

# Chapter One



Piari flattened himself on the sun-dappled jungle floor, his chest heaving. *Did they hear me? Will they see me?* His bow and a fistful of arrows lay uncomfortably under him where he had quickly dropped.

The enemy tribe would not hesitate to kill him were they to find him. What he did was crazy! Even a much older and more experienced warrior would rarely do what Piari had just done. Tribal warfare in the Enga was unpredictable. But normally the warriors stay linked to their fight leader. While serious injury and death was inflicted on the enemy in this way, it was the unexpected that could deal the exceptional blow. And that was what Piari wanted. And that was what he was about to achieve. But the late arrival of some enemy warriors on the path blocked his move to get behind his target and attack from behind.

Much later, Piari appeared back at Niungu, his home village. Some of his friends saw him approach the village and met him with a chorus of voices. “Piari! Piari! You made it! Hey, you’re OK!”

Hearing the commotion, his mother, Titam, ran out. “Where have you been? We all thought you had been injured or even killed!”

Pulling him by his ear, Titam dragged Piari toward their hut, a typical, low-sitting grass-roofed hut. This would-be man quickly remembered he was still a boy. He knew resistance would be to no avail. The subdued golden glow from the internal fire of this windowless wood, bark, and grass structure added intensity as this desperate mother challenged her twelve-year-old son. “The other warriors returned not knowing where you were. We all thought you had been speared—or worse!”

“Oh, Mother, I fight for the protection and honor of our tribe,” Piari responded. Completely ignoring his mother’s concern, he continued with great relish. “And I nearly got behind the enemy this time. If those enemy warriors hadn’t come along, I could have killed more of our enemy today!”

A shadow fell over the low, small entrance to the hut. Piari’s father, Nun (the

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“u” pronounced as in *full*), crouched and nimbly moved inside. He sat down cross-legged by the fire. Piari didn’t look up. He knew exactly what look his father was giving him.

“Piari! Fighter!” his father growled. “We named you Amusa, which means ‘the bush holds together forever,’ so that you will be the father of a strong and united family that continues on into the future. But the village people have tagged you with this new name because you are getting much fame as a warrior. Piari—the fighter! Piari—warrior! I fear this name will stay with you all your life. But it may be a short life.”

Nun reached out his muscular arm and deftly grabbed hold of Piari’s hair before the boy knew it. “*Idi hup!*” Nun said with deep emotion. “God hold on to you from now on! The God who lives in the land of mystery will place a heavy

burden on your head.” This old, wise, and God-fearing father knew that God would not give up on the boy, no matter how long it took to draw him to Himself.

Tribal fighting was a part of life in the Lagaip Valley of what is now the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea. It was thought that if there was no payback for something done by neighboring tribes, such perceived weakness would mean more trouble, possibly threatening the very existence of the tribe.

And so the men would plan their attack in the days leading up to the fight. During the nights, the valleys would echo with the strong Engan calls from mountaintops, declaring the fight. Well before the sun warmed the mountain air—frigid even in the tropics at seventy-two hundred feet above sea level—warriors would light small fires, rub pig fat over their bodies, and chant and stomp their feet rhythmically while armed with spears and shields or bows and arrows. As the sun came up, these warriors, having psyched themselves into a frenzy, would move out to the fighting front.

Piari was a member of the Piolai clan of the Piapri tribe. This was one of the few Engan tribes that allowed uninitiated boys to participate in the fighting. Not many boys got involved, but Piari was at the head of the pack. He already had a number of kills to his name. Piari, the fighter!

But while Piari was at the center of any fighting, his father, Nun, was not. Opposed to fighting, he constantly urged his tribe to resolve conflict in other ways. Nun worshiped God as his father and grandfather had. The ancestors of the Engan people always believed in a great, good eternal God who lives in the land of mystery.

Yet most of the tribe had allowed superstition and fear to have the last word, which gave the evil one control over their lives. Piari’s father was different. He really believed in God. And he believed that life was sacred. Nun regularly worshiped God and made sacrifices to Him.

The other boys in the village listened with wide eyes as Piari recounted his escapades, more interested in joining his audience than in joining the fighting. Engans are master storytellers, and Piari was no exception. Emerging from the family hut, he would see the boys gathered at the guava tree and race over to them. His father’s pleas disappeared behind his friends’ eager faces as Piari strutted up to his friends.

“You should have seen us! The Niungu warriors were faster than our enemy—those weaklings. Our spears and arrows were on target. We had it all over them. We moved as one from among the tall casuarina trees. The enemy warriors were like scared grasshoppers, hopping about but going nowhere. Haru, your father raced forward and shot an arrow straight at the enemy fight leader. He got him—I’m

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*sure* he did. Did you hear their cry go up? We got one of them, all right!”

Piari’s face beamed as he relived the excitement of the fight. “When I saw their momentary confusion and the focus on their fight leader, I got an idea. I raced along the side of the gully and across to the other side. The jungle was dense, but I pushed through to get in behind the enemy.”

“That’s crazy, Piari,” his best friend, Nala, interrupted. “We have been taught to stay together in the fight. You shouldn’t do that.”

“Not normally, Nala. But what an opportunity when they were confused and distracted!”

Nala’s mother called him to bring firewood. It was getting late, and the thick white smoke of the fires pressed through the grass roofs of each *hauskuk* (small cooking hut) as the women prepared food in the soot-blackened, earthenware pots. The group of boys slowly dissipated as they walked back to their huts. In a way, Piari was glad that he did not have to tell the rest of his story. This way he could save face. He knew the boys envied his spirit, and he loved fighting. He was truly Piari—fighter. Piari—warrior!



# Fact File

Papua New Guinea is a nation comprising the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, just north of Australia.

With a population of around 75 million, well over eight hundred languages are spoken in this small country, about 12 percent of all the world's languages.

The Enga Province is home to one of the larger language and cultural groups in Papua New Guinea.