

Island Mother

By Betty Bontang

Prologue

All day the weather has been wonderful, despite the predictions from the weather forecasters for rain and storms.

“Island Mother won’t allow anything to disrupt Her day” the locals say, in one form or another. The celebration has been growing over the years. In the beginning, it was only among a few families, but over time, it has become more organized. Games for the children, dancers, drummers and musicians, and contests of every sort are part of the celebration. However, the most attended events are with the storywomen, the old women that know the history of the islands and pass it along in their tales of long ago and now, not so long ago.

A crowd has gathered around a particular storywoman, one not so old as the others, who has less grey hair and whose voice is strong and passionate. Dressed in a hibiscus red dress and sitting on a reed mat, she drinks from a bamboo tumbler that always seems to be full of whatever she is drinking.

“Come kiekies, gather around close.”

She waits until the youngest has squirmed closer to her mat.

“I have a story to tell. Not one of long ago, but one just before most of you were born.”

She smiles and looks at the group, knowing that most of the crowd knows at least part of the story she is about to tell, but not all of it.

“I am going to tell you a story about Nurse Peke, Koa, the island’s warrior, the Island Mother and what they did to drive out the invaders from our islands.”

The storywoman takes a drink from the tumbler and then a deep breath.....



Chapter 1

“The Island Mother saw what was happening to her kiekies, her little ones, and saw that it was bad. She made the ground shake, and the fire to spew up from the mountain!”

She looked around at the group of children clustered around her in chairs and wheelchairs and on the tile floor hooked up to IV lines and monitors.

“The evil invaders felt the ground move, and saw the pahoehoe flowing towards them. They dropped their spears and ran to the shore. Then they pushed their canoes out into the ocean and paddled away.”

She smiled and waited for the children to stop cheering and clapping.

“And that is why we honor the Island Mother, with our songs, our gifts and our prayers, so that She will protect us when we need it most.”

“So why doesn’t Island Mother stop them now?” one of the girls asked quietly.

“I don’t know Lokemele,” the nurse answered before shooing the children back to their beds, and helping the ones in the wheelchairs.

“Nurse Peke,” the unwelcome voice behind her droned.

Turning she saw the monitoring droid floating just above her eye level. The other staff members in the area turned away from the scene.

“Yes, Monitor?” she replied, knowing that the droid was going to chastise her for the story.

“You have been warned about telling such stories to the children.”

“But it is an old story from our history. It does no one harm.”

“Nevertheless, you have been warned before. This is your second warning. Do not let it happen again. You are a good worker here Peke, the children like you,

but do not assume that it will protect you from the consequences if you fail to heed the rules.”

“Yes, Monitor,” Peke replied, looking down, hoping she was showing enough contrition.

The droid moved away, drifting down the hallway towards the central station for the ward. The staff quickly found other things to do. None wanted to seem to be slacking in their duties while it was around.

Peke stuck her tongue out at it when it was far enough away and continued to help the less mobile children back to their beds. Several giggled, having seen her childish act of defiance.

“You are a very stubborn woman, Peke,” a man behind her said. “You are going to let your youthful arrogance get you into trouble. And then who will be here for the kiekies?”

“I hoped you would be, Doctor Kami.” Peke smiled. “I know you hate the invaders as much as the rest of us.”

“That may be true, but I know better than to be openly defiant with them.”

The young doctor looked around to make sure none of the sympathizers was close enough to hear them. He and Peke had gone through school together, had been there when the invaders had landed and the world leaders had proclaimed them saviors. The outworlders were not saviors; they had seized control of the world’s governments and slowly over the last five years choked off freedoms. People began to rebel and the offenders were crushed, unmercifully. Now, the whole world lived under some form of slavery to the Monitors, or their masters, the aliens. The racial name was untranslatable, but the closest anyone could pronounce was ‘Shazbot.’

“You know Peke, that teaching the old stories has been forbidden, especially stories about Her.” Kami said quietly. “If you get caught again, I will not be able to help you.”

“I know Doctor Kami.” Peke told him, “Someone has to stand up to them.”

“That someone doesn’t have to be you, Peke,” Kami replied, drawing up close behind her.

“I know, Doctor,” Peke said, grabbing a stack of charts to make her afternoon checks.

But if not me, then who? she thought quietly to herself as she moved down the hallway.

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Sunrise found Peke on the mountain where the old legends say that the Island Mother lives. In the tradition of her people, she had shed her clothing, except for the heavy boots, which protected her feet from the hot ground and sharp edges of old lava flows and had walked up the shallow side of the mountain to the crest of the caldera.

There she chanted an old song of praise to the Island Mother and set out gifts of fish and rice, a set of hand-made beads, and a plant from her garden.

As Peke chanted, she felt the heat from the caldera soaking into her body. Up through the palm mat she knelt on, the heat penetrated her body; slowly the outside world dropped away and she saw the Island Mother in her vision: a Goddess of fire and beauty, sun browned skin and flaming hair.

The flitter’s sensor showed a human life form on the mountain. Some local was trespassing. The sentry signaled his wingman and they headed for the blip on their screen.

“You Peke, are to be my Champion, to break the hold of these invaders on my islands.”

“Why me, Lady?” Peke asked, on her knees in front of the Goddess.

“Because, kiekie, you hold to the old ways, even at the risk of your life. And you have asked it of me.” The Goddess smiled at her, reaching out a hand to lift up Peke’s face to look into her own. “I have heard your songs and chants and your prayers. And I am answering them.”



It did not take long to zero on the blip, the two flitters slowing to a crawl as they approached. They could see the woman on the ridge, kneeling. The sensor had to have been malfunctioning since it was showing that she was radiating heat at close to one thousand five hundred degrees. No human could do that. They were frail things that could not survive more than a tenth of that temperature.

He tried to radio his base, but there was nothing but static in his headset. He motioned to his partner to wait, and he unsealed the cockpit of his craft. The light

armor that all sentries wore would protect him from the unnatural environment outside.

The ground was warm through his boots as he approached the still kneeling woman. She was young, maybe twenty-two or three local. He moved to within several paces of the kneeling woman and activated his outside speaker.

“What are you doing here?” his voice boomed. “Get up. Come with me.”

The woman got up, turned and faced him. The sentry recoiled, for the woman’s face was nothing but a sheet of flame. Instantly he raised his weapon and fired, but it had no effect.

The woman raised her hands pointing at him and his partner. His world went white, then black.

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“You must go kieke, go quickly back to your home.” Island Mother told her in her mind.

“My things...”

“Will be waiting for you. Go now, picture in your mind where you need to be and you will arrive there. Now GO!”

The command rang in her mind. Peke pictured her home and there was a feeling of quick movement for a few seconds. As she opened her eyes, she knew she was in her home. The sight of the two flaming sentries was burned into her mind. She knew it had happened, but it still felt more like a dream, a simple gesture and the two aliens were no more. She shook her head to clear her mind of the vision.

A light on her communications unit showed a message waiting. She wondered who would be leaving a message for her. She played back the message and

heard the electronic voice of a Monitor telling her that her shift assignment was changed and that she was due into the hospital that morning.

Quickly she ran into the shower and changed into her nursing uniform. The clock on the message unit showed less than ten minutes to her start time, and the bus she rode would take at least a half hour to get her there.

Remembering what the Lady had told her, she visualized the garage entrance to the hospital, the North side where her bus would let her off. Again, there was the brief sensation of quick movement and she opened her eyes to see the entrance to the hospital, just as she had visualized it. Entering quickly she swiped her badge in the time clock just as it clicked to the start of her shift.

Taking the stairs up to the Pediatrics ward, she stopped at the nurse's station to check in. The charge nurse there told Peke that her assignment was changed. Hurrying down to the basement of the building, she found a Monitor waiting for her as she entered the Morgue.

"You are late, Nurse Peke" the mechanical voice intoned.

"My apologies Monitor. I was informed only a short time ago that my shift was changed, and did not know until I went to my old assignment that I was to report here."

The floating device remained silent for a time other than for the clicks and whirls of its machinery. It turned and floated away and around the corner into a different section of the hospital.

"They can be annoying, can't they, Nurse," came a new voice from behind her. "Matt Hemingway, pathologist and fellow exile."

Peke turned and saw a tall haloe, a non-islander, standing in the doorway of the supervisor's office. She returned his infectious grin and walked towards him.

"I'm Peke. My last rotation was pediatrics, but I am not sure what I am doing down here. Do you really need a nurse in the Morgue?"

“Normally no, but I have your transfer order here. It says that you are being transferred to satisfy a work imbalance.” The doctor read from the top of a folder and then tossed it on the small desk in the office. “That’s Shazbot officialese for ‘you’ve been a bad girl.’”

He smiled at her again and motioned for her to take a seat in the chair while he sat behind the desk. “Don’t worry, I don’t like them either and for some strange reason, they seem to keep me here ALL the time.”

“You are a pathologist; you are supposed to be here.” Peke said, smoothing her uniform skirt.

“Actually I was trained as a cardio-thoracic surgeon. But the Shazbot don’t leave many of their victims alive enough to need my services, so” -- he waved his hand around the room -- “they reclassified me. That and I tend to be a pain to them myself. Fortunately, they think more of my skills than my acts of impropriety, so here I stay.

“Even with the invaders here, the normal chaos of human existence goes on,” he continued. “Shootings, stabbings, traffic accidents and accidental death still plague the humans on the island. There will be a steady stream of business to keep us busy down here.”

Dr. Hemingway took Peke on a short tour of the pathology lab and morgue. When they arrived back in the reception area, the doors to the elevator opened to reveal one of the orderlies and a shrouded body. The doctor signed the orderly’s chart and wheeled the gurney into the autopsy room.

By the end of her shift, Dr. Hemingway and Peke had examined five more bodies. As Peke rode the bus home, she reflected on the events of the day. What had happened to her up at the volcano’s rim, what had happened to the invaders who had confronted her? On the more mundane level, why the sudden change in shifts and locations? Was there a plot to trip her up and force her into the re-education process?

The bus stopped for a long time, then turned off onto a side street. Looking up, she could see barricades across the street. Following her instincts, she rang the buzzer and stepped off. Hurrying back to the intersection, she encountered a large group of people in the middle of the wide road. This did not look good. Squads of armed and armored troopers were herding more people into the roadway.

A mass execution? In the middle of town? No, this..WILL..NOT..BE!

The wooden traffic barricades burst into flames at her approach. A trooper ran towards her, his rifle pointed at her chest. A wave of her hand and instantly he became a pillar of flame; the floater next to him caught fire as well. A ground car in her path ignited and sank into a pit opening beneath it.

Calmly, Peke walked around the circle of civilians, leaving a wake of fiery destruction. In a panicked mass, the townspeople fled the street. Troopers in their armor fired their guns at her but the bullets had no effect. Another trooper's energy beam struck her squarely between her breasts, but did nothing but ignite her nurse's uniform.

Peke brushed off the flaming clothing and stepped towards the armored soldier. At her gesture, the ground beneath him opened, gouts of flame and hellish smelling smoke engulfed him and he fell screaming into a pool of pahoehoe. The lava pool spread slowly, engulfing the other military vehicles blocking the street. Troopers that did not move fast enough were caught and consumed.

Peke halted in front of the command vehicle looking up at the frightened officer in its hatch.

"You will leave my islands. If you stay you will be destroyed!"

Without concern, she stepped naked into the lava and sank into it.

Chapter 2.

Peke found herself at the water's edge, near a vent that poured molten lava into the sea. Water hissed and boiled away as the lava pushed further out into the water, building the island's edge.

As Peke watched, another tube opened further inland and streamed lava on top of the already hardened layer. Waves of heat washed around her as she approached, but to her it was like a warm sea breeze. Reaching down she plunged her hand into the stream of molten rock, letting it rush between her fingers. For her it was no warmer than water from her kitchen tap.

Pulling her hand back she watched the lava clinging to her hand cool from orange to black. With casual ease she closed her hand into a fist, feeling the rock break, flake and fall away.

"Yes, the rivers of lava will not hurt you Peke," came a voice behind her. "Neither can the invaders' weapons."

Peke turned to look at the woman she knew to be the Goddess, the Island Mother. Dressed in a pareo and shell necklace she stood barefoot in the black sand of the beach. Peke fell to her knees in the warm sand.

"You did well today. You gave them warning which is what a civilized person would do. But you cannot be passive now, Peke. There are too many of my people's lives at stake and the enemy knows who it must fight now. You must attack the invaders and drive them into the sea."

Taking the girl by her hands, she lifted Peke to stand in front of her. The woman's proud and commanding presence would not allow Peke to argue or back away. "You have all my powers, Peke. Use them justly."

The Goddess disappeared into the sand of the beach, leaving behind a white pareo and shell necklace. Only the priests and other attendants of the shrines wore white garments and adornments. Since the early days of the occupation,

the island religion had been forcibly repressed. Priests either renounced the Goddess or met with 'accidents'. Shrines were destroyed and even the old stories and ways were 'discouraged.'

Peke picked up the pareo and wrapped it around herself. Tied at her waist, in the Old Way, with the shells around her neck, it would tell people who she was now. Peke was gone. Koa, the island's pu'ali, the island's warrior, stood upon the beach.

Closing her eyes, she moved herself to the high point of the valley, overlooking the base the Shazbot had built to house their soldiers. From the head of the valley, she started the long walk to the base. People stood watching, staring as she made her way along the valley floor, barefoot. Many just watched, some of the elder men and women bowed as she passed, a number of people joined her as she advanced toward the gate.

The sun was high overhead when she stopped and looked at the massive gates. A number of guards were stationed there and at watchtowers to the left and right. The throng of people stopped, yards behind her.

Koa moved forward into the wide, clear space between her and the gates. Halfway there she paused again, looking at the gates, and began a chant. Not a greeting chant, not in the ways of the island people greeting trading ships of years ago, but a darker, malevolent chant, a war chant; one that the island had not heard used in centuries outside of the shrines and teaching classes. Behind Koa, men – the young and the elderly – lined across the clearing, making the counterpoint, repeating the challenge in her words and gestures.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty. Koa ended the chant and lifted her voice in the guttural tones of the Shazbot native language.

"These islands are not your home. These are not your people. You must leave these islands. I am Koa, the warrior of the Island Mother. I challenge you, come and face me!"

Minutes passed and the massive gates opened. A group of soldiers emerged in mobile armor, along with a junior officer in an open-topped ground vehicle.

“You people are here illegally. You will disperse, all except for the woman leading you. You!” he shouted pointing at Koa, “You will come with me.”

“It is YOU that will leave.” Koa replied, gesturing.

Immediately the ground under them rumbled, tossing many of the people and soldiers off their feet. A vent opened under the vehicle and gouts of steam engulfed it and the soldiers standing close by. The vent opened wider; a red glow colored the undercarriage.

Soldiers leaped away as the vehicle sank into the pahoehoe boiling from the ground. The pool turned into a lake and the lake spread towards the base. Behind Koa, the people ran away, unable to withstand the heat from the molten rock. The soldiers backed away towards the gates.

Koa smiled and waded into the flow, her feet disappearing to the orange-red lava bubbling up from the ground. Slowly she walked towards the open gates. She could see the soldiers firing at her, feel the bullets brushing against her dark skin, but it concerned her as much as the ocean spray at the beach.

She walked easily and casually through the gates. Behind her lay nothing but a sea of destruction, the lava consuming everything in its path. She walked ahead of it, towards the headquarters of the Shazbot army. The soldiers barring her way met the same fate as the first two, becoming pillars of fire before sinking into the relentless flow of lava.

The commander stood in the doorway, looking out at the unstoppable destruction coming his way. He could not surrender and there was no way for him to stop this unnatural woman. How could he tell his superiors that a single, half-naked woman was able to utterly destroy a battalion of troops and his entire base of operations?

“Will you leave?” came the question from the woman, stopping only yards away. Her body was covered by a sheen of sweat, her eyes, coal black but holding the fire of the lava pooling around her feet.

“I cannot,” he replied. “What will happen to my people?”

“Those that fight will meet your fate.”

“And those that do not?”

“She is not unforgiving.”

The commander only nodded. Koa gestured and ropes of pahoioi burst forth from the pool at her feet and pulled him under. He quickly disappeared beneath the surface. She knew his death was as quick and as painless as possible.

She stood at the building, watching as the lava consumed it. Fire broke out on the first floor, then the second and third. The lava followed its path to the sea. When it hissed into the water, the building was gone.

Turning away, Koa surveyed the scene back towards where the gates once stood. The flow of lava from the opening continued and everything from there to the sea was gone. She could see a few soldiers fleeing to either side of the valley trying to escape the fate of their comrades.

Calmly she walked back through the lake of lava to the group that followed her here. At her approach, most knelt, then bowed, their heads to the ground.

“Meokei, stand and face me,” she told the elder of the group.

The man, in his late fifties at least, but with the strong heart and body of a younger man, stood up before her. She placed a necklace of red shells around his neck.

“You and your warriors will find the other invaders. Take them to the old place of judgment.” His smile was bright against his dark skin. “Meokei, act honorably

in this, do not take vengeance against them if they do not resist. If you do not, Meokei, I will know and I will be sorely wroth.”

The man blanched and then bowed. Picking out a number of men, he started back up the valley.

“Tahanni,” she said, pointing to a woman near her. “Gather your women and prepare a dinner at the same place.” She hung a necklace of blue stones and shells around the young woman’s neck. “Take care of the wounded that the men bring. If they are severely injured, take them to the city hospital.”

“Yes, Goddess, but how are we to pay...”

Koa handed the woman a pouch covered in brightly colored shells. “You will have what you need.”

The girl blushed and turned, taking most of the crowd with her. The few that were left continued to kneel on the ground, their foreheads on the sand.

“Go to the old shrine. Help prepare the dinner, aid those in need,” Koa said quietly, knowing that all of them could hear her. They rose and quickly followed the others up the valley, away from the destruction. Quietly, she sank into the ground.

Chapter 3

Peke found her apartment occupied when she arrived. A familiar face greeted her, the smile on his face lit up her world, then died, a look of concern and alarm spreading across the doctor's fine features.

"Peke?" he asked quietly, not sure of what to make of the woman standing in front of him, the white pareo wrapped about her waist.

The woman nodded and nearly collapsed into his arms, sobs wracking her young frame.

"I felt them, Kami. I felt them all die." She sobbed into his chest. "I can feel them in me, I know each one, their lives, their memories."

"Feel who, Peke?" Kami held her tight. They had grown up together, shared all their secrets together as young children, before their lives separated, Kami to medical school on the mainland and her off to nursing school on a neighboring island.

"The soldiers; the invaders. The ones that didn't run away when we.... when I destroyed it.

"Destroyed what?" Kami asked quietly.

"The Invader's base, Kami," she sobs into his chest. "I destroyed it all."

Kami wants to ask her 'how,' but now was not the right time. Now was the time to comfort his friend, to just be there, a reassuring presence for her.

Kami picked his long-time friend up in his arms and carried her to the bathroom. Gently he unwrapped the pareo and set her into a tub of warm water. As when they were children in the sweet water pools of the rivers in springtime and summer, Kami bathed her, soothed her. Little by little, the full story worked its way out of her. By the time the bath was over, Peke was herself again.

“I must go Kami,” Peke said, stepping out of the bath, her skin immediately dry again. She picked the comb from the sink and gave her long black hair a quick brushing, tying it behind her in a long ponytail. “They will be waiting for Kao to arrive.”

“Arrive where?”

“On the grounds of Island Mother’s shrine, the house of judgment.”

“I take it you can get there on your own?” Kami asked, a slight smile on his face.

Peke nodded quickly. She knotted the pareo around her waist and reached for the necklace. Kami reached it first, and reverently slipped it over her neck, letting it settle into place.

“I will be there, Kao For you.”

She nodded slightly and disappeared.

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Hours since the razing of the base, the field surrounding the ruins of the Island Mother’s shrine was abuzz with people. The women had set up cots for medical, tables for food and a large barricaded holding area for those captives that did not need medical treatment. There were a large number of women and children in the holding area as well as captured soldiers.

Kao moved between the areas. As she approached, island men and woman bowed until she passed. She purposely left the holding area to last. Women moved through the group passing out paper plates of food for the captives.

Walking back to the top of the clearing she found a large wicker chair waiting for her and Meokei. She sat in the chair and Meokei blew into the conch shell he has, blasting out a long note to signal the people to gather around.

Kao looked out over the gathered throng and stood up. Instantly the meadow was quiet.

“The Island Mother is to be praised. Today it was She who drove the invaders from our shores with her fire. The story of the defeat of our enemy will be passed from generation to generation through our storywomen and hulas.

“Our stories tell us that our enemies will be destroyed, utterly. But, our stories also tell us that anyone who reaches out with a hand of friendship, will be welcomed. Those of the Shazbot who wish to remain will be allowed to remain. Those that wish to leave, will be allowed to leave.

“Bring the prisoners forward and let them declare their intentions.” Kao told Meokei.

In groups of two and three the survivors were brought forward. Most asked to remain on the island. One burly man started to come forward but broke free of his guards and rushed Kao. In motion too fast to see, Kao sidestepped him and he fell forward into the grass. His head rolled a few feet further before it too came to a stop. Kao paused to look at the man eyes as the life faded from them, then turned her back.

“Feed this offal to the sharks.” Meokei said as the two guards gathered up the corpse and dragged it off.

There was only one group of people left, three women and a dozen or more children. All of them were from families of the defeated Invaders.

One of the women came forward and bowed to Kao.

“Who do the children belong to?” Kao asked her.

“They are the orphans. I and the other two women are responsible for them now.”

“And you are?”

“Your people call me Nurse Shasta.”

“You worked at the main hospital in town, in the children’s ward.” Kao said, keeping an eye on the woman.

“Yes.”

“Promise to raise them in the island way, teach them the history of our people, and yours, then you and your sisters may raise the children.”

“Aye, we can do that. We will need....”

“You will be given what you need to start.” Koa reassures her quietly.

The children surged out of the holding area towards Nurse Shasta and her sister nurses. One girl broke free and ran up to Kao, hugging her waist.

“Do you know where my father is?”

Kao knelt down to look the child in her eyes, and learned everything about her short life, her name, and the name of her father.

“No, kiekie, I don’t know where your daddy is right now. I know he wasn’t at the base today, so he is probably hiding in the mountains.”

“You won’t hurt him, will you?”

“Not if I can help it.” Kao says her.

Kao got up and looked at Shasta. “I am sorry about your husband, the commander.”

“Did you kill him?” Shasta asked.

Kao nodded.

“He would not, or could not, surrender. He asked mercy for his men.” Kao said quietly. “His death was swift.”

Shasta only nodded. Having been a soldier's wife for so many years, she knew this day might come. Her responsibility was to the orphans now. She would mourn her husband later.



Epilogue

"Kao kept her promise to be the island's warrior. When the Shazbot fleet arrived a month later, she was there at the beach to welcome them. Most of the two dozen ships did not survive the giant tsunami that crashed into them, sinking them with all hands. The survivors steamed out to sea again and have not been heard from since."

The storywoman stops to take another long drink from her tumbler and continues her tale.

"Kao will return when she is needed. We must all remember to thank her and the Island Mother in our prayers and chants. Now, off with you little scamps."

The woman laughs as the children scatter in all directions squealing with delight. She looks up at the approach of a young woman dressed in jeans, pale blue top and a white necklace of shells.

The woman kneels next to the storywoman, slips the lei of flowers around her neck, and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, Tahanni, for telling that story so well."

She gets up and strolls off to another part of the meadow leaving Tahanni looking at the retreating woman with disbelief.

"Mahalo, Peke."