went back up the ladder into the loft. She remembered the old people talking about tying themselves but had never thought such a thing would occur in her lifetime. It was cozy up here compared to the turbulence they faced below. The tightly folded thatch she and her mother had made, and that her father and the others had tied, kept the wind and rain outside. The window flaps that lined the house below the eaves and overlapped the walls were also tightly thatched. The simple wick of the coconut-shell lamp in the corner flickered, undisturbed.

“What did Father say? Are we going to die?” her sister, Jorkan, joked.

Helkena responded seriously. “Father says the wind will switch, come from the lagoon, whip up the waves, and threaten the village. But maybe it won’t get that bad. I guess it depends on the timing of the storm and the tide.” She glanced at the baby in her arms. “Look at him dreaming there peacefully, oblivious to all this.”

The baby was content and at rest now, his face glowing in the lamplight.

“Well, he knows his mother is gone,” replied Jorkan.

“He does, for sure, though he’s not thinking of that now. But she wouldn’t have left him here if she thought he was going to die. She was thinking about her boats and wanted them off that shore.”

“Where will we go if...?”

“Inland, I suppose. To the middle of the island. Maybe it’s best you go below and get used to the storm like everyone else,” Helkena suggested.

“Will I have to get wet?”

“No. Everyone is on the lagoon side, where it’s still dry.”

Jorkan went below, leaving them alone in the ever-creakier house. Her family had folded each pandanus leaf over a strip of coconut frond and threaded it with a coconut-leaf midrib that secured each leaf of the thatch shingles. Each shingle was the length of a man's arm. They had then tied and staggered these, one on top of the other, from ridge to eave.

The house stood on posts made of seasoned hardwood coconut trunks. The islanders had made the walls of the same materials as the roof, tied in the same way, and had lashed the thatch shingles to the poles that framed the structure. They had built these pole houses this way for ages, to be as flexible as their proas were on the ocean. The houses mimicked the proa's ability to rise and fall with the swells and to withstand the twisting force of the wind. Although their house still stood there, creaking but flexible, it would be no match against *kāleptak* swells pounding the shoreline if it came to that.

"The backwash could suck the sand and beach stones from around the posts, and the whole house could topple," Helkena thought, glancing at the house around her.

She laid her head next to her charge. His face was beautiful when it wasn't contorted and crying. There he was now, without a care in the world. "Lainjin." She said his name out loud. Then she drifted into favorite thoughts about Tokki, a boy from [Medyeron](#)⁶ she'd had her eye on. Not exactly a *rijelā*,⁷ that one, but there were so few boys her age she wasn't related to. She mulled over these favorite sentiments and drifted into a well-deserved nap.

Her sister awakened her a while later. Helkena was so tired she had no idea how much time had lapsed. All was surprisingly quiet now. The house no longer creaked, and that alone gave her spirits a lift, until her sister dropped her mood-changing words.

"Father says to bring the child below. He says it's time to tie ourselves!"

The words shocked her. They weren't what she had prepared herself for. She had expected to stay where she was until it all blew over, like so many times before. Then she remembered the stories of a lull before the strike. Was this what they had talked about?

She had lived on the shores of [Wōtto](#),⁸ the principal islet of this atoll, her whole life. With the predominant wind direction from the east, she had looked west, at the mostly peaceful lagoon, every day. The islet was so small she could walk its circumference in one morning. But it didn't seem small to her. At high tide, the surface of the lagoon rose right up to the beach's strand. The atoll was just a ring of flat coral islets, like a cup filled to its brim and ready to spill. But it didn't seem low in the water to her. Maybe, were she a bird that could fly high above and gain perspective, she might see things differently. She often tried to imagine that.

Hearing the lagoon waves thumping on the shore more clearly now that the weather had quieted, she knew what her father's words meant. The eye of the storm had passed over them, but its wind would come back from the opposite direction. This was their time to prepare, and she knew well from the stories what to do. She rolled her [jaki](#)⁹ as tightly as possible. She grabbed her charge, with his mat wrappings, from where he lay and snuffed the lamp for safety's sake. Amid the blackness, holding the crying child in one arm, she found the exit and felt her way down the ladder. Her father was waiting and handed her the rope she was to use to tie herself. Now she was holding the boy, the jaki, and the rope.

“Do you want me to take the boy?” her father asked.

“No. Please, I've got him.” His life would be in her hands, she thought.

“Okay, we'll head inland and find a thick coconut tree that's a little slanted and off by itself. The water will come from the lagoon, so we'll get to the middle of the island.”

Her charge was crying again, but now Helkena was on a mission. She realized that everyone was abandoning the village. All the villagers were moving inland, and other children were crying. She wasn't alone. Her sister, father, mother, brothers... They moved as one group, as did the others. The rain had stopped, and she was glad for that. Looking up, she was surprised to see stars. To the unsuspecting eye, the storm was over. “Was this movement inland really necessary?” she wondered. She kept stumbling in the dark. There were so many broken limbs, and no real path to where they were heading.

Her father, always the leader, took his family to a spot he had in mind and started pointing out trees to each of them. He let her continue to hold the baby while he tied her to a tall coconut tree.

“Right over left,” he said out loud, always teaching. “Left over right. Done.” Then she saw him in the distance, tying himself to the same tree as her mother. “What was the sense of that?” she asked the baby in a singsong voice. “If she stays protected behind the tree, he’ll be exposed to the weather!” Her mother, being her mother, must have insisted, and her brave, ever-suffering father had complied.

Ḷainjin hadn’t stopped crying, so she lifted his face to hers and baby-talked to him in as carefree a voice as possible. He wasn’t amused in the least and wanted his mother, but she had long since gathered her fleet, crossed the lagoon, sailed through the broad passageway, and got her craft safely to sea. Suddenly, it turned dark again as clouds covered the sky.

She remembered that first day well. Ḷainjin’s mother, Tarmālu, fat with child, had brought hundreds of bundles of *bwiro*¹⁰ to trade for Wōtto logs of *jāānkun* and *jaki*.¹¹ Right off, she had asked for a midwife, and everybody pointed to Helkena’s mother’s house. So, that’s how it started. She gave birth and, as the moons passed, the *jaki* and the *jāānkun* piled up as she distributed the bundles of *bwiro*. The *jāānkun* would supply nourishment during the trade-winds season when food was scarce, and the women of Wōtto made very fine *jaki*, and their men dried fine *jāānkun* as well. Sunlight they had in abundance.

So, the women of the island had gathered ever more pandanus leaves and made more mats. As Ḷainjin had grown, things slowed down. Helkena had helped her mother gather various leaves, which they heated with water in a *jāpe*¹² for Tarmālu’s baths. Yesterday had been the second day of the storm, and then that evening, she decided to leave and off they went.

And here in Helkena’s arms was Ḷainjin, the infant left behind. She held him between the tree and herself so she could brace him in her arms against the trunk. Peering into his little face and smiling, she said, “You’re a heavy boy! Too much mother’s milk.” The storm, it seemed, was restarting, or at least clouding over again, and she was already tired of holding him. She looked over at her