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Books by Kate Cudahy

The Duellist Series:

Hal - 2015

Hannac (The sequel to Hal) - 2015

The Invitation (A Short Story) - 2016

The Firefarer - 2016

THE FIREFARER

Kate Cudahy

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PROLOGUE: MUNA

Muna lay belly-down on the cliff-top, peering over the edge. Far below, the sea slammed against rocks, a few desperate gulls clinging to the surge. Wind whipped her hair across her eyes and cheeks and stung her face with sea-spray.

She sucked in the salt air and imagined herself riding the waves: her body reaching each crest before plunging down and rolling to the ocean floor. Then up again, a snatch of breath and down once more.

Thrilled, she shivered and raised her head, scanning the horizon, the mainland obscured by dark skies. A real storm must be brewing, gathering force; clouds stirred and swelled as if pregnant with rage. And between all that power - between the dark sky and the brooding water - she made out a single, dark speck.

Muna narrowed her eyes, tucking stray locks of hair behind her ears. The shape carried long and low in the water, foam breaking against its sides. At first she thought it must be a whale, but no giant tail fin broke the surface, no jet of spray soared above it like a geyser. She curled frozen fingers across her mouth, stifling a gasp. A boat! Now she made out men heaving against oars, the prow skimming the peak of a wave before crashing back down into the water.

Pushing herself to her feet, Muna dusted dirt and slivers of shale from her dress, glanced once more out to sea and then ran. Bare foot, she leapt over clumps of grass, across sharp-toothed naked rocks, between stunted, gnarly roots of gorse.

A slim flake of slate cracked beneath her and she fell, her ankle twisting as she hit the ground. Cursing, Muna scabbled to her feet, limping towards the squat stone walls and turf roof of home. Hurling herself against the door she landed, panting, on her knees, her eyes struggling to adjust to the dim interior. Outside, the wind continued its assault on the cottage, tearing at the shutters and moaning through cracks and chinks in the stonework. She slammed the door shut, barring it with a heavy chunk of sea-worn timber.

"Da? Hori?" Muna groped her way forwards, tracing her fingers around the rough edge of the table. No fire glowed in the pit: they must still be sleeping.

"Muna, is that you?" Hori piped rather than spoke, his voice a thin reed.

"Yes. It's me. Hori get up. Is Da awake?"

She felt along the wall, aiming for the furthest, darkest end of the cottage, aware of a wet, acrid smell rising up from the floor. Da must have been so far into his cups last night he'd not made it outside. Stalling a wave of nausea, she stretched outwards, sensing the rising heat of his sleeping body buried beneath a pile of furs and seal skins.

"Da! We've got to leave!" She clamped his shoulder between half-frozen fingers, sensing the solid muscle of his arm tense and then relax as she shook him awake.

"What is it?" His voice was low, gritty and slurred.

"Da, they're coming. From the mainland. A boat - I saw it!" She plucked at the furs and skins, catching a brief glimpse of his matted hair and weathered, tattooed face. He rolled away, hugging the bedclothes to his chest, his back rising and falling like the great waves outside. Hori now stood beside her, tugging at her tunic. He peered up, his face pinched and frightened, his dark hair sleep-tousled.

"Muna are they coming for me?"

She froze inwardly, as if a skein of ice had coated the underside of her skin. "We won't let them, Hori."

Sinking down beside the bed, Hori began to sob in light, throaty sighs. A huge hand slid out from beneath the furs and skins to pat the boy's head. Sniffing, Hori clambered up, tunnelling through the pile of pelts to cling to his father.

"Da! We have to leave!" Muna shook him harder this time. "The coracle's on the south shore. We could aim for the Source Isles. Or even for the Pagi."

"We're not leaving." Da's grainy voice was muffled by the furs. "And if your mother heard you now, she'd weep."

"She'd want us to live."

Da sprang up, Hori still clinging to his side like a limpet. Shocked, Muna stepped backwards as her father swung unsteadily out of bed, shaking himself free of his son. He clumsily wrapped an old seal skin around his waist before clutching at the wall for support, his chest and face camouflaged by a maze of tattoos. Then, without another word, he lurched past her towards the table, seized a leather skin of water and tipped the contents over his head.

He stood, shaking, water dripping from his wild black curls, his eyes two glittering slivers of jet set within a swirl of tattoos. "Your mother'd fight to save her home and her family. Even if she were one against a thousand."

"I'm not my mother."

"That's clear enough."

Hori was now behind her, his thin arms threaded around her waist, his head buried in the small of her back. Dumbstruck with shame and fury she stared at her father. Outside, the wind picked up again, the cottage door rattling and shaking as if it had a life of its own. Da looked away, wiping the water from his face with a trembling hand. He turned back, his eyes tired and haunted.

"I'm sorry." Slumping down on a bench, he dragged a plate of dried fish and stale bread across the table, stuffing the contents into his mouth. Muna watched, a hot spring of frustration welling within.

"If you'll not help him, Da, I'll take him myself."

Da slammed a palm down on the table. "You're going nowhere. Neither of you."

Anger overcame her fear. "If you were so brave Da, we'd still be living on the mainland, not on this wet rock."

He rose again and she edged backwards, stepping on Hori's feet. The boy squealed.

"This is the home of your mother's ancestor's, girl!" He punctured the air with a thick, dirt-stained finger as he spoke. "And I'll not hear you defile them."

"Don't lie!" She heard her own voice rise to a thin shriek and hated herself for it. "We're here because you hate the Ahi."

With a sudden roar, Da slammed a fist into the underside of the table, sending knives, hooks, nets and bottles crashing to the floor. "Liar? You're calling me a liar?" Clay and fishbone snapped beneath his feet as he staggered towards them.

"Yes. A liar!" Muna no longer feared. The Ahi were coming anyway. She felt strangely distanced from her father's rage, her brother's weeping, as if all this were happening to someone else in a different time and place.

Da had almost reached them, his hand drawn back to swipe at her cheek. She felt Hori's shivers through the coarse wool of her tunic and reached behind her back, taking his arms in her hands. "Mother'd weep to hear *you* now, Da," she whispered.

His hand lowered, his shoulders sagging in sudden grief. He stumbled backwards, his massive weight crashing down amongst the tangled mess of nets and hooks. Sitting on the floor of his cottage, Erland Hyr buried his face in huge, hair dusted hands and wept.

Hori slid out from behind Muna and jumped down into Da's lap, flinging his arms around his father's thick neck.

"I'll not let them take you, Hori." Da was whispering, rocking the boy in his arms. He looked up at Muna then, eyes wet with remorse. "They'll not take either of you."

"So run. Now! Before it's too late."

She darted around the cottage, gathering supplies for the voyage: seal skins for warmth, a net, some smoked fish. Piling them on the table, she poured the dregs of their fresh water into a single skin. Just enough, she thought, to see them safe to the Source Isles. Erland remained sobbing on the floor, his face pressed into Hori's shoulder. Hissing in frustration she ignored him and concentrated on the task in hand.

The door shook violently - battered again, she thought, by the wind. Tired hinges creaked and groaned, light creeping in around the edges of the frame. But then, as if carried on the air itself came the rise and fall of voices. She froze, staring at her father whose eyes registered danger for the first time.

"Erland? Open the door!"

That was Taua's voice. Muna recognised the sharp, insistent tone of her mother's former friend. "Leave us alone!" she screamed.

"Muna? We want to talk. Open up."

"Never."

She caught Hori's thin wail and then watched, horror stricken, as the blade of an axe splintered the weathered oak of the door. Erland was finally clawing his way back onto his feet, Hori still clinging pathetically to his leg.

"Alright, Taua. You're frightening the children." Prising himself free of Hori, he padded across the room, ignoring the falling blows of the axe head as he dragged up the timber bar and hurled it to the floor. The door swung open and he reeled away from the sea-bronzed bodies of five Ahi warriors who now plunged into the cottage.

Taua's heavy features curled into a sneer of contempt as she laid eyes on Erland. Squat and powerfully built, the image of a hawk tattooed across her face, she stood in dripping tunic and seal-skin leggings, threw back her head and laughed.

"Erland Hyr. You insult your wife's memory, hiding away on this miserable island."

Da no longer sobbed or shook. Drawing to his full height, fists clenched into balls, he glared down at Taua. "This is the island of my wife's ancestors. She's amongst them now, because of you."

The sneer dropped from Taua's face, her black eyes stormy. "She died as she would have wished. In battle, an axe in her hands."

"You know nothing of how she would have died!" Erland's voice was thick, grief-stricken. "She would have died at home in her bed, with her children grown and strong. That's what she told me as she bled out amongst those barbarians, a knife piercing her guts. If you hadn't fled, you would have heard her."

Another warrior of the Ahi now crossed the threshold: taller, more powerful even than Da. Silhouetted against the stormy light, he reminded Muna of one of their ancestral statues: solid, impassive and solemn as hewn rock. His head almost scraping the ceiling, he entered to stand alongside Taua.

"Koka knew well what dangers she faced when she led our warriors into that cursed valley." His voice rolled and sang like the surge of the sea. "And neither you, Erland, nor I, nor Taua could persuade her otherwise. Now she's gone. But she left us this...gift."

He knelt on the floor, arms outstretched, preparing to embrace Hori, but the boy flinched and slunk out of reach. With the swift reflexes of a man half his size, the warrior lashed out, seizing Hori by the arm. Screaming, Muna dived for her brother, only to find herself overpowered: her arms seized and gripped from behind.

"Muna Hyr. Your mother had earned her tattoos long before she was your age, girl. You ought to be ashamed." Taua's voice was a low growl, hot breath flickering across her ear. Muna struggled. "She never wanted me to fight."

"You're fighting now, girl."

"You made me."

Teeth chattering with fear, she stared in despair at her father who bore the look of a man who had just woken from a dream.

"Let the children go. You'll take me instead - a gift, to our ancestors if you will, but leave them."

"We've left you for long enough, Erland." Taua's muscular forearm pressed into Muna's throat as she spoke, causing the girl to splutter and gasp. "While you've hidden away on this ghost forsaken island, the fire mountain eats at our land. We've seen fields and forests reduced to ash. We need to find new homes for our people. Koka understood that. She sacrificed her own life to help us."

"My family's sacrificed enough."

"Not yet. Not nearly enough." The Ahi warrior lifted Hori up, turning him for the others to see, the boy's scrawny legs kicking and thrashing against the air. "The boy's a Firefarer - we've heard enough rumours of his power to believe them true. We'll

take him to the Pagi, we'll set him against them. And when he's reduced their barbaric, heathen cities to rubble, we'll sit him on a throne, place a crown on his head and set an axe between his hands. What father would deny his son such honour?"

Erland paled, his lips tight and white as ice. "One who loves his child."

He took a step towards Hori but the Ahi surrounded him, the tips of their knives and axes pressed towards his chest. In spite of the pressure of Taua's arm a long, plaintive wail of despair rose in Muna's throat. She wrestled against her captor's sinuous power, clawing at the warrior's arm, her strength ebbing as she fought for breath.

"Hori! No!" Da's voice was a distant echo, blending with the pulsing inside her ears and the strange rustling, surging pressures which now filled her head. Her father charged against the Ahi, arms flailing as their knives drove home and pierced his chest, the black spirals of his tattoos obscured with blood. Erland hit the floor, his eyes still trained on his son.

"Da!" Even her own hoarse scream seemed far away. She bit down on Taua's arm, tasting brine, then sweat, then the salt tang of blood. The warrior shrieked in pain, and at the loosening of her grip Muna slid down onto the floor, crawling, air-starved towards her father. With labouring breaths, his teeth clenched, he lay in a rising pool of his own blood. "Not me, Muna," he gasped. "Hori!"

Raising her head, the room still aswim, Muna stared at her brother who now swung lifelessly between the Ahi's hands, his head lolling against his shoulder, a thin string of drool sliding down his cheek. She pulled herself across the stone flags of the cottage towards him, forcing herself up onto her knees, fighting against the dizzying swirl of the room as she dragged herself to her feet. But then Hori's eyes flickered open, and she knew she was too late.

First came a strange rushing sound, like the sucking of currents into a sea-cove. As it gained in force and volume, the Ahi dropped their weapons, clamping their hands over their ears, their faces charged with horror. Hori's captor howled in pain, dropping the boy to reveal fresh burn marks staining his palms. The boy's limp frame unfurled at his feet, jerking in a series of spasms, his dark irises rolling upwards, lids peeled away from the whites of his eyes.

"Muna! Cover your face. Come here, girl."

She flung herself onto the floor, huddling against Da's dying form, sensing the life leaking from him. The room was growing hot: a heat so intense that beads of sweat formed upon her cheeks and forehead. The Ahi must be scrabbling to get out: Taua

screamed at them to stand firm, but her words were lost against the thunderous, maddening roar which now filled the entire room - the violence of the fire mountain channelled through Hori's tiny body and released upon the Ahi.

Muna rocked and moaned, eyes screwed shut, palms flat against her face, the air now thick with the sickening reek of smouldering flesh. The Ahi were screaming now, and she knew why. There was no need to look, she had seen it before: their skin would blister, crack and then melt, leaking like wax onto the floor. Desperate but weak, they would claw their way to the door, the light misting in their eyes as the heat consumed sight, sound and sense. She lived this scene at night in her dreams. She saw it when she rose in the morning, lighting the fire in the hearth. It was the reason they had left their home on the mainland to live on this storm-soaked, grim little island. Yes, she had lied to her father. She knew why they lived alone.

It may have been hours before she opened her eyes. But then again, it may have just been minutes: she couldn't tell. The room had grown silent. It was the wind itself, the real wind which now set the shutters flapping and the door madly slapping against its frame. Beside her, Da moaned and shuddered. He was growing cold against her, his breathing stilted and forced. Her tunic clung to her skin, clammy and thick with his blood. She pushed herself into a sitting position and opened her eyes.

There was little left of the Ahi. Here and there lay a few rags of frayed, singed material, some charred bones, the blackened remnants of axe heads and blades. All the rest had gone, taken by the force of her brother's fear and rage. And lying amongst the smoking remains of his victims, head resting upon his arms, Hori slept, his eyelashes still wet with tears.

Stiff, fearful, she reached for him, tapping him on the shoulder. "Hori, we have to go."

He did not wake. He wouldn't wake for hours. He never did. She scooped him up in her arms, his head lolling against her neck. A sudden gust of wind knocked the door clean open, light flooding the cottage to reveal the cliff tops and sea beyond.

"Take him. There'll be more of them. Take him far away." Her father's voice was the ghost of itself. She turned to see his eyes grow sharp, earnest. "You see what this is, Muna. Control it."

His mouth leaked blood. He slumped onto his back. Air escaped his lips in a long, forced rattle.

"Da?"

Hori shifted in his sleep, his arms curling around her neck as she crouched beside her father, stretched out a hand and held it over his lips. She drew away, flinching at their coldness.

"Goodbye, Da." She rose, swaying slightly as she headed for the open door, for the crashing of the waves and the raw air, Hori's warm weight against her shoulder. There was still a day's worth of light left, she told herself. Enough time to reach the Source Isles - if the storm didn't catch her first.

PART ONE - FONS

PART ONE: CHAPTER ONE

DOVES

When Vito checked the dovecote that morning, he was astonished to find two birds missing. Blinking, he counted again, searching for telltale feathers on the ground, the grisly remains of fox-kill. Nothing. Still wet with dew, the unstained grass beneath the cote told no secrets. Except...except...his eyes narrowed, following a flattened trail of grass blades which stretched past the well, veered away from the monastery and ended at the edge of the forest. Clearly, whatever had taken the doves had two legs, not four.

Sighing, he pulled a bag of grain from the deep pockets of his robe. If he pursued the thief up the bank, he wouldn't make it back in time for morning prayers. And the loss of two birds was nothing compared with brother Achill's sharp tongue and harsh sarcasm. So as he trudged around the cote sprinkling grain, he prayed for divine justice, envisaging the poacher choking to death on the wrong end of a dove bone, or plagued by a bad attack of the guts.

He had scattered all the grain and was heading for the cloister gates when a sudden flash of colour caught his eye somewhere amongst the trees. Vito stopped, turned and peered up through the glossy greens and muddy browns of the forest. For it had been a streak of blue that caught his eye - the shade of a kingfisher's wings when it plunges from sight into a stream.

Behind him the spring morning seemed to drop away, its melodies of birdsong and crickets' hiss drained out by the thudding of blood inside his own ears. Holding his breath, he stared up at the forest. Nothing. No movement other than the soft swish of oak and sycamore against the morning air. And cutting through that stiff, painful silence the bells rang out for morning prayers - three long, resonant booms.

Vito bit his lip and shook his head. *Must be seeing things*, he told himself. The forest had always seemed a place steeped in shadow and illusion, marking as it did the boundary between church and Pagi. Perhaps his imagination, as yet untrained by years of prayer and meditation had led him astray. He turned again, trudging toward the high arched gates of the cloisters, glancing nervously behind him. And that was when he saw her.

It had not been the blue of a bird's wing that he had seen, or a fleeting glimpse of sky against the treetops. Vito now realised it had been a flash of someone's sleeve. For, picking her way up through the forest, two doves slung over her shoulder on a string, was a girl.

"Hey!" His voice echoed around the pasture: a roar, hoarse shout. Still with her back to him the girl halted, cocking her head on one side. Then she whirled around.

She did not run. She simply stood watching him, her pale, heart-shaped face bracketed between two long brown plaits which stretched down to her waist. His temper now rising, Vito ran through the deep, wet grass, the hem of his robe already sodden with dew by the time he'd reached the tree line. He looked up to see her still standing, watching. Now furious, he pushed on upwards, the soles of his sandals slipping on mossy roots and rocks as he gained ground. And at last he reached her, too exhausted even to speak. He bent over, drawing in great gulps of air, sweat racing down his face and through his beard and hair.

"They're...my...birds," he gasped at last.

"What? These?" Her grey eyes flecked with amusement, she dangled the doves before him. He reached out but she pulled her arm away, stuffing the two small carcasses into a leather satchel which hung at her side. "Finders keepers."

"You didn't find them, you stole them. You're a thief."

Her thin lips flickered into a smile. She was young, he judged, perhaps his age - a score of years, no more. A pair of close-fitting trousers hugged her legs, striped in blue and white. She wore, as a man might, a shirt and belt and a brocade jacket the colour of a kingfisher's wings. Rich, then. No villager. Perhaps a Paga. Whoever she was, she had no business stealing his birds.

"I'm no thief." Her gaze was calm, clear, steady. "I'm a treasure-hunter. And a scholar. Look." She opened the satchel to reveal a massive, leather-bound book, its title inlaid in gold leaf.

Vito snorted. "One book doesn't make you a scholar."

She snatched away the bag before he could reach once more for the birds. "And a habit doesn't make you a monk. Besides, that's hardly good, monkish behaviour on your part. I thought your tenets exhort you to divide and share."

"Not with corrupt Pagi."

"So I'm a Paga now? And why not a travelling tinker? Or a pilgrim? Or an acrobat? I could be any of those."

With barely a glance behind her, she slung the satchel upwards, its strap looping around the broad branch of an oak. Then, in one lithe movement, she raised her hands, caught the branch and swung herself upwards, landing astride it, legs dangling above him.

Vito saw himself outplayed. Climb after her and she would no doubt spring from reach like a squirrel. Wait for her to come down and he would miss two rounds of prayers. He envisaged Achill scanning the chancel with his long face and irritable blue eyes, weighing up Vito's absence and devising suitable penalties - a night-long vigil, or an entire day spent in prayer and solitude. Vito shuddered.

"Keep them then." Flushed with shame, he turned to go. "And I hope you choke."

"Wait!" A slender set of fingers clutched his shoulder. He shrugged them off.

"Didn't you hear that?" the girl whispered.

"What?" In spite of himself he halted. Her eyes had rounded in genuine alarm. She pressed her hand to his mouth, urging his silence.

Frowning, the shame still clawing at him, gnawing at his pride, he listened. At first, he caught no more than the breaking of branches, the light thudding of hooves. A herd of deer, perhaps, spooked by a woodsman's step, a poacher's arrow? But now it were as if the entire forest were shaking, the ground itself seemed to rumble and moan. Vito dropped down, crouching beneath the shelter of the oak, peering through the dense thickness of undergrowth, straining to catch a glimpse of whoever or whatever had, on this fresh gift of a morning chosen to break the stillness, the silence. Below in the pasture he spied a stallion's coal-black legs, followed by others that were chestnut, piebald, ivory. He parted the twin saplings which obscured his view. There were many horses now, too many to count, and sitting astride them were riders, the like of whom he had never seen. Half naked, their bodies were tanned to a golden, honeyed brown, long matted hair snaking down their backs, and their faces - were they even human? He blinked, horror mingling with fascination. For tattoos laced their cheeks, their chins and brows: black, swirling curlicues, patterns bearing no apparent order, thick streaks of ink which rippled across their skin as they shouted and laughed.

A light ruffling of leaves pulled him back into the moment. He twisted around to observe the girl, who was now hanging upside down by her knees from the branch, her long plaits brushing the ground. "Climb up here," she whispered.

"But I need to get back to the monastery. I need to warn my brothers."

She shook her head, her face now glowing as the blood rushed downwards. "Your brothers are already dead."

She extended a hand, and instinctively he took it.

PART ONE: CHAPTER TWO

ANDRE

Vito hitched up his robe, his sandals slipping comically on the tree's bark as he pushed against its trunk and levered his way upwards. A few gristly splinters caught in the exposed skin of his legs and he almost lost his balance, rocking belly down on the branch before dragging himself into a sitting position. Unsmiling, the girl furled and unfurled as she drew herself upright. Her grey eyes had widened with terror, her lips were white and strained. Vito followed her gaze, the extra height now gaining him some vantage, and he peered down directly into the pasture below.

The horsemen reeled in wild, careering circles: whooping, screaming, calling to one another with guttural cries and shouts. With a sudden thwack, an axe was planted into the dove cote sending it crashing to the ground, the birds escaping with a frantic flapping of wings. Vito almost cried out in dismay but the girl stopped him, her cool hand resting on his shoulder.

"The Ahi," she whispered. "Be thankful I stole your doves."

"The Ahi? Who are they?"

"Shh!"

His thoughts spinning now, his mind in chaos, he peered back down at the pasture, its grass already churned to pulp by hundreds of restless, stamping hooves.

The cloister gates were flung open. He craned his neck, desperate to see which of the brothers had courage enough to face these savages. No, not even savages. Demons, evil spirits that the Ruach might conjure to scare their children.

Flanked by novices, one brother stepped forward to greet the horsemen, pushing back his cowl to reveal a short shock of curly red hair, a pale, freckled face. Of course. Rasmus always spoke for the brothers at their meetings with the villagers. He represented the monastery on the common council. Who better to treat with these monsters?

Clutching the hands of both novices, Rasmus took a step forward. The boys flinched, pulling back, but the monk urged them on, calmly stepping across the grass towards the Ahi. The pounding of hooves died away, silence falling once more upon the pasture: heavier than the humid summer air with its buzz of insect wings, its scents of

flowers and cornfields. The horsemen had formed a circle around the three monks now, lowering their axes, spears and arrows. For one hope-fuelled moment, Vito was sure that they would speak to Rasmus - that in whatever coarse, harsh tongue they spoke, some understanding could be reached. Perhaps, he thought with sudden zeal, Rasmus would persuade them to shed whatever barbarous beliefs they held, to join with the brothers in celebration of the great Mystery, the unnameable, the power which fed through all living things. He stole a glance at the girl who sat with legs astride the branch, her knuckles paling as she curled her fingers around its bark.

Brother Rasmus uttered a few words but a sudden breeze rippled through the forest, muffling his voice. He threw his arms wide apart in greeting, gesturing in the direction of the cloister gates which were now lined with monks, their eyes inked with fear. Then, Rasmus turned back to the Ahi and awaited their response, a patient smile drawn across his lips. An Ahi drew his axe, its steel flashing against the sun's rays, the light blinding Vito briefly. He blinked, his eyes watering from the brightness, and when he opened them again, Rasmus's headless body sank to the ground, his head a trophy in the hands of an Ahi who swung it by its copper curls, the monk's lips opening and closing as if still welcoming his murderer.

Vito felt his own jaw drop, his hands shake and he almost plunged from the tree, the girl flinging her arms around him just in time.

"Don't look!" she breathed into his ear. "Just sit here. Stop your ears. If you love your life, don't look!"

He burrowed his face into the soft material of her jacket, shuddering as she passed her arms around him and held him close. With hands pressed to his ears, he tried to block out the shrieks and screams as his brothers were hacked down, the clatter of horses' hooves as the Ahi entered the cloisters, crushing men against walls or slaughtering them where they stood. And it would not stop. He told himself that he was still in bed, that this was a nightmare from which at any moment he would awaken, look around his cell, find himself late for morning prayers and race down to the chancel. But he did not wake up. Instead, he clung to the girl like a drowning, desperate man might cling to driftwood as the din, the roar of carnage rose up from the monastery below.

Vito did not know how long he sat there. He could not have said exactly when the screams, the pleas for mercy, the savage butchery came to an end. When he raised his head from the girl's shoulder it was quiet, save for the summer's hum of insects and

birdsong. He sniffed the air which was now thick with the reek of burning timber. Peering through the trees he made out pockets of fire bursting through the thatch and slate of roofs, stained windows of the church exploding as the heat licked at the glass. He turned to the girl and noticed the sleeve of her jacket, sodden with his own tears.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It doesn't matter."

He noticed her own eyes glistening, although through fear or grief he couldn't tell.

"What's your name?" she asked him, her voice still quiet and low.

"Vito."

"Well, Vito, I think we ought to leave this place. Now."

"But my brothers..."

"Forget them. Look, I'm sorry..." she must have noticed the way his face crumpled, how he choked back sobs, a hole in his chest where his heart had once been.

"I'm sorry, Vito but there will be nothing left down there. The Ahi - they are warriors from across the August Straits. They have already attacked the coast, although I never heard of them reaching so far in land before. They leave nothing in their wake. Nothing. They kill, they burn, it is said, to warn us..."

"To warn us of what? To warn you, you mean, the Pagi. What have we done? Nothing."

"It was enough that you were in their way. They don't care who you are, Vito. They are warning us that one day, when they have weakened us sufficiently, then many of them will come. They are people of fire."

Vito considered this for a moment. He had never heard of these Ahi, these fire people. Although, he realised, nothing much ever reached the monastery from the outside world. And they were happy that it should be that way. Worshipping the Great Mystery was best done in isolation, with no worldly distractions to tempt or lead astray.

His legs now tingling with cramp, he lowered himself down from the branch, half-falling before grabbing the tree's trunk to straighten himself. The girl swung herself down, landing softly beside him, seized her satchel and swung it over her head. "Ready?"

Silently he nodded and allowed her to draw him back down the bank, stumbling and tripping, his robe catching around his legs. They had neared the tree line when he realised his stomach would no longer hold out. "Wait!" he gasped.

With one violent heave he vomited and then rested with his back to a sycamore until, racked by another bout, he gave up what was left. The girl looked on, impassive. When it was over he slunk down to the ground, panting. She passed him a handkerchief. "Alright?"

"No. I can't say I am."

"We have to move on, Vito. They might come back."

"Oh really?" he gasped. "For what?"

Receiving no answer, he stared up at her again. How could she be so calm, so controlled? Well, they were not her brothers who lay slain, their throats sliced, their life bled out by savages who were worse than animals. He ran a hand through wayward curls now rinsed with sweat. "So what's your name? Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Andretta Ermetena Ol Adama."

"What?" The names washed over his fear-numbed mind like water over glass.

She sighed. "Andre. My family call me Andre. Come on."

His stomach still quavering, Vito staggered to his feet, grasping her hand as she led him back down towards the meadow. He blinked, the sunlight blinding after the humid darkness of the forest. Then he whirled around taking in the corpse-strewn pasture, the church, refectory, tower and cloisters now engulfed in fire, charred timbers splintering as they crashed to the ground.

Andre was already across the pasture and she yelled to him, her hands cupped around her mouth: "Vito! Come on!"

But he couldn't. He looked back at the burning remains of his home: the only home he'd ever known. What if someone were still alive? He had been saved, he realised, only through his own cowardice, hiding in a tree with a Paga of all people! He owed it now to his brothers to risk his life, to try to bring some of them out of there. And so, in spite of Andre's frantic screams he ran towards the cloisters, covering his mouth and nose with the sleeve of his robe as he leapt over the bodies lying across its stone flags, the floor sticky with their blood.

The heat was unbearable. It singed his hair and beard. His lungs grew tight and he threw open the chapel doors to be met by near solid palls of smoke. Vito dropped to his knees, tears leaking from the corners of his stinging eyes. Bent double, the coarse linen of his habit still pressed pointlessly to his lips, he surrendered to a series of harsh, racking coughs. When the wheezing and spluttering had subsided, he found

himself staring down at a pair of sandalled feet sticking out from beneath a bench, one ankle clearly snapped and twisted.

Vito stared at the feet and for some reason he wanted to laugh. The horrors of this day, the wild horsemen, Rasmus's severed head, the slaughter that had followed, it was all reduced to this one moment: a pair of feet peeking out from beneath a bench. A high, nervous wail escaped his lips and he dropped to the floor snorting and giggling, slack-jawed, spit welling and dripping from his open mouth.

It was perhaps only seconds, a minute at most that insanity rioted through his nerves and laid claim to his mind. For, behind him, heavy feet crunched over smouldering, brittle fragments of glass and burnt wood. He clawed his way back round on hands and knees, inhaling another acrid mouthful of smoke as he stared up through rising dust into the wild eyes of an Ahi. And now he could not distinguish between flames and tattoos, the man had merged with the fire itself as he raised his spear above Vito's chest, ready to plunge.

From somewhere in the roof came a terrible ripping, a groaning as the skeleton of beams and joists collapsed, caving in on itself, spitting chunks of timber and masonry down onto the floor. Vito tilted back his head to observe a blue scrap of sky outlined against the fumes and debris of the ruined building. And then there was nothing but light and heat and smoke as he sank down and dreamed of death.

PART ONE: CHAPTER THREE
PEOPLE OF THE PAGI

"Vito! Vito, wake up!"

Vito stirred, groaned, coughed. Something heavy weighed upon his lungs. It hurt to breathe in and it was an agony to breathe out. Above him the world whirled into view and a face loomed above his own, long plaits tickling the raw, burnt skin of his cheeks.

From somewhere deep within, he conjured up a name - a strange name he had only learnt that day. Or had he always known it? "Andre?"

"Why did you run back in there, Vito? You nearly died!"

"I'm not dead, then?" He twisted his head from side to side, taking in the ravaged green of the pastures, flames still devouring the monastery to his right.

"No. Of course not. I pulled you out."

"You?" Someone had been in the chapel, but it was not Andre. He recalled the Ahi's wild, wolfish eyes, his skin imprinted, it had seemed, with flames as he raised his spear above his shoulder. With a gasp, Vito sat up, the ground swaying as he rose.

Andre's hair was singed at its ends, her face smudged black with soot, her clothing inexplicably wet.

"I soaked my clothes in the well." She tugged at her sodden jacket. "Then I came inside. You were lying on the floor. The fire had nearly reached you."

"And there was no one else?" He dragged a shaking hand down his face and beard. A sticky paste, the residue of sweat and soot, coated his palm.

"No."

"No...no Ahi?"

"Vito, if the Ahi had still been in there, they would have killed you." Her voice was patient, tired.

"But I saw one of them. He held his spear above me."

"Vito, you were half-crazed. Delirious. Perhaps you imagined it."

He shuddered. The man had been there. He had lain beneath him, waiting for the end, praying for death. Of course he could not explain why he was now alive to tell

her so. He may have been maddened by fire, by the slaughter of his brothers. But he had not imagined the Ahi.

"Perhaps he wanted me to see him."

"Vito, he wasn't there!"

"You seem to know a lot about these people." A dark suspicion wormed its way inside his head. "Perhaps you're one of them...perhaps you led them to us."

Her pale face twisted with anger and she jumped to her feet. "So that's all the thanks I get for saving your life is it? Do I look like I make a habit of rescuing idiot monks from buildings?" Seizing her satchel, she dragged the strap on over her head. "You need to warn your high Prefects Vito, and believe me it's a long way to Animum. I was going to offer to accompany you there, but somehow I don't feel like it now."

And with that she stalked, lank and loose of leg across the grass, disappearing as the pasture rolled down towards the dusty track on its southern flank - the road to Animum.

Vito watched her go, gripped by a strange, hopeless fear. He was alone now for the first time in his life. Yes, he knew the way to Animum, and yes he understood his duty to warn those high Prefects that nothing, not even the ancient monastery of Fons was sacred to the Ahi. But to venture out into that world by himself, a monk who had never strayed beyond the village, who knew nothing other than how to pray and care for birds and sing the praises of the Divine?

He saw Andre and her theft of those two doves in a different light now. A Paga she might be, but she could at least fend for herself. And, in his heart, he knew that he could not. And so, dragging himself to his feet, he picked up the end of his robe and yelled: "Stop! I'm sorry. Stop!"

Andre was already loping down the lane when he caught up with her.

"So now I'm to be trusted am I?" She did not turn around, did not break her stride, forcing him to pant and wheeze as he ran to keep up with her, his lungs still choked with smoke.

"I'm sorry. Please, stop, it's just..." collapsing amongst the high grasses of the verge, he crumpled in a series of barking, air-starved coughs. He drew breath at last,

relieved to see her still standing in the middle of the road, her arms crossed, concerned eyes belying the stern, fixed cast to her lips.

"Here. Take this." She pulled a leather flask from her satchel and handed it to him. Vito raised the bottle to his lips, offering up a prayer to the Mystery itself for such relief.

"Alright, I'm a Paga," she said briskly. "If that offends your tender, religious sensibilities, then we should part now. If, however, you wish for company on the road to Animum, then we can walk together. My cousin is a Prefect. I can gain you an audience with him."

"Your cousin?" One day and his entire life had been thrown upon its head. "Paga cannot even *live* within the City of Shrines!"

She raised a lean eyebrow. "And Ahi know no mercy. And yet here you are." She extended her hand. "Come on, Vito. I'll not save you a second time."

Even as they headed down the dusty, sun baked track and out into the surrounding meadows, the fire seemed to remain with Vito, as if it had seared its way inside him. He had always loved the lush countryside which lay beyond the monastery, studded with cypress and olive trees, the river winding its lazy route amongst them. Now, however, he saw nothing but flames, smelt ash, the sweet air seemed choked with fumes. And a slick sense of dread unfurled within his very stomach as they approached the monastery's neighbouring village, Acita. Rounding a bend in the lane, he observed a fresh band of smoke drifting up from the fields below. And he knew that there was no hope for the villagers either.

Andre stopped, looked at him, her face white beneath the smudges of soot. "Let's not go down there, Vito. We've witnessed enough horror for one day. You can do nothing for them."

He stared down at the village. It was just one more tragedy to add to the litany. He felt himself turn hard and dry within: a thing that had shrivelled in the heat.

"There was no one there you..."

"No." he said quickly. "Well, there was once. My brother - my real brother. But he left when I was still a baby. Handed me in at the monastery. My parents had died in the plague."

"I see."

He felt her gaze on him once more: cool, perhaps seeing more than she would admit. He nodded in the direction of open fields: "Down there."

They crossed meadows bright with lavender, poppies and cornflower, their petals rustled by a breeze which still bore scraps of burnt parchment or thatch from the monastery. Vito tried to ignore that, focussing instead on the silver line of the river below them as it fed through fields, forest and eventually a shallow gorge. The sun now at its height, grime and dust still plastered to his face, he craved its cleansing, coursing waters. But as they approached a narrow cleft in rocks which split the gorge from the fields and trees, Andre held up her hand and gestured for him to stop. For the sound of human voices, of horses' high whinnies and muted laughter carried above the splash of the waterfall below them.

The river narrowed as it passed between rocks and Andre hopped over it, crouched and peered around a boulder into the small canyon below. Nervous and exhausted, Vito hunkered down on the opposite bank, clutching the slimy, mossy stone before him for support before swivelling so that he could see around it. His stomach spasmed and he almost fell into the stream, regaining his balance just in time. Ahi warriors bathed in the plunge pool below them, ducking beneath the surface, pouring water from leather skins over their hair and faces, their horses tethered to the surrounding tree stumps and branches.

With a sharp intake of breath, Vito span back round, flattening himself against the rock. Had they seen him? He glanced across at Andre whose eyes had rounded in surprise, whose thin fingers now gripped the limestone before her as if it were all that kept her upright. "Look!" she mouthed at him.

Trembling, he crawled on hands and knees to stare back into the gorge. And what he saw there had him gasping for breath, his already dazed mind now reeling as he struggled to register the sight before him. For as the Ahi bathed, away came the ash and blood. But away also came the tattoos, the honey-toned skin, even the long, matted locks of hair which were pulled off to reveal shorn heads and pale faces. And the voices which rose above the flow of the waterfall spoke not in harsh, guttural barks, but in words that he recognised, that he himself used: in the lilting melody of Pagese.

He strained to catch snatches of conversation over the burble and rush of water: "monks' blood," "village women," and a name tossed back and forth as if it were a

ball: "Ol Terenzo." "Lino." "Lino Ampelio." "Lino Ol Terenzo." Thick laughter, shouts and harsh cheers accompanied the words. And then at last, the final traces of Ahi warriors shed, they climbed from the pool and pulled jerkins, caps, trousers and boots from panniers, dressed on the river bank and leapt into the saddles of their horses, transformed into Pagi.

Vito wanted to shout, to scream, to weep, to jump from his hiding place and curse them for the traitorous, murderous scum they were. How he had witnessed their treachery, how they had massacred his brothers, how he would not rest until the world knew of what had taken place at Fons and in Acita, but Andre pulled him back. "They'll cut you down, Vito," she whispered. "You can do no good when you're dead."

Biting back sobs, he nodded and watched as they rode away, the pulse of hooves echoing to silence just as it had ushered in the horrors of that morning.

"Come on." Andre held her hand out to him. "We should rest. They'll not be back, I expect. They've gone to inform their master that his dirty work is done."

"Their master?"

"You heard them. Ol Terenzo!"

He stared at her, his mind blank.

"Lino Ampelio Ol Terenzo? The Elector of Venanum."

"Never heard of him."

"Gods above, you lived a sheltered life in that monastery."

"There's no such thing as gods..."

"Don't go splitting religious hairs with me now, Vito. We need to reach Animum and tell my cousin what we've seen. And you need to eat and rest, and...and you need to bathe."

He looked downwards at his robe which was peppered with singe marks, and realised how black and filthy his face must be. Anyone they encountered on the road to Animum would scream in fright. And so, with a weary nod, he allowed her to lead him down a gnarly path around the rocks to the base of the gorge, where she proceeded to gather firewood.

Vito began to tug at his clothes and then turned around, ashamed. "Don't, don't look...will you?"

She smirked and turned away. "I wouldn't dream of it." In spite of all that had happened, Andre hummed to herself as she slipped amongst the trees, gathering twigs and light branches. His face still glowing with embarrassment, Vito edged as far

as he could behind the shelter of some boulders before stripping and then launching himself into the pool.

The water was freezing. He rose up for air, breath catching and shaking in his lungs, before diving once more and rising beneath the rush and flow of the waterfall. And there he stood, its liquid force coursing over his body, the grime and ash flushed into the plunge pool.

The juice of walnuts, he realised, could have darkened the skin of the Pagi, their faces tattooed with quills, matted strands of horse hair fixed to their scalps. And yet why take such elaborate precautions? If some bastard of an Elector wanted the monks dead, why not just send out men to do his bidding? But then his mind journeyed back to those few near fatal moments in the chapel. The 'warrior' had not killed him. He had left him alive. Why? Clearly somebody wanted the world to know that this was the work of the Ahi.

His fingers and toes now numb, he swam to the edge of the pool and clambered out, pulling his robe on over dripping skin. Andre, he observed, had already lit a small fire and was busy plucking feathers from the doves. All that remained of his former life, and he was about to eat it.

He sank down next to her, the coarse wool of his habit sticking to his wet limbs. With tender, delicate gestures, Andre fed a couple of thin twigs through the gutted carcasses of the birds and proceeded to roast them over the fire.

"So what *were* you doing near the monastery?" he asked, his mouth watering as the scent of roasting meat wafted towards him.

"I told you. I'm a treasure hunter."

"A treasure hunter? And what kind of treasure do you seek?"

Her eyes seemed to harden, flecked with an intense unease. Perhaps even, he thought, with a hint of sadness or regret. She blinked and the moment passed. "The best kind. The most precious," she said.

He stared at her again but her lips were tight, pressed together as if forbidding any further words from escaping. Vito decided to change tack. "So what is so important about that book you've got, then?"

"Oh, that." Smiling, she reached inside her satchel and pulled out a tome so thick and weighty Vito could hardly believe she was carrying it.

"I don't know," she continued. "My father always forbade me to look at it so I assumed it must be worth reading."

"Your father? Who's he?"

Her brow furrowed and again her eyes clouded with concern. "A Paga," she said.

"Does he know you're out here?"

"No."

"Who is he?"

She threw him a long, level look. "Perhaps you would like to hear something from my book?" she asked. "It's full of surprises. I heard my father say once that it will reveal the very secrets of your heart. Although how, I do not know."

Vito held her gaze and then turned away, focussing on the dark, churning waters of the river. It was clear that she did not wish to tell him anything. Well, she could keep her secrets. Once they had reached the City of Shrines he would be rid of her. No doubt Animum would welcome his services - he could chant plainsong, read, write, tend to birds and animals. Bitterness bled through him like ink blotting on parchment. "I have no use of Pageese magic," he said.

"Suit yourself." With her back to a tree she drew her knees up, rested the book against her legs and began to read, occasionally reaching forward to turn the roasting doves on their makeshift spits. Vito lay down amongst the long tufts of grass, picking at them in irritation, for Andre released faint "Ohs!" of surprise as she turned each page, or sighed repeatedly until finally, sitting up, Vito asked: "What?"

She had freed her hair from its plaits. It spilled over her face and down her shoulders in long, wavy tendrils and when he saw that, something worked inside him, something he could never have expressed: a ripple of nerves, a prickly warmth which caught him by surprise.

"Whenever I pick up the book, it tells me a different story," she explained.

"Impossible."

"Impossible as Ahi who become Pagi?"

"That was different. They were in disguise." And yet his curiosity was now piqued, and in spite of himself he asked her, "so what story does it tell you now?"

"Well, it tells me of a woman of the Ruach who was forced to flee from her lover who was a Paga."

Vito snorted and shook his head. "A likely story."

Andre glared at him. "More common than you would think. And this woman, she...she sailed out to sea, but a storm broke and she..." her eyes darted from left to

right as she read, her face glowing with sudden excitement. "Survived! She washed up on a beach."

"And? What happened next?"

"It doesn't say."

"What do you mean, it doesn't say? All stories have an ending. That's the whole point!"

"Well this one doesn't. Yet. But as I said, the book is full of surprises. If I read from it tomorrow, it may have an end."

Vito sank back down again upon the grass, his mind spinning. He had heard of Pageese magic, of how dangerous it was and how easily it could trick you, reel you in like a fish on a line and then ensnare you. "I don't want to hear any more of your stupid stories, Andre," he muttered. "What good is a story without an end?"

"Fine." She slammed the cover down. "And I suppose you don't want to eat, either?"

He sat up with a groan. "They're still my doves, remember?"

"Who cooked them?"

They ate in sullen silence, picking the delicate meat from the bird bones, wiping their greasy lips upon their fingers and then washing their hands in the river. And at last, Vito lay down amongst the shelter of boulders and trees, a warm breeze fanning his face and slept. The horrors of the day wormed their way into his dreams, and he was back once again in the chapel, lying beneath a fire in human form, screams and cries ringing in his ears. But he also dreamt of lithe, pale limbs lifting him from the flames, and he felt the sweep of someone's hair across his face. He reached forward, but his fingers grasped nothing but air.

PART TWO: THE MEARAHN DEPTHS

PART TWO: CHAPTER ONE
SPIRITS

Consciousness crept up on Moran - stealthy, remorseless. She opened her eyes to catch a blur of waves and sky, her face pressed into the wet grittiness of the beach, surf breaking over her bare feet. Her stomach pulsed and she brought up a mouthful of brine before rolling onto her back, her skin now almost blue with cold. High above, clouds scudded across a raw swathe of sky, chased by the biting wind which blew down from the north.

With a long, low groan she pushed herself upright, resting with her hands flat on the sand, her legs crossed before her. The sea was grey, crested with foam, whipped up by the storm which had driven her back onto the mainland and away from the Source Isles for which she had so desperately aimed. It were almost as if the spirits themselves had conspired against her.

Moran dug her hand around a small clutch of pebbles - polished smooth as glass - and turned them over in her palms before carefully throwing each one back into the sea. At least, she decided, her appearance ought to be enough to scare away any Pagi who might happen to stroll across the beach. The thick plaid of her dress was now ripped at the shoulder: loose, sodden and misshapen. Wind tugged at wet locks of hair, and she shook and trembled as the cold mined beneath her skin, burying deep within her body until she could no longer feel her fingers or toes. If she stayed here, she would die - her body washed out once more to sea, drifting beyond sight or memory. And so with an effort which seemed to wrench her limbs from their sockets she rose, turned, and dragged herself up towards the dunes which fluted off the beach above her and offered some hope of shelter.

A hollow amongst the sands staved off the worst of the wind. She fished around for driftwood, finding a few bare pieces on the beach and then concentrated on lighting a fire, splitting a piece of wood and stuffing the groove with dry, matted grass before working over it with a slim stick. The process seemed to take hours. The light was fading, and with it went the dregs of her strength. When a spark finally caught in the tinder, she could have wept. She transferred the precious flames to the driftwood and, as the fire caught hold, she stripped and laid her tattered dress before it to dry.

There would be no chance of catching anything to eat, she realised. The evening was drawing in and the sea was too wild. And so, lying naked on the sands as close to the fire as she dared, she drew an arm up beneath her head and fell into fitful sleep, with the break of waves and the crackling of flames for company.

She could not say what had woken her. Soft footfalls on the sand, perhaps, the sense of another presence. Moran stirred, moaned and rose, trembling. The fire had long since died away to red embers and the wind had picked up. Shivering, she tugged on her dress.

"You'd make the spirits blush, sister, lying there without a stitch on."

"Carin?" She craned into the shadows, picking out her sister's dark, sinuous outline. "How did you know I'm here?"

Carin leant forward and prodded at the cinders with a piece of wood. A few fine wisps and sparks spiralled upwards into the night air. She tapped her temple with a dirt-encrusted nail. "You know how."

"Spirits?"

"Amongst others."

Moran experienced a sudden surge of relief. At least she wasn't alone to face the perils of the mainland. Carin rose, and Moran stared up into her sister's face, into the sharp, angular features, the closely cropped dark hair, her eyes two gleaming slivers of jet. "Too bad I lack the skill, Carin." She drew her knees up in front of her and rested her head on them. "In fact, I've nothing left now."

"Self-pity doesn't become you, sister. Besides, you can't say we didn't warn you."

Carin reached above her shoulder, drawing out the trident she kept strapped to her back. A small eel dangled limply from one of its prongs. "I imagine you're hungry."

"Ravenous."

"Best get that fire started again, then."

They stoked up the charred fragments of driftwood, flames lapping around fresh tinder. Carin crouched down, her dress tucked about her thighs and twisted the trident over the rising heat, the eel hanging from one of its prongs. When it was cooked, she ripped it in two, passing half to Moran who sank her teeth straight into its salty, smoky juice. It slithered down her throat; warmth spread through her body, restoring energy and strength. Carin handed her a leather flask and she sipped from it, gasping as the sharp, fruity tang of alcohol burst across her tongue.

"Where...where did you get that?" she choked.

Carin shrugged. "Some old woman by the road - too blind to see me for a Ruach. She called it best summer liquor. I call it rancid bilberries. But it goes down all the same. So..." she leant forward, her chin cupped between rough, strong hands, her face half lit, half in shadow. "What happened?"

Moran sucked in a deep breath, releasing it in a long sigh. It was all too fresh, too painful to put into words. And yet find words she must, if she were to restore her sister's love.

"I ran." She shook her head, the shame rising within her like a sickness.

"She made you go?"

"No. I never even said goodbye. I...I left without a word." Tears caught in her throat. She swallowed them down, masking her grief with a bitter little laugh. "Her brother - he warned me. He was always good to me. Her whole family was. They're good people, Carin - the Pagi are not all animals."

Carin shook her head, stoking the fire with the butt end of her trident, provoking an angry blast of sparks. "You're blind, sister. They kill us. They maim, torture and persecute us. Enslave our children, humiliate our old men. They hate us."

"It's not true!" Fury entered Moran's voice. "You're as bad as they are if you can't see that - if you think they're all the same. That's how they think of us - that we're savage, barbaric, primitive, dangerous." Her voice shook under the strain of emotion. She'd gone too far and she saw it, registered the flash of indignation in Carin's eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered then. "You're not like that."

"Go on." Carin's tone was stony, unmoved. "Tell me your story."

Moran remained silent for a few moments, gathering her thoughts, listening to the crash and suck of waves as they hit the beach, the hissing of burning driftwood. "I saw what was happening, but I closed my eyes to it," she said at last. "Everyday brought new tales of executions, lynchings and hardships. Her family sheltered me as best they could. I taught languages well, they claimed, and above all else they valued knowledge. They left me the keys to their library, time to be with her. They saw our friendship blossom, saw no harm in it. I taught her Ruach, Ahi, even the antique languages - old Pagese, ur-Ruach. She was...she is a good student, ready to listen, to learn, all heart and ears."

Her words faltered, her memory straying to a time before the fall. Andre lying naked in her bed, a shaft of sunlight rendering her skin golden, her hair snaking over her

shoulders as she recited love poetry in old Pagese. The sudden sense of loss felled Moran like a blow.

"It was her brother, Estachien, who finally told me to leave. They could no longer protect us, he said. At night the town's people would surround the palace with torches in one hand, unsheathed blades in the other. They would demand the expulsion of any Ruach. And so, like an adulterer or traitor, I slipped away. I saved my own skin. I ran for the coast, sleeping by day in hedgerows, hidden, dirt smudged across my face for camouflage. At night I ran like a hunted beast, avoiding the lights and laughter of their villages until at last I smelt salt on the air. A line of rafts and coracles rested on the beach. I stole one out in the pale dawn light. I thought, if I could only make it to the Source Isles, hide amongst their rocks and forest, then perhaps word would reach me of new times, of better times. And then I would come back, search for her once more, beg her for forgiveness..."

"But the storm."

"Yes. The storm. I clung to the broken hull of my little boat until, all my energy sapped, I let go and gave myself up to the waves."

"The Golach commanded the storm."

"What?" Almost feverish with grief, she seized Carin's flask, gulping down a sour mouthful of liquor.

"The winds told him of your fall, sister. But he wants to hear it from your lips, as you have told me now. He offers you redemption."

"Redemption?" Moran snorted. "Nothing can repair my mistakes."

Carin shifted stiffly. "He considers your offence to have been against the Ruach, not Ol Adama."

"Against the Ruach? An offence? What business is it of his who I love?"

"It's his business if you bed the enemy, sister - the scum who killed our parents, our friends...I told you once before - bed them and forget them. It's a hollow victory but it's better than none. We shared this land with them once, we lived beside them as neighbours." Carin's dark eyes seemed to capture the fire's light and hold it. She rose, her back to Moran as she continued to speak. "It was their arrogance, their blindness, their magic, the filthy corruption of their arts which made them think they had the right to mistreat and kill us, to see in us animals, vermin. The spirits weep, sister." She turned around, her face streaked with tears, her lips quivering with rage. "And

you claim to love one of them?" Her fingers folded around the polished bronze of her trident. "I will spear her on this, as if she were an eel, if I ever set eyes on her."

"You will not, you ignorant, heartless bitch!"

The fury welled within: a hot, harsh seam of violence which she knew had lain, hidden but not dormant, for months. Rising, fists clenched into balls, she ran at her sister, knocking her off her feet. They landed amongst the dunes, punching, kicking, scratching blindly in the darkness, just as they had as children. Back then, their mother would settle such arguments with a few keen blows of her belt. But now there was no mother to punish her wild daughters, no father to shake his head in despair when they traipsed inside, all ripped clothes and split lips. Now there was only the night air, the breaking waves and the spirits who, Moran knew, were not on her side. Nor had they ever been. For, unlike every other Ruach, she lacked the gift to conjure them.

And so, her strength once more at an ebb, she surrendered at last to her sister's brute power, Carin's sheer size and hardened muscle overwhelming her until she lay, stretched out upon the sands, blood issuing from her nose and the air forced from her lungs. And at that, she laughed.

"What's so funny?" Carin growled, slumped against a dune, the fight now gone from her.

"Us. We never grow up, Carin. Do you think we'll still be doing this when we're a pair of old hags?"

"We'll not live that long, sister." Rising, she towered over Moran. Blocking out the moon's pale rays, she extended a hand and Moran took it, seizing Carin in an embrace, clinging to her, tears leaking from her eyes, mingling with the blood which streaked her face.

"What does the Golach want of me?" she whispered.

"I don't know, sister," Carin replied. "He told me only this - for there to be redemption, there must first be sacrifice."

Moran buried her face in Carin's shoulder, still weeping like a child. "Take me to him," she said at last.

PART TWO: CHAPTER TWO

FALLING

Dawn was rising by the time they broke camp and set off in land. The sky remained dark and pitched with menace over the sea, but a thin finger of red graced the mountain peaks of the Harars up ahead. Carin strode in front, trident strapped between her shoulder blades, her bare feet disappearing amongst the tall, fine grass blades of the plains.

"Come on, Moran!" She turned, her face wrapped in a scowl. "I'd have us out of Pagi territory before the light rises."

Perhaps, Moran thought wearily, she was still lost at sea: half dreaming, half drowning. But then her sister handed her a flask and she tasted sweet water, not brine. A light breeze picked up, whisking her hair, casting it into her eyes. It was all too real.

"Where is the Golach now?"

"In the caves at Mearah."

Moran stopped and stared at Carin. "In the Harars?"

"Where else would he be? It's our last refuge."

Moran craned her neck back, taking in the wild, bleak summits which towered over the plains, dull stretches of grass and scree clinging to their sides. Even now in mid-summer, dirty patches of snow still lay in gullies or the low troughs of cols. It was as desolate and unforgiving a place as she could imagine, but it remained a refuge for the Ruach. Up there amongst the mountain wastes were old friends and neighbours - many who had survived the days of terror. And, of course, amongst them reigned her king in exile: the Golach.

"Moran for the last time! I don't want to be climbing when night falls."

Biting her lip, she hitched up the tattered remains of her dress and ran. "So tell me," she panted, catching up with Carin, "which one of your spirits told you where I was?"

"They're not *my* spirits. They speak to us all. Well, all of us except you." She turned to Moran with a gaze which fell just short of pitying. "Perhaps you don't know how to listen."

"I've listened for them every day, sister. It's they who have abandoned me, not I them. Perhaps I'm simply not a Ruach. Perhaps I'm some...some changeling. Perhaps our mother..."

"Enough!" Carin snapped, her jaw set, her pace quickening as she pushed on across the plain. "I'll not hear that kind of talk, Moran, and you know it. You're enough of a Ruach to know who is worthy of respect."

"Well apparently on that score I fail too."

Carin lapsed into stony silence, chewing on her lips as if she were biting back words.

"Do you see our parents amongst them?" Moran asked. "Amongst the spirits?"

There was a long pause. Her sister appeared to be labouring beneath a weight, a deep, pressing burden. "Sometimes," she said at last.

"You could tell them...tell them I'm sorry," Moran said in a half whisper.

She hadn't really wanted Carin to hear that. The words had been addressed to herself as much as her sister. But then Carin said, "I already have done."

That was the only thing she regretted. Not the long, humid nights lying in Andre's arms. Not the days spent in study and lovemaking. No, for that she would apologise to no one - not even the Golach himself, were he to demand it of her. What she had shared had been a love so precious that its loss was akin to death itself.

But the knowledge that, as she had lain beside her lover one star soaked night, her mother had been hacked to death by murderous Pagi, her father hung in the street - their home ransacked of its treasures and then burnt to the ground, that was unbearable. And when the news had reached her, she had broken down, almost losing her mind to grief. That, she now realised, had been the moment when she knew that if she stayed with Andre any longer, it was not just her own life which she risked.

The plains seemed to dissolve into her tears. She would not allow Carin to witness her weakness. So, dragging her hands across her eyes, she asked, "So who else do you speak to, then? What are they like?" Taking in the raw emptiness of the plains with their long, slender grasses dancing on the dawn breeze, she shivered. "Are they here?"

"They come and they go. I hear them on the wind. Sometimes I see them." They approached a shallow brook which filtered down from higher ground, its waters sluicing around rocks and over pebbles. Carin knelt on the bank and lowered her leather flask into the stream to refill it.

Crouching beside her, Moran dipped her hand, keeping it beneath the icy flow. "Which ones brought you to me?"

Carin shrugged. "The Golach summoned the storm. It was he who brought you back. I merely listened. Voices whispered to me - some I recognised. I've heard them before. Some babbled in Ahi or Pagese. Those I ignored. Sometimes they are restless. They scream or howl. At other times they behave like children, playing tricks on me...hiding my belongings, or throwing things into my path." She squinted, her gaze fixed on the middle distance as she screwed on the cork of the flask.

Moran shuddered. "You make me almost glad I can't see them, Carin."

"That's blasphemy. And besides, they saved your life."

"Yes, but as you said, the Golach had more of a hand in that. And for what dismal purpose I cannot begin to imagine."

Carin gazed at her, her hard, dark eyes softening, betraying a brief lapse into compassion. But then the moment passed like a sudden glimpse of the sun through storm clouds and they pressed on, the ground steepening, their breath shortening.

Before them, the grass and plains gave way to treacherous slopes of scree and boulders, an occasional rowan or patch of broom hanging precariously on dried, withered roots. Hardened as Moran's feet were after a lifetime spent barefoot, she avoided the sharp edges of loose stones where possible, scrambling instead amongst the clusters of boulders, feeling for hand and footholds. It was exhausting. Her lungs fried, her arms and legs ached until they were numb. Sharp slabs of slate grazed and cut her fingers, dirt congealing beneath her nails. She gazed upwards to observe Carin perched on an outcrop above her, eyes closed, lips parted as if in conversation. Dragging herself up to meet her, she sank down beside her sister amongst clumps of yellowing, withered grass and seized the flask, almost crying out in relief as water hit her parched throat.

"They were here," Carin said.

Sweat ran into Moran's eyes, soaking through the plaid of her dress. But that body heat was soon lost to the cold, biting wind which seemed to weave its way beneath her very skin, whistling about her ears. She strained to catch the voices she knew had just ridden upon it but heard nothing. Just a phantom-like howl as air rushed between crevices and cracks in the mountainside.

"They told me it isn't far now, Moran. They will guide our way. The Golach fears ... he fears discovery and so our people move from cave to cave."

"He thinks the Pagi would find him up here?"

"The Pagi would go to the ends of the earth to catch him, sister. And it is only their own ignorance which has kept them from hunting him down so far. If they had ears to the spirits as we do - I mean as I do - he would not be so lucky."

"The spirits would betray him?"

"They are not our spirits, Moran. Though it pains me to say so, they belong to all of us - Pagi, Ahi, and Ruach alike. Even the church, which claims that one cannot know the spirits, even its followers are amongst them - the wraiths of Prefects, monks and sisters. Imagine that! How deaf they are. How blind..." She snorted in derision. "The spirits are the essence of those we have lost, regardless of race or nation. And one cannot take a good spirit from an evil man. Just as they were in life, so they are in death." She took the flask from Moran's hands and corked it. "Save it," she warned. "There is no water now until we reach the caves."

Moran thought of this as the dumb, wild wind whipped up her hair and shook her to her very core. Her sister was wrong. Andre had told her that the church believed in the spirits. But they would not give a name to them, refused to define them. Once again, she conjured Andre's image, now also spirit-like; her wit, curious beauty and warmth hardened to an essence in Moran's memory. She opened her mouth to speak but Carin was already rising and offered her a hand, hauling her upright. Frozen muscles screamed as she rose, and she found herself standing, sore and stiff, the vast plains stretched out below her and the Angust straits now calm and placid, sunlight glinting on their waves.

It took another two hours before Moran spied a jagged gash amongst the rocks, signalling one of the entrances to the Mearahn caves. They clambered over boulders and rubble and slipped inside, the solid walls of slate offering some shelter from the wind's bite.

"Where now?" She peered into the depths of the tunnel which trailed away into absolute darkness.

"We pray that we don't get lost," Carin replied grimly, already stalking away. Moran released a soft growl of irritation and then followed in her wake. Her sister's terse, tactless manner had always grated and sometimes that irritation spilled over into pure anger. But this was not a time for arguments. Here amongst the tangled knot of shafts and channels which ran deep within the mountain, conflict would only sap their strength. And the thought of staggering, half-starved and lost along long, unlit corridors of slate and basalt chilled her to the core.

At first, light filtered down through chinks and cracks above her head where the caves opened out onto the mountainside. But as they moved further in, the darkness seemed solid in its weight and she could hear nothing but the persistent thud of blood within her own ears. Aware of the mass of rock above her head she speeded up, almost crashing into Carin who let out an angry hiss. "Take care, can't you? There could be shafts beneath our feet for all I know."

She heeded the warning and slowed down, trailing her hand along the dry, crumbling wall, aware of the tap tap tap of Carin's trident as she checked for fault lines and breaks in the floor before her.

Moran did her best to quell a rising sense of dread as they continued for what seemed like hours. The caves sucked out all sense of time, all memory of light or fresh air, and when she spied at last a tiny pinprick of torchlight burning up ahead, she could have wept.

The brand burned in its bracket on a distant wall, the flames painful in their brightness, illuminating the craggy outline of tunnels leading off to right and left. More torches beamed away in both directions, fading into the void, and Moran thought she heard the distant murmur of voices from somewhere deep below them. "Which way?" she whispered.

"Neither," Carin replied. "These routes are traps set up by the Ruach to send unwelcome guests astray. Our path leads down."

"Down?" Try as she might, Moran could not see any other path. The rock was solid, the passages twisting away as far as she could see. Carin tapped once more upon the floor with the tips of her trident, the bronze ringing out against the rock. After a few moments, it gave out a different sound - a dull, hollow thud. Dropping into a crouch, Carin scabbled on the floor, pulling away a few loose rocks. Beneath them was a swathe of netting which she pushed aside, before levering up a pair of dry, dusty wooden planks.

A dank rush of air fed up from the caverns below and Moran's stomach lurched. For, hanging on bolts fixed into the stone of the floor, a hempen ladder swung below them. She peered over the edge. What appeared to be stars nestled in the darkness, thousands of tiny lights winking back up at them.

"What's that?" she whispered, awed.

"The earth's core glowing." Carin smirked. "Candles. Want to go first?"

Moran shook her head, now almost sick with exhaustion, hunger and fear. "You go."

"As you wish."

Her sister swung a leg over the edge, grabbed the sides of the ladder and disappeared down through the hole. Moran observed her, wrestling with a growing sense of dread. Carin revelled in such dangers, where she shunned them. The world was full of terrors enough without seeking more.

"Moran..." Carin's voice echoed up from the cavern below.

"Yes?"

"Pull the planks back over the hole when you come down."

Perfect. Not only was she to risk her life dangling from a manky old piece of string, she would also have to seal herself back into the darkness. "Alright," she yelled down.

Moran placed one tentative foot on the ladder. It seemed solid enough and so, her stomach now threatening to spill, she lowered herself onto the next rung. The bolts creaked and groaned, but they held. Gripping the rope with one hand, she hunted around for the planks above her, knuckles clenched and paling as she clung on in desperation, her palms slippery with sweat. She dragged one heavy piece of wood over her head, reached for the other and then stopped. Something didn't seem right. She thought she'd heard something: a faint tearing.

Panicking, she peered downwards but could not see Carin. The candles appeared to hover in the darkness, and she realised she had no idea how far above them she was. She took one last, desperate look up towards the surface. No one would notice that plank out of place, surely? Her grip was failing and if she held on for much longer, she risked plummeting from the ladder altogether. And so she carried on down.

"Moran, what are you doing up there?" Carin's voice seemed to emanate from the very air itself.

"Nothing. I'm coming." Perhaps she had imagined that light, ripping sound. Her nerves were on edge, that was for sure. She pressed on downwards, refusing to succumb to her fears, cursing herself for a coward. And that was when she heard it - it happened so fast she had no time even to scream, as the hemp coiled in on itself, lashing her in the face as she fell. She was weightless suddenly, her legs and hands grabbing uselessly at the air as if she might catch hold of it. The world rushed up to meet her and then all was silence.

PART TWO: CHAPTER THREE
THE GOLACH

Moran felt the pressure of hands against her back. Someone was holding her, and she was moving, gliding, weightless. She also felt cold - freezing, as if her blood itself had frozen. She shivered, shaking herself awake, aware of sounds condensed around her: the ripple and drip of water.

"For the spirits' own sake, Moran. Twice half-drowned in two days. Even by your standards of carelessness that's quite a feat!"

Was that her sister's voice which now echoed off the surrounding walls? Moran turned her head and received an earful of water. She coughed, spluttered and then spoke. "What happened?"

"What do you think happened? You fell and hit the pool below. Just be thankful they say it's deep."

She felt her sister's legs kicking away beneath her, frog-like as she ferried Moran across the surface. A light drifted past, its tiny flame flickering on the subterranean breeze. The candles *had* been floating she realised. Not on air, but on water! Surrounded by tiny pinpricks of light, she gazed up at the vaulted roof of the cave high above, stalactites looming into view and then fading back into the darkness as if the rocks themselves oozed blood or tears.

Carin slowed in pace and shifted, planting her legs on the pool's floor where it shelved up to meet dry rock. Pulling Moran through the last stretch of water, she hauled her onto the side. They both lay like fish washed up on a low tide, panting and shivering, mouths open as they sucked in the musty air of the cave.

"The ladder gave out," Moran gasped at last.

"You don't say. Come on." With a groan, Carin rose. "I'm so cold I can hardly feel my toes. If I lose any of them, I'll be taking some of yours."

"Charming." Moran allowed Carin to drag her to her feet and then they trudged on, clinging to each other for warmth, stumbling over the uneven surface of the cavern before turning down yet another long, torch-lit corridor which fed away from the pool. A warmer draft of air drifted towards them, bearing on it muffled shreds of

conversations and the homely scents of wine and roasting meat. Moran's heart kicked with sudden relief.

The tunnel fanned out into an arc at its far end and as they approached, two figures emerged from the shadows clad in plaid kirtles and tunics, bearing tridents, spears and wheel-shaped wooden shields.

"Well if it isn't the wayward daughters of Ariocho."

Carin stiffened. "We're here to see the Golach, Keles. Let us past."

But the guard to whom she had spoken took a step forward, standing before Moran, his lips a tight sneer. Now half faint with cold, weariness and hunger, Moran took in the tall, muscular frame, the shaved head and scorn-flecked eyes of her father's former friend. He stared back at her, his two companion guards flanking him on either side, waiting, watching. Drawing back his head, he hawked, spitting out a long trail of phlegm which whistled through the air and hit the ground at her feet. She backed away in disgust and he laughed.

"Pagi lover. The Golach ought to have drowned you like a rat."

"The Golach has his reasons for bringing my sister back to us, Keles." Carin positioned herself in front of Moran, her hand twisting behind her back, fingers curling around her trident. "He has his purpose, and who are we to question that?"

"Your sister is a traitor. You're a true warrior of the Ruach, Carin. Loyal. Strong. Don't risk that fine reputation of yours for her worthless sake."

In spite of her weakness, Moran felt fury and frustration unfurl within like a vicious pair of vipers. "It is you who shame our parents' memory, Keles. You were their friend, you swore to protect us not scorn us. And you had Pagi acquaintances too, lovers even before Ol Terenzo spread his poison amongst them."

"That was then, before the fall, you ignorant bitch. Those days are gone." He took another step closer, but Carin remained between them, her trident now drawn.

"Keles..." one of the guards placed a hand upon his shoulder and drew level tugging away her bronze helmet. Long, loose brown hair tumbled down about her shoulders, eyes the colour of amber catching Moran's gaze and holding it. "As Carin says, the Golach has summoned Ariocho's daughters. And who are we to question his orders?"

"Ida?" Recognising her childhood friend, Moran stretched out a hand in greeting, but received only a brief shake of the head, a folding of arms in response.

"That doesn't mean I accept what you've done, Moran. You renounced your own parents when you left them to live amongst the Pagi."

"They understood. And if they were here now, I know they'd forgive me."

"Believe that if it gives you comfort. Come, let's face the Golach - and, if need be, his wrath."

Moran was grateful then for the arm that Carin slid around her waist, for the sisterhood that still remained between them when all else had failed. Who were these people - Keles, Ida - to judge her? Of course they would claim that loyalty to one's people overran and outweighed all other types of love. That the "fall" - as they called it - the unleashing of Pagi hatred against the Ruach had created a rift between their two races that could never be healed. Hope lay only in the reclaiming of land that had been stolen from them - land that they had shared with the Pagi for millennia. And yet who amongst them, she wondered, had ever experienced anything like the passion she had shared with Andre? An emotion as painful as it was powerful. An awareness that, now the war had finally caught up with her, now she had been ripped from her lover's side, she no longer cared for her own safety, for her own life or, she admitted with a glowing sense of shame, for her own people. The only crime she acknowledged was to have run when she did, to have left her lover and fled to the coast. But not to have done so could have endangered Andre herself.

Keles released a snort of contempt and then set off down a stone-hewn flight of stairs which plunged into the lower systems of caverns and caves.

"Follow him," Ida said, her tone chill and flat. For a fleeting moment, Moran recalled a kiss she had shared with Ida: an earlier passion which had flared for just a few months, intense enough to have burnt itself to dust. They had been young, on the cusp of adulthood: two, maybe three years before the fall. It had been an awakening of emotions as yet untried, untested -- a faulting, fumbling exploration of each other's bodies which had left them both breathless, surprised, as if they had crossed a border into a hidden world. That was before Ida's colt-like limbs and supple grace had attracted the attention of the village boys - Pagi and Ruach - leaving Moran confused and stunned.

Carin was already disappearing down the torch-lined staircase, still gripping her trident in one hand, her broad shoulders and arms swinging as she moved. She disappeared amongst the shadows and Moran followed, aware of Ida trailing close behind. As if she could turn back now, swim across the pool, clamber the walls of the cavern, haul herself through the cavity above it and then make her way back, alone and half famished down the mountainside!

The drop to her right plummeted to unseen depths. To her left, smaller caves and tunnels punctured the rocks. Many of these were occupied by Ruach families, their few belongings scattered in untidy heaps, the wreckage of past lives and hopes. She saw pots and pans, children's toys, books, candlesticks - objects gathered up in frantic, fear-fuelled panic, shoved hastily into bags or clutched to chests, the Ruach having run with whatever came to hand as they escaped the knives, the spears and the swords of their Pagi neighbours.

There were also items of more esoteric or ornamental value, once the pride of place in a study or library, now dumped carelessly on the stone floor of the caves - astrolabes and clocks, telescopes, globes which span on tilted axes, lutes, spectacles, richly woven rugs and even, she noted with a pang of sadness, sundials - so useless down here in the Mearahn depths. It all seemed a mockery of home, a desperate attempt to recreate a life which was now so utterly lost: annulled by time, by the inhuman world of the caves, and by Pagi violence.

She was aware of people watching as she passed, of eyes peering at her through the darkness. Sometimes she caught a glimpse of children: matted, straggling hair snaking around a dirt stained face, their eyes an open question. The few old men and women who had struggled up the mountainside now sat on the steps, some smoking pipes, others simply leaning, heads against the rock, their brows twisted and furrowed as they struggled to grasp just why they were here, underground - what had brought them to this place. From somewhere amongst the shadows, a woman's voice screamed: "Traitor!"

Moran shuddered and hurried on, catching up with Carin as she reached the base of the stairs.

"Stop!" Carin said, her voice hushed in sudden awe. "Look!"

They had reached a natural amphitheatre, the size of a Page's palace or market square. Every surface - walls and floor - winked and glittered with light. Moran noticed that torches had been cleverly hidden amongst folds and clefts in the rock, spilling light over the natural gems which lay clustered like so many galaxies embedded in the stone.

"Seams of gold and diamonds," Carin whispered. "Beautiful." She turned to Moran. "But useless to us now. If only we'd known of it before the fall."

"Who would want to prize them out of here anyway? It would be a crime to strip this place of its treasure."

Carin gazed at her, one eyebrow raised and then shook her head. "You're such a dreamer, Moran."

Ida stepped down to join them. "You see, Moran, if you'd not been bedding the Pagi, you'd have known about all of this long ago."

Moran opened her mouth to speak, but then thought better of it. There was little point in provoking Ida - especially now, when she was to face the judgement of the Golach himself. And so she allowed the gibe to pass and waited, and waited. There was no sign of Keles - he had disappeared off somewhere in the darkness - and so she stood, her mind at swim, her thoughts restless and frantic as she weighed up all the possible consequences of her audience with the Spirit Master.

After some time, she was aware of the padding of feet, the murmur of voices, and realised that Ruach families had joined them, settling down around the fringes of the cavern. In the semi-light of torches and gemstones she picked out some familiar faces - old neighbours and friends. She bit her lip and focussed on the floor, avoiding the interrogative stares, the anger, worst of all the confused, questioning expressions of those she had once known and loved.

She caught sight of the Golach's shadow before she saw the man himself. Clutching a burning brand, Keles had re-entered the makeshift courtroom behind the Spirit Master, and the old man's tall, stooping frame was cast into relief, lengthened across the stone floor of the cave. He still bore the ceremonial robes which she recalled from childhood visits to the temple - before it had been smashed and plundered by the Pagi. Loose, flowing swathes of red silk enveloped his frail body, while a crimson cap covered thin, greying wisps of hair. His eyes, haunted and myopic, peered from a face wrinkled beyond repair.

"They're here, your Greatness." Waving the brand before him, Keles indicated Moran and Carin. The Golach peered forwards and then edged towards them.

"Daughters of Arioeh?"

Moran shuddered. His voice was always so resonant - a chord rather than a plucked melody, as if he were speaking with more than one tongue.

"We're here, Master of Spirits."

"Ah." Again that harmonic cluster of sounds, receding to a whisper. "Come closer."

She was before him now, peering down into those fading blue eyes, aware of Carin hovering to her right. Instinctively, she knelt.

"Do you know how we once dealt with those who fraternised with our enemies?"

Trembling, she shook her head. "No, Sire."

"They were staked out on a mountainside. Fodder for the eagles." He laid a twisted hand upon her shoulder. "But rise. We are here to offer redemption, not to punish."

Shaking with sudden relief, she got to her feet, Carin's earlier words echoing in her ears: *for there to be redemption, there must first be sacrifice.*

"You seem to have lost your way, child."

"I fell in love, Spirit Master."

She caught the snorts of derision, the quiet hisses of contempt and chose to stand proud. What had been done could not be undone. Nor would she ever wish to change it.

"And was not the love of your own people enough?"

"It was love of a different sort, your Greatness. Love the like of which I have never known." She caught Ida's eye but the soldier turned away, her lips curled into a sneer.

"It was the semblance of love you experienced, Moran. A mere glimpse of sunlight on a cloudy day, no more. The Pagi have long held us in contempt. You are a fool to believe otherwise. What they seem to give us with one hand, they always take with the other. Ol Terenzo's purges are but one episode in a sorry history of crimes against our people." He shook his head. "But you knew, I think, where your true love lay. You returned to us."

She threw Carin a glance of surprise. "I believed it was you who conjured the storm which brought me back here, Sire."

His smile did not reach his eyes. "Yes. Yes I did. But you could have given yourself up to the waves. Instead, you swam for shore. You saved yourself, as the spirits told me you must."

"The spirits?" She quelled the rising strain of doubt in her voice.

"Yes. They have brought me hope, Moran. And you are a part of that hope."

"Me?"

His eyes seemed to lose their haze, now burning with an impossible brightness. "Yes, Moran. They offer me a chance, a belief that our lands might be restored to us, that we might claim them for our own, that we may even live without the Pagi and their persecution."

She could not have said why it then was that a sudden chill claimed her heart, as if a fist of ice had wrapped itself around the organ and was squeezing it tight. Trembling, she struggled to breathe. "What do they intend for me, Greatness?"

"They tell me that the Ahi have arrived in these lands in search of someone - someone so precious to them that they will do anything to get him back."

He took a step towards her and his breath flickered across her face when he spoke, musty and dry with age. "The one they call the Firefarer is here. A living vessel of destruction. And you, with your eloquent tongue and your gift for languages, you will find this child and persuade him to join us. You will go back amongst the Pagi - as you love them so well - you will search for him and you will bring him to us."

"Your Greatness, this is no redemption. You are commanding her to her death!" Carin had pushed before her now, standing between her and the Golach. "Alone amongst the enemy? Moran will not survive such a mission."

The smile he threw them was no longer that of a benign conjuror of spirits, but the tight-lipped grimace of a sly old man. "Which is why you will accompany her, Carin. Her sin has stained you both, after all. Yes. The two of you will venture out amongst the Pagi. You will root out this child, and you will bring him back to us. And our enemies will answer for their crimes. With fire."

PART THREE: WARVUM

PART THREE: CHAPTER ONE
ARTEMISIA'S STUDIO

Muna's arms screamed from the exertion of rowing. She leant back into the stern of the coracle, allowing the tiny craft to drift and bob over waves which seemed gentle and playful after the terrifying crash and fall of the open sea. Pensive, Hori huddled in the prow looking old beyond his years.

She had told him nothing of his uncontained, destructive fury, of the incineration of Taua and her warriors, or of their father's death. He had slept for an entire day until she finally dragged the boat up onto the shingle of the Source Isles. At last, as she wrapped him in seal furs, he stirred. She raised his head, trickling sweet water into his mouth before he passed out for a second time. When he finally came round they were out to sea once more, and now he seemed watchful, sealed within his own thoughts, as if he were somehow aware of what had passed and was struggling to reconcile himself with their fate.

Seagulls bleated and cawed. She watched as they swarmed above the deck of a small fishing vessel which was sailing alongside them. Leaning on the boat's rail, a boy of the Pagi peered down at her, his skin wind-tanned, his eyes a liquid brown. He blew her a kiss and she looked away, her face hot with embarrassment and confusion. Picking up the oars once again, she twisted around to observe a small harbour that was busy with boats, its quays lined with colourful squat dwellings. Drawing on her last dregs of strength, she rowed to shore.

Muna steered the coracle through the medley of four-masted carracks and small barques, avoiding the curious gazes of fishermen and sailors, aware of men shouting and speaking a fluid, melodic tongue which was not her own. She brought the small boat up beside a sea-battered flight of stairs which led to the quay above, their surface slimy with sea-weed and plastered with barnacles. Hopping out, she uncoiled a tattered stretch of rope and secured the boat to an iron ring. Hori stood stiffly, his eyes wide and uncertain. She offered him her hand, lifting him onto dry land before gathering their few belongings in a rough, hessian sack - a leather skin containing fresh water, a pair of seal skins and some fish hooks. Then she climbed the steps with Hori in tow, unsure as to where to go or what to do. At least she could catch some

fish, and perhaps a stream would provide fresh water. Other than that, her one hope was to get far enough in land to hide from the Ahi.

And so it was with shock and near despair that she caught the gruff tones of men and women speaking in words she recognised as she neared the top of the stairs. "Keep down!" she whispered to Hori who shrank below the wall, pale and fearful.

Muna risked a single glance at the quayside and saw all she needed to. As many as ten Ahi stood grouped in a loose circle clutching axes, nets and broadswords, their faces and upper chests blackened with tattoos, their lower bodies swathed in fur and seal skins. They appeared to be arguing amongst themselves, pointing in different directions, shouting and yelling, ignoring the sailors and ships' clerks who passed them on the quay. Two burly Pageese fishermen lumbered over to them, gesturing back towards an Ahi long ship which, Muna now saw to her horror, lay anchored just beyond the harbour entrance. The fishermen were greeted with rough shoves and slaps and eventually they backed away, too intimidated to risk a public brawl.

Muna slunk down out of sight, taking in the chaotic traffic of fishing vessels and sailing boats below. She was being watched, she realised. An old sailor peered up at her, his watery, sky-blue eyes set deep in a weather-tanned, wrinkled face. Slowly coiling a length of rope around one arm, his gaze passed to the Ahi above her. She shook her head, raising a finger to her lips. The old man grinned, revealing a mouth bereft of teeth, and then nodded. After a while he laid down the coil and tiptoed his fingers along the rail of his ship in imitation of walking. Muna turned and risked another glance onto the quayside. There was no sign of the Ahi.

She smiled at the old man who winked back in return. Then, hauling Hori to his feet, they made their way up the steps. Sea folk thronged the wharf: fishwives crying out their wares, young boys crossing barefoot with rods and nets slung over their shoulders, mariners and merchants bartering and bragging. More people were gathered in one place than she had ever seen in her life. Instinctively she threaded an arm around Hori's shoulders, drawing him close. Here, she was certain, there would also be cutpurses and thieves, or men who might seek to harm for pleasure. And of course there were her own people - the Ahi, whose intent she could only guess at. But no one seemed to take any notice of either her or her brother as they wound their way amongst the rippling pools of people. Perhaps, she thought with some relief, the best place to become lost was amongst crowds such as these.

A narrow alley led away from the quays, snaking between houses which almost pressed together, their upper floors jutting out over the road. The confused rush of conversations, the reek of rotting fish, the mad bustle of the harbour - it all faded away as they passed into the darker, quieter back streets of the town.

"Where are we going, Muna?"

She squeezed Hori's hand. "I don't know yet. The Ahi are here already, Hori. We need to find somewhere to hide."

"Why didn't Da come with us?"

Her heart plummeted like a sunk stone. "He's dead, Hori."

Hori's face crumpled and he halted suddenly. "Did I do it?"

Bending over him, she stroked his hair. "No, Hori. You didn't. You tried to protect him. You were very brave, but now ... now we have to find somewhere safe. So try not to think about it. Be brave again for me. Please?"

He nodded, choking down tears, his face as sunken and mournful as an old man's. "We need Da."

"We'll manage. We have to. Come on." She succeeded in dragging him a little further down the alley and then stopped, froze, the hair on her arms and neck rising. For as they turned a corner, she saw the Ahi warriors up ahead. She made to turn, their shouts and calls ringing in her ears: "They're here!"

"It's the Firefarer and his sister!"

"Catch them!"

Hori was already running, his bare feet pumping the cobbles as he shot away. Heart racing, breath shortening, she followed, houses and shops reduced to a blur as she fled past them. Behind her, the Ahi yelled out her name, muttering threats and pleas for them to stop, but she would not. She could not. And as she followed her brother back out onto the sunlit quays, she pushed against those who crossed her path, ignoring their angry complaints, aware of Hori disappearing amongst the crowds.

"Hori!" Desperation threatened to overwhelm her as she fought against the tide of people. He had gone, was nowhere to be seen, and behind her she caught the furious, menacing growls of the Ahi.

"Hori!" Again she called his name but he had disappeared without trace. Now frantic, her thoughts tipped over into madness. A hand shot out from the crowd, gripped her upper arm and tugged, pulling her towards a low, half-opened doorway. Muna struggled, desperate to tear herself from this new, unseen threat. Half yanked

off her feet, she twisted and turned but was dragged inside a dark, smoky interior. The door slammed shut behind her. The noises of the street faded away, distant and muted. Lips pressed to her ear hissed and spoke in strangely accented Ahi - "Keep quiet, child!"

Wildly, Muna gazed around the room, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. Stacks of paintings lay piled in corners, some resting against furniture, others hanging crookedly on smoke-singed plaster walls. Nestling amongst the mess of canvases and parchments were statues carved from wood and stone - some of men, women and children, others representing animals: dogs, cats, horses, even some exotic creatures that she did not recognise, almost human in aspect save for their long, curling tails.

Standing amongst them all was a strange old woman, so frail and bent with age that Muna could not believe she had strength enough to haul in strangers from the street. A tattered piece of cloth encased her wizened, time-worn face, and she wore a simple, shapeless smock plastered with paint stains. "You look for boy?"

Muna nodded, surprised to hear her own tongue spoken by a Paga. "Yes. He's my brother."

"Your brother?" The old woman eyed her curiously, without malice. "Why they seek you - your people? What you do?"

"Nothing. They just - we ran away."

"You run? From home? Why?"

A half-told story might save her further questions, Muna realised. "They killed our father. Where's my brother?"

The old woman's face softened. She raised a gnarled old hand and stroked it down Muna's face. "Poor children. Fatherless. Motherless too?"

Muna nodded.

"Your brother - he upstairs. In studio. Come. Come. You hide here while they pass. The father killers. They not know you're here."

"You're sure?" Muna hesitated. It was all too strange - this ancient artist, her dark little hovel of a house. She had heard her parents speak of the Pagi and their enchantments - how they could breathe life into words, to music, to art, how they could pull phantoms from the very air and seal them in their craft. But outside in the town her enemies lurked, waiting to ensnare Hori, to make him bend to their violent will. They would kill her for a traitor too, she realised, if they caught her. And so, what choice did she have?

The old woman hovered at the base of a rickety ladder, apparently sensing her doubts. "I sure. They pass by. But you must wait. Come." She beckoned. "Your brother frightened. Want to see you."

She hitched up her smock and clambered up the slim wooden rungs which creaked and groaned under foot. Muna followed, passing through a loft trap into an attic space which was as light and airy as the room below had been dark. The ceiling sloped at a steep angle down to the floor itself and she caught a glimpse of rooftops and clouds through a wide skylight. Here too, the room was littered with half-finished canvases and sculptures, an easel set at their heart. Muna spied movement amongst a stack of frames and Hori wormed his way out from underneath them and flung his arms around her.

"You're safe!" she gasped. Sagging with relief, she turned to the old woman. "Thank you!"

"You are beautiful children." Again, she laid a time-twisted set of fingers to Muna's cheek. "Hair like midnight. Skin like fired earth. I love beautiful things. I paint them. I draw them. I remake them. In this way, I keep the beauty. It not go." She narrowed her eyes, as if preparing a mental sketch of Muna. "I save you. Now, I paint you. Yes?"

A spark of fear prickled its way up Muna's spine, but she dismissed it. The old woman had offered them sanctuary of a sort. What harm could a portrait serve? Besides, she thought, no one had ever called her beautiful before. The Ahi, they found her freakish. Sixteen summers and still no tattoos to show for it? A face bare and unornamented - she should cover it in shame. And yet here amongst the Pagi such things did not matter. She need not wish herself brave enough to have earned her ink. And so she found herself nodding.

"Is good then." The painter extended a hand and Muna took it. "My name, Artemisia. And you?"

"Muna. This is my brother, Hori."

"So, Muna, Hori. Sit, please, while I sketch. Will take a little time. And then you may go. Your enemies pass by."

She drew up two wooden chairs and placed them before the easel. Muna sat down and gestured to Hori to join her, but he turned away. "It's alright, Hori. Artemisia is just going to draw us. She saved us from the Ahi. We should do as she asked."

"I don't want to."

"Hori, please."

"No."

Muna sighed. "He's a stubborn boy. And sometimes, he's very stupid."

Hori stuck his tongue out at her and folded his arms. Muna laughed, and then realised that was the first time in days that she had felt anything approaching happiness.

"Is no problem," Artemisia said, dipping a quill in a large pot of ink. "He change his mind, I think. First, I sketch. Then, I paint. Please, sit straight, fold your hands before you - yes that's right. Try not move. I be quick."

Artemisia raised the quill and put it to a swathe of canvas stretched across the easel. As she did so, Muna shivered. It were as if she had been touched, as if an invisible hand had run its fingers through her hair. Surely this was her imagination taunting her, the stories of the Pagi plaguing her thoughts? "How did you learn to speak Ahi?" she asked, seeking to push her fears aside.

"They come here, your people. Sometimes I paint them. In turn, they teach me their words. See?" She pointed to a painting of an Ahi warrior, his fierce face peering out at Muna from the canvas, his eyes burning with an intense fury, his lips open as if in mid-speech.

"Please," Artemisia continued. "Sit still."

Her stomach knotted into a ball, Muna did as she was bid. Again, that peculiar frisson, the sensation one might have at the onset of a sea storm when the very rocks and trees seemed to sing. It were as if the air around her was being etched, inscribed with an invisible power. She found that she could not turn her head. She stared at Artemisia, panic stricken, but the old woman continued to sketch, her tongue hovering on the corner of her lips as her quill scratched at the canvas.

"Artemisia?" Muna tried to speak, but her lips wouldn't move, the name sealed behind them.

Hori had risen, was pointing to her, his eyes wide with fear. "Muna, where are you going? Don't leave me, Muna!"

She didn't understand him. But she felt that she had somehow grown lighter, was less herself, unable to move, sealed within a strange element: an element no kin to fire or water, to air or earth, but rather to something illusive, not borne of reality, and she realised then that Artemisia was sealing her within magic. She saw the scattered paintings and sculptures in a different light now, understood the anger in the Ahi warrior's eyes, recalled the twisted, tortured poses of those portrayed in the room

below. Artemisia smiled as she shaded in her outline with colour, and with every stroke of the brush Muna became less flesh and blood, more paint and canvas as she was bound within the picture.

"I keep your beauty, Muna," Artemisia whispered. "I keep it all for myself."

As the life drained from her, ink ran in its place. And she had just enough time to hear Hori's scream, to feel the air grow hot, and to recall her father's dying words: "You see what this is, Muna. Control it."

PART THREE: CHAPTER TWO
THE CARTOGRAPHER

Muna could never quite describe what happened next. The air grew unbearably hot - so hot that paint melted on the canvasses around her, pooling in slow, fat drops onto the floor. Hori was screaming, her vision grew faint, the room slipped into a dizzying spin around her head. And then she was no longer in Artemisia's studio at all. She had travelled beyond it, was above the town, above the lands of the Pagi and Ahi, floating over the sea, spiralling ever upwards until at last she was amongst the stars. They soared and looped around her and she amongst them, a furious wave of darkness succeeded by a surge of light.

But then, suddenly, that all stopped, and she felt herself tugged downwards, as if unseen hands were clutching at her legs and feet, pulling her towards the earth. She sped through clouds, over rooftops and she was back once again in the cluttered little attic, drawing in desperate mouthfuls of air. She was aware that the heat had lost its intensity, that in fact the room seemed cool, yet in even greater disarray. Statues lay overturned and upended. She caught the ashy, acrid scent of burning wood and saw that the easel bore singe marks and that smoke was now drifting upwards from Artemisia's limp, lifeless body. She lay beneath the wreckage of her canvas, her head cloth loose and smouldering, strands of grey hair shrivelled and shrunk from the heat. A length of rope coiled around her neck, her lifeless fingers clutching at it as if still prising it from her throat. And standing above her, a tarred end of the cord still in his hands, was the old Pageese sailor Muna had seen earlier in the harbour.

Hori squealed, leaping at her with outstretched arms and knocking her from the chair. She landed amongst a shattered pile of portraits with her brother on top of her, and he clung to her for a few moments, his skinny arms and legs twisted around her own.

"Muna! You vanished! I thought you were gone!"

"I'm back now," she breathed.

"The man killed the bad lady. He strangled her."

"I know, Hori." She sat up, keeping him in her lap. "Thank you," she mouthed in Ahi to the fisherman.

With a strained, toothless grin, he walked two fingers through the air, and she realised that he must have followed her. He pointed to Artemisia's prone body, and then to the chaotic mess of paintings and sculptures.

"I know," Muna whispered. "I understand now."

The old man extended a hand and she took it, allowing him to drag her to her feet, his grip warm and rough. He uttered a few words in Pagesese, but she shook her head. "I don't speak your language."

Shrugging, the old man beckoned towards the loft trap. Muna nodded, pulling Hori along behind her, still shaky as she descended into the lower room. Something plagued at the fringes of her confused, shattered thoughts. The fisherman must have broken Artemisia's spell when he strangled her. But the room had been thick with another power - with that of the Firefarer's destructive fury. And yet here was Hori, still conscious, displaying none of the exhaustion which usually followed such an outburst.

"Hori," she whispered up to him, stopping on a lower rung. "Did you get angry back then, when Artemisia tried to trap us?"

"Yes." He peered down at her through the gloom. "I thought she would make you disappear forever."

She searched the dark wells of his eyes, but read nothing in them. Perhaps, she thought with sudden hope, he was beginning to control his terrible gift.

They stepped down into the dim little room below with its dusty paintings and sculptures. How she wished she could set them free: all those children, all the men and women, all the animals entombed in paint, in wood and in stone. With a few shuddering creaks of wood the old man dropped down, supple and spritely in spite of his worn, weathered appearance. Muna was now aware of shouts and a rush of voices out in the street, of fists thumping on the door, and then it flew open, a shaft of light slicing through the haze and dust. She raised her hand to her brow, shading her eyes against the brightness as a group of Pagi spilled into the room - sailors and fishwives for the most part - their faces flushed with fury. They pointed upwards at the studio, babbling in Pagesese, the wild melodies of their language confusing her further.

The fisherman's response was explosive. Putting his hand to his heart, he then wrapped his arms around Muna and Hori to shield them as he drew them through the crowd. Against whom, Muna wondered, was their anger directed? Surely they would not defend the witch, who had ensnared so many with her twisted art? But as more

people surged in off the streets and climbed the ladder to the studio, the old man grew agitated, hurrying Muna and Hori away towards the end of the quay where an old nag of a horse stood tethered to a battered cart. Muna flung one last desperate look behind her, taking in the thin trail of smoke curling upwards through the sky light of Artemisia's studio.

The Pagi were turning now, muttering and calling, some running in their direction. The fisherman raised a tarpaulin on his cart and they climbed beneath it, squirming between old lobster pots and nets, the stench of rotten fish overpowering. Hori stretched out his arms to her and she drew him close, clutching his thin, frightened frame as the fisherman cracked his whip and the cart jolted into motion. Then they were bouncing over cobbles, sliding violently amongst the traps and crates, nets catching around their feet, their bodies thrown upwards and then slammed back down as they careered away from the wharf. But the Pagi were growing distant - their shouts and screams ever fainter. Muna rolled onto her back, closed her eyes and allowed herself to breath.

Beside her, Hori released his grasp, his face still taut and strained as he shuffled forward on his belly and butted the tarpaulin aside with his head. A fine stream of salt air stung Muna's cheeks and lips, and she pulled herself up beside him in order to peep out at the passing streets and houses. They were different to those lining the quays: many-tiered and dripping with stucco reliefs, some fronted with gardens, with fountains, wide, decorative arches and, she observed with a shudder, with statues. This, Muna realised, must be a wealthier district of the town - the homes of merchants and clerks, perhaps of Pagi elders or priests. Did they have such people amongst them?

And then at last they began a steady climb, leaving the town behind them. She stared down at the sea lapping at the distant harbour, tiny specks of boats bobbing upon its waves. The sun crested the horizon before sinking, leaking shades of fire, and those sedate, pleasant houses gave way at last to forested hillsides, to the lush greens of trees, the base yellow of a dirt track, the colours merging and deepening as dusk fell. She reached for Hori, pressing her fingers to his chin and tilting his head towards her. He smiled at her, his teeth nipping at the darkness, a curious blaze of excitement at play in his eyes. She felt it too, for the first time since their father's death, their escape to this land of strange enchanters, artists and fishermen. Not fear, not

desperation, not even the grief of exile. She felt alive, as if her body resonated to a melody she could not hear.

"We're going to see the world, Hori," she whispered.

He yelped in excitement and they clung together beneath the tarpaulin as the cart bumped its way into the unknown.

She must have fallen asleep. The tarpaulin rustled above her head and was pulled back to reveal a night sky brimming with stars. A fine breeze whipped her hair about her eyes as she rose. Hori lay, curled silently amongst the pots and nets. She shook him awake and he sat up without complaint, his eyes smudged with sleep, his hair lank and tousled.

Now haggard with tiredness, the old fisherman stood at the side of the cart, his eyes ringed with shadow. He beckoned to her and she groaned, stretching out her stiff, sore limbs before helping Hori down onto the road. They were amongst a series of rough, low-roofed dwellings, which reminded her of the home she had shared with her father and brother on their lonely island. In place of turf, however, these buildings were tiled, their walls constructed of pale stone. Candles winked invitingly through tiny chinks of windows.

The old man ushered them forwards - she turned to Hori, but the boy seemed somehow less furtive, more certain, curious of his surroundings rather than fearful. That gave her hope. She waited for their guide to swing back the door of one of the cottages before crossing its threshold.

Candles cast a scant yet cheerful light. A man of middle years sat alone at a low table nursing a pot of beer between grimy, powerful hands. His hair, thinning and dark, stretched down to his shoulders, and he wore the work-stained shirt and ripped breeches of a farm labourer. He glanced up as they entered, his features sallow yet handsome, his dark eyes intense and mournful.

Behind him a fire burnt in a simple hearth, a hare roasting above it on a spit. A few objects rested against one of the walls - a spade, a scythe and a couple of barrels. Clay pots and pewter plates lined the shelves of a dresser on the opposite side of the room. All was bare and simple - no ornaments, books or pictures to hint at hidden magic.

None of the stuffy, overpowering reek of enchantment which she now realised had wafted through Artemisia's studio like the stench of rotting meat.

"Greetings to the Firefarer and his sister." Rising, he wiped his hands on his breeches. Muna froze: wary and fearful. Not only was a Paga speaking near perfect Ahi, but he knew who they were. How stupid she had been to place her trust in the fisherman! Seizing Hori's hand, she turned for the door.

"Wait. Please!" The man spoke with sudden urgency. "I won't hurt you. But there are many out there who will, so please sit down, warm yourselves, take a slice of hare to fill your empty bellies."

She turned around. "I have already trusted one Paga too many. How do I know you are not the same?"

He nodded, deep in thought. "You have the right of it. A wise person would not trust any of us. But if my aging uncle here had wished to cause you grief, he would have done so already. And I am of his blood. Moving amongst the Pagi is like sailing through a storm. You may reach land, if you have the wit and luck to do so. But at any moment your boat could founder, and you will be cast beneath the waves. So choose your allies with care, girl. I see your brother has already learnt this lesson."

She turned in surprise to see that Hori had seated himself at the man's table.

"I've never eaten hare," he said.

"In that case it will be my honour to serve the Firefarer his first joint."

"My name is Hori."

"And mine is Hieronimo. And your ancient rescuer's name is Ranzo."

The old man slumped down, dogged with exhaustion, and poured himself a mug of beer. Hieronimo leant forward, one elbow resting on the table and whispered artfully to Hori as if they were conspiring. "And your suspicious sister? What is her name?"

"Muna." Hori shot her a malicious little grin.

She hovered on the threshold, torn between the night and its lonely road, and Hieronimo's cottage with its promise of food and rest. "How do you know who we are? And where did you learn our language?"

"Look, why don't you at least sit down? If it makes you feel better, I'll leave the door open. You can run anytime you wish. But your brother seems intent on eating his hare and I'd guess you've not had a decent meal yourself in days. What provisions you might have had you've lost already, I see."

With a pang of despair she realised he was right. She must have left their skins and fishhooks in the artist's studio when they fled. What kind of protection could she hope to offer Hori now? Weariness and her stomach won out. She slumped down at the bench, and her host threw her a relieved smile.

"In answer to your questions, I used to sail alongside my uncle out of Warvum - that is the town he tells me you rowed to today." He pulled two mugs from the dresser, filling them from a barrel with what she took to be dirty water. "I was also a cartographer. I made it my business to explore the wild coastline of your own country. And back then, there was regular trade between your people and the Pagi. They had seal skins and pelts, we had crops and fruit."

He put one pot before her and she sniffed at it, wrinkling her nose at its sourness. "Small beer," he said, observing her face. "It's all I have, I'm afraid."

Sitting opposite her, he smiled as she grimaced at the beer's bitter, rancid taste. Beside her, Hori made retching sounds, pretending to be sick. "Hori," she warned. "We're guests."

"It's alright." Hieronimo offered her a lazy smile. "He'll get used to it. But to return to your question, there was talk back then of the Firefarer. Of how one might emerge in a generation if at all. Of how he could level whole cities at a glance. And when the molten rivers of the fire mountain began to steal land from your people, they looked to our lands with envy. I could see their intent. They began to search for the next Firefarer. They spoke of using his powers."

He frowned and swigged down a mouthful of beer. "I sailed when I saw which way the tide was turning. Just in time, as it happened. Soon the raids began, and I thought it safe to move in land. Particularly as my art had stirred up certain enmities between our peoples already."

She shivered, recalling the horrors of Artemisia's painting. "Your art."

"Yes. Many of us have such gifts, if we choose to use them. Even Ranzo crafts his nets the better to farm the sea. Ranzo..." he turned to the old man who was nodding off, his nose pitching into his pot of beer. Ranzo shuddered awake. "Ranzo, *terese welle io aby gospara maren, ano?*"

The old man slid his head up and threw Muna a sly glance. "*Ano. Rovnivo mysli mio virintem charem.*" He laughed then, tears leaking from the edges of his eyes, and Muna caught herself smiling without understanding the joke.

"He says the competition believe him to be a great sorcerer," Hieronimo said, also laughing, and he slapped the old man on the shoulder. "Not all Pagi put their gifts to foul purpose, Muna. Artemisia was a great artist - but her own powers had corrupted her. The people of Warvum adored her work. She brought fame to the town. But their admiration blinded them to its real meaning. And that is why you endured their wrath today, if what my uncle tells me is true. Artemisia had grown to worship art above life. But for many of us, art is mere play, nothing worse. And my maps - well, they were special in their own way, as you may well imagine."

Rising, he crossed the room and raised the lid from the second barrel, which contained neither beer nor grain, but scrolls of parchment. He took one out and spread it across the table. Muna peered down at what she realised must be a map of the Pagi. Here were mountains, lakes, towns and forests inked out in such detail that she could almost hear the wind screaming across high peaks, catch the rush and hum of distant conversations, dip her fingers into the chill waters of rivers. And yet it was just a map, a sketch, no more. She stared at Hieronimo, the breath catching in her throat.

"Oh yes," he smiled. "This was my own little masterpiece. I sought to catch the very life of the Pagi, just as my other maps bewitched the Ahi, sent them astray, off course, bewitched and befuddled them, led them into ambushes or back out to sea. In this map, Muna, the lands of the Pagi will unfold before your eyes. Not as they were, when I drew it, but as they appear at this very moment. Look here, for example, to its centre."

She followed his gaze to a swathe of land in which he had depicted golden fields of corn, rolling hillsides, small villages perched on their crests. A great building lay in ruins, its roof caved in, its walls ablaze.

"What is that?" she gasped.

"That was the ancient monastery at Fons, put to the torch by your own people, I imagine. They have been carrying out raids along our northern coastline for many months now. I have witnessed them all on this very map."

She tried to peer at it once again, but he rolled it up. "You see how desperate your people are, Muna. They will stop at nothing - not even the massacre of our most saintly men to take what they wish. And make no mistake, they are on your trail." He handed her the scroll. "Take it. It may help you to spy out danger. And now..." he rubbed his hands. "Food."

"You can't give this to me. It's too precious."

"Don't make Artemisia's mistake, Muna. Art is never more precious than life."

He picked up a knife and sliced two succulent sides off the hare, tipped them onto plates, and set them down before Muna and Hori. Muna inhaled the meat's herby, rich scent. Beside her, Hori devoured his supper, juice running down his cheeks.

"And how does the Firefarer enjoy his hare?" Hieronimo took his seat opposite again, his eyes cast with mirth.

"Delicious," Hori mumbled through a mouthful of meat.

"Excellent. You will of course stay the night, and then my uncle and I will take you wherever you wish to go in the morning. But I have two suggestions for you, Muna. Stay off the main roads. Your people have been seen upon this very track in recent days. And your best hope is to seek out the Ruach."

"The Ruach?"

"They are a people in exile, like yourself. You have much in common with them. They worship spirits as your people worship ancestors. And once, they lived alongside us as neighbours, as brothers. But that was before Lino Ol Terenzo began to sow discord amongst us."

"Ol Terenzo?"

"The Elector of Venanum. He rose, it seems, from nowhere. If anyone ever knew his origins, they are no longer alive to tell us. The Pagi electorates were always rivals in their own way. But Ol Terenzo creates enmities between them. And he persuaded our people that the Ruach, who will not partake in Pagine art, are lesser beings - that they are somehow low creatures, that they deserve persecution, extinction. They never quite seemed to suit his plan of Pagi unity, you see. And so he resolved to destroy them. He fed our prejudices, encouraged our fears. And now those wise people, those people with whom we played together as children are all but gone - some enslaved, many killed, the rest - fled, we think to the Harar mountains. But if you succeed in finding them, you may find that your cause and theirs could be as one."

Ranzo had fallen asleep, his head now on the table, deep, racking snores issuing from his open mouth. Hori's eyes were also closing as he pushed away his plate and lay down on the bench. Hieronimo rose, took a worn old blanket from a corner of the room and stretched it over the boy.

"One last thing, Muna, before we sleep." He stared down at her then, all trace of humour gone from his face, his eyes intense and earnest.

"What is it?"

"Never betray your secret."

PART THREE: CHAPTER THREE

SIMONE

Disoriented, Muna woke from half-remembered dreams. There had been a beach, waves breaking on its shore. Someone had been running towards her. And then...the dream slid from her grasp, like sand slipping between her fingers, and she was back in the cramped little cottage, the morning sunlight pouring in through deep-set windows and spilling in pools on the stone floor. Pushing herself upright with both hands, she observed her brother sleeping on the bench beside her. Ranzo still snored in his chair, slumped forward with his arms folded on the table. There was no sign of Hieronimo.

She forced herself to stand, her limbs stiff and cold. The room still carried the residual scents of roasted meat and ale, evoking memories of the previous night: her strange conversation with the cartographer, his talk of magic and art, his maps, and his final warning to her of secrets and betrayal. Shivering, she pushed his words to a distant corner of her mind. He must have been mistaken. She bore no secrets. She was protecting Hori - nothing more.

Tiptoeing across the room, she pushed open the door and slid outside, sniffing the fresh morning air. What she had taken for a small village was in fact no more than a hamlet comprised of perhaps three or four cottages and a wooden barn. A few chickens scratched at the dust of the track which twisted away into woodland, trees lining the slopes of the steep-sided valleys ahead. Far beyond, she made out the dim shapes of a mountain range, their peaks so high that they appeared as one with the clouds: The Harars, perhaps, of which Hieronimo had spoken the previous night, home to an exiled people. The world was so much greater, stranger and wilder than she had ever imagined.

An old woman bustled about with a bucket swinging from one hand. A tired old dress and apron enveloped her plumpness, while her worn features were locked into a scowl. Muna flinched, edging for the safety of the cottage. The villager paid her no heed, but launched the contents of her bucket across the road before traipsing back inside her own house.

With a squeal and bump of cartwheels, Hieronimo appeared from amongst the trees, guiding the old horse by its bridle, the wagon grinding and rolling along behind.

"You're awake." He stopped in front of her, a clay pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Well, best wake the others. The sooner we move the better. Your people may well be scouring these roads for you already. We'll head for the Harars. As I told you last night, the Ruach may well offer you some kind of protection."

He handed her a sealed leather tube dangling on a strap. "Here, the map. Take it."

She hesitated, but he lowered it into her hands. Its art briefly flared with a burst of energy, its heat searing across her palms and then cooling as its magic waned and she slipped the strap over her shoulder.

"It won't hurt you, Muna," Hieronimo said. "It may save your life. Wake the others. We should move on."

Ranzo had already stirred and was now chewing on the cold remains of the hare, washing down his breakfast with a mouthful of ale. He grinned at her as she entered, his lips peeling away to reveal his toothless gums. She smiled back and then leant over Hori, shaking him gently until he woke. Hori struggled to his feet, rubbing at his eyes. The old fisherman handed him a sliver of meat and he took it, the two of them chewing away together almost, Muna thought, like an aging grandfather and his grandson. That perception shot her through with sorrow and she wandered back outside to hide her tears. It ought to have been their father with whom Hori shared his morning meat, not some old Pagese fisherman.

Hieronimo had his back to her as he finished preparing the cart. She drew her hands across her face, wiping away stray tears, furious with herself for such a moment of weakness, of primitive sentiment. Such feelings would serve them ill upon the journey ahead.

"You can sit in the cart," Hieronimo said, turning to face her. "But if we encounter company, it's best you both hide beneath the tarpaulin." She felt his gaze upon her for a moment, his face solemn and drawn. "It's a heavy burden you both bear."

She nodded glumly.

"Ranzo and I will do our part to ease it."

"It cannot be eased."

Unsmiling, he enfolded her in his arms for a brief moment. She buried her face in the folds of his shirt, doing her best to ward away further tears.

"There will be better times, Muna. Better days. Believe it."

She didn't, but nodding she pulled away and stepped up onto the cart, settling down amongst the nets and lobster pots. Hori and Ranzo emerged from the cottage and joined her, both still swallowing their breakfast. Hori handed her a slice of the hare, but she shook her head. Her stomach wouldn't allow it.

Hieronimo had seated himself at the front. He slapped a felt cap on his head and then snapped his fingers, the vehicle groaning into motion as the old horse strained against the weight. Muna's stomach lurched and she threw Hori an anxious glance but the boy seemed content enough, watching as Ranzo picked up a huge needle and set about mending his nets. She observed him as he meshed and wound the twine, his stitching and unstitching casting an almost trance-like spell. Then she recalled Hieronimo's words of the previous night - Ranzo crafted his nets the better to farm the sea. Even in the old man's workmanship there was magic.

Discomforted by that thought, she gazed out into the surrounding woodland. They were climbing high, amongst rocky folds and a dense forest of fir and pine. The horse slowed as they neared the top of the road, and she caught another glimpse of the distant mountain range, its stony wastes a pale blue in the early morning light. Then the track levelled out, winding amongst pastures and pale green thickets, passing the occasional goat herd or shepherd to whom Hieronimo tipped his cap.

All was quiet, all was peaceful. The horse plodded along its path and Ranzo's weaving lulled her into a half-sleep. She imagined herself a fish reeled into his trap, a willing victim. Her eyelids flickered down and she awoke with an occasional jerk or fitful start to find herself still on the road, still travelling through forests and over hillsides ever deeper into a strange land of languid beauty and sublime danger.

Then came a sudden scream - inhuman, animal. She woke, shock coursing like quicklime through her veins. Hieronimo pulled the cart up with such force that it keeled to one side before righting, and she stared in horror as the old horse crumpled with a desperate series of whinnies and groans, the fletching of several arrows sprouting grotesquely from its head, chest and flanks. The cart toppled forwards as the animal sank to its knees, and they slid to its far end in a chaotic avalanche of nets, pots and traps. Ranzo urged her down below the level of the cart's sides, sheltering

Hori beneath him as a voice echoed out along the road in Ahi: "Are you trying to cheat us twice, Mapmaker?"

"You've no place here, Pere. Do you think the Pagi will tolerate your raids much longer?"

Pere! She remembered the name from her mother's tales of raiding. An elder and a warrior, a man late in years and with many victories to his name, experienced in war: ruthless. If the Ahi had sent him out to search for Hori, they were truly desperate.

"Just give us what we seek, Hieronimo, and perhaps we'll let the old man live. And allow you a death quicker than the one you deserve."

She caught the clip of hooves upon the track. They were surrounding the cart: there would be no escape. Hori was whimpering, shaking, and she knew he could not control his fear for long.

"We know you're hiding there, Muna, like the little traitor that you are."

Her mind raced, her entire body raged. She rolled over onto her back, her heart pumping furiously. "If you know we're here, why don't you get us? Or is it that you fear us?"

"You've led your brother astray, Muna. He'll come to realise that eventually. And you just doubled your treachery when you chose to ride with this sketcher. Or perhaps he didn't tell you that he sold us the very map that led your mother to her death?"

"Muna," Hieronimo's voice was thick and hoarse. "That's a lie. Don't listen to them."

She remembered their earlier conversation - of maps that bewitched and befuddled, that led into ambushes or back out to sea. "Never betray your secrets, Hieronimo," she whispered to herself. To whom had his warning really been addressed?

"Come out, Muna, give up the Firefarer and we'll overlook your treason - I'll anoint you myself with your first ink." Pere's voice was mere inches away.

"He's my brother!"

"He belongs to us all."

With a sudden cry, Rando rose, standing over Hori's trembling body, half screaming, half shouting in Pagesese.

"Run, Muna. He wants you to run," Hieronimo yelled, and Muna pulled at Hori's hand, dragging him backwards off the cart just as the air grew thick and dense with arrow fire. She turned back to see Rando shot through, his body crumpling and tipping back off the cart to be trampled beneath the legs of horses. Dragged from his

seat, Hieronimo was hauled into the road, axes and spears rising above him, then plunging down, then up again, then down.

Hori's hand was hot against her own as they fled into the forest, the thud and fall of hooves just yards behind, and she heard Pere call out: "Kill her! Just take the boy."

She sensed the rise of Hori's heat, the palm of his hand smouldering against her own. His uncontained fury might be their only chance. The forest loomed before her, its trees swarming and swaying as if alive, their roots coiled across her path, the hoots and caws of hidden birds mocking, laughing. Hori dropped, felled by his own power, and she caught a sight of wild eyes and tattooed faces, of horsemen charging through the undergrowth, of bows cocked at waist-height, arrows levelled.

And then, cutting through the insanity - the knowledge that this was the end, the raw, unleashed destruction - came the long, sustained ring of a hunting horn. It was a sound which sliced the air in two, which forced its way amongst the trees, which rendered Hori still and motionless at her feet.

The Ahi slowed, dropping their reins as their horses reared upwards: legs flailing, foam welling around their muzzles. Some were thrown from their mounts, others tried to cling on, scrabbling for bridles and saddles while clapping hands to ears. And still the sound continued.

Muna stood amongst the chaos, unable to determine its origin as some of the Ahi turned and fled, their steeds thundering back towards the path, Pere's voice strident as he urged them to stand firm. She whirled around, her dress snagging on briars and thorns, peering through the forest's gloom.

The undergrowth was swept aside, the hooves of unseen mounts pounded the earth, and she dropped down, cradling Hori in her arms as a small group of riders entered the clearing, the horn's blast now so intense that she covered her own ears.

The Ahi had gone, the sharp sound ceased, the forest's own melodies of birdsong were restored, and a pair of buckskin boots dropped to the ground before her. She looked upwards taking in riding leathers and a brightly embroidered doublet. Before her stood the most beautiful man she had ever seen: hair the shade of sunlight running to his shoulders, eyes as green as the forest itself. His companions climbed from their horses: men and women, all of them young, wealthy people of the Pagi, their gowns, coats and doublets stitched with signs and symbols, with harps and flutes, books, scrolls and tiny, intricate labyrinths. Bows and hunting horns swung from their shoulders, some rode with falcons on their arms - the birds hooded

beneath masks of leather. Behind them, plainer in both clothing and appearance, two young men followed the party, supporting a pole from which hung the sleek, limp body of a stag.

He spoke to her, but she understood nothing. She shook her head, frustrated as words from her own language formed and then fell from her mouth, but he smiled and shrugged. Then he stretched out a hand and she took it, while one of his companions gathered Hori up in his arms and climbed astride his horse.

She had no choice but to follow, she told herself. They had Hori. And yet part of her knew that she could have run, could have resisted, could have plucked Hori away from them and dragged him back to the road and to the mutilated remains of Hieronimo and his uncle. Instead, she allowed herself to be led, to be lifted into a saddle, to stare all the time in wonder into the face of this stranger until he laughed and climbed up behind her.

And then they were galloping away, leaving behind them the birds, the roots, the bark and the leaves: leaping over streams, over pools of sunlight on the forest floor, until the woods thinned out entirely and they climbed steep tracks between tall avenues of cypress, winding ever higher. And all around her, carried on thin wisps of wind, she caught the distant strains of broken melodies. She twisted around, keen to spy out the musicians and their instruments but saw only the trees, the path, the Pagi who laughed and spoke as they travelled on upwards to a small stone fort which topped the hill.

Was she dreaming this? Had she in fact fallen asleep, entranced by Ranzo's craft? Would she awaken now, find herself still in the cart, rolling ever onwards towards the mountains? A part of her prayed that was not so. And then another part of her recalled Ranzo's arrow-studded corpse and was ashamed.

They crested the hill, pulling up outside the fort. She was lifted from the horse, and found herself standing before an ancient, ivy-choked building, white plaster flaking from the balconies which ran the lengths of its walls, the melodies now insistent and sustained. She heard more laughter, conversation, caught the scent of wine and roasting meat.

Her rescuer put his hand to his chest. "Simone," he said.

"Muna." She gestured towards her brother who slept in a Paga's arms. "Hori."

He smiled. "Muna. Hori." Taking her by the hand, he led her towards an arched entrance, its stonework crumbling with age. Within lay a long, tapestry-draped

chamber, a rich, red carpet stretched across its floor. At the room's midst stood a table laden with food: with bowls of nuts, of fruit, flagons of wine, roasted meats and wheels of cheese, an entire peacock resting on a silver tray, the marine eyes of its feathers arrayed as if in display. Pagi sat around the feast in ornate, high backed chairs, many playing on instruments - on harps and lutes, recorders and viols, while others sang.

She watched as the Pagi carried Hori up a narrow, twisting flight of stairs to a chamber above, her brain scrabbling at something she seemed to have forgotten - something which had once seemed so important, but was no longer of consequence. With a light touch to her arm, Simone passed her a plate weighted with grapes and peaches, slim slices of cheese and tiny fish rolled delicately around olives. He poured wine for her - its sweetness carried warmth, drowsiness, and all she could see then was his face, his green eyes, his golden hair.

The feast wore on, daylight faded, candles were lit, the scent of molten wax mingling with the heady aromas of wine and roasted meat. She laughed at Pagi jokes she couldn't understand, inclined her head in response to questions she could not answer, danced with first one Paga then another, until she was dizzy and breathless.

That was when Simone offered her his hand. She took it, and he led her from the chamber, away from its music and laughter, from the low murmur of conversation. She followed him up those same narrow, winding stairs, once again aware that something important lay within this house - someone important. But who was it? The thought was fleeting, gone as soon as he had pushed open a door to reveal a panelled room, a canopied bed, candles pulsing at the windows.

His hands were to her shoulders then, to her waist. She felt herself a viol or flute such as those she had seen below, as he coaxed from her a new melody, one she never knew that she held within. His lips pressed to her neck, her forehead, her cheeks and finally her mouth. And as she sank down upon the bed, she began to speak to him. What harm could it do? He did not speak her language, he would not understand. The room whirled around her, she was drowning in his warmth, and as he drew new strains from her body, she delivered up the words which no one was ever to hear, the truth which lay at the very base of her beating heart, the knowledge which, her parents had told her, she was never to impart. What harm could it do?

PART FOUR: ANIMUM

PART FOUR: CHAPTER ONE
THE CITY OF SHRINES

"You see, Andre, if you'd bothered to read scripture and not works of Pagi blasphemy you'd know these things. And don't roll your eyes at me like that."

"Like what?" Andre sneered. Vito didn't like it when she sneered. That reminded him of brother Achill's harsh sarcasm. But then he remembered that Achill was dead, and that his memory was deserving of prayers, not contempt.

"You asked me a question, that's all," he continued, ignoring her. "The Pagi cannot work or live within the City of Shrines. Not unless they renounce their corrupt arts and pay a penance. And so, I'm sorry but you're very much mistaken if you think your cousin serves as a Prefect."

A wasp buzzed around his hair and he swatted at it in irritation. It flew away, only to return, hovering a permanent inch from his left ear. Three days of trekking along dusty, sun-baked tracks had turned his legs to lead, conjured blisters from his toes and heels, burnt his forehead and nose. His beard and hair were damp with sweat, his belly ached with hunger.

Andre had proven to be less skilled at tickling fish than at poaching birds, pulling no more than a few bony troutlet from streams and brooks. Much to his disgust, she had resorted to stealing eggs from the farms they passed through, forcing him to run from the villagers' angry cries like a common thief. But when he explained the sinfulness of her crime, she merely shrugged and suggested that he might care to go hungry. He had watched her later as she cracked open an egg, tipped back her head and gulped it down in one as if it were an oyster. She had devoured two more before he caved in to his rumbling belly and spinning, food-starved brain. Seizing one, he broke it over his mouth, resisting the urge to gag as the yolk slithered down his throat, the juice crawling through his beard. Andre had stared at him for a moment and then laughed. "Be careful, Vito. Your unnameable one might strike you down with a thunderbolt for that." Unable to endure her mockery, he had stamped over to a brook to wash the evidence of the crime from his face.

Far in the distance, Animum emerged, no more than a thin grey line on the horizon, yet the sight inspired hope. And zeal. "The point is, Andre, that you Pagi twist the

truth with your art. You make a poor copy of our world. You would improve on that which shouldn't be improved, amplify what is already sufficient, drain our existence of all reason. What the Church offers is a haven from such corruption. You are no more than poor mimics - we offer the truth. Even the primitive Ruach grasp that."

"They're not primitive." She paled, her grey eyes rippling with anger.

Vito gazed at her in surprise. "A Paga defending the Ruach? Praise to the Mystery for it worketh miracles."

"Shut up. Do you hear me, Vito? Close that saintly trap of yours before I shove my fist into it."

"Charming. You know I'm beginning to doubt you are a Paga after all - more likely the daughter of a ... a common vagrant and a whore, the oaths and threats that come out of your mouth."

She snorted at that, plucking a long blade of grass from the verge and wrapping it between her thin, tapering fingers. He remembered then, with a pang of discomfort, that he had dreamt of those fingers again the previous night: he had imagined them smoothing down his hair, trailing across his temples, his cheeks, resting on his lips. The dream had stirred parts of him: parts which he knew to be sinful. As a monk, his life was bound to the Mystery, to seeking union with it. Union with a Paga would foul his spirit, would doom him to wandering after death between the realms of the Mystery and earth, a wraith to be summoned by the Ruach.

When he had woken that morning to find Andre lying some yards away from him, sleeping with her head resting on her satchel, his heart had flooded with relief. It had been a dream after all. Then he was down on his knees, meditating, praying, desperate to rid himself of any remaining shreds of sin or impurity before it was too late. He had turned to find her sat cross-legged, plaiting her long hair, her gaze cool and scornful as if she knew the desperate thoughts that lay behind his sudden act of repentance.

He could make out the spires and rooftops of Animum now, almost sense the city's aura of sanctity.

"Well I won't be paying any penance, I can assure you." The girl's biting, jibing tone cut through his visions of a life led in purity and self-sacrifice amongst the city's faithful.

"No amount of penance would permit you residency anyway."

"And how would you know that? Just because I stole a few eggs you think I'm beyond redemption? You weren't complaining when you were stuffing them into your mouth earlier."

"I was merely sharing the burden of your sin, Andre. There will be less for you to repent of later. And as a monk, my spirit is unblemished. A few eggs are hardly going to tarnish it."

Again she snorted, kicking at a stone in the path. "You monks - you think you can save yourselves, hiding away behind those great, thick stone walls. But look what comes of your refusal to see what's beyond them..."

He winced, as if she had thrown a punch to his stomach. "And if our only fault was lack of foresight, did we deserve such punishment?" he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean you deserved it. Look, let's not argue anymore, Vito. It's so exhausting. I'll take you to my cousin - I mean the Prefect - and then we can go our separate ways. Perhaps he'll offer you work within the cathedral."

Vito's heart kicked with sudden hope. "Do you think he would?"

"I can't say. But maybe."

"And you ... where will you go then?" Phantom like, that dream of her fingers, of their feathery lightness, plagued his thoughts. He bit his lip and focussed on the dust of the road.

"I told you. I'm in search of treasure," she said.

"There are treasures to be had in the City of Shrines, Andre. Not perhaps of the type you seek - not of gold or precious stones, but..."

"And what would you know of the treasure I seek?" she suddenly snapped.

They continued in silence. She always grew so bitter, so secretive when he broached the subject of her own quest. Or of her origins. And if this were to be their last day together, perhaps they ought not to spend it bickering. He drew a sleeve across his brow, dabbing at the sweat. These summer days would heat even the blood of a monk. Perhaps those strange dreams of his were merely the feverish products of the season with its cloudless skies and humid, restless nights. Once safely back amongst the shadows and cloisters of a monastery or church, this would all seem a fleeting trance or dream - nothing more.

Animum began with a series of shrines: there were no surrounding villages or grand country residences, merely an outer perimeter of wooden altars, stone monoliths, flowers strewn in circles upon the ground. This, as Vito knew, was to ward off Pagi as

much as to worship the Mystery - to remind them that their magic was not welcome here, that this was a place of natural truths, not of unnatural arts.

Once past the shrines, they found themselves moving through outer streets lined with low, simple, white-washed dwellings - the cottages of those who laboured on behalf of Prefects, priests, nuns and monks. And then at last they were within Animum itself, every road marked with a church, a mausoleum, chapel or sanctum, the sun reflecting off their bright, pale walls, the sky obscured by the twisting, climbing mass of spires and steeples. And at the very heart of the city, towering over it all like some mighty fist of rock and glass stood the cathedral.

Vito stopped for a moment, craning his neck to stare upwards at the buttresses fluting off the building's bare, white walls; its twin spires puncturing, it seemed, the clouds themselves, windows which arched ever upwards, their panes laid in tones of blue and crimson, of milky, opaque glass and dull, earthy browns. A wooden scaffold had been set against a near wall, masons and carpenters hammering and sawing from its heights. Vito recalled, from earlier pilgrimages, that the cathedral was always in want of repairs or improvements, as high Prefects came and went, determined to alter, to change, to recreate.

They crossed a stretch of grass which lay between the road and the entrance and then slipped inside. It took Vito some time for his eyes to adjust to the dim, hazy light within. He scented the cloying sweetness of incense, caught the distant echoes of footsteps, of chanting. As the shapes and forms of the cathedral gained in clarity, he tilted his head upwards, taking in the soaring, vaulted ceiling. It all made him feel so small, so insignificant, and he recalled that this was the very purpose of such a building - to inspire awe, to reveal the greatness of the Mystery, and to confirm a believer's place within it. Not, he thought with a sudden spasm of contempt, to arrogantly presume one's place beyond it. He turned to offer that insight to Andre, but found her already gone, strolling through the building's vast emptiness as if she were taking a walk through a park or field. Swallowing his irritation, he followed her.

She had stopped behind an altar to speak to three young men who leant against the wall, brushes dangling from their fingers, their doublets stained with paint. Vito drew up beside her and then stared. His mouth opened, then closed. He winced, trying to form words, but produced instead an incoherent series of sounds. The workmen stared at him in amusement. Andre stood, hands on hips, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes?" she asked.

"That...that's a fresco."

"Yes. We know that, Vito."

"But...but frescoes are not permitted in Animum. No art is."

One of the artists smirked: a callow young man in dun coloured doublet and cap. The other two hid their faces, turning back to the wall and pretending to work. And what were they painting? What profanity was this? He had to see. Pushing his way amongst them his brow knotted, his eyes rounded as he absorbed the fresco - a scene of dense woodland, a group of men and women astride horses, bows across their shoulders, falcons on their wrists, hunting horns pressed to their lips. One figure, young and handsome with blonde hair and green eyes was extending his hand to a girl who, it appeared, had fallen. Beside her another child slept in the grass. And as he stared, he thought...or perhaps his wits had genuinely descended into madness, were slipping down a precarious slope towards insanity...but he thought the blonde man turned to look at him, was staring at him from the paint and the stone behind it.

He shivered. "The high Prefect cannot have permitted this, surely? He'll have it taken down. It's blasphemy, it's a desecration!" The Pagi had already taken from him his brothers, his monastery, his entire past. And now they were to strip him of his faith? Some plot, some hideous conspiracy must be at work for an act of such vandalism to be permitted within the cathedral itself. The few truths to which he clung, they all came crashing down amongst memories of dusty tracks, hungry days and feverish dreams, of his brothers' screams and of his last sight of Fons consumed in fire. He slumped down beside the altar, his shoulders heaving beneath the weight of his sobs.

"Vito! Vito!" Andre was beside him, those long, tapering fingers resting on his shoulders. "Vito get up. Vito, the Prefect's coming!"

He raised his head, but could make out no more than a man's dim outline: a mere blur in brown and black. Dragging his hands across his eyes, he saw a thickset man of middle years dressed in the plain robes of a Prefect, ebon skinned and angular of face. "You weep for this, young brother?" he gestured to the fresco.

He managed no more than a nod, despair mingling with embarrassment, aware of his own tear-streaked face, a trail of snot leaking from his nose. He wiped it away hurriedly with the back of his sleeve.

"There are many, many ways of worshipping the Mystery, boy." The Prefect squatted down before him and took his hands. "For years we have spurned the Pagi. Regarded

their art as mere corruption. And yet all that occurs on this earth is a manifestation of that same Unknown. All is to be embraced. Come."

Rising, he pulled Vito to his feet, curling a warm, friendly arm around his shoulders. "You look hungry - exhausted, young pilgrim. Follow me." The Prefect turned to Andre, who had slunk back amongst the shadows. For the first time, Vito sensed her uncertainty: witnessed her hesitate.

"Andretta Ermetena Ol Adama..." the Prefect's words seemed to hang, suspended on the still, incense-heavy air.

"Yes, cousin?"

"Word has it that you've been a very, very bad girl."

PART FOUR: CHAPTER TWO

DARIO

Vito did not quite know what he had expected of the Prefect's chambers, but it was certainly not this. A rich, red carpet ran the length of the room, the walls of which were plastered with paintings, lined with sculptures, with books piled high on shelves or stacked in corners. A massive globe rested in the alcove window, depicting the known world, imagining the wonders which lay beyond it.

The Prefect sat behind an oak desk buried beneath rolls of parchment, scrolls and maps. Exhausted and slightly drunk, Vito and Andre slumped in a pair of satin upholstered arm chairs, the effects of a fine Venanium red already working its way along Vito's veins in a lazy roll.

There was a sharp knock at the door and then a young man entered bearing a plate of pastries. His blue eyes were bright with irony, his hair a short shock of gold. Vito noticed with discomfort that the Prefect's hand lingered on the young man's wrist as he set the plate down between them. There was a familiarity to the touch, and the servant responded with a discreet smile. Vito turned away, disgust brewing like bile in the back of his throat. At the monastery he had learnt that such intimacies might be encouraged amongst immoral Pagi or primitive Ruach, but they held no place in the Church.

His face must have betrayed his distaste, for the Prefect stared at him then, his gaze cutting and humourless. He dismissed the man with a faint flick of his fingers. "Eat. The pair of you must be famished if your appearances are anything to go by."

Vito hesitated, but Andre's hand shot forwards and she grabbed a sweet roll, stuffing it into her mouth in a single bite. "Thank you," she muttered through a mouthful of pastry.

"You do realise I will have to inform your parents as to your whereabouts, cousin?"

Andre stared at him, her lips slackening around the semi-chewed roll, her face covered in crumbs. "Why? I'm a grown woman, Dario. Not a child!"

"Your poor mother is beside herself with grief, girl. She believed you kidnapped by the Ruach or..."

Andre snorted with laughter, flakes of pastry shooting from her mouth. "Kidnapped by the Ruach? She always did have an overactive imagination."

"You find this funny? I can assure you that your family doesn't. You disappeared without a word, left no note, took something which we both know doesn't belong to you..."

"It's just a book, cousin."

"That's not just a book. It's..."

"My brothers are dead."

Both the Prefect and Andre fell silent, staring at Vito.

"Well that is why we're here, isn't it, Andre? I realise you have important family business to discuss, and that perhaps the massacre of a few monks is of lesser importance, but..."

"I'm sorry, Vito." She took his hand and squeezed it. He felt those long, cool fingers wind through his own and shuddered, drawing away.

"He's right, cousin. The monastery at Fons - it has been destroyed. And all those within it."

The Prefect threw back his head, exhaling sharply before sinking his face behind one bulky hand. "How?" he asked from behind trembling fingers. "The Ahi?"

"Yes. Well, no actually," Andre stammered. "They looked like the Ahi. I mean, they rode on horseback, they bore tattoos, they fought with axes and spears."

"The Ahi." The Prefect shook his head. When he raised it, tears welled at the edges of his eyes, spilling down his sharp, dark cheeks. "The Pagi have been warned to look to their defences and they have done nothing. Nothing." He clenched his fist. "They are all gone, young monk? All your brothers? I would offer you comfort but I fear my heart will break."

Memories of Rasmus's severed head, of Fons bathed in fire rose like phantoms in the eye of Vito's mind. "Mine already has," he whispered.

"But cousin! You're not listening." Andre had risen. Hands planted on the desk, she craned forward, pushing aside scrolls and parchment. "It was not the Ahi!"

"What?" A faint flash of fear swept across the Prefect's face, cutting aside the grief. "What do you mean, girl? Of course it was the Ahi."

"No!" She slammed her fist down on the table. "Vito and I saw them later. They bathed and...and they changed."

"They changed?" Dario tapped his temple with a stubby finger, staring at her through red-rimmed, grief-stained eyes. "Have you lost your wits altogether?"

"No! Of course not. I saw what I saw. We saw it, didn't we, Vito?"

"Yes." But now, he wasn't sure. The Prefect's face was a study in incredulity. Vito's mind dredged through those visions of fire, of blood and then of water as the river cleansed the murderers' bodies free of tattoos and they had shed, it seemed, their very skins. Perhaps, in his smoke-riddled brain he had dreamed it all. "Yes. I suppose so."

"Your young friend doesn't seem so convinced, Andre."

"He saw it. We both did. And when they stepped from the river, they were Pagi. And they spoke...they spoke of Lino Ol Terenzo. He sent them, cousin. It was all his doing."

"Andretta..." the Prefect breathed a heavy, impatient sigh. "Andretta, your behaviour has been ... of late ... your parents tell me, irregular."

She growled in frustration.

"Perhaps you have your own reasons for despising Ol Terenzo. For wanting to ascribe blame where it doesn't belong? Your parents have told me of your misplaced friendship with a certain woman of the Ruach."

Vito noticed her flinch at that. What other secrets was she hiding?

"Lino is a good man. Believe me," Dario continued. "I have met him several times. I account him a friend, a man of integrity. He sees the Ruach for what they are - a canker, a disease. He dreams instead of a perfect union amongst the Pagi. He would never..."

"Spare me your moralising, cousin. He's a snake in the grass!"

"Be quiet girl!" The Prefect thundered. Andre's jaw fell slack, and she sank back in her chair.

"Now you will go back to your parents. You will beg their forgiveness. And as for you, young man..." he rose, moved around the table, his heavy palm pressing on Vito's shoulder. "You have suffered greatly. If you return to me on the morrow, I will find you work amongst my novices."

Vito's heart leapt with sudden gratitude. "Is that possible, your Grace?"

Beside him, Andre folded her arms and hissed.

"We can always find work for devoted young men such as yourself, Vito."

"Devoted?" Andre sneered. "Deranged, more like."

"Cousin. I'm warning you. You still have a chance to return home of your free will. One more word and I'll have you escorted there."

"You will do no such thing!" She rose, seizing her satchel. Pain tore through Vito's chest. Would she leave without a word, then? After those long, hot, dusty days of walking and arguing, she would simply desert him?

To his relief, her cousin hurried around the table, blocking her path. "Come, cousin, let's not be so hasty. What say you and I come to a little agreement?"

"What agreement?" She remained on her feet, the satchel swinging from her hand.

"I won't send you back. And you'll give me the book."

She was silent for a moment, and then lowered herself back into her chair. "Why do you want this book so much, Dario? What makes it so valuable?"

Her cousin perched on the edge of the desk, his sandalled feet dangling in midair, in what Vito considered to be a very unperfect-like manner.

"It's not its value, cousin," he said, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "It's the danger it carries. Andre, this book may describe and narrate and entertain as others do. But it can also create. It can alter, it can trick. Read it in the wrong way, and it could change the future."

She seemed less certain now. Her hand dropped to the bindings on her satchel.

"Cousin, give me the book. I'll keep it safe within the cathedral."

"And in return?"

He shrugged and smiled. "I never saw you?"

She hesitated, one hand hovering over her bag. Then she opened it and drew out *The People of the Pagi*. Dario appeared to relax, a hint of humour dancing in his coal-black eyes. "So," he breathed. "There it is."

"You promise?" Andre still clung to the book: tentative, uncertain. "You won't tell them where I am? I'll return to them when I'm ready, Dario. But for now...there's something I have to do."

"I promise, Andre. Just give me the book."

With a long sigh she passed it to him. He took it from her hands as if it were made of fine glass or crystal, lowering it quickly into a drawer beneath his desk.

"I never understood it anyway," Andre muttered. "Every time I looked at it, it seemed to be telling a different story."

"It's all one story, Andre," Dario smiled. "It just depends on how you read it. Now go before I change my mind." He turned to Vito. "Remember what I said, Vito. Come back tomorrow. I have good work for a man of your qualities."

"Thank you, your Grace," Vito muttered. But this time he wasn't so certain. There was something unsavoury about Andre's cousin, he decided. Something which smacked too much of the Pagi, and too little of the true believer.

"Oh and one other thing, cousin, in case we don't meet again." Dario called out to them before they reached the door.

"Yes?" Andre turned with reluctance.

"The time is coming when we will all have to choose sides, Andretta. All of us."

"Well you already have, Dario. That much is plain." She stalked out, Vito trailing in her wake.

"What are you doing?" Vito peered up at Andre who was perched on a plank of scaffolding, legs dangling over the edge, her chin resting on her hands.

"Admiring the view."

"It's dangerous up there."

"Only if you throw yourself off it."

The scaffolding had been raised as high as one of the great arched windows of the cathedral, and artisans buzzed around her like worker bees: sawing, hammering, chiselling.

Vito contemplated the series of decrepit wooden ladders feeding up between the planks, then wiped the sweat from his palms onto his robe, hitched it up and began to climb, ignoring the scornful looks Andre threw down at him. By the time he had reached her he was breathless, his head dizzy with terror and exhaustion. He sank down, doing his best to ignore the plummeting drop below.

Andre opened her satchel which was bulging with pastries and handed him one.

"Stocking up for your journey?" he asked.

"Perhaps."

"Which would be to where?"

"None of your business."

Vito groaned and stowed the pastry away in the pockets of his robe. "What's the great secret, Andre? I mean it's not like our paths will cross again after today." His throat tightened and he stared down at the pale sprawl of the city.

"You see how things are, Vito. I trust no one. Even cousins turn out to be devious bastards."

"What do you mean?" He looked at her sharply.

"You were right. Frescoes have no place in the City of Shrines. Nor does literature, paintings or sculptures. My cousin paid that penance you spoke of once. He renounced his life as a Paga in order to become a Prefect. And yet here he is, surrounded by art, bedding handsome young men, fraternising with Ol Terenzo. Something's wrong."

She stood up. "Still, he seems to have taken a shine to you, Vito. And all you want is to serve the church, am I right? So here's your chance. Good luck. I'm sure you'll make a great monk."

Her voice dripped irony. He couldn't look at her then. When he turned, she was already swinging her way down one of the ladders.

"Thank you, Andre." He called out lamely.

"For what?"

"For saving my life."

"Oh. That." She paused, her smile like a sudden burst of sunlight through clouds. "You're welcome."

"Where are you going?" he asked. His throat seemed to have grown dry and painful.

"To get my bloody book back!"

PART FOUR: CHAPTER THREE
STRANGE BLOOD

Vito first visited Animum as a child raised on a diet of meagre rations, prayers and hard graft. Back then it had seemed a city of wonders, a place in which the enlightened gathered to meditate, to contemplate, to exchange ideas. A place of truth: a beacon of learning and knowledge burning in defiance of the Pagi and their dark, unholy ways. He had made the pilgrimage several times since then, journeying with his brother monks on mules or in wagons, eager to exchange the confines of the cloisters for Animum's wide, whitewashed streets.

So why was it that this seemed such a different city to the one he remembered as a child? Why was it that as dusk fell and shadows lengthened, he skulked along those same whitewashed streets with something akin to fear pulsing through his veins? Why was it that, on hearing a dog's bark or a priest's laughter, he seemed to inwardly shrink, to quake, even to mutter to himself like a man half-insane?

Perhaps it was all Andre's fault. Perhaps he had spent so long in the company of a Paga that she had passed on some of her faithlessness: that it had hooked onto his mind as a bur might catch on his robes. But as he stumbled aimlessly through the gathering darkness, all he could think of was how alone he felt. First his brothers slain, now Andre gone. She would have known what to do: how to find a free bed for the night, how to forage for leftovers even if, the Mystery forbid, they were stolen. He recalled then her battered jacket of kingfisher blue, her long plaits swinging down her back, the steady confidence of her stride. How could she have deserted him?

Footsteps clipped on the cobbles behind him. He picked up his pace: wary, nervous, yet unsure as to the source of his fears. He had offended no one, knew neither friends nor enemies in the City of Shrines. And although his robe was now torn, singed and dusty, his sandalled feet calloused and black with the filth of the roads, he still bore some resemblance to the young novice he had been a few days before. Who might possibly pose a threat? And in Animum, of all places?

Even so, he moved faster now, convinced that the footsteps were speeding up behind him. He was suddenly aware of how empty the road was, of the drumming of blood within his ears. A side street beckoned up ahead - he could slip down it

perhaps, follow it, find some deserted chapel or garden and wait there till morning. Then he would return to Dario and accept his offer of work. The man might be a Paga in Prefect's robes, but there was no other soul he could turn to.

Vito passed into the side street. The footsteps followed - insistent - hobnails ringing on stone. Dread churned in the pit of his stomach. He lost all logic: panicked and ran. His pursuers gave chase - he heard them bolt and then laugh as he smacked head first into the wall of a church.

A dead end, his way blocked and blood now leaking from his nose, he turned around. The three fresco artists from the cathedral stood shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the street. Vito's mouth grew dry, a bitter taste formed at the back of his throat. He tried to speak but what came out was a faint, incoherent croak. The artists laughed again: sallow-cheeked young men with leering, drunken eyes and lank, sweat-soaked hair. Two of them brandished mason's hammers, the third drew a dagger from his belt.

"I don't suppose they teach monks to fight, do they?" The tallest of the trio stepped forward, swinging the hammer in a wicked, violent arc. "Well, even if they did, wouldn't be much use to ya now, would it?"

"What are you doing?" His voice was a hoarse, strained whisper. "I've done nothing wrong. And this is holy territory."

"Well it certainly will be when it's soaking up monk's blood. And it ain't got nothing to do with what you've done. It's what you've seen. That's what matters."

"I haven't seen anything." Perhaps he could play for time. "I haven't spoken to anyone, don't know anyone."

"You've spoken to one. That's enough."

"Dario?" So Andre had been right. Her cousin was not to be trusted, must have thrown in his lot with this Ol Terenzo. Vito felt as if his head were being both frozen and gripped in a vice. The awful sickening awareness of what had just infected the church threatened to send him reeling to the ground. He backed against the wall, tracing its rough, cool stone beneath his fingertips, aware that this sensation would be his last.

A sharp whistle pierced the air. Vito looked up; his three assailants span round, startled and angry. Against the grainy light of dusk he glimpsed a girl's tall, lean outline: satchel thrown over her shoulder, her face half obscured by shadow. He wetted his dry lips with his tongue. "Andre?"

"Now this *is* going to be a difficult choice, boys." Andre lowered her hands to her hips. "I imagine my cousin sent you out after both of us. But now you're going to have to choose - the monk, or me."

And with that she fled, tearing down the road with all the measured grace of a greyhound, two of the artists in pursuit.

Vito could not later explain the furious, wild impulse which then drove him to kick the third man in the back before he could turn around, forcing his attacker to the ground, the mason's hammer falling from his grasp as he stumbled. Nor did he recognise the burning, intense rage with which he picked up the hammer and brought it down on the young man's head. It was only when blood trickled through matted, sweaty locks of hair, when the boy's legs danced in violent spasms, when a long, slick stream of spit pooled from his mouth, it was only then that Vito stared down at the body below him, the hammer tumbling from his trembling fingers. Bloodstained nails pressed to his mouth, he staggered out onto the main road, refusing to turn back and acknowledge the crumpled, twitching figure behind him.

Several yards up the street Andre turned, pulled off her satchel and wheeled it around her head like a lasso, hurling it into the face of one of her attackers. Stunned, he plunged like a stone slung from a shot, his temple cracking on a cobble. She reached for the bag but the remaining artist had already grabbed it and was on her heels. He would run her down, Vito realised with a sudden stab of horror. The girl was fast, but her pursuer was powerful of build and mad as a bee-stung bull. He was almost upon her now. Vito ventured further into the road, at a loss as to how he could help her, but just as the artist made a lunge for Andre's waist she flung herself upwards, catching hold of a drainpipe and clawing her way out of reach. For a few tense seconds she hung from a gutter above the street, before swinging onto a stretch of flat, white rooftop. With a grunt of rage the artist followed, clearing his way upwards in a few mighty bounds and thundering after her.

Like a cluster of clucking hens, a group of sisters emerged from the buildings below, disturbed by the thud of footsteps over their heads. Grey woollen cowls draped over angry brows, their long habits sweeping the ground, they pooled out onto the street in a swell of fury and outrage. Then they saw Vito and fell silent, mouths falling open, eyes rounding in fear.

"Help us!" he gasped. But they did nothing but stare, and he was suddenly aware of the blood still gushing from his nose, the stains on his robe, his red, gore-encrusted

nails. With a collective shriek, the sisters pushed their way back inside and slammed the door. He heard a wooden bar drop into place, keys click in their locks, the nuns shielding themselves against the vagrants and murderers of the streets.

Andre was now perched on the very edge of the roof, heels almost jutting out over the side street. Her pursuer's face stretched into the thinnest grimace of a smile and he swung her satchel at her. Andre ducked and hopped to one side, her arms spread for balance. The artist took another step closer. She tried to dodge past him, but he flicked the dagger towards her face, forcing her to jump backwards. For a few breathless moments she rocked and twisted, desperate to recover her stance, but he swiped again with the bag and she dropped, catching hold of the guttering just in time.

Vito took one last hopeless look at the drainpipe, hitched up his robe, rolled up his sleeves and began to climb. Mere yards above the street and the sweat was already trickling into his eyes, stinging them. The ground now seemed far, far away - his arms were straining, his palms greasy, his grip weakening. Grunting, groaning, fighting the urge to scream, he scabbled along the guttering, his sandals finally gaining purchase on the rough stone of the wall. At last, belly down, he levered his way onto the roof, his face wet and glowing, before somehow dragging himself to his feet.

Vulture-like, the artist hunched over Andre, watching with sadistic fascination as she swung from the rooftop, her grip weakening. Again Vito was assaulted by a swelling, gushing rage. Like a man possessed he tore across the roof, ploughing into the man's undefended back. They landed on the very brink in a frantic weave of arms and legs, the artist struggling beneath him, desperate to break free. And then they were rolling together. Vito winced as an elbow stabbed his stomach, his assailant almost slipping from his grasp. He curled a fist in response, driving it into the back of the man's head. Briefly stunned the artist sank, limp, unable to defend himself as Vito pummelled his face, back and neck.

"Vito! Leave him! Help me!"

Andre's voice was faint, laced with terror. Still straddling the artist, Vito raised his head. The girl's legs windmilled on the empty air, her fingers tearing desperately at the guttering.

"Take my hand." He reached for her, seizing her elbow, relieved when her fingers twisted around his arm. "Come on, Andre. Hold on!"

She was weak - he could sense it. Her hand slipped and he caught her beneath her armpits, hauling her upwards. Dragging her to safety, he curled his arms around her, aware that she was shuddering with fear and exhaustion. Her body rose against his own. He could feel her, lithe and nervous as a leveret.

"Vito! Look out!" He released her, spinning around to find himself facing the artist once again, the man's face beaten bloody, his clothes ripped and torn, his fists clenched.

Vito's brain was a fog, his body now drained of its fury, of its unbidden craving for violence. He simply stood and stared, open mouthed as the artist dragged himself forwards.

"Duck!"

He dropped to his knees just in time. Andre's satchel hurtled through the air, smashing into the artist's lower body. Their assailant staggered, listing to one side, his legs crumbling beneath him as he toppled off the roof and landed with a wet thud across the body of Vito's first victim. The satchel followed, scattering stolen pastries as it plunged into the side street.

"My book!" Andre stared down in dismay. "Well come on, Vito. There could be more of them!"

Dazed, still on his knees, Vito found himself dragged upwards and pulled across the rooftop.

"You first." She pointed to the drain pipe.

"I...I'm not sure I..." he peered over the edge to the street below. "Perhaps there's another way down."

"There's no other way down, idiot!" She pushed past him and lowered herself over the side. "For the Mystery's own sake, Vito, get off the roof before my cousin sends more of his goons!"

Trembling, he followed her over the edge, hugging the iron pipe, flattening himself against it, dropping back down into the street barely able to believe that he was still alive.

She was already in the side street, her satchel draped over her shoulder. "Did you do this?" She gestured to the prone body of the first artist, his head bathed in a pool of his own blood, the mason's hammer lying just a foot away.

"Yes...well, no. I didn't kill him. I just stunned him. He'll be alright in the morning. Just a headache..."

"You killed him Vito!" She narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure you're a monk?"

His face must have crumpled then - his eyes brimmed. "No. I'm...I'm not sure. Not anymore." For what monk would do something so brutal, so bestial, what kind of novice would commit the gravest of crimes - one against life itself?

Andre's sharp features softened and she put one hand to his shoulder. "Vito, you saved us both. Now we're even. Come on." She tugged at his wrist. "Let's get out of this city."

"You're coming with me?" The faintest of hopes unfurled, deep at his heart's base.

"Yes, brother monk." She threw him a crooked smile. "Of course I'm coming with you."

The night sky was paling, stars slowly extinguished by the dawn. Tiredness now served Vito as his constant companion: an aching weariness which flowed through his arms and legs, which both dulled and dazed. He trudged on in Andre's wake, Animum already a distant dream, open countryside beckoning them on.

"Down there." She pointed to a patch of woodland buried in a valley. "That will serve for cover."

They pushed their way through a cornfield rendered silver and ghostly by the moon's light and then threaded amongst the trees at its far edge and traipsed downwards, dew soaking their feet. A tepid night breeze bore the ripe scents of leaves and grass. At the base of the valley lay a small pool, its waters breaking the moon's reflection into a thousand rippling fragments.

They sank down at its edge, cupping their palms to the water and drinking, before devouring the remains of Andre's stolen pastries, their backs resting against the trunk of a massive oak. "Are we safe here?" Vito whispered, staving off memories of men falling to their deaths, of masons' hammers, pools of blood and blind, relentless fury.

"Safe enough. For now."

"How did you know your cousin would send those men?"

"I slipped back into the cathedral to get my book. Dario had just left his chambers so I thought it was safe. But then I heard him coming back. I hid in one of the cupboards beneath his table. He called in the artists and gave them orders to kill us. It's because

of what we saw, Vito. Ol Terenzo *did* send those men against Fons! Dario must have known it all along."

"But why would he disguise them as Ahi?"

"I don't know. And Dario didn't say. He left with the artists and locked the door. It took me ages to pick the lock."

Vito fell silent then, his mind shattered. It were as if his life had been torn apart, ripped to shreds, and then trampled on. But so too had the world he knew: its pillars of belief, its stability, its very existence now resting on a knife's point. He sensed a stranger's blood beneath his nails and shuddered. "I think I'd like to bathe."

"Good idea. We should find some fresh clothes too. We look..."

"Like murderers?"

"We're not murderers, Vito!" She grasped his shoulder, squeezing hard, her nails biting into his skin so hard he yelped. "We were defending ourselves. Dario is a murderer, Ol Terenzo is a murderer - a man with the blood of an entire race of people on his hands. Not us!"

She spoke with such passion, such rage that he was stunned once more into silence. "I'm going to wash," he said at last. "Just don't...don't look, will you?"

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Yes. Well...just turn your head away."

He got up, dragging his robe over his head, stripping at the water's edge, shivering as the dawn breeze brushed his naked skin.

"What the hell's that?"

He knew then that she'd been watching: felt ashamed, aroused, and then ashamed once more. "I told you not to look!"

"Well I couldn't resist. I've never seen a monk's arse before. But seriously, Vito, what is that thing on your back?"

Instinctively he put his hand to his lower back, tracing the raised pattern of bumps and weaves that blemished his skin. "Nothing. A birth mark. I've always had it."

"It looks like... like a fountain."

"I know. So people tell me. I've never seen it." And with that he dived into the chill waters of the pond, finding at last some relief as the water cleansed him of blood and grime and sweat if not, he realised with a sinking heart, of sin. He lowered his head beneath the surface, weeping out his grief into the water.

At last, rising upwards to meet the dawn, he wiped himself down with his tattered rag of a robe before pulling it back on. And then he stopped.

She still sat beneath the tree, illuminated by the gritty light, the book open across her lap. But her face was now waxen, her eyes fixed on the page before her, her hands trembling.

"Andre?" he whispered, crouching down before her. "Hey! Andre!" He raised a hand, waving it before her face.

She looked up, *The People of the Pagi* falling from her grasp. "I just wanted to see...I just wanted to read another story." Her voice was the merest ghost of itself.

"And what...what did you read?" He grasped her wrists, her pulse racing beneath his touch, her skin cold and clammy.

"It's Ol Terenzo," she said. "He's going to murder my family."

PART FIVE: ALCHIM

PART FIVE: CHAPTER ONE
CALLIGRAPHY

"Carin, this is hopeless."

The heat was unbearable. Even the surrounding rocks burnt Moran's fingers when she touched them. Mirages and haze shimmered over the grasslands on the other side of the road, the air merging with the earth, the earth with the air.

"Quiet!" Carin threw her an angry glare. "We'll wait as long as we have to."

"We'll be dead before we've even left the wastes of the Harars."

"We'll be worse than dead if we don't have a disguise."

It had been first light by the time they put the scree of the mountain slopes behind them. That was when Carin had determined that they would wait, crouching behind these rocks ... for what exactly, Moran wasn't even sure. Her sister stated simply that they would not survive a day in Pagi territory dressed in plaid. Their only hope rested in acquiring Pagi clothes.

"Acquiring?"

Carin creased her thin lips into a vicious smile. "Stealing."

"Do you suppose Pagi will readily part with their clothes to a pair of Ruach?"

"They will if I present them with this."

She wafted her trident beneath Moran's nose. Moran pushed it away delicately. "Well, you're the warrior," she conceded.

"And you're the traitor, sister," Carin remarked blithely. There had been no further discussion. Moran ground her teeth, shifting from one leg to the other, her dress soaked with sweat and sticking to her skin. But after several hours of suffering in the searing heat, the tally of potential targets had been disappointingly poor. First came a troupe of actors: drunken, singing and swaying atop a high, horse-drawn wagon.

"Too many of them," Carin hissed. Moran watched, despondent as the cart careered away across the plains, threatening to spill its passengers into the long grass. As the sun rose higher, her eyelids drooped. The Golach had permitted them no more than a few hours rest: a fitful, feverish sleep in which Moran dreamt of Andre burning and melting, her long hair aflame, the skin dripping from her face. She had woken, screaming, to be escorted from the Mearahn caves by Ida and Keles, who watched

with grim satisfaction as the daughters of Arioch stumbled their way down the mountainside. She knew what Keles was thinking: they would not be coming back.

"Look!" Carin pointed to a distant cloud of dust rising up from the road on the horizon. Shaken out of sleep, Moran squinted against the sun's light. The cloud was travelling towards them, accompanied by the thunderous pounding of hooves on dry earth. And then, perhaps twenty or more Ahi emerged from the miasma of dust and dirt, their faces blackened with tattoos, braided locks of hair streaming out like banners on the wind behind them.

Carin released a long, low whistle. "They may be on their way to slaughter some Pagi - perhaps we should have offered our services," she smirked.

"Or perhaps we're not the only ones seeking the Firefarer."

"Perhaps." Her back to a boulder, knees drawn up before her, Carin twisted her head to face Moran. "They're not animals, you know - the Ahi. I saw that once."

"What do you mean?"

"The Pagi believe the Ahi to be wild beasts. They say the same about us. But I saw once...I saw..." she swallowed, her stern eyes softening.

"What did you see?" Moran laid a hand on Carin's forearm.

"It was before Ol Terenzo had turned the Pagi against us. Perhaps two autumns past. Our little adventures together had stopped - do you remember? You were already too infatuated with...with Ol Adama by then."

"Andre," Moran whispered. Her sister ignored her.

"So I was exploring by myself. High up above a canyon. I heard a woman crying down there, and so I got down on my belly and peered over the edge. There were dead Ahi everywhere - the Pagi must have lured them into an ambush. Just two seemed left alive. The woman lay stretched across her man's legs, a knife buried to its hilt in her stomach. She was a beautiful girl, Moran. Long-limbed, powerful - like a willow. She was crying, and so was he - uttering strange words in their strange language. You would have known what they were saying. I suppose he was just begging her to stay alive."

She stopped, the memory too painful, tears brewing and then streaming down the sharp angles of her face. Moran squeezed her wrist. "She was beyond help."

Carin nodded. "She died in his arms," she whispered at last. "I watched him stagger out, bereft. He carried her from the canyon, his face buried in her hair." She drew her

hand from Moran's, fiercely wiping her face free of tears. "They're not animals," she repeated.

A faint clip clop of hooves caught their attention. Moran put her eye to a gap between the rocks. Dressed in a tired, stained shirt and breeches the traveller sat astride a mule, a set of wicker panniers hanging from his saddle. Carin raised a finger to her lips, nodding.

"But there's only one!" Moran hissed.

"I have a plan..."

"You said we both need..."

"Moran," her sister gripped her arms. "You know what to do. Now off you go."

Sighing, Moran rose. She didn't want to do this. She wasn't sure they *had* to do this. She hovered, still uncertain, behind the rocks.

"Go!" Carin shoved her and she stumbled out into the road, clutching her sister's trident. The traveller stopped, his mule issuing a short, discontented bray. He was of middling age, his raven black hair slicked back from his forehead with sweat, his frame wiry and his complexion pasty. He eyed her with contempt.

"Perhaps you hadn't heard, traveller," she began, her voice strained with nerves. "There's a toll on this road."

He looked at her, hawked and spat, a gob of phlegm landing just before her feet. "I pay no one. Especially not Ruach witches."

"Good Sir, if you are not content to make payment, I shall be forced to take it from you." She waved the trident in what she hoped was a threatening manner.

"Try, bitch, and I'll flay you with these..." he drew a knife and cleaver from the top of one of the panniers. "And hand your skin over to Ol Terenzo himself."

In spite of herself she took a step backwards and he laughed. "In fact, I'll probably do that anyway."

It all happened in the space of a few moments. The laugh stuck in his throat, transmuted to a strangled groan as Carin hurled herself onto the back of the mule, wrapping a bare arm around the man's throat. The stranger struggled, hands ripping at her grip to no effect. They toppled sideways off the mule, rolling in the dust of the road before he shuddered, emitting a final gasp of air in a long, drawn out rasp. Spooked, the mule bucked and brayed, its legs kicking wildly.

"Grab it!" Carin yelled, her arm still hooked around the traveller's neck.

Moran seized the animal's reins but it took off down the road, dragging her in its wake. She clung on, now on her feet, now on her knees, rocks and stone biting into the flesh of her legs.

"Hold on!" Carin screamed. "There might be something of value in those panniers."

At last the mule seemed to register the futility in running. Drawing to a halt on the plains, it began to chew on grass stalks as if that had been its intention all along.

Panting, Moran dusted herself down, blood running from gashes in her knees, her bare feet cut and filthy. Pulling the mule behind her, she hobbled her way back towards Carin, the animal following at a docile trot. Her sister was already busy, stripping the traveller's body free of clothes.

"Was that necessary, Carin? Did we have to kill him?" She stared down at their victim's body. The Paga's tongue lolled against his lips and his eyes were glassy and wild even in death.

"Leave him naked and unconscious in the midday sun for vultures to peck at? What kind of monster are you, Moran? Check the panniers. Hurry - we need to get him off the road." She disappeared behind the rocks, dragging their victim behind her. Stifling her conscience, Moran opened the first bag which contained bread, dried meat and a skin of wine. A swift glance told her that Carin was well hidden from view. She twisted the cork from the skin and swigged. The wine was sour and warm, but she felt better the moment it slid down her throat and hit her stomach.

Returning the vessel, she checked the other pannier and gasped. Beneath a brutal array of weapons - daggers, cleavers and knives - lay a pouch of money. She shook it, enjoying the harsh clink of coins. "Looks like we're rich, sister."

"It looks like I am, you mean." Carin emerged from behind the rock dressed in the traveller's stained shirt and loose brown breeches. "From now on, Moran, I am Master Borso: a gentleman of the Pagi. Down on his luck, and in search of new ventures."

"And me?" Moran asked. "Who am I?"

"You, Moran, are my Ruach slave."

"I won't do it." She trudged behind the mule which Carin rode with all the swagger and arrogance of a down at heel Paga. "Surely I can get some kind of disguise too? This is just...it's just demeaning."

Her sister snorted. "Demeaning? Is there any honour in behaving like a Paga? But at a pinch I can at least pass for one, Moran. You? You're Ruach through and through. How many Pagi have you met with wild black curls and green eyes?"

"There may be some."

"They'd claim their blood was tainted. No. It wouldn't work. So just remember, when we get to Alchim, who am I?"

"Borso," she muttered.

"Master Borso. And who are you?"

"Look, why can't your spirits help us? Perhaps they can tell us where the Firefarer is. Why do we have to go through this dangerous farce of marching straight into the first Pagi town we come across?"

Carin's expression soured. She reached into the pannier, drew out the wine skin and swilled it around her mouth before swallowing. "Want some?"

"Yes. Why not ask them, Carin?" The wine fizzed across her tongue. She was reminded of vinegar and rancid, rotting fruit.

"Because, as I told you, they trick me. They deceive me. I don't trust them." Carin rubbed at her brow wearily and tugged the wine skin from Moran's grasp, stuffing it back into the pannier. "Sometimes they tell me the Firefarer is at sea. Then they say he's on land. Some tell me that there is more than one Firefarer, others say that there is only one. We need to talk to these pigs, Moran. We need to find out what they know - perhaps something has happened, perhaps someone has seen something."

But Alchim was another day's walk, by Moran's reckoning. Which meant a night spent beneath the stars with only the hiss of crickets for company, the hoot of owls riding the cool currents of night air in search of prey. The plains gave way to white rocks and rough tufts of grass, to copses of olives and the silver traces of thin brooks. "We'll stop here," Carin said, sliding from the mule.

At least, Moran conceded, their disguise permitted the lighting of a fire. No traveller would be surprised by the sight of a Paga and his slave camped at the edge of the road. With the mule tethered on the brook's bank, her stomach full of a stranger's bread and wine, she found herself almost free of fear for the first time in many days. Her mind drifted, slipping back to a summer's day two years past. Or had it been a

different life? She couldn't quite be sure. There had been a river, and a girl lying face down on the grass beside it, reading from a book. Long plaits obscured her face and the dishevelled blue silk of her dress had ridden up her legs. She rested with her knees bent, her bare feet pointed upwards to the sky. Moran had crouched down behind a tree, watching for some time, her breath caught in her throat as the girl licked a finger and then turned another page, pushing one of the plaits behind her back to reveal a pale, heart-shaped face and intelligent grey eyes.

That was when she had submitted to the compulsion to rise, to push back the branches of the tree, to walk towards the girl and sit down beside her. Andre had displayed no alarm or contempt, she remembered. She had merely surveyed her: those cool eyes curious.

"What are you reading?" Moran had surprised herself with her own boldness.

"A book." The faintest flicker of a smile caught on Andre's lips.

Moran had bristled with unease, with insecurity then. And witnessing that, Andre had said, "An old epic. But it's written in ancient Pagese. I understand only every second word."

"But I read ancient Pagese!" Moran blurted out.

Andre shifted, sliding into a sitting position in one fluid movement, her legs crossed before her. "You do?"

"Yes."

"So what does this say?" She ran a long, tapering finger across a page, its margins richly illustrated, the font a wild calligraphic whirl.

Moran bent down over the page, her head level with Andre's shoulder. "Run where you please - I will find you," she translated. "On sea, on land, amongst the winds or through the smoke and fire of hell, I will search for you."

PART FIVE: CHAPTER TWO

ALCHIM

Alchim rested amongst vineyards and orchards, its rooftops a maze of red tile, the tall facades of houses, inns and shops aligned like a many-fingered fist. It was midday by the time they reached the town, the sun at its height and the air thick with haze and heat.

"So who am I?" Carin buckled her trident to the saddle and climbed astride the mule.

"Master Borso," Moran muttered.

"Just so. And don't forget it. Otherwise we're as good as dead."

With a light flick of reins Carin set off, Moran traipsing along behind her. Others now joined them on the road: fruit pickers and farm hands, merchants journeying to or from the town, tinkers, jugglers, whores and vagrants. Some saluted Carin, others leered and pointed at Moran. Their disguise, it seemed, was humiliating but effective.

They passed through the wide arched gates of the town and into a medley of hawkers, acrobats, street sellers and street walkers. Moran was now painfully aware of how her plaid, her dark skin and hair marked her for Ruach. Some hissed, others observed, eyes burning with contempt as she pushed on in her sister's wake. It had never been like this before the fall, she recalled. Back then Pagi and Ruach had lived alongside one another as neighbours. Perhaps the tensions had always been there, erupting into the occasional brawl or exchange of insults. But for the most part, Ruach children had played with those of Pagi, their mothers gossiping together in the streets, their fathers ploughing the same fields. What evil could have spawned such hatred, she wondered, leading those same mothers to watch listlessly as their neighbours and children were rounded up and hacked to death? What insidious power had wormed its way inside the minds of those fathers who then chose to betray and kill their fellow workers? And why should she now feel a stranger - an enemy even - in a town which had once been home to both Pagi and Ruach, their two cultures enmeshed like the strands of a rope?

Carin must have sensed her unease. Bending low in the saddle, she hissed in Moran's ear: "We'll stop at an inn. I'll try and ask a few questions. You can stay in the room."

"I don't like it. Let's turn back."

"No! If we find the Firefarer, all of this will end, remember?"

Moran made no reply. Perhaps the Golach was right. Perhaps the Firefarer's powers would be enough to right the wrongs of the Pagi - to punish them for their crimes. But nothing would ever bring back the past. In spite of the heat, the jostling crowds, the stink and confusion of the town, she shivered.

The street spiralled upwards, narrowing until the roofs appeared to close in above them and the sky itself was a mere strip of light. At last Carin stopped outside a darkly-timbered inn. Its sign dangled from rusty chains and the paint on its boards was faded and chipped, but Moran still made out two words: *The Elements*.

Carin rapped with all the confidence of a true bred Paga on the door. It swung back after a few moments to reveal the landlord, his bulk swathed in a worn doublet and filthy apron, a few greying locks of hair plastered across a pink expanse of scalp. "Well?" Jowls quivering, the man gurned at Carin, his swinish eyes peering out through folds of fat.

"We seek a room for the night."

"We?" Swivelling his entire body to the left, he peered at Moran as if she were a beetle he might crush beneath his boot. "No Ruach. There's only one good place for them and that's at the end of a rope."

Carin's eyes narrowed and burned. Moran held her breath. Her sister's fury might be the death of them yet.

"We can pay." Carin jangled their bag of stolen coins beneath the landlord's nose. His piggish eyes turned weasel.

"We've room for Pagi, not Ruach. She can sleep in the stables with the other animals."

Carin shook her head. "I need her with me. Thanks for your hospitality, but we'll find another inn."

The innkeeper smirked. "Good luck to you, then. You'll not find anyone else prepared to let Ruach scum cross their threshold."

Pain seared Moran's chest like molten iron. She reached for Carin but her sister shook her off. "Alright," she breathed. "If that's the way it's to be, I'll take the room. But see to it that she's comfortable."

"If needs be."

"They must."

"Then I'll get the girl. She'll show her the way."

Wiping fat fingers on his apron, the landlord turned inside. Moran seized Carin's shoulder, whirling her around. "You can't let him do this! It's inhuman."

"It's our only hope. Stop it, Moran - get off me!"

Around them eyes turned, mouths muttered: Moran witnessed indignation, outrage everywhere.

"That Ruach bothering you, Sir?" A woman's shrill voice echoed across the street. "We're hanging some of them tomorrow. She can join them."

"No. It's alright." Carin shook herself free and then shoved Moran away. "She's just my slave. That's all. Listen," she lowered her voice, pretending to buckle her pannier as she spoke. "It's not what I'd have wanted, but we have no choice. I'll send you food and blankets. Just wait for me."

But that molten pain had now solidified, bearing almost physical weight. This was not an insult to be shrugged off and dismissed. And when the girl came - her eyes a suppressed joke, full lips curling in contempt - Moran refused to turn back and gauge her sister's guilt.

The landlord's girl gripped the mule's reins in one hand, took Moran by the arm and led her up the street. The small courtyard into which they turned was bordered on three sides by workshops and stables. After leading the mule through one gate, the girl unlocked a door to its right and pushed Moran inside. She landed on her knees amongst straw and rushes, the chamber dark and cramped, reeking of dung and mould. The girl bolted the door from without with a heavy bar. Moran heard her whistle as she made her way back across the courtyard.

She leant against a wall, drawing her knees up to her chest. Light filtered in between the slats of the door, but that did little to pierce the gloom. And around her, the rustling and shifting of straw indicated mice - or worse. She would not sleep, that much was certain.

How could life, which had promised so much, have deceived her so cruelly? Had she wanted more than was her share, dreamed of a freedom to which she was never

entitled? That day by the river had brimmed with promise, she remembered. She had sat beside Andre, their arms brushing as they read the ancient text together, revelling in its romance, its brave heroes and beautiful heroines, the old Pagese language spilling from her tongue as she breathed life into battles, into wars that lasted centuries, tragic love affairs and valiant deaths. But then, the sun winding its way down behind the forest, Andre had suddenly jumped to her feet. "I must go." She bundled the book into a satchel, pulling on her boots.

"Now?" Moran rose beside her, the sudden wrench to her heart almost too much to bear. "Must you go? Will you come back?"

"I don't know." The girl's hair burned gold in the sunlight, Moran noticed. "I live far away."

And with that she had gone, leaving Moran alone on the bank, the day dissolving into night and her heart a fusion of hope and grief. She had returned to the river all summer, persuading herself each time that Andre would be there again, sleeping or reading. She imagined herself creeping up on her, lying down beside her. Their hands would touch, fold together. She dreamed of their lips touching, of Andre's hair falling over her face as their bodies entwined and merged. But that day never came. And then leaves were falling from the trees, the air grew cool and flecked with rain, and autumn served to confirm her fears - Andre was not coming back.

And neither, it seemed, was Carin. For now what little light remained was fading and the sty or stable into which she had been cast descended into gloom. Perhaps, she realised with a sudden spasm of alarm, the landlord had already seen through Carin's disguise, was handing her over to the town guards. Which meant that in the morning they would come for her too, and... she buried her face in the folds of her dress, willing herself not to call out.

The bar was pulled up, the door creaked open, and she was aware of someone standing on the threshold, peering down at her. Her mind now swarming with fears, she scrambled backwards into a corner of the stable, praying that the darkness would conceal her. But whoever it was merely bent down, laying a plate and pitcher on the floor, dropping a frayed rag beside them.

"Your Master sends you food. And a blanket." It was the inn keep's girl, her curves and curls outlined against the moon's light.

He's still alive, then? Moran wanted to ask.

The girl hovered just outside the door, as if unwilling to leave. "Your Master," she said at last, warily. "Is he...does he have a girl? Some sweetheart somewhere - he said you were from the duchy of Libarum. Is there some woman waiting there for him?"

About twenty, Moran could have said. "No. There's no one that I know of."

"He's a fine man, your Master." The girl leant against the door frame, her face turned out towards the evening. "He's stories to tell and such a way of telling them."

I'll bet he does. What was Carin doing? Moran knew something of her sister's appetites. Seduction was a game she played: lovemaking the prize. But she shrugged off one lover to claim the next and bedding a Paga could only ever be a question of conquest, of revenge, not romance. Besides, if the girl was really so stupid as to believe Carin a man...

"He'd never have sullied himself with *you*, anyway." There was no malice in the girl's tone when she spoke. It was stated as a fact, an obvious truth. Anger washed over Moran like a wave, but she held her tongue.

"No," the girl continued. "Master Borso's a gentleman. He'd not stoop so low as to bed a Ruach. And if you say there's no sweetheart waiting for him back in Libarum...well." With that she turned into the yard, letting the door swing shut before dropping down the bar. Once again, the chamber was plunged into darkness.

Moran picked up the pitcher and drank. The water was lukewarm and bore a brackish aftertaste but her throat was dry with dust and heat. She knew what was happening now. And she could have put an end to it: she could have claimed that 'Master Borso' was more beast than man: that he would hurt the girl, both in her body and her mind. That 'Master Borso' had been known to bed a different girl every night for a week. But something had stopped her. She understood, in part at least, Carin's rage. The girl's words echoed around her head: *He'd not stoop so low as to bed a Ruach*.

"No. He won't," she whispered to herself. "But you will."

Light edged the door. From a distant street or yard a cock crowed, ushering in the morning. Moran rose: cold, stiff, her hair peppered with straw, her throat dry once more. She raised the pitcher to her lips and drained the remaining drops before dry-washing her face with dirt stained palms. If she had slept at all it had been fitful, her

dreams filled with horror and pain: visions of Andre falling from a rooftop, of a strange child engulfed in fire, of blood welling amongst the cobbles on a street. She rose shakily, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders.

Footsteps clipped across the courtyard and then with a groan of hinges the bar was raised. She squinted into the light, both relieved and furious to see Carin waiting outside, a tight smile stretched across her face, her shirt and breeches creased and dishevelled. Moran stepped forwards and slapped her sister hard across the cheek.

"Strangely enough, that's what she did too." Carin took the blow without even flinching.

"When she found out you were a woman?" Moran breathed.

"Oh she knew that all along. She wasn't blind. No. It was when I told her I was Ruach that she hit me."

Moran stared at her, so shocked she could barely speak. "You did what?"

"Oh come on, Moran. Don't look like that. If they were going to kill us, we'd be dead already. But can you imagine the little bitch's face? All night bedding 'Master Borso,' and in the morning she discovers she's shamed herself with a Ruach? That's a secret she'll take with her to the grave. You should have seen her sobbing into her pillow." She sniffed at Moran's hair. "You really stink, you know."

"That's what happens when you're locked in a pen for the night, sister. You should try it some time. Let's go - I'm not as convinced as you are that your lover will remain tight-lipped."

"Oh she will do, believe me. *I'll never be clean.*" She mimicked the inn girl's lisping tones. "*I'll probably put an end to myself, so I will.* Of course, I offered to help her with that but she seemed to change her mind. Where's the mule?"

The mule appeared to have enjoyed more of a restful night than Moran could boast of and trotted out peaceably to join them. Carin threw saddle and panniers across the animal's back and then set herself astride it. "Well come on, Moran. We've a Firefarer to search for."

"I imagine you were too busy indulging yourself to find out anything on that score."

Her sister threw her a pained expression. "Moran, do you honestly think I would put myself through the agony of bedding a Paga were it not for the promise of reward?"

"It was the promise of revenge, sister, that drove you to such 'agonies.'"

"Tsk." Carin shook her head. "You never trust me, do you? In fact our little slut of an inn keep's daughter proved quite informative."

"She's his daughter?"

"Never mind that." They passed beneath the arched entrance to the stables and out onto the street. Moran cast a brief glance upwards at the mullioned windows beneath the eaves of the inn. A pale face peered down at them: tear-streaked, lips trembling in misery. Moran knew that she ought to berate her sister further. The girl had been young, naive, innocent. Innocent? *Master Borso's a gentleman*, the words repeated through her thoughts. *He'd not stoop so low as to bed a Ruach*.

"So what did she tell you?" Moran strode to catch up with Carin who was disappearing down the hill.

"Of something strange that happened not far from here, in Warvum a few days past. An old artist was destroyed - burnt to death in her own studio. The townspeople saw two strangers leaving the witch's house: a young woman and a boy, but they spirited themselves away before they could be caught. And as they can't have headed coastwise without being seen, they must be moving inland."

"And you think it was the Firefarer?"

"Who else? In any case, we need not trouble ourselves with heading down to Warvum, Moran. If they were headed inland, we can cut across country to find them. Don't worry - no more nights in stables for you. At least for the time being."

"And I should be grateful?"

"I can always find you another sty."

There was no chance to reply, for Carin gave the mule's reins a sudden tug as they approached the town walls. A crowd of people had assembled: their excitement palpable. Gossiping, shoving, laughing, the townsfolk encircled a raised dais. Erected at its centre was a wooden scaffold, five lengths of rope dangling from its frame. Moran's legs weakened, a cry of despair catching in her throat. For an entire Ruach family stood atop the platform.

At the base of the scaffold an old grandmother slumped, too weak to move. A child clung to her arm: a girl of no more than five summers, so thin and filthy that her legs stuck out from beneath her dress like broken sticks. The girl's parents stared into the crowd, their eyes drained of all expression, while an older son fought and spat against his captors until they subdued him with blows and he lay exhausted on the ground, his famished frame unable to withstand such punishment.

A richly dressed Paga climbed up beside the Ruach and addressed the crowd, his tri-corner hat indicating his station as a town clerk or burgher.

"In our midst, ladies and gentlemen. In our very midst." He swept his arms wide to take in the Ruach who merely gazed down into the streets, their lips dry and flaking, their skin encrusted with dirt.

"It is sometimes to our shame that certain Pagi succumb to base sentiment and offer refuge to filth such as these. And they have been punished for their foolishness, as well they might."

"A year in prison for harbouring Ruach," Carin whispered with scorn.

"But as the great Elector Ol Terenzo proclaims, we must rid ourselves of these parasites, these leeches who suck us dry, who feed upon us, who defile the purity of the Pagi. And therefore by decree of the town of Alchim, they will be hanged."

The crowd chanted, fists punching the air: "Hang them! Hang them!"

Moran stared at the old grandmother, her ancient eyes ridden with rheum and confusion. Two guards dragged her to her feet, plucking the young girl from her side. The child began to scream, kicking and lashing out with her hands as she was hoisted upwards towards the scaffold.

"Carin," she whispered, clutching her sister's hand. "We've got to do something."

PART FIVE: CHAPTER THREE

DA CAPO

Wait!" Carin's voice rang out over the laughter and jeers of the crowd.

Looking up sharply, the burgher scowled. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have pressing business to attend to and I have no intention of wasting more time on these Ruach vermin than I already have done."

"At least hear me speak, Sir." Carin pushed her way through the throngs of townfolk, many of whom glared at her, hissing or muttering their irritation. Ignoring them, she sprang up onto the platform and turned to address the crowd.

A warm wave of pride washed over Moran. Carin was not without her faults - she loved and hated with equal passion, spoke without tact, succumbed easily to prejudice. And yet she was at the same time courageous, breathtakingly loyal, and capable of fierce compassion for those she cared for. And here she now was, Moran realised, prepared to risk discovery in order to save the wretched Ruach who stared at her, hope renewed in their eyes.

"What will it benefit your town to kill these people, Sir?" She addressed the burgher directly.

"Not people. Ruach. And it is our duty, as his worthiness Ol Terenzo has insisted it must be, to maintain the purity of the Pagi. The Ruach have polluted our people for too long with their primitive magic and their filthy, undisciplined ways." Several people screamed out their agreement, others clapped and cheered.

"Yes. You are right." Fury mounted in Carin's voice. Moran prayed she would restrain it. "Ol Terenzo did order us to root out this canker and destroy it. But did he not declare that where possible, the Ruach might serve us as our slaves? That in this way, we will preserve our right to rule over them, and they at the same time may serve our ends? In this way we may civilise them."

"It is true," the burgher conceded. "But what good did these low born specimens ever serve, hiding in cellars like the rats they are? I say we hang them."

"Hang them! Hang them!" Cries and catcalls rippled through the crowd. A few leered at Moran, laughing when she flinched.

"And I say your town would benefit more from trade than death." Carin waved their stolen pouch of coins before the burgher's nose. "My name is Master Borso. I am a merchant in my own way, seeking out fresh ventures. I put Ruach to work on my vineyards and in my orchards, and in this way I am rich. That girl you see standing there," she pointed to Moran. "She too was due a hanging. But I insisted that she serve me as my slave. And now she is all deference and willingness to work. Isn't that true, Moran?"

Moran nodded, peering down at the cobbles as if duly conscious of her own low status.

"You see, Sir? Take my money and free these Ruach. I will put them to good use, depend upon it."

Moran looked up, relieved that the crowd had turned their attention back to Carin and her little charade. Upon witnessing the bag of coins, the burgher's determination appeared to waver. He stared at the small sack as she dangled it before him, swinging it like a pendulum.

"I am sure, Sir, that as a loyal official of this town, you can put this coinage to good use - perhaps funding some public games or theatre which all your people can enjoy? Perhaps to offer them free beer or wine?"

The crowd's mood altered. They grew quiet, gazing up in expectation at the burgher, who mopped at his brow with a lace bordered handkerchief.

"Sell them, Master Ardello!" A man yelled out. "Let him take them and we'll drink to him."

"Aye! What do you burghers ever do but drink our taxes anyway?"

Moran repressed a smile. Knowingly or not, Carin had wormed out a source of resentment. Ardello's haughty features soured and he flapped his hands frantically, urging peace. "Gentlemen! Please!" He cast a desperate glance at the sea of straining, indignant faces. "This is what you wish for, gentlemen? A night of revelry in exchange for true justice?"

"May he work the bastards to death," one man yelled out. "Hanging's too good for them anyway. And we'll all enjoy a drink at your expense, Master Ardello."

Ardello's shoulders slumped. "Alright, Master Borso. Take your slaves." He signalled to the guards to release their charges. They pushed the Ruach towards Carin, the old woman crumpling to her knees. Carin turned to help her up but then clearly thought better of it. Too much concern for the Ruach would be viewed with suspicion.

Instead, she slapped the bag of coins into Ardello's waiting palms. As he leant forward to seize it, he whispered something at Carin - a threat or warning, Moran assumed, for although Carin made no reply, her eyes hardened.

"Come on, move!" She herded the Ruach through the crowds, dragging the boy along by his elbow. His parents followed - both frail and haggard beyond their years, their hair long, dark and matted, their eyes haunted. The grandmother waddled along behind them, her granddaughter still clinging to her leg. With a sudden smile, she caught Moran's eye. She knows, Moran realised. She knows.

A few townsfolk spat or yelled at the family as Carin propelled them forwards, but most of them had now turned their attention to Ardello, who stood alone upon the platform hugging the bag of money to his chest.

"Well, Master Ardello - aren't you going to share that with us all now?" As they crowded around him, he backed away.

"Yes, yes of course. I must take it first to the cloth hall to be counted and distributed fairly."

"Distributed fairly amongst you and your cronies, more like. Come on lads, let's follow him and see we get our due." And with that the crowd dispersed, many trailing Ardello as he made a hurried retreat from the stand and disappeared amongst a sea of arms and heads and backs.

"Come on, Ruach." Carin maintained her gruff, business-like persona and jumped onto the mule's saddle. "Get behind them," she whispered to Moran. "Make sure none of them stray."

They trudged out beneath the town gates, Moran repressing the urge to laugh out loud at Carin's boldness, her brazenness. And it was only when they were well beyond sight of the town walls and entering the relative shelter of an orchard that Carin held up her hand and they stopped, the column of Ruach collapsing beneath the shade of peach and cherry trees. "Thirsty?" Carin fished in the panniers for their flask. The Ruach drank and drank, water trickling down their faces as they drained the vessel dry.

"We can't stay here for long," Carin warned, crouching down before them.

"Thank you." It was the mother who spoke. She must have been beautiful once, Moran decided, but her face had been ruined and ravaged with suffering, her skin ingrained with dirt after long months spent underground, her eyes wild and haunted. Her hair, lank and grey, had fallen out in clumps to reveal bald patches of skin.

Moran took hold of the woman's hands and she began to cry. Her husband snaked an arm around her waist, his own eyes welling with tears. "It's been a long time," he whispered. "Our old neighbours gave us shelter. Now they are imprisoned for it. And we thought that the time would pass when we could climb back into the light - when our children would play once more in the sun."

"That day will come, I promise you." Carin compressed his shoulder in a tight, fierce grip. "My sister and I have been sent by the Golach to ensure that such a day *will* come again."

He stared at her then as if he were looking at a ghost. "You're not really a Paga? I just thought you were, like our neighbours, great of heart."

Carin grinned. "It's to my discredit that I make a very passable Paga. But no, my name is Carin and this..."

"I know who you are." The old grandmother cut through her speech. "You are the daughters of Arioch."

"How...how did you know that?" Moran stammered.

"Of noble lineage," the old woman continued, ignoring her question. "Descended from ancient Golachs. And your father was, well, I heard he was a man of great learning. A scholar."

"But how do you know this?"

"Don't you ever listen to the spirits, girl?" The old woman peered keenly into her face, her eyes now bright with fluid energy.

"I can't...I can't see them," she whispered. The others all looked at her then and she turned away, ashamed. "I can't hear them."

"You will, child. One day you will hear them. It will cost you dearly, but you will see them all." The old woman edged towards her, wheezing, panting with age. "She looks for you, Moran. She searches for you everywhere."

A sharp, intense dizziness threatened to lay her low. She released the mother's hands and raised her fingers to her own brow, rubbing away the breaking sweat. "Andre?" she whispered.

Beside her Carin rose, headed for the mule, unbuckled her trident and speared the ground with it. "I tell you, sister. If she comes near you, I'll kill her."

They parted with the Ruach family at crossroads a few miles north of Alchim. The Harars loomed into view once more: a serrated length of snow-capped peaks and crags dividing the sky from the earth. To the west, rolling fields and orchards fed upwards to the yellowing expanse of the grass plains, while forests sprouted from the hillsides to their east, rising in a thick canopy of oak and sycamore.

"Stay clear of the roads," Carin warned the Ruach. "Travel by night. Our people are gathered - as many as could make it - in the caves at Mearah." She gestured to the sky. "You must trust to the spirits to guide you."

"We will. Thank you once again, Carin. Moran." The father inclined his head in respect.

"I want to go with them!" his son protested, his face a mottled web of cuts and bruises.

Carin shook her head. "Your task is to see that your grandmother and your sister make it to the caves, Ravi. And I'm charging you with a message that you must pass on to the Golach. You are to tell him that you've seen us, that we are close - very close, to finding the Firefarer. And when we have the child, we will revisit Alchim. We will revisit it with fire, with death and with destruction. Tell the Golach that."

Moran turned on her sister. "What madness are you speaking?"

"Madness?" Carin smirked. "Well, perhaps you could call it madness, Moran. But I call it justice."

"It's not justice, it's revenge."

"The line between the two is thin and fragile as a hair, sister. Be sure to tell me when it's broken, won't you?"

They watched the family go, waving as they wound their way amongst the trees, the old woman supported by her grandson. "She'll not make it," Moran whispered.

"She's stronger than you think, Moran. And if she is to die, it will be as a free woman, not at the whim of the Pagi."

The thought was not as consoling as Carin may have imagined. And as they headed up through the forest, Moran felt sick and ill at ease. They were nearing the Firefarer with every step, or so Carin claimed. The spirits now spoke in unison, her sister said. She relayed their visions - an abandoned, ruined fort atop a hill, ivy choking its crumbling walls, enchantment pervasive - floating on the very air in strange, eerie harmonies.

"It can only mean one thing." Carin had dismounted, leading the mule up through a mire of stony ground and tree roots.

"Pagese magic?"

"And who is famed for bending music to his will?"

Moran stopped and stared, fear surging down her spine. "Simone Seraf ol Lauro?"

Carin nodded grimly. "Lord ol Lauro himself. Let's pray we're not too late."

The forest also seemed a place of subdued mystery or danger - leaves rustled, and yet there was no wind. Occasionally the ground appeared to move, to sway and slide as a snake sashayed across their path, its skin of a colour with the earth. They climbed upwards all the time, the light blotted out by branches and no sign of the road upon which, Carin was certain, the Firefarer must have travelled.

Moran dreamed back to happier days and nights. She remembered a winter evening when, all hope of Andre finally gone, she had sat beside her father studying ur Ruach. There had been a knock at the door. Her mother opened it, wiping flour-white hands onto her apron. A woman stood on the threshold, the fur hood of her cloak caked in flakes of snow, her lips almost blue with cold.

"Please, come in. Warm yourself. Arioach, give the lady your chair."

Moran and Carin had risen, edging back amongst the shadows as their guest took her seat by the fire, water pooling around her boots, the hem of her dress soaked and filthy. "Such a night." She smiled, dropping back her hood to reveal grey eyes and long, blonde hair caught behind her head in a winding plait. She looked to be of middle years and blessed with a beauty, Moran realised, that she had witnessed somewhere before.

Their guest took a hot glass of wine between trembling fingers, glancing around the cottage. "I cannot stay long - my coachman will never forgive me in this weather."

"He must come inside," Moran's mother insisted.

"No, no I will be brief. My name is Erminia Giorgina Ol Adama. I am here at the request of my daughter. She has taken it into her head to learn the ancient languages - old Pagese and ur-Ruach. Why, I cannot say. The girl is given to such whims and I do my best to humour her. It's either that or she wanders off in search of her own amusements. And then I must fear for her safety."

"And you believe that I might teach her?" Moran's father leant forward in his chair, removing his thin-rimmed spectacles. "I see you are a Paga, Madam. Perhaps such an arrangement would not be wise."

"Master Arioeh, I know you to be a scholar of repute. But in fact Andretta requests that your daughter Moran be her tutor."

Carin grabbed Moran's wrist, her grip fierce and painful. "Don't do this, sister. Don't leave us!"

Moran shrugged her off. "I've studied for this purpose, Carin. I'll go." Her head seemed clear, stripped of all else but thoughts of Andre - of her pale skin, her sleek, slim frame, her curiosity and her wit.

"You are certain?" Erminia smiled up at Moran. "It would give her much pleasure. It would bring me peace of mind. But she is...she's a strange girl."

"Yes. I know," Moran had replied. "Take me to her."

"Moran, come on!" Carin's voice rang down through the trees. "It'll be getting dark soon."

Moran shook herself free of the past and trudged on. Her breath short, sweat running into her eyes, she dragged herself upwards, clinging to trunks and branches for support until she was level with Carin. "Is this the road?" she gasped, hopeful. The earth curled in a wide stretch of ochre through the forest beyond, its surface rutted and uneven.

"Let's hope so." Carin headed off, leading the mule, denying Moran even a few minutes of rest. With a low growl, she continued, the soil soft and shifting beneath her feet, every step sapping the strength from her limbs.

Carin had stopped - was standing, head held to the wind, sniffing the air. "Death," she stated with grim certainty. "I smell it." She unbuckled her trident from the mule's saddle, indicating the road's peak some yards up ahead.

Moran inhaled the forest's scents. Carin was right. Something sweetly putrid mingled with the earthy aromas of leaves, of pine needles and bracken: the cloying stench of decay.

"Be careful, Moran," Carin whispered. "I'll go first."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

They edged upwards, the sickening reek of rotting flesh now so intense that Moran covered her face with her hand, fearful of retching. A frenzied buzz of flies accompanied the smell: the air thick with noise.

"Perhaps we should go round," Moran choked.

"No. This could be important." Carin dragged the mule up the last section of road, the animal shying, bucking and braying with fear. Then she creased over, vomiting violently, still clutching the mule's reins as it tried to break and run.

"What...what is it?" Moran put her sleeve to her mouth and nose, forcing herself to look.

At first she could not see past the upended cart, its back wheels suspended almost comically in the air, the driver's seat buried in the soft earth. She crept around it, peering down at the carcass of a horse still strapped into bridle and harness, hair and hide peeling away from its muzzle and the eyes long gone - pecked out by forest birds. And beyond that...she ventured further, a black wall of flies briefly rising from their feast before resettling.

Moran sank to her knees, the contents of her stomach brewing and then released in a stream of vomit. The man - she assumed he had been a man - had been cut to pieces, his head half severed and twisted round to face the sky, eyeless and grey-green with rot. Beside him his fellow passenger still knelt as if in prayer, resting against the side of the cart, his body studded with arrows.

"Let's go." Carin laid a trembling hand on her shoulder.

"This is not Pagi work."

"No. This is Ahi. And they could be nearby. Come on - we need to leave the road." Propped against each other, they struggled for the forest.

"Where's the mule?" Moran spluttered. Retching once again, she clung to the trunk of an oak for support.

"It ran. I couldn't hold it."

An hour earlier and Moran would have howled with grief for the loss of their mount and supplies. "I can't blame it," she gasped, wiping strings of spit and bile from the edges of her mouth.

Was the forest without end? She tried to stave off the possibility that they were now lost, that they would wander around, dazed and starved, weakening until their legs buckled and all hope was gone. Or perhaps the Ahi were still here - hoping to ambush a few Pagi. Would they distinguish between Pagi and Ruach? Could they? She doubted it. She thought of the travellers' remains left rotting on the road for crows and flies and retched up what little was left.

Raising her head, she was aware of a sudden, subtle change in the air. It was in the earth too, in the shades and sounds of the surrounding woodland. Carin must have

sensed it, for she stopped, her head cocked on one side, watching, listening. The forest floor stretched out before them dappled with sunlight, its colours more intense, more varied. And a light rustling of leaves, a breath of wind brought with it a faint, rising harmony. Was that it? Perhaps this was madness, the raving which presaged death. She listened once again and caught the thrum of viols working beneath the carefully plucked melodies of a lute. Carin nodded. She had heard it too. "From the pan to the fire, sister. From Ahi to Pagi."

They walked as if in a dream, the music teasing, dying to a distant strain until it was nearly lost, then rising once more in wild, discordant waves. Moran raised her hands to her ears, but it seemed to work beneath her skin, to mingle with her blood and draw her on. The forest thinned out, its dark, entangled maze of roots and branches feeding into low lying scrub and brush. And beyond that were foothills upon which cattle grazed, fields of flowers and an avenue of cypress twisting up towards the lonely ruins of a fort.

"Is that it?"

Carin nodded.

The air was stewing with music now. They seemed to press against a wall of sound, pushing their way upwards, the melodies harsher, jarring, as if warding them away. And by the time they had reached the fort itself, the notes had degenerated into screams, wails and cries.

"Carin, we may lose more than just our lives here," Moran had to yell to be heard.

"We promised the Golach, Moran. This is our journey's end." Carin cupped her hands to her mouth and bellowed. "This is our victory. We can't fail now."

She tugged at the jagged remains of a door which flapped on its ancient hinges like a furious giant bat. "Come on, Moran. Just one act of courage and all of this finishes." She slipped inside. Moran stared after her, music whipping and tugging like wind at her hair and ears. The door handle came away in her hands when she pulled it. She cast it to the ground and followed Carin, her skin prickling with dread

Once within, the music lulled into soft, chiming cadences. They had stepped into a low-ceilinged chamber, the gloom so thick it might be cut with a knife. The few remaining window panes were blackened and stained with age. Cobwebs swept the length of the room, clinging to candlesticks and plates which still rested on a massive table bearing the remains of an ancient feast. Moran worked her way around empty,

high backed chairs, staring in wonder at the dried, withered husks of fruit, bread black with rot, a peacock's once proud carcass now weighted down with dust.

"Upstairs," Carin whispered, her trident raised and ready. Twisted, worn floor boards creaked beneath their feet. Moran held her breath but the music played on: a counterpoint of soft, seductive melodies.

Once above, a series of doors ran the length of a narrow, windowless corridor. Carin pushed the first one open. Within lay a collection of time warped instruments: a harp, its strings broken and furred with dust. Viols and fiddles, their bows snapped in two; a pile of discarded recorders. They moved on, Carin suddenly freezing as she entered the next room, a finger pressed to her lips.

Peering over her shoulder, Moran stifled a gasp. For lying on a decrepit bed, his young body rising and gently falling as he slept, was a young boy.

"The Firefarer?" Moran whispered, awed.

Carin nodded and moved towards the bed, but Moran hung back. How could something so fragile, so innocent harness the power and violence of which the Golach had spoken? For he slept as any normal child would with tousled hair, long eyelashes fluttering, his lips gently parted. "I'll take him," she said.

She crossed the room and plucked the boy from the bed. He stirred briefly in her arms - she felt his warmth pressed to her own, his arms curled around her neck. And still he slept. "Let's go now."

"No. Simone." Carin turned to her with a tight, tortured smile, her dark eyes blood-hungry; maddened, Moran thought, by the music.

"We have the Firefarer, Carin."

"And the chance to rid our people of another Paga."

"Just one."

"One of power. A friend to Ol Terenzo." She pushed back along the corridor, Moran following, the boy a sleeping weight in her arms. Each door once opened revealed - nothing. Old furniture, instruments, some dusty, time-ravaged books in a long abandoned library. And then at last Carin stopped, put her shoulder to a set of splintered panels and pressed down on a handle, half falling through a dust cloud into a musty, half-lit bedroom.

The child stirred in Moran's arms - she caught him whisper a word, a name in his sleep. "Muna."

There was nothing but a canopied bed, its ancient fabrics worn and faded, candles set in alcoves burnt down to stubs of wax, a few fraying tapestries lining mildewed walls. But the bed was occupied, Moran realised with a sudden stab of horror. She made out the sleeping form of a young woman, her long, dark hair wrapped in twists across her face. And beside her rested Simone, Lord Ol Lauro, his body almost skeletal, twisted and time wracked, once handsome features now dry and yellow as parchment, a few long strands of blonde hair still clinging to a bald expanse of scalp which was wrinkled and spotted with age.

As Carin stepped forward, Simone's eyes opened - pale, green and watery. He stirred, gnarled fingers clutching at the bed clothes in fear, scrabbling and inching their way towards the girl. Carin raised her trident and plunged it down. The music stopped.

PART SIX: OL LAURO

PART SIX: CHAPTER ONE

INK BLOT

Somebody was screaming: long, quavering wails rising in pitch and volume, succeeded by a series of choking, air-starved gasps. Then the screams began again, this time resembling the brutish howling of a wounded animal. It took Muna some time to realise these were her screams - her own howls - which pierced the very fabric of the air.

She forced herself to look at Simone, still unwilling to believe what she saw. Simone had been young, lithe, strong. Beside her lay an old man, his skin yellow and dry as ancient parchment, his limbs wasted to mere strips of gnarled, knotted flesh. Where Simone's hair had been thick - the colour of spun sunlight - pale strands now clung, lank and limp to the corpse's bald scalp. And his eyes - she had surrendered to those eyes, studied them for hours. She had drowned in them. Now they stared at the ceiling, glassy and drained of life.

Blood spread across the bed linen, fanning out around Simone's corpse like ink blotting on a page. She watched as it fingered its way towards her until, unable to bear more, she rolled off the bed, crumpling on the floor, her head buried in her arms, her body shaking violently.

This, she told herself, was just a nightmare. Real life lay with Simone and she would wake soon to days of feasting and music, to nights in which their limbs and lips fused and became one. Together they would hunt the hart through endless forests, make love in darkness punctured by the glow of fireflies. That was the future he had promised her. He could not - he would not - have lied.

She was aware of someone passing her dress over her head, threading her arms through the sleeves, her feet into her boots as one might clothe a child. She struggled, wrenching free. A hand slapped her hard across her face. Heat seared, there was pain and then the metallic tang of blood. Shivering, whimpering, she put her fingers to her lips and drew them away, red and wet.

"Muna!"

Someone had spoken - someone she recognised. Perhaps she was dredging up memories from another life, from another person's life? She looked back at Simone.

He was still dead in her nightmare, his mouth gaping, fish-like, a fine line of blood trickling down his cheek.

"Muna!"

That voice again. She turned towards it, too weak to scream any longer, her body overpowered by loss, her mind numb, empty, desperate to anchor onto something, anything that might tell her where she was, or who she was.

"Muna!"

Arms gripped her legs, a head butted gently into her stomach. And suddenly it were as if a pane of opaque glass had cracked, shattered, and was crashing to the ground in a thousand falling shards. It were as if she had stepped from one world and into another. And she saw - she saw Hori, his face pale and sleepy amongst the shadows. She lifted him upwards, crushing him to her chest. "I'm sorry," she whispered in his ear. "I failed you. Again I failed you."

"You didn't fail him." A woman spoke in strangely accented Ahi. Muna peered through the gloom. Two figures gained form, shrouded in haze and shadow. One appeared to be female, her hair splashing down in wild waves about her face. Her companion was of the same height, but wore the loose fitting shirt and breeches of a Paga, hair cropped, eyes bright and bitter.

"You were tricked, Muna. Deceived by Lord Ol Lauro." The long-haired woman reached for her but she flinched and backed away.

"Please, for your brother's sake, if not your own, we must leave this place. Simone had friends - powerful friends. And your own people are searching for you. We found the remains of their victims in the forest."

"Two...two men?" She ran her tongue over cracked lips, tasting once more the salt of her own blood. A rush, a torrent of memories flooded her thoughts - chaotic and out of sequence. An old woman burning, her hair aflame. A child sitting on a beach, listening to the wild caw of gulls. Her father Erland dying, his final words: *control this*. Pere's fierce, tattooed face. And two men - one ancient, his face wrinkled and kindly. The other grave and stern. He had given her something. Where was it?

Dropping to the floor she scrabbled about, her fingers curling around a thin roll of leather. Energy surged along her arm, coursing upwards until it burst in another confused mess of memories. Hieronimo, Ranzo - they had both delivered up their lives for her sake. She saw the old man shot through with arrows, heard his nephew

urging her to run. And she remembered that what she now held was no ordinary map, but an exquisite piece of Pagese magic.

The two strangers were talking, possibly arguing in an unfamiliar language, waving their arms and shaking their heads. "What is it?" Muna asked the long-haired girl.

"My sister says we must run, now. I asked her to give you some time. You are shocked and in grief. She doesn't understand."

"And why would we run with you?" Instinctively, Muna laid an arm around Hori's thin shoulders. "Your people have deceived my brother and I from the moment we arrived amongst you. First, the old artist. Now ... now this." She jabbed savagely at Simone's lifeless corpse. "Hieronimo's maps led my mother to her death. Why should I trust you? We'll make our own way."

She stumbled for the door, dragging Hori along behind her but the other woman blocked her path, the cruel blades of her weapon still wet with Simone's blood.

"We cannot let you go," her sister said. "I'm sorry. But you can depend upon it that we mean you no harm."

"Oh? How so?" Her voice near breaking with despair, she swallowed down her fear.

"Because we are not Pagi. My name is Moran. My sister is Carin. We are of the Ruach."

"The Ruach?"

"We are persecuted by the Pagi as you are. Our great elder, the Golach, he has sent us to find you. He knows you are here and...he wishes to offer you refuge."

A ghastly strain of laughter escaped Muna's lips before she could hold it back. "Refuge? No one offers us refuge. My people hunt us like animals. The Pagi prey upon my ignorance." She would not look at Simone's corpse. She could not. And those memories of endless nights, of measureless pleasure seemed to crumble, dry as dust and lifeless as ash, to fragment into a hell of deceit and lies. She heard herself cry out once more.

"Muna, at least for your brother's sake come with us, allow us to accompany you to the mountain chain our people call the Harar. They wait there for better times, safe within. They will protect you."

"The Harar?" They had been heading for the mountains, she recalled. Perhaps Hieronimo had spoken honestly. Perhaps, after all, he had been steering them to safety.

"Muna, you must come with us. I'm begging you. We cannot stay here - it's too dangerous." Moran stretched out her hand and this time Muna took it, clinging to her as a person drowning might do, desperate and almost beyond hope. Moran's green eyes betrayed her relief. With a solemn, silent nod her sister swept Hori into her arms and carried him downstairs.

"Wait, my map." She slung the leather tube across her shoulder and then followed Moran, fighting the impulse to turn back, to gaze at Simone once more, but the man she had loved was gone and with him, her innocence. A cruel, vengeful thought snagged and took root amongst the darkest regions of her conscious thoughts. His death was deserved. And if she had taken hold of Carin's trident now, she would have plunged it again and again into his lifeless, withered form, forcing him to yield up every last, treacherous drop of blood.

When faced with the remains of the long abandoned feast below stairs, she shuddered. Where there had been music, laughter, song, there was now silence broken by the whistling of wind through cracked window panes, cobwebs rising and falling on foetid currents of air. She stumbled out into a brooding, purplish dusk, storm clouds mounting above the surrounding forests amid growls of distant thunder.

"Hurry!" Moran pulled her down the hill and away from the fort, Carin already charging ahead with Hori clinging to her back. Head swimming, lungs fit to burst, Muna allowed Moran to drag her on, the wind plucking at her dress and hair. A few fat drops of rain hissed as they hit the hot ground, steam rising wraith-like above the grass. Moran, she noticed, ran barefoot, yet fled sure and nimble towards the forest.

Once beneath the trees she could see little. Wet leaves slapped her face, she slipped on slimy roots, an occasional white shaft of lightning explosive against the darkness.

"Here! Down here!" Moran yelled to her as grains of ice struck the ground, splintering off bark and rocks. Thunder now roared from above, wind ripping through tree tops which sagged and swayed, spraying loose twigs and branches down onto the path.

Muna slipped several feet down a ditch, sliding over wet earth and leaves, landing at the entrance to a cave. She raised her head in time to witness a birch topple forwards, groaning and creaking, its roots ripped from the soil. With an ear-splitting crash it fell across the cave's mouth. Convinced that Moran lay crushed beneath its weight, she screamed, but the Ruach girl waved to her from behind the tree's fallen length.

Hitching up her dress, Moran scrambled over the birch and crawled into the shelter of the cave, lying for some time upon her back: grateful for the solid dry dome of rock above her head.

The two Ruach women were talking again, shouting to each other over the storm's fury in their strange, harsh language. "What is it?" she asked weakly, drawing Hori close, smoothing down his wet hair.

"Carin thinks we should wait until the storm passes and move on," Moran explained. "She doesn't believe it safe to wait here too long when your people are searching for you. But I told her you both need to rest."

Muna shook her head. "I'm alright," she yelled. "And Hori has slept for days. Your sister's right. We should move on."

Moran shrugged. "As you wish."

But the storm would not abate. Beyond the cave, it seemed as if the world itself were being torn apart, the plaything of some savage, ruthless giant. She rested her head against the cave's wall, lapsing into sleep only to be jerked awake by a fresh clap of thunder or a violent shock of light. And when at last she opened her eyes once more, it was morning. Pale rays of sun had dispelled the clouds, and birds sang jubilantly from the trees above.

Her stomach growled with hunger, her head now dizzy, the previous night a blur of blood, shock and storm. Rising, stiff with cold, she shook Hori awake, observing from a distance as Carin arranged a series of wide, flat leaves on the cave's floor and laid berries on them. With a single grunt, Moran's stern sister indicated that she should eat. Muna reached forward, tentative, uncertain, and rolled the fruit into her mouth. It burst, sour and sharp across her tongue. Moran handed her a gourd filled with rain water. She sipped, but it did little to quench her thirst.

"Can you move? Are you well?" Moran asked, her green eyes tired and ringed with shadow. Moran carried a strange beauty, Muna decided - kept it almost hidden, like the pores of her skin, or the faint lines of laughter etched around her mouth. But sometimes it would flare up, revealed in her speech or gestures. Then she seemed exquisite - to be watched and wondered at. Carin, in contrast, might have been cast in stone - her face a constant scowl, her eyes wary, simmering with barely suppressed rage.

"I'm fine," Muna lied. "My brother too, I expect. He's stronger than he looks." *Far, far stronger*, she added to herself. Hori crouched, watchful at the rear of the cave, chewing on berries, his arms drawn tight around his knees.

"How is it that you speak our language?" She turned back to Moran.

"My father was a scholar. He taught me several languages - some long dead, like ur Ruach or ancient Pagese. Others of strange accent and alphabet, like your own."

"And where is he now?"

Moran shivered, her eyes narrowing as she peered out into the morning mist. "He died. Together with my mother. The Pagi destroyed our village. They hung the elders in the streets and left them to rot. My father was the first to die." The Ruach woman bit her lip and ran her fingers through her hair. The memory was clearly a fresh one, unbearably painful.

"Did you see it?" Muna whispered.

"No." Moran rubbed at her temples with dirt encrusted nails. "I was elsewhere."

Carin rose and tapped Moran on the shoulder, uttering a few terse words.

"What is it?" Moran asked.

"She wants to know what you carry in that tube."

"Ah." Muna unbuckled the straps and coaxed out the parchment. "It was a gift. A map."

"A map?" Moran stared, intent, as Muna rolled Hieronimo's legacy out across the floor. Behind her, Carin hissed and turned her back.

"Why is she angry?" Muna asked.

"It's Pagese. She doesn't trust it. Where did you get this?"

Together, they pored over the map, its magic inducing a sharp gasp from Moran. Muna watched the sea roll in endless waves, lapping at the shore of the island on which she had once lived. She saw the monastery at Fons, now a cold, lifeless pile of ash. She saw an entire community living out a dark, despairing existence beneath the weight of distant mountains. And then her attention slid further south, to the plains and grasslands, the forest and the coast line surrounding the Harars. For those empty, open swathes of map were now black with ink, and in that ink she saw men, women, horses, tents, blood and fire.

Muna raised her head and stared up at Moran, whose eyes were now glazed with fear. "We won't make it to the Harars," she whispered. "They're here."

PART SIX: CHAPTER TWO
BRIARS AND THORNS

The Ruach sisters were arguing once again - yelling at each other in their strange, guttural language, punctuating their words with sharp jabs at the air or, on occasion, at each other. Muna sat with her arms wrapped around Hori, who had covered his ears with his hands. At last, unable to bear it any longer, she screamed: "Stop it!"

Carin turned bold, arrogant eyes on her, stunned into sullen silence.

"I'm sorry." Moran shook her head. "She doesn't trust it."

"Trust what?"

"Your map. She says its Pagese trickery. She says we must keep going towards the Harar, no matter what. I tried to persuade her of what we just saw."

"Is she always so stubborn?"

Moran's lips twisted upwards into a thin curl of a smile. "We had a mule before, but it ran away. She out-stubborned it."

"There's no such word as out-stubborned in Ahi."

"I know. I just made it up."

Muna rose, now giddy from lack of food, her head swimming, her vision tunnelling. "Ask her if she has good reason to doubt the map."

Moran fixed her with a cool gaze and then translated Muna's words. Immediately, Carin lapsed into another gabbled tirade.

"What is she saying?" Muna asked, frustrated.

"She asks...Carin, shut up!...She asks why you, of all people, would trust the Pagi. After Simone and... we know what the enchanter back in Warvum was capable of."

Muna gnawed on her nails. Carin could well be right. Why trust Hieronimo? Perhaps he had been as false as Artemisia, or Simone. His maps had deceived her parents after all. She thought, then of her mother, of the day she had left with a raiding party bound for the Pagi. She had kissed Muna's forehead and bid her take care of Hori while they left in search of land. Muna had never imagined that she would not be coming back - Koka Hyr, famed for her courage, her skill with axe and spear. When only Erland returned, he'd seemed half the man he used to be without her.

"So maybe Hieronimo lied." Muna picked up the map and shook it in the sisters' faces. Carin backed away, staring at the parchment in disgust. "Maybe this is just more Pagine treachery. But why should I trust you? Does your King, your Golach, does he seek my brother because others do? Does he want to use him, to send him out against your enemies as my own people would do?"

Moran turned away, biting her lip. Muna's suspicions gathered pace. "Will he have Hori incinerate the Pagi with a mere stare? Look at me, Moran. Tell me the truth!"

Moran turned back, her face pale and haggard. "He offers you both refuge," she repeated, but the words rang false and hollow.

"Let me tell you about my brother, Moran." She grabbed the Ruach woman's arm, pulling her before Hori. "People see him as a living weapon, a vessel of fire. But do you know what he is?"

Moran shook her head.

"He's just a young boy, Moran. A child. His parents are dead, he has no friends, he is hunted like a frightened animal from one end of the earth to the other. All I wish is that he might find some safety, some security and grow into manhood. Is that too much to wish for?"

Carin tapped Moran on the shoulder, keen to understand Muna's words, but Moran shrugged her off. With a low growl, Carin stomped over to the rear of the cave and slumped down against the wall, cradling her head between powerful hands.

"Muna..." Moran cleared her throat. "We all do what we can to protect those we love."

"Really? It sounds as if you stood up to the Pagi when they came for your parents."

She regretted the words as soon as they had slipped out - so vicious and hateful. So unlike her to judge a person or their past without true knowledge. Moran flinched as if she had been stung. Her lips parted and then shut, the pale skin of her cheek tightening as she clenched her jaw. Muna closed her eyes. How cruel, how mean of spirit she was becoming. But it was these foul lands, these people who lived for art and not for life - they had made her so. How wrong she had been to think that she might hide her brother here. He was on his feet now, his face as shrunken as an old man's, his eyes grave and hopeless. And when she looked at him - so hungry, so afraid - she blamed herself.

But Moran's weasel words - her lies about protection and salvation - they offered no hope. And those vague suspicions now seeded themselves, fermenting until Muna

was convinced that they were running into yet another trap. She knelt beside Hori, squeezed his cold fingers. Carin still rested against the cave wall, her face buried in her hands. Moran stood with her back turned, no doubt wrestling with her own private hell - a past filled, Muna was now certain, with betrayal and regret. She slid a sly glance at her brother and whispered, "run?"

Sucking in his lips, he offered a solemn nod. She tugged at his hand and they fled. The forest floor had been churned to mush by the storm and the fallen trunk of the birch tree loomed ahead. She passed Hori over it before jumping across. Carin's furious, hoarse cry rang out from the cave behind, followed by the clash of angry words. Dropping down, Muna allowed Hori to scramble onto her back, and then they were running - veering, swerving amongst the trees. A wiry knot of brambles blocked her path. From behind came the thud of feet. She pressed around the thorns and scrub, desperate to find a way through, the air half-choking in her lungs.

"Muna! They're closer!" Hori yelled in her ear. Muna looked back as a shaft of morning sunlight beamed off Carin's trident. She swept aside some of the scrub with her bare hands, the thorns ripping open wounds across her palms. Tendrils of rough vegetation caught around her legs and snagged on her dress and hair but she didn't stop. They were clear of it now, anyway. Before her the forest floor sloped downwards, littered with leaves and pine cones.

She dashed on, fear blocking the pain, aware only of the blood leaking from her hands and knees. Carin's shouts grew fainter, and Muna's heart lifted. They were losing the Ruach! A bank loomed before her. She struggled upwards, the wet earth treacherous and slippery beneath her boots, Hori's nails digging into her shoulders. Her lungs now scorched from want of air, Muna crested the bank and then stopped, sank to her knees and gazed down in despair at the view beyond. For just below her, the white canvas of tents slapped lightly against the breeze. She caught the clink of metal as axes and spears were stacked or distributed, accompanied by the distant whinny of horses and shouts and orders delivered in Ahi.

"They're here!" Hori had slid from her shoulders and now stared ahead with rounded eyes, his entire body slumped and deflated in defeat as he registered the hopelessness of pressing forwards.

"I know, Hori."

"What will they do to you?"

She turned to him and slid a hand down his cheek, the red of her blood a crimson stain upon his skin. "It doesn't matter, Hori. It's what they do to you - that's what frightens me. Listen brother," she knelt, aware of Moran and Carin gaining ground, of Carin's wild whoops when she spied them. "Listen, whatever they ask you to do, don't do it. They won't hurt you. You're too precious to them, but if you obey them you'll destroy yourself. You're too weak, Hori. Too young to bear this burden. Control it. One day you'll be ready to use it. But not now."

And then Carin was upon her, pinning her to the ground, the sweat glistening upon her forehead as she glared down into Muna's face. Hori jumped on Carin's back, his small fists flying into her spine, but Moran tugged him off. "Why did you run, Muna?" she gasped, wheezing and struggling for breath. "We're her to protect you. Don't you trust me?"

"It's too late." Muna wormed her way free of Carin's grasp. Around them, it seemed as if the trees, the brambles and briars, the forest itself were quaking.

"What do you mean, too late?" Still holding Hori's arm, the boy squirming and snapping like a frightened puppy, Moran seized Muna by the shoulder and span her round.

"They're here." Muna peered down towards the tents and Moran followed her gaze, her mouth falling open in dismay. Shouts rang up from the forest on every side, horses hooved at the damp earth, and from amongst the dappled shades of leaves and bark, faces emerged, their rough, weather-tanned features inlaid with swirls, lines and dark patches of ink. The Ruach sisters shrank back, drawing together, Moran loosening her grip on Hori, who flung his thin arms around Muna's waist.

"It's alright, Hori," she whispered. "We'll be alright."

One man stepped before the others: tall and willowy, his black hair swept back from his face, greying at the temples, his chest bare and tattooed to the waist, flesh and ink moving as one. Pere.

"Muna." His eyes - bright, unsmiling - settled first upon her and then softened as he acknowledged Hori. "Our champion." He inclined his neck in a curt bow. "The Firefarer."

She remained silent, trembling. Beside her, Carin fumbled for her trident.

"Take them," Pere ordered. "Kill the Pagi."

"They're not Pagi." From somewhere, she found the strength to speak. "They're Ruach. The Pagi are their enemy too. Don't kill them."

She felt the warm weight of a hand upon her shoulder. Moran had moved to stand beside her, her fingers squeezing into Muna's flesh as she surveyed the ranks of Ahi. Pere bent to confer with a woman to his right, her hair wrapped in intricate plaits and curls which mirrored the spirals and loops of ink upon her skin, her face a study in chiselled grace.

"Very well." Pere turned from his adviser and spoke. "I am informed that they may well be of use. We will take them, for now." His shark eyes fell on Muna once more. "This is the end, Muna. You cannot run any further. Have no fear for your brother. We will treat him well. And you will watch as he reduces the Pagi to ash."

Sunlight wept down on her from between stray flaps of canvas. It might have been mid-afternoon: the rays a burnished bronze, the air humid, stuffy and barely breathable. In truth, Muna did not know how long she had sat there, tethered to the central pole of the tent like an animal awaiting slaughter. Her people came and went, many to stare in solemn silence or point and gesture, shaking their heads, glaring beneath deep-set brows.

Others brought her food, spooning sea-broth into her mouth as if she were a small child. She choked on its briny taste, chewing on the gristly lumps of shellfish. It was tepid and she would have sooner spat it back in their faces than swallowed, but the hollow emptiness of her stomach was even worse. And once they fed her, she found the ringing in her ears and the dull thudding in her head subsided and she could, at least, think.

Where was Hori? What were they doing to him? She knew that, as much as the Ahi coveted his powers, they would be wary of provoking him. She imagined Pere coaxing her brother, offering him a few childish toys in the hope of persuading him to direct his will against the Pagi. The thought almost made her smile. Hori was wise beyond his years - he would laugh in their faces, shake his head and refuse. And so they might offer him great possessions - lands, horses. But if her brother was too wise for childish treats, he was too young to appreciate offers of power and influence. He would stare at them, his face blank and shake his head once more, this time perhaps confused or stunned into silence.

Muna alone knew what Hori wanted at the very base of his being. He wanted a mother whom he had not seen in over a year. He dreamed of his father - she knew it, for he cried out in his sleep for Erland's rough love and warmth. And he craved a home they might all share - Muna, Koka, Erland and Hori all together at last, mending nets, eating, telling stories as they had once done. That, she realised with bitter satisfaction, was something the Ahi could never give her brother. She wondered how long it would take them to see it. And what they would do when the truth rose up like a wall between them and their dreams of conquest.

Leaves crunched and crumpled beneath boots, words were muttered on the wind, and then the canvas was tugged back to reveal Pere's rangy frame. He stooped, passing beneath the tent's sloping roof and planted himself before Muna, his eyes the shade of sea-foam, his hair long, loose and lank about his shoulders. "You've taught your brother well, Muna. He does not trust us."

Muna thought of her mother then. Of how Koka had praised Pere when returning from raids along the Pagese coast. A warrior amongst warriors, she had claimed. A man who seemed beyond pain or fear.

So leave me and the children then, Koka if you love him so, Erland had muttered, hunched in sullen silence over his nets.

Ah there's no one to match you, Erland Hyr. Not even a man who doubled Pere in strength.

Muna craned her neck back and stared up at Pere. A warrior amongst warriors? A snake amongst snakes, more like. How misplaced Koka's admiration had been. "I taught Hori nothing. He's wise. That's all."

Pere squatted before her, reached forward and feathered a strand of her hair between his fingers. She drew from him with a shudder.

"He is too young to know his own mind," Pere said. "But he will come to see where his duty lies."

"What have you done to him?"

Rising, Pere shrugged. "Nothing. We talk to him, that's all. We offer him new possibilities - a path he never knew was his to follow. Your family were wrong to deny him that."

"I want to see him."

She struggled, leather cords biting into the skin of her wrists. Pere's smile was savage. "No, Muna. Those times are over. You've poisoned his mind long enough. You may see him only on condition that you persuade him of our cause."

"I have only one cause, and that is my brother's safety."

"Safety is a luxury none of us can afford. And your words are cowardly. Your mother would weep."

"How can you know what my mother would have done? She would never have sacrificed her son for a few acres of Pagi dirt."

He tilted his head to one side, eyes bright with controlled fury. "That's what you think this is about? A few feet of land?" He turned his back on her, hands balling into fists. "Your father kept you ignorant of the truth, Muna, hidden on your island as mice or rats hide in the grass from birds of prey. Our people are burning, Muna." He turned around, spittle frothing at the edges of his mouth as he spat out words. "The fire mountain has eaten away their land, their farms and livestock until they have nothing left. Would we risk the lives of our good warriors in these lands - lands forsaken of the ancestors themselves - were it not that we are desperate? Do you think this is a game for us? A way to pass the time between seasons?"

"No..." she heard her own voice shake. "I know it is not so, but..."

"But what? In this world there is no special privilege for people like yourself, or your brother. If we are to survive, then he must use his gift. Hanja!" he suddenly yelled over his shoulder. His adviser from the forest stepped in, her hair a lacy web of braids, her loose linen tunic draped over leather riding trousers.

"Bring in the Ruach. Perhaps we can convince our little traitor of her true purpose in...in all of this." He gestured emptily at the air. Hanja nodded and then left them.

"They were not as forthcoming as you gave me reason to believe, Muna." He crouched before her again. "Their people are no friends of the Pagi either, it is true. But nor can we call them our allies. When the time comes, they too will be in our way. The interpreter, well, she may prove useful. But her dumb she-wolf of a sister? I think not."

Again the hiss of leaves beneath feet, a broken exchange of words in Ahi and Ruach, and then Hanja pushed her way into the tent, breathless, a loop of raven-toned hair working loose from her braids and dusting her cheek. In a blizzard of angry words, Carin was pushed in behind her, one eye bruised and swollen shut, a thin line of

blood leaking from her nose. Moran appeared shaken but unscathed, her face pale, her eyes wildly darting about the tent and settling finally on Muna.

"Look at them, Muna." Pressing his fingers beneath her chin, Pere tilted Muna's face towards the Ruach sisters. "They may be all who pass for your friends in these treacherous lands."

He was right. Moran had offered a kind of friendship. And in spite of it, Muna had run, dragging Hori along with her, leading them straight into the arms of the Ahi.

"You have one night, Muna. One night." He squeezed down upon her face, his grip vice-like. "Tomorrow, I expect you to do everything in your power to persuade your brother that he must destroy the Pagi. Refuse me and the Ruach die. Do you understand?" He released her. She tasted blood and swallowed, stifling a whimper of pain.

"Do you?"

"Yes." She looked at Moran then, registered the hopelessness in the Ruach woman's eyes. Moran knew - and that knowledge was brutal. Muna could do nothing to prevent the Ahi from butchering the Ruach. For she would never trespass on the memory of her own parents. They had dreamed of a normal life for their son - that he would grow into manhood, take a wife: farm, fish or fight. It was a legacy she was to pass on to him. And she would risk her own life to ensure he received it.

PART SIX: CHAPTER THREE
DUST AND ASH

The sleeping forms of the Ruach women were just two patches of shade now, as if darkness had coalesced into human form. Carin snored, her long rasps succeeded by unnerving breaks of silence.

"How can she sleep at such a time?" Muna whispered.

"She always could. My father used to say that Carin could sleep through the ending of the world itself." Moran's words felt their way towards her, faltering and hesitant. "Listen, Muna, I know what they've told you to do. I know what choice you've been given - if you can call it a choice. You cannot allow your brother to destroy the Pagi."

"But they'll kill you both if I don't!"

There was silence - a silence so long it was almost solid. Muna opened her mouth to speak, but then Moran said "I know that. But...perhaps this is the end of our journey. The end of our road. There's someone...someone I love amongst the Pagi. Someone very dear to me. And I would sooner die than see her and her family annihilated or enslaved. So you see..." her voice cracked beneath the weight of her words, "you see I couldn't bear the knowledge that I'd lived so that she might die. It would be too much."

Guilt threatened to topple her, to lever its way beneath her shell of self-restraint. Muna nearly broke down, screaming, begging for the peace and solitude of her parents' island, for a life in which she could learn to trust once more. For now she knew for certain that what Moran had offered had been true friendship, a step towards safety. And in running, in fleeing from the Ruach sisters, she had consigned them all to their deaths.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's not your fault, Muna. You did what you thought to be right."

Somehow, she slept. She had not thought it possible. Muna had determined that she would punish herself, deny herself sleep, keep her thoughts fixed on the morning and what it would bring: the Ruach dead at her own hands, Hori a mere tool of the Ahi. But tiredness tugged at her eyelids and she felt herself become weightless, drifting hopelessly into a feverish dreamscape in which she was consumed by fire, flames

caressing her body, licking her hair. She inhaled choking fumes, tasted ash. The Ahi rushed about her, their screams bitten off as the heat engulfed them, skin dripping from their faces and pooling like wax amongst the grass.

She urged herself to wake, smothered by her own imagination - as poisonous as the smoke it conjured in her nightmare. And only when the night air seemed to clear, when the howls and screams deadened and silence grew thick with menace, only then did she wake.

The sun had already risen, turning the white canvas of the tent a faint, honeyed yellow. Incredibly, Carin still slept, her knees curled up towards her stomach in an almost childish pose. Beside her, Moran sat with legs crossed, her hands still bound before her and leaves peppering the brown curls of her hair from a night spent on the floor. But in the paleness of her face and the wild cast to her eyes, Muna read abject, unmitigated fear.

"Moran, I'll do as they ask. I can't let them kill you."

"What?" Moran turned her head slowly in Muna's direction, her lips opening and closing as if unable to give word to her thoughts. "Were you asleep all night?"

She looked away, ashamed. "I had nightmares, not dreams."

"Yes, but...did you, could you have slept through it all?"

"Through all of what?"

Moran stared at her, her mouth dropping open. "The fires? The screaming? They were burning, Muna."

Suddenly, the world seemed a very quiet place as if it consisted only of herself, of Moran and the space between heartbeats. "Hori!" she gasped.

Moran planted a foot between Carin's shoulder blades and shoved. Her sister muttered, rolling onto her back, but continued to snore. Groaning, Moran struggled into a kneeling position. Then she leant forwards, put her lips to her sister's ear and bellowed, "Carin!"

With a startled snort, Carin woke, her eyes red and caked in rheum, one side of her face bearing the imprint of leaves and grass. Moran continued to yell at her in Ruach, a torrent of words from which Muna made out only "Ahi," and "Hori." It was a revelation, however, that appeared to free something in Carin's stern countenance, for she nodded, then smiled, and then threw back her head and released a strained volley of laughter.

"What is it? What does she find funny?" Muna struggled against her own bonds, rising so far as they would allow, causing the central pole of the tent to bend but not to give. With a yelp of frustration, she kicked it.

"She has a very twisted sense of humour, Muna," Moran explained. "She thinks it amusing that your brother has burnt the faces off the Ahi."

Muna stared at Carin, a sickness crawling at the insides of her stomach. The Ruach woman's laughter subsided and she pushed her way to her feet, crossed the tent and gestured for Muna to move away from the pole. Then she raised her leg and delivered a single, solid kick. With a sudden crack the wood snapped, the canvas sagging above their heads. A bullish push from her shoulders reduced the pole to splinters. The entire frame toppled inwards, swaddling Muna, Carin and Moran in a mess of canvas, rope and dead leaves. Her hands now free, Muna wormed her way out into the sunlight, coughing and spluttering, gulping in air. She watched as the Ruach sisters followed, butting at the material with their heads until at last they too were free, blinking weakly into the sun's strong light.

At first, it were as if Muna's thoughts - her awareness of who she was and of where she was - were disconnected from her physical being. She experienced the curious, horrifying sensation of being suspended in space, observing the forest through a pane of milky glass or a prism, too distanced to comprehend its meaning. But gradually the details merged to form a complete picture, and that was the point at which genuine horror rooted and took hold. The grass and leaves had been scorched, the trees still bore dark patches and singe marks where flames had danced about their roots and trunks. And yet there was no evidence that the fire had spread much above ground. Nor, however, was there a sign of the men, the women, the horses or the tents which had studded the forest but a few hours before. And as she willed herself to follow Carin and Moran, she observed darker patches of cinders and ash amongst the grass. Dropping low to study these stains, she made out vague shapes - of heads, hands and dry dusty fingers still curled around axes or the hilts of swords. Pere's people had been obliterated, she realised - erased by her brother's raw, ruthless energy. And where was he? In releasing such a wave of death, might he not have destroyed his own weak body? Still on her knees amongst the lines of incinerated corpses, she bent over and retched.

"Muna! Get up. Come on. We have to find your brother." Moran was dragging her to her feet. She stumbled, dizzy, the stench of burnt flesh seeping into her clothes and skin.

"He can't have survived," she whispered. "These episodes - they exhaust him. And he never... he never released power such as this before."

"We must try to reach him, Muna. Come on.

Up ahead, Carin split her bonds on the point of a blade buried in the ground, the remains of its former owner blowing away on the morning breeze. She turned to them, urging them to follow, her eyes lit with a strange excitement: a mad, frantic will.

"What has happened to her?" Muna asked Moran. "She seems...almost joyful. Has she lost her wits?"

Moran remained silent for a moment, breaking the ties around her wrists on a spear stump. "No," she said at last, her eyes narrowing as she watched Carin rush onwards through the early sunlight. "She has seen what your brother can do."

A dull, aching pain laid claim to Muna's heart. She forged onwards, the cindered piles of bodies now more closely packed, lying in rows. They must have been surrounding something, she realised with a shudder. And she knew instinctively what that something had been.

It was the only tent left standing, after all: a small turret of white canvas, hammered into position in a clearing, the sun's rays piercing leaves and branches to bathe it in light. And there was no way to reach it other than to walk upon the remains of her own people, the first focus of Hori's rage, their bodies now of a piece with the forest floor. Carin was already inside the tent, determined to find Hori, to claim him for the Ruach. Running now, breathless, Muna pushed Moran aside in her desperation to reach her brother.

He was sleeping, his tiny frame swathed in piles of furs, his body rising and gently dropping as he slumbered on, exhausted and oblivious to the devastation his own rage had wreaked beyond the tent. Surrounding him, she noticed with a pang of sadness, lay toys - wooden horses, balls and hoops. Clearly the Ahi had thought to coax him with their childish gifts. She observed also piles of weapons - spears, axes, swords - Carin's own trident lying amongst them. The Ruach woman seized it, wrapping her hands around it as if embracing an old friend.

Muna picked her way over to where Hori lay, sinking down beside him and stroking his hair. His eyelids flickered, the air caught in her throat, and then slowly like a leaf unfurling on a branch, he stretched himself awake.

"Hori?" She stared down at him, confused. "Are you alright?"

"Of course." He smiled up at her. "They said you'd come to see me today. They said you had something to tell me. And I dreamed of you last night, Muna. I dreamed that you were protecting me. So I wasn't scared."

Muna looked up in time to catch Moran's gaze. And there was something in it - a frightened flash of recognition - which caused her to look away. For a moment they seemed suspended once more in time and space: a dimension in which new possibilities were emerging, new possibilities which troubled and plagued, which clawed at her mind, tore at her entire sense of being. She broke free of such thoughts, returning her attention to Hori, who had pushed himself upright, staring wildly around the tent.

"Where did they go?" he asked, his voice thin and quavering. "Where are our people?"

"Nowhere, Hori. They've gone - that's all."

"But they said...they said I would be a prince. A lord amongst them." His lower lip quivered. "They said we were to be rich and powerful, Muna."

"Hori, you mustn't believe them. They're liars. All of them." Gathering him into her arms, she pulled him off the bed, felt his head fall against her shoulder, his entire body surrender to tears. She turned to face Carin who was clutching a slim scroll of leather.

"Your map," Moran observed. "It was here amongst the weapons. "She says she believes in it now. She wants you to take it. She will carry Hori. She says you are too tired."

With one hand, Carin offered the map, but her eyes were fixed on Hori. It were as if the Ruach's entire being had been consumed by one great hunger, a craving fuelled by the scent of death, by the row upon row of blackened lifeless forms, the prospect of revenge.

"No." Muna pushed past her and back out into the blinding light of the sun. "No one is to touch him. No one but me."

PART SEVEN: TERENCE

PART SEVEN: CHAPTER ONE
FRUIT PICKING

For a second night she had submitted to his embrace. Her long hair trailed lightly across his raw, sunburned face; her fingers felt their way down his neck, teasing at his naked arms and chest before slipping lower and lower. He threw back his head, stifling a gasp of pleasure as her kisses landed upon his hips and then his thighs.

Vito reached out for Andre in the darkness, pulling her even closer, their skin melting and merging, her warmth becoming his.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

With a surging stab of pain, he woke. Andre straddled his waist, one fist poised and hovering above his stomach, her face flushed with fury. He raised his hands up protectively, blood leaking in a sluggish dribble from his nose. "I couldn't help it. I was dreaming."

She continued to sit above him, clenching and unclenching her fist. Vito turned his head, peering out into the darkness, shamefully aware of his body as it shrank and shrivelled.

"That's what you said last night, Vito. Next time you touch me, I'll use this." Leaning across him, she fished in her satchel and pulled out a knife.

"Where did you get that?"

"Never mind where I got it. Just worry about what I can do with it." She rolled off him at last.

Wheezing and spluttering, he struggled to sit upright, grimacing against the pain in his lower back where rocks had bitten into his flesh. "Andre, I'm sorry. Like I said, it was just a dream."

One eyebrow raised, she eyed him warily. "Yes, well. From now on sleep further away." She stowed the knife in her satchel and studied him, anger draining from her face, exhaustion creeping in to take its place. "You know what you need, don't you?"

"What?" he asked, warily, her question conjuring an entire circus of possibilities.

"You need a haircut, Vito. And a change of clothes. So do I for that matter. Dario's men are looking for a monk and a girl. And if Dario's sent word to Ol Terenzo, so are the entire Pagi. We need a disguise."

Sunrise saw them moving further east, and Vito knew instinctively that they were leaving the borders of church land - that for the first time in his life he would cross over onto Pagi soil. And with that crossing, he would be no more than an ordinary man on an ordinary path. Wait! Not an ordinary man. He was a murderer, a fugitive, his home destroyed: a man who would kill, maim or cheat to save his own skin. His mind skipped back to those twilight hours in the city of shrines - another man's legs twitching and spasming in a macabre dance as he bled out towards death. Despite the early morning warmth Vito shivered, his brain frothed and churned with tiredness, his limbs shaky from lack of food. Andre strode ahead, always two paces in front.

He caught her up, determined to stall his own massing fears with an argument. "Andre, I understand the book is special, but how can you trust it? I mean how do you know that it describes your family? Or even Ol Terenzo. Perhaps it's all just a story."

She halted, turning to face him, her gaze cool. "Because, idiot, it describes them. It actually names them. *And the elector invited his guests to a feast. And at that feast attended the dukes of the scroll.*" She quoted from memory.

He shook his head, confused. "What does that mean, the dukes of the scroll? It could mean anything."

She gnawed at her lower lip, the skin growing white beneath the pressure of her teeth. "That's my family's name."

He continued to stare at her dumbly.

"Vito," she sighed, "my family are the dukes of Libarum, their symbol is the scroll. And I have heard rumours of Ol Terenzo's feasts."

"Just rumours?"

"Enough to give me reason to believe my family may not survive one," she snapped. "Come on, Vito. We need to change."

"How?" he asked, but she was already on her way, making time in long, easy strides. With a groan, he trudged on behind her.

The electorate of Venanum boasted lush and fertile landscape. To the south, Vito spied forests stretching onwards in an eternity of leaves and swaying treetops. But here they moved amongst vineyards, fields of corn, pastures of braying cattle or orchards rich with the promise of fruit. And as the sun rose and the heat bore down with almost solid intensity, Andre and Vito followed the path of a river which wound from one pebbled bank to the next, its waters clear and sweet, teeming with fish. For once, Andre succeeded in tickling a trout from the water, the fish resting limp and

pliant across her palms. They risked a fire beneath the overhang of the bank, roasting the trout on a stick. It tasted of the river, of silt and sweetness. He felt his strength revive with every bite, and lay back satisfied as Andre put out the fire, burying the ashes beneath rocks and soil.

Downstream the waters steadily widened. He caught the swish of a mill wheel and a high pitched call of laughter. Andre gestured for him to keep low, and they crept below the line of the bank, crouching behind tufts of overhanging grass and brambles. "Look!" she whispered.

A small group of women waded knee-deep in the water, skirts tucked up above their thighs as they laundered sheets and shirts.

"Perfect," she grinned.

"Surely we're not going to steal from them?"

With a light hiss, Andre sucked in her cheeks. "Why not?"

"They're just poor Pagi."

"Vito," she patted his shoulder as if addressing a small child. "You've just killed a man - two, in fact - and you're worried about stealing linen?"

"It's just the principle." He folded his arms and sank down against the damp earth of the bank.

"Principles? Can we feed ourselves on principles, Vito? Are principles going to keep us safe at night or clothe us?" Turning her back on him, she observed the women intently, until they headed back to shore, staggering beneath the wet weight of their washing before hanging it to dry on the branches of trees.

"Well you can remain here with your principles, Vito." Andre glared at him. "I'm in need of something a bit warmer."

He watched, his determination wavering as she crept along the line of the river, keeping her head below the overhanging tendrils of shrubs and plants. Then, as if picking fruit, she leapt from one tree to the next, plucking down trousers and shirts.

"Oy!" A sharp shriek had him scrabbling to his feet. Vito watched in horror as three of the washerwomen raced out of the mill, one bearing a pitch fork. With a yelp and a curse, Andre fled, leaving Vito with no choice but to splash down the river in her wake, his robe soaked, heavy and soggy. Well, he'd have new clothes now, anyway. Andre had seen to that: she was reeling him in even further with her unprincipled, immoral ways, stripping him of every last shred of self he possessed. Tearing, ripping at his habit, he tore it off, casting it into the river as if slipping his skin, and then ran,

naked apart from his small clothes, ignoring the hoots of laughter, the catcalls and insults of the washerwomen.

He had to admit that clean linen was far more comfortable than his scratchy robes had ever been. And when he ran his hand through his freshly cut hair, he realised that he felt clean for the first time in days. His beard trimmed on the sharp blade of Andre's knife which she'd found - well, it wasn't his business where she'd found it - he felt like a new man, like a Pagi.

But dressed like Vito in linen shirt and trousers, Andre seemed somehow paler, even thinner, less substantial, he thought with a shudder.

She stretched out one of her long, tawny plaits. "Cut it."

He stared at her, startled at the sudden, surprising prick of tears. "Andre, you mustn't!"

For the briefest sliver of time she softened, her lips creasing into a rueful grin. She reached forward and put a hand to his face, withdrawing it before he could touch her. "My hair will grow back, Vito. My head...well, that's more of a problem. Ol Terenzo and Dario are seeking a monk and a girl with long plaits." She held out the knife again.

He hesitated, sliding the back of his hand across his eyes. "Alright. Hold Still."

They came away in two bold sweeps of the blade. He couldn't bear to look at her at first, staring instead in dumb fascination at the thick brown twists, knotted on either end with blue ribbons, the strands already working loose as if they had a life of their own. Vito raised his head and she looked away, her hair now cropped and ragged, framing a pinched, drawn face. "Should we bury them, together with your old clothes?" he asked, swallowing down the lump in his throat. "In case you want them back?"

"No." She seized the plaits and stuffed them into her satchel. "I want to keep them."

"Why?"

"Because if I ever see my mother again, I'll need to prove to her who I am."

PART SEVEN: CHAPTER TWO

TABLEAU

The city of Terenzo burst out of the landscape like an explosion of fireworks on a calm summer's night: a sudden release of energy, colour, sound and confusion. Vito craned his neck back as far as it would go, staring open-mouthed as they passed beneath an immense brick barbican, its walls plastered with flags and shields - the emblems of Pagi houses. And then they were swept up amongst the currents of people - jostled and bounced, their toes trodden on, their backs shoved, half smothered by the smells of roasting meat, wine, cloying perfumes and stale sweat. His head span as the crowds surged onwards - a sea of pedlars and merchants, traders, nobles, beggars, children - cutting him off from Andre.

"Vito! Over here!" She thrust one hand above the heads of the crowd, waving frantically.

Vito shouldered his way towards her. "Where are we going?" he yelled over the clash of conversations.

"We need to get off the main streets. Come on!" She seized his arm and dragged him down an alley. It was cramped, dark, and stank of rotten fish and raw sewage. "My stomach's so empty I can barely think," Andre moaned. "And if we're about to break into Ol Terenzo's palace, I intend to eat well. It could be my last meal." She dangled a leather purse before his nose.

"Where did you get that?"

"Never mind where I got it. Follow me."

She plucked at his sleeve, leaving him no choice but to follow. The alley narrowed, the busy chatter of the street ever fainter. Vito risked a sideways glance, catching sight of a smoke-choked interior, of men and women sprawled on benches, tables and the floor: some naked, others swathed in blankets, a glowing fire pit belching out fumes and ash. "Who are they?" he gasped.

"Fire drinkers."

"Who?" he stole another look. From within, one old woman raised a gnarled hand and beckoned, her face disfigured beneath boils and warts, her eyes milky and insane.

"Vito don't stop!" Impatient, she grabbed his shirt front and pulled him on. "Just one glass and they'll give up everything for the next one...and the next and so on until their homes, their families, their lives mean nothing to them." She raised a cautionary finger. "Be wary of food and drink in Terenzo, Vito, or we may never leave this place. Behold!" She stopped, breathless, before another doorway, throwing wide her arms as if she were its owner. Inside, people huddled around tables spooning broth into their mouths, hacking at joints of meat with rusty knives or draining tankards of ale. "The House of Clay."

Vito's mouth watered, but her earlier warning gnawed away at his resolve. "How do you know this place is safe?"

"I've eaten here before with my brother. Trust me, Vito, I swear you'll never have another meal like it. You'll be on your knees thanking me, after what we've been through. Come on!"

She dragged him inside. At first, he failed to see much more than haze and shade, the vague shapes of clientele perched on stools and benches stabbing at their food. "Doesn't seem much," he sniffed.

"Just wait. Sit here." She pressed him down onto a bench and then disappeared. Vito narrowed his eyes, peering through the gloom at his fellow diners, many of whom attacked their meals with all the ferocity of ravenous dogs, drooling and grunting, their faces shiny with grease. In spite of his hunger, his stomach lurched.

"And there we are." As light and graceful as a trained acrobat, Andre returned, balancing a tray of roast meat in one hand and two frothy tankards of ale in the other. She set them down and then straddled the bench opposite him.

"What's this?" he poked dubiously at the food.

"Roast pig's knuckle and clay ale. Well eat it before it gets cold, won't you, Vito?" And without waiting, she plunged her knife into one side of the ham, tore off a strip and stuffed it whole into her mouth. "Mmm." Andre closed her eyes, chewing. "Paradise in my mouth."

He hesitated, recalling once again the fire drinkers with their slack lips and vacant faces. But then hunger won out. Vito raised the carving knife, hacked off a slice of meat and put it to his lips.

Those long days of wandering - empty-bellied, the ache of hunger a constant companion - disappeared. This was ecstasy, he decided, as the meat's juices slid down his chin, as his fingers grew sticky with pork fat and the ale wormed its way inside his

brain, releasing a cloud of foggy warmth. And it just seemed endless, his appetite sated yet he could not stop until at last, fit to burst, he sank back against the bench, clutched his belly and stared at Andre.

"That was incredible."

"I know." She licked at her fingers with cat-like delicacy. "My brother was sick in the street he ate so much. So..." she pushed aside her plate and leant across the table. "You don't have to come with me, Vito. Into Ol Terenzo's palace, I mean. You've already seen what he's capable of."

He shook himself free of his stupor. "It's too late to save my brothers, certainly. But perhaps we can still rescue yours."

"Thank you." She smiled - briefly, sadly. "I left them, you know. I never even said goodbye. I just thought they wouldn't notice I was gone, they were all of them so buried in their books and papers. Stupid." She bit her lip and stared at her hands.

"And why did you leave them?"

She looked up, her eyes suddenly tired. "I told you. For treasure."

There was no point in pursuing the question, he realised. She would only get angry or defensive. Vito picked up the carving knife by its hilt, working its point into the table top. "So who exactly is Ol Terenzo?" he asked. "Where is he from?"

She shrugged. "No one knows."

"What? The most powerful of all the Pagi and no one knows who he is?"

"Venanum is an electorate. He bought his way to power. Colluded and bribed and, in some cases, murdered. It was only a few years ago that the Pagi woke up and realised what had happened - an unknown, a stranger with the keys to the electorate in his hands. "

"And then?"

"Well, that wasn't enough for him, was it? Ol Terenzo has this vision of unity, you see. He believes that under one ruler the Pagi will be stronger."

"Him?"

"Of course. But what makes matters worse is his perverted ideal of purity."

"Purity?"

"Yes. He says that non-Pagi elements weaken us, stain us in some way."

"Like the Ruach?"

"Yes. Like the Ruach." Her voice tightened. Frowning, she looked away.

"And the Church?" he asked, speculating out loud.

"Possibly. Although now with Dario on his side, he as good as controls the Church anyway. And Ol Terenzo is cunning - he risks his popularity if he attacks the Church outright."

"So in spite of everything, you think he's popular?"

"Of course he's popular!" she snapped. "They all love him - Dario, Simone ol Lauro, Petro ol Diacomo: all the Pageese nobility. All of them except my family." She leant forward even further, dropping her voice to a mere whisper. "My parents refused to be bribed or threatened. They were always friends to the Ruach, saw through Ol Terenzo's lies. We shared these lands with the Ruach for centuries and we were stronger for it."

"So in that case, why would they simply drop in for dinner with their enemy?"

"I don't know, do I? That's what the book says."

"Andre...do you not think it's possible that the book deceives? Perhaps its treacherous...how can you trust it?"

"You just said you were with me!"

"I am but..."

"Vito, make up your mind, Are you coming or not?" She was already on her feet and heading for the door.

"Hey, wait!" Vito flinched and blinked against the daylight as he followed her outside, his belly churning and swirling beneath the weight of food. "Of course I'm coming."

Once out on the main streets, the world pitched, rolled and transformed itself again into a dizzying carnival of sound, light and colour. "But have you got a plan?"

"Yes!" she hissed back, threading her way through the crowds. "Ol Terenzo hears petitions every day. We'll just line up with the petitioners and sneak in that way."

They crossed a market place - the air thick with the calls of street vendors - and then wound along roads edged with workshops, warehouses and brothels. They passed girls with masks for faces, men whose forearms bulged as they rolled barrels onto carts, smiths striking sparks from anvils. And then there was a river, a bridge spanning its length, more vendors and whores milling amongst the crowds, the water below a refuse-strewn murky brown, specked with boats and barges.

"Come on, Vito!" She was on the other bank now, clambering up cobbled streets towards the city's crest and the palace which topped it, its facade whitewashed,

reflecting the sunlight, its rooftops tiled in red, a hundred windows embedded in its walls. Vito gulped, breathless, sweating, nerves now pricking at his skin.

She had been right, of course. She always was. A thin, orderly line of Pagi snaked across the palace courtyard, right up to two liveried guards who stood barring an iron-studded door with halberds. The petitioners spoke in soft excited murmurs - people from all walks of life - men and women, rich and poor.

"They won't believe us," Vito moaned. "They'll suspect!"

"And why should they? We just look like ordinary Pagi now. Listen, once we're inside, we'll slip away and search the palace. If my family aren't in there, then we'll hide and wait for them."

He stood, tapping his feet and humming nervously as the crowd inched forwards, step by anxious step, until they were staring up into the guards' faces, one of whom said: "name your business with the Elector."

Vito could not later explain what possessed him to speak. Before Andre had even cleared her throat, he said: "We seek his protection. Our village, Acita has been destroyed by the Ahi."

Andre stared at him, her lips opening and closing a few times, but she somehow recovered her self-restraint and remained silent. He crossed his arms and waited, feeling almost smug. The guards nodded in unison - word must have spread of the destruction at Fons as swiftly as the fire itself had done. The massive doors opened, and they stepped inside.

Within was all coolness and light, a tiled marble floor echoing beneath their feet, paintings, tapestries and mounted antlers hanging from the walls. Conversations floated, broken and disembodied on the still air like phantoms, their sources unseen. On the opposite side of the lobby, a dark, wood-panelled door beckoned and before it, Vito realised with a stab of horror, stood two more guards.

"Looks like they're expecting us," he whispered. "What do we do now?"

Andre stared, chewing on her lower lip, the muscles at the edges of her jaw taut and flexing. "We run." Without waiting for him, she turned and fled.

The guards looked at each other, and then at Vito. Blood thudded in his ears, a thin skein of sweat rolled its way down his brow, and then he, too, ran.

"Oy!" Footsteps pounded in the distance, echoing as they hammered across the floor. A corridor stretched before him, Andre already at its furthest end, her legs pumping and then skidding as she reeled around a corner. He followed her, his mind

half numb with panic. The airy lightness of the corridor passed away into gloom as he entered a windowless passage, its floor carpeted, a grotesque menagerie of stuffed animals lining the walls: bears and birds, wild cats, deer and boar.

Where was she? He whisked his head from side to side, the pick-pock of the guards' feet growing ever closer and Andre nowhere in sight. Blindly, desperately, Vito stumbled forwards, his hands occasionally brushing against bristle, fur or claws, his skin crawling with terror.

"It's a dead end, laddie. Give it up!"

The guards were right, he realised, the fear quickening, his heart pulsing and throbbing. Before him, a tapestried wall barred his path.

"Here!" A hand shot out from between the feathered eyes of a peacock, dragging him off his feet. Andre pulled Vito backwards into an alcove and down a spiralling flight of steps, the walls plain and unadorned, the floor no longer hewn from white marble but from rough, worn stone. The guards clattered their way down behind them: yelling, threatening, cursing. Vito caught a rich whiff of stew and wine rising from the floor below, the crackle of a fire, and realised they must be nearing kitchens.

In contrast to the eerie calm of the lobby and corridors, below stairs was a blizzard of activity: kitchen workers bent over tables, blowing at great hearths with bellows, sweat pouring from their brows as they kneaded, chopped and stirred. With no windows and little fresh air, the place was half choked with smoke: shadowy, infernal. "Terenzo's kitchens," Andre's breath rustled against his ear. "Famed and feared."

"Feared?"

She had no chance to reply for at that moment the guards crashed downwards, knocking into tables in their fury, turning over baskets of dried herbs and vegetables, jars of spices shattering on the ground as they thundered through. Sliding into a recess, Vito and Andre flattened themselves against the wall, swallowed up amongst the shadows. The guards must have passed them by, Vito realised, half sagging with relief, for then he could hear only the outraged calls of kitchen workers as they swept, mopped and scrubbed away the destruction.

He sank low and peered around a corner. "Come on."

They clawed their way out, dropping back into empty pantries or behind cupboards whenever a head was turned. Another flight of steps led out of the kitchen at their furthest end, and once more they found themselves in a world of light, air and danger.

Without warning, Andre slammed into a door, shoving it with her shoulder. "Andre!" Vito gasped. "What are you doing?"

Within, a richly dressed group of young men and women sat around a table, cards in their hands, apparently frozen with fear. To Vito's surprise, however, they made no response when Andre hurriedly spun round and raced along the corridor, barging into another room.

"Mother! Father!" she yelled. "Estachien!"

Meeting no response, she forced her way from door to door, seemingly oblivious to the heavy ring of the guards' boots as they returned. Wilder by the minute, Andre shot from one side of the corridor to the next like a deranged ghost. Vito peered over her shoulder into chambers, dining rooms and salons, dread writhing through his veins. For the Pagi all sat as still and silent as the stuffed animals he had already witnessed, some with wine glasses raised to their lips, others poised open-mouthed as if in mid-conversation, or with fingers frozen to the strings of a harp or lute.

She flung open the last door. When she screamed, he knew immediately what she had discovered. It was too late anyway. Guards flooded the corridor, a figure in their midst: tall, slightly stooped, dark brown hair tied back from his face. A trim beard framed sensual lips and the long cowl of his green gown hung from angular shoulders. Lino Ampelio Ol Terenzo.

He cocked his head on one side, bird like, and smiled at Vito, almost apologetic in his stance. "Well, she would have found out sooner or later."

Vito shuddered, twisting around to find yet more guards pressing in from behind. "Please, Vito." Ol Terenzo smiled again. "Well, that is your name, I believe?"

"How did you..." he cursed himself for a fool. Of course. Dario.

"Shall we?" Ol Terenzo gestured towards the door, his courtesies more painful than any blows would have been. Vito stared at him for a moment, desperate to shut his eyes, to turn from what he knew must lie just across the threshold. Then, resigned and suddenly very, very weary, he stepped inside, followed by Ol Terenzo and his men.

Andre sagged, her arms curled around the neck of a beautiful, blond-haired woman who sat with a wine glass raised to her lips as if about to drink. Beside her, other diners froze in attitudes of surprise or horror: some with forks raised to mouths, others holding hands, tears preserved like resin on their cheeks. Vito observed subtle

reminders of Andre in all of the figures seated around the table - in their tapering fingers or the cool greyness of their eyes - a macabre tableau of death.

Andre raised her head, her eyes burning, her entire body shaking with grief. "Murderer!" She clambered onto the table, crunching the crystal of a decanter beneath her boots, her knife out stretched: a wild cat hunted and finally cornered.

"Andretta get down." Ol Terenzo yawned and then shook his head. "These theatrics will get us nowhere."

Hissing, howling, she launched herself at him, only to be plucked from the air by the guards like a bird shot down in flight. They held her as she squirmed and twisted beneath their grasp.

"How could you? Murderer!"

"How could I?" Ol Terenzo scratched at his cheek as if perplexed. "My dear Andretta, how could *you*? You must know why they came here, after all."

She stared at him then, her lips opening and closing around a question, no words forming.

"Tsk." He shook his head. "They came here because of you, Andre. Dario informed me of the little visit you paid him back in Animum. He told me you had something that didn't belong to you too, which, by the way, I shall take now." He snapped his fingers. The guards tore away Andre's satchel, handing it to Ol Terenzo. He looked inside and then tapped the bag, satisfied. "Good. *The People of the Pagi*. A most rewarding read, as I'm sure you can testify."

A tear slid down Andre's cheek. With his odd, apologetic little smile, Ol Terenzo brushed it away. "So when I realised your family were looking for you, I told them where to find you. And they were so grateful...by all that's beautiful, they were grateful to me."

He wrung his hands together, so evidently pleased with the snare he had laid for the Dukes of Libarum. "Your father, for example," Ol Terenzo moved to stand behind the figure of a handsome man, his trim beard dusted with silver, who still gripped his wife's pale, thin hand, even in death. "*Let us put these past feuds behind us, my Lord Ol Terenzo.*" He mimicked the deep voice of Andre's father. "*Yes, my Lord. As soon as I see my daughter restored to me, I shall consider you my friend.*"

Andre sank to her knees, her neck bowed, surrendering to grief. Still smiling, Ol Terenzo patted her head. "And they waited for you...they waited...they ate...they drank. And when the poison began to take its toll...well, it was too late. Your brother

here was the first to realise, if I recall correctly." He pointed to a young man who appeared about to rise from his chair, his eyes clouded with fear. "But that's my apothecary's skills for you. They all know at the last. But then the paralysis sets in, and then...it's too late. And so here they all sit, mired in their own plots and corruption, preserved in their own disloyalty and cowardice. My enemies."

The fake air of nonchalance, of gentility was gone. Vito caught Ol Terenzo's stare and realised that he was looking into the eyes of a man who would calculate, measure, dissemble, and then...kill.

"Keep her here. let her dine her last meal with her family. The final piece in my collection." He turned and swept a cold, soft hand down Vito's face. "I will speak to the monk in private."

PART SEVEN: CHAPTER THREE
THE PLAGUE

It was hot. Unbearably hot. Vito sat, the ropes which tethered him to the arms of a chair biting into the skin of his wrists, his brow shiny with sweat. It drizzled into his eyes, stinging them; stuck his trousers to his legs, left damp patches beneath his armpits. And Ol Terenzo did nothing but stare at him from behind a carved, heavy wooden desk: curious, malevolent, a cat hypnotised by its prey before the kill.

Something ticked and whirred in a distant corner. Vito squirmed round, trying to ignore the guards who stood, still as statues, their backs to the door. Perched on a table a small clock measured time, its hands flicking through the hours, its bare cogs meeting and parting, meeting and parting. Above it, a young woman peered down from a portrait on the wall, her lips opened in a slight 'o' of surprise and dark hair twisting like creepers around her neck and shoulders.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

Vito swallowed and nodded.

"Dead now. A pity. Such a lovely girl. So full of life. So vital," Ol Terenzo continued. "But as luck would have it, I had her portrait commissioned. The painter - a mistress of her art, as you can see. Artemisia of Warvum. Also dead now. Burned alive in her own studio." He shifted in his chair. "You wouldn't know anything about that?"

"Look, I already told you. I don't know anything about any Ruach women, Firefarers or Pagi artists. I just know one thing. You murdered my brothers."

"Me? How so?" Leaning back in his chair, Ol Terenzo picked at the embroidered fringe of his gown.

"They uttered *your* name. *Your* men said *your* name. They bathed in the river and...their darkness peeled away like the ripe skin of an apple. The Ahi became Pagi."

Ol Terenzo snorted, tears of mirth racing down his cheeks. "Mad! A mad monk! You know, I may just keep you alive to entertain me. How utterly priceless." He wiped at his eyes, now drained of laughter: two chips of hard, green ice.

Vito thought then of Andre sitting beside the bodies of her family, hunger eventually stealing up on her in spite of her grief: slow and stealthy. She would stretch out her hand, reach for the remains of their feast, withdraw knowing what would happen. But

then, at last, all hope lost, her fingers would curl around a piece of fruit or a slice of cake. And when she put it to her lips, she would savour her own death, staring into her mother's glazed eyes as paralysis took hold and she too became a testament to Ol Terenzo's hatred. "Save her," he said.

"What?"

"Save her. You can do what you like to me,"

"...and I will."

"But spare Andre. Please. I beg you."

"Oh, my dear, dear mad young monk." Rising, Ol Terenzo raked his fingers through Vito's hair, slid them down his face, brushing them lightly across his lips. "I do believe you are in love."

"I'm not in love, but..."

"Did she tell you what she was doing, so far from home, traipsing south through the church lands?"

Vito's mind scrabbled for a hold on reality. "She said she was looking for treasure."

Once more, Ol Terenzo threw back his head and laughed. "Treasure? The little whore. Is that what she said? She was searching for her lost lover, Vito. For the Ruach woman who left her."

And suddenly it were as if a chasm had ruptured in the very fabric of reality itself, and everything he had allowed himself to believe fell into the void that had opened up. He peered into an abyss, a dull, hollow ache burrowing deep into his heart. "A woman?" he asked, his throat dry, scratchy, a nest of briars and thorns.

"Oh my dear, dear Vito, you never guessed?" Ol Terenzo was behind him now, the question purred into his ear, an exploratory hand running along his collar bone, lightly stroking the bare skin at the opening of his shirt. "So young. So naive. "

His fingers tightened around Vito's neck and squeezed, cutting off air. Vito choked and struggled, his lungs aflame. Dark spots clouded his vision, bursting into sudden flashes of light. His consciousness faded, reality lost its sharpness - shapes and sounds merging and becoming one. He slumped in the chair, spit flecking his lips as Ol Terenzo released the pressure and returned to his seat, idly skimming through *The People of The Pagi*.

The Elector licked an index finger and slid it beneath page after page, his eyes darting across the text, seemingly now oblivious to Vito's presence. Wheezing and

dazed, Vito pulled himself upright: watching, waiting, the seconds ticking by and with them what remained of his life.

At last, Ol Terenzo sat back with a satisfied smile, snapped the book shut, and rested his hands behind his head. "Find Urso. This book will reveal where the Firefarer is."

With a swift nod, a guard slipped from the room. Ol Terenzo returned his attention to Vito. "Well, our mutual friend has proved very useful in this respect at least. The book bends time and space to its will. It is a mere question of reading it in the correct way. But I expect she didn't know that, or you wouldn't be here now." The door clicked open and the guard returned, accompanied by a stout man: face blotched red with thread veins, his hair and beard cropped into short ginger bristles, a long sword dangling from his waist. "My Lord?"

"The Firefarer is here - headed south in the company of a Ruach whore. Find him. Kill her."

Urso nodded. "Sir."

"The Ahi are landing in their droves. Take as many men as you need. And when you have the Firefarer...you'll know what to do."

"And if he won't do as we ask, my Lord? He may still sense some shreds of attachment to his people." Urso coughed gruffly into the heel of his hand.

"Persuade him. Buy him. Torture him. Do whatever needs to be done."

"As you wish."

With a brisk click of his heels, Urso was gone. Ol Terenzo smiled. "My captain of guards, you see, Vito. A man of war: strong, ruthless. Loyal to whoever pays him. And I pay him more than anyone else can afford to. Well, in these troubled times, who can one trust? All are either faithless or weak. Your brothers, for example, holed up in their monastery without the good sense to rise to the threat of the Ahi until they were knocking on their very door."

"You sent them. That was you!"

"The dukes of Libarum - unwilling to sacrifice their own freedoms for the sake of a greater good. For the sake of Pagi unity."

"It's not unity you seek. It's power!"

Ol Terenzo struck him with sudden furious force. His head swam in dazed circles. When he came round, he tasted blood and realised he had bitten his own tongue.

"No. They are all disloyal or feeble of thought." Ol Terenzo had returned to his seat, was hunched, vulture-like over the desk. "Sorca." His eyes drifted upwards to the

girl's portrait. "So beautiful. So treacherous. Or Ol Lauro - another I believed strong, dependable. Now also dead, pinned to his bed, a knife through his stomach. No doubt victim to his own lust and depravity, the old fool. Risking a few moments of pleasure for the safety and security of our lands. You wouldn't know anything about that either, I suppose?"

Dumb with shock, pain-stricken, Vito shook his head.

"Hmm." Those green eyes seemed to bore their way through his skull. "You don't know much about anything, do you? And yet here you are, an intruder in my own palace in the company of that little traitor herself, Ol Adama."

"I already told you, I know nothing."

Ol Terenzo stared at him again, his jade eyes running the length of Vito's body, the palest ghost of a smile tracing his lips. "Well let's find out for certain, shall we?" He glanced up at the guards. "Flog him."

"What?" Panicking now, dazed, sweat running in icy waves down his back, Vito twisted and squirmed in the chair. "Look, I told you...Andre came here to save her family. I wanted to find out why you murdered my brothers. There's nothing more. I don't know anything!"

But it was hopeless. A guard slashed free the bonds around his wrists. He lashed out with his feet, aware of the chair toppling over behind him, of blood thudding in his ears, of his own breaths sharp and laboured. Aware too of Ol Terenzo's smiling presence as he watched and waited while they forced Vito face down over the desk, pushing aside piles of books and papers. He shuddered, straining against the hands now clamped around his shoulders and arms, stifling a sudden urge to vomit: a painful, welling nausea that gripped him in the very pit of his stomach, burning its way upwards through his body, mingling with the metallic, brackish taste of blood.

With a sudden, violent rip, his shirt was torn open, cold air brushing his bare skin. Vito closed his eyes, clenched his teeth and waited...and waited. It was some time before he realised that the room had gone very silent, that no one was holding him down any longer, that the guards had in fact left, and that he was now alone with Ol Terenzo. Tentative, shocked to his core, he raised his head.

Ol Terenzo was at his side, one pale, thin hand covering his mouth, his eyes bright with shock. "Get up," he whispered.

Pained, dazed, Vito forced himself upwards, his legs threatening to buckle beneath him. And then they did. He gripped the edge of the desk just in time, sinking to his

knees. Seeing that, Ol Terenzo hastily righted the chair and helped him into it, his eyes never leaving Vito's face.

"How...how did you get that?" he asked at last, his voice now hoarse and dry.

"Get what?"

"The mark on your back." He traced swirling patterns in the air with his finger.

"I always had it. Since birth."

"Ha." Ol Terenzo nodded, his hand once more covering his mouth as he lowered himself, shaking, into his own seat. "And who...who were your parents?"

Vito shook his head, bewildered. "I have no idea. Villagers. They died in Acita during the plague. I was left at the monastery doors by..."

"your brother."

"Yes," he said, his heart now throbbing and pounding. "By my brother."

"He waited for days, you know." Ol Terenzo's lips curled into a sneer. "Each day, returning to Fons, begging the bastards to take you. A nameless newborn - helpless. Your mother died just days after your father. Continued to nurse you up to the end. But then the sickness overcame her, disfigured her - she was so beautiful, you know."

"How can you..."

"And Lino knew he could never stay in that village a moment longer."

"Lino?"

"Not living with their memory. Not with half his own friends dead. And so he took you to the monastery. He begged them, *take the child. I can't care for him. Not where I'm going.*"

"By all that's sacred." Vito felt weak, the room caved in around him, the green glare of Ol Terenzo's eyes the only constant. "You're my brother?"

"I spoke to Achill first. We'd always served the monastery well, our family. Our father kept them stocked with grain, as had our grandfather. *Take the child*, I begged him. *I can't take him with me. He'll perish on the road.*"

Vito's memories wandered back to Achill, master of sharp sarcasm, of words that cut like barbs. Achill who had turned him out of bed at sunrise to tend the doves, who had enforced night long vigils for the slightest of sins - a raised voice or laughter during prayers. Was it possible?

"No." Ol Terenzo shook his head. "He would not let you in. Said you were a burden, not a blessing. I pushed you into his arms. He lowered you to the ground, left you

screaming at the monastery gates. I could not take you, Vito. Believe me...what was I to do with a helpless infant?"

"Well they must have taken me," Vito stammered. "In the end, one of them must have persuaded Achill to let me in."

"I didn't know." A tear peeled from the corner of Ol Terenzo's eye, running unchecked down his cheek. "I left you - walked away, ignoring your screams, walked into a new life. I vowed then that I would destroy them. All of them."

"So that is why...all of this is about...your hatred of the brothers?"

Lino crouched before him, taking hold of his hands. "I travelled far, Vito. I saw how weak, how quarrelsome the Pagi are, that what they needed was a ruler, someone strong, someone who could unite them." Vito flinched at that, but Ol Terenzo ignored him. "I taught myself to read, spent my days studying the arts, history, politics and war. I slept with the right men and women, begged, stole and lied my way into power, position, this palace." He allowed himself a brief, rueful smile. "I saw that the Ruach, the Ahi, even the Church - they all posed threats to the supremacy of the Pagi. And we are, Vito, the only true inheritors of these lands."

"How do you know? The Ruach and the Ahi lived as neighbours for centuries."

"Yes and we allowed their weaknesses to stain us, to contaminate us."

"You're mad!"

"No! No!" Lino squeezed his fingers so tightly that Vito feared he could break them. "I see things, Vito. I've seen so much - the cruelty of the church, the corruption of the Ruach, the savagery of the Ahi. And our own weak self-indulgence, our cowardice in the face of such dangers!"

"I'm not a Paga, brother. I'm a man of the church."

"No. No, you're not!" Half drunk on his own zealous words, Lino clutched the arms of Vito's chair, towering over him. "You're a Paga. Accept it, Vito. Join me. We can rule all of this together! You - my brother, a man I can at last trust. A man I can call my own blood."

For a few moments, Vito stared into Ol Terenzo's face, his words seeping in, framing another reality: one in which he held power. It would be a power he could use to free Andre, to save her, to rebuild Fons. But then another vision took its place. He remembered a man's feet twitching as he whimpered his way towards death on the streets of Animum, his head haloed in a pool of his own blood, a mason's hammer cast to one side, its metal filmed with hair and flesh. That was the past. It was also a

future - one of a thousand possible futures now spawned by the feverish spin of his imagination. Slowly he raised his head and looked into his brother's face. "I'm not your brother. My brothers are dead."

Ol Terenzo continued to lean over him, his face draining of colour, his eyes flickering with uncertainty, with surprise. Unable to bear that gaze any longer, Vito shoved at him with outstretched palms, forcing him backwards against the desk.

"What are you doing?" Half-dazed, Ol Terenzo struggled to his feet. "Do you think I can let you leave now, Vito? I just offered you the Pagi!"

"You can't give me what you don't own."

His brother drew nearer, his eyes a green fire, his mouth slack and trembling in shock, a thin spool of spit threading from his lips. Turning to the desk, Vito's hands fell upon *The People of the Pagi*. It was all over before the clock's cogs had measured out another second. The crack of his brother's skull beneath the weight of parchment and leather. A low groan, a sigh. And then Lino Ampelio Ol Terenzo dropped to the floor, his feet twitching, dancing, like those of a dying man had done on the streets of the city of shrines.

Vito knelt beside his brother, taking his wrist between two fingers, sensing the steady pulse of blood beneath the warmth of Lino's skin. "Didn't you read about that in your precious book, Ol Terenzo?" He set down *The People of the Pagi*, mentally measuring up his brother's length. Lino was taller than him by an inch and slimmer but...there was no choice. It was his only chance.

He jerked the green gown from Ol Terenzo's body in a series of harsh tugs. The fabric ripped beneath his brother's unconscious weight but he ignored that, pulling it over his head to leave Lino lying half-naked at his feet. "Sleep well, Ol Terenzo. Dream of my brothers - of their screams as they were cut down and burnt."

A half-groan escaped Ol Terenzo's lips and for a brief moment Vito paused, raising the book above his brother's head, ready to slam it down again in one final, fatal blow. But then there was silence. Pulling the cowl low over his own forehead, he tucked *The People of the Pagi* beneath his arm, held his breath and opened the door.

The corridor was empty, his footsteps echoing once more on cool marble. No light, save for a few candles singeing the walls. Closing the door to Ol Terenzo's study he set off, head down, his heart performing wild leaps within his chest. Which door had it been? Within which room was Andre sealed, poison perhaps already crawling along her veins, paralysing her as it had her family?

He turned a corner, down another passage, a sliver of natural light beckoning at its furthest end. And to his right, before a solid oaken door stood two guards. This was it. He remembered the series of rooms winding into the distance, a tragedy preserved in poison behind each one.

"Let me in," he growled, his shoulders hunched in imitation of Ol Terenzo's vulture-like posture.

"My Lord, you told us to leave her."

"I said let me in."

With a sharp shrug, one of the guards twisted a key in the lock and Vito stepped inside, pulling the door shut behind him.

The room was cast in a greenish haze as the evening settled in through a set of high arched windows, and Vito detected a faint, sweet scent of decay. That, he told himself, must be the feast rotting. Now arranged in a series of silhouettes against the dying light, he was half convinced that the Dukes of Libarum might stand suddenly, greet him, invite him to dine with them. But instead the silence fell as solid weight, and he trained his eyes against the gloom, noting miserably that Andre was not sat amongst them.

Instead, she rested on the floor unmoving, her head bowed, a glass of wine set before her. Time seemed to stop. He crouched down, reached out towards her, unable to keep his hand from shaking. With a sudden shriek, she threw herself at him. "Murderer!"

"Andre! It's me!" He found himself knocked off his feet, forced to shield his face against her punches. "Andre, stop it! It's me, Vito!" Seizing her wrists, he forced her onto her back, pinned her to the ground and pulled back the cowl. Her eyes registered uncertainty, confusion and then the faintest glimmer of hope.

"Vito?" She sank back to the floor, her red eyes rimmed with tears. "What happened? Where's Ol Terenzo?"

"I...I killed him." The lie half stuck in his throat. But if she thought Ol Terenzo still lived, they would never escape.

"You killed him?" She sat up straight, her pinched face suddenly eager, almost triumphant. "You, Vito...you did that?"

He pressed her to his chest, ignoring a wave of guilt. "Yes, Andre. And...there's no time to explain now. We have to get out before...before his guards find him. But, Andre, I must tell you one thing."

She stared up at him, her lips pursed to form a question, but he shook his head.
"Andre, I know who your treasure is. And we're going to find her."

PART EIGHT: OL LABRENA

PART EIGHT: CHAPTER ONE
DREAMS OF FIRE

She woke as dawn sunlight fingered its way through oak trees, the hardness of the forest floor impressed into her back and the taste of Andre in her mouth. How was that possible? Moran twisted her head to the right, taking in the slim curves of Muna's sleeping back, her arms twisted like vines around her brother's shoulders. To her left Carin also slept, her trident buried hilt downwards in the earth beside her hip, her mouth wide open as she released long, shattering snores.

She must have been dreaming. These dreams seemed to bubble up from beneath the bedrock of her conscious thoughts with greater potency every night. She sought to suppress them, spent her waking hours focussing on their weary march towards the Harars, herding Muna and Hori before her, fearful of the covetous looks Carin stole at Hori.

Carin grew wilder with every passing mile, Moran decided, and she knew what spirits now led her sister onwards, tempting and tormenting with whispers of destruction. Carin had witnessed the power of the Firefarer, had seen with her own eyes the incineration of men, of women, of horses, their ashen remains mingling with leaves upon the floor of the forest. And it had been the touchpaper to her own lust for vengeance. If Carin had ever harboured doubts that the Ruach would destroy the Pagi, they were evidently now gone. Now she ran, sometimes carrying Hori in her desperation to deliver up their prize to the Golach.

Moran eased her way painfully into a sitting position, flicking dry leaves and twigs from her hair. She understood Muna's fears now, and she wondered at Carin's blindness, at her inability - or her unwillingness - to see them too. In her dreams the forest had blazed once more, spitting down sparks and flames, the skin melting, dripping from her own face. And there, in the midst of the fire stood Andre. Moran's dream returned to her, so vivid, so clear that she sucked in her breath. They had pressed together, kissing, as brightness and heat consumed their bodies, as they crumbled into ash, their remains carried away on currents of hot, fume-choked air into a scream-ridden night. Andre's voice still carried to her through the heat and fury, begging her to stay.

Moran struggled to her feet, bent double, clutching her belly as she clawed her way from the camp, spewing the contents of her stomach into a briar patch. And no matter how hard she retched, nothing took away the horror of the dream, the dry taste of ash, the realisation that this was the fate towards which they were heading.

Behind her the others stirred themselves awake: moaning as they stretched out aching, frozen limbs and rose. She wiped her mouth hastily on leaves, hauled herself upright, forced her way back to them. Carin handed her a skin of water. It smelt of the moss and silt of forest streams, but she drank with relief.

"Bad dreams again?" Carin tugged the skin from her hands before she could drain it. She nodded, her breathing still heavy and laboured.

"Never mind, Moran. You'll sleep like a newborn when we reach the Harars."

"I shouldn't count on it."

Carin shrugged, tugging her trident free of the ground. "Let's get moving." With a broad swipe at the undergrowth, she turned to go.

"Does she ever rest?" Muna asked, rubbing tired eyes awake.

"Never." Moran gazed after Carin as her sister swept up Hori, balancing him on her shoulders before marching off, head down amongst the trees. "Never," she whispered again to herself.

"Moran, there's something I must show you. Something you ought to see." Muna began to swing the leather tube from her shoulder, but Moran raised her hand.

"Later, Muna. We'd better catch her up first." Ignoring Muna's growl of impatience, she set off in her sister's wake, her stomach still burning and lurching in reproach.

Their path climbed upwards away from Ol Lauro's deserted palace, away from the still smoking remains of the Ahi camp, the ground steepening with every step, the forest thinning into bare patches of rock and grassland. Occasionally she glimpsed a rare flash of blue far below to the West as the Angust Straits hove into view. Ahead, the Harars loomed on the horizon, their scree slopes a delicate pink in the early morning light, clouds dancing about their summits. But between the mountains and the forest lay those same plains and grasslands they had crossed on their way to Alchim. And nowhere would they feel more exposed than on open steppe - mere targets to be picked off by Pagi or Ahi. For they were still coming. She felt it in her bones.

There was only one way to shake off these restless, sickening thoughts she had discovered, and that was to delude herself: to believe that beyond the Harars, beyond

the war which was now creeping inevitably towards them, Andre still waited. That there was a future, as there had been a past, in which they clung together, suspended beyond time and space in a world of their own creation, sharing breaths and thoughts. It was an indulgence, and a costly one at that. But she allowed her mind to drift back to a time before the fall. Not the fall of her people - the calamity of Ol Terenzo's rise to power - but of her own personal fall from days so filled with love and grace that the loss felt like a death in life, the opening of a vein, the steady bleeding out of her spirit.

Adama had nestled amongst hills, she recalled. Not towering beasts like the Harars but gentle, scooped out valleys and snow covered slopes resembling the foamy crests of waves. Andre's mother had given her wine to drink on the journey there, and she had slipped in and out of drowsy sleep, waking only to wonder how Andre could have wandered so far to have wound up on the river bank on that peaceful, sun-soaked summer morning.

"My daughter is wayward and stubborn," Erminia had said, as if able to read her thoughts. "I am afraid that, for all your learning, you will teach her little."

"I will teach her as much as she wishes to know, my Lady," Moran had replied.

"And then you will leave?"

Moran felt the weight of Erminia's gaze, and stared out of the carriage window. "If she wishes it."

Surrounded by a high-walled garden, the palace of Adama rested atop an angular series of terraces some distance from the town. Snow dusted the branches of olive trees and the twisted, trailing creepers of vines which lined its walls. The place appeared deserted: silent and still, hunkering down against the winter's assault. They clambered out into a small courtyard, a fountain frozen at its midst, ice cascading down its sides in impossible arcs. And then they were moving along a dark, narrow corridor. Moran sensed the warm tug of carpet beneath her feet, made out portraits along the walls, faces staring down at her, many of whom bore Andre's grey, curious eyes.

At last they entered what appeared to be a solar: low of ceiling, with a fire blazing in a massive stone hearth at its furthest end, upholstered chairs arranged around the warmth, and the walls plastered not with paintings but with books. Row upon row of leather bound, gilt inlaid books: some arranged in neat rows, others stacked in

precarious, loose piles. Many appeared ancient, their spines broken by the hands of countless readers, their covers tattered and stained.

"Is this...is this your library?" Moran ventured. What her father would have given to exchange his few poor scrolls for this!

Erminia smiled. "Every room in this house is a library, child. Please, wait here. I will fetch Andretta."

She was gone, and Moran wandered around the chamber, noting titles, tracing her fingers along dust-coated volumes, scenting the dryness of timeworn parchment. Then, strangely uncomfortable amongst this riot of language and literature, she eased herself into a chair and stared into the flames, imagining how easy it would be to burn all these books, and what would be lost if that happened.

That was when cool, tapering fingers slid across her eyes, covering them, and she felt the hot flicker of breath against her neck. "You agreed to come. Thank you."

Moran raised her hands to Andre's and lifted them from her face, blinking into the fire's light. Smiling, Andre threw herself into the chair opposite, her long hair rolling down her back in a single plait. She wore a blue silken dress which stretched to the floor, a woollen jerkin thrown over it and wrapped around her waist. Was that the same dress she had worn that day? Moran remembered the grass stains on Andre's bare, upturned feet, her hair spun gold in the sunlight, her voice hesitant, stumbling as she read out unfamiliar words in a long dead language.

"I thought I could teach myself ancient Pagese." Andre threw her a rueful smile, and Moran's heart plummeted down, down, down.

"That's why you sent for me?"

"You said you could teach it."

"Yes, I can, but...Yes. I can." She wilted beneath the weight of her own foolishness. Here she now was, stuck in a lonely snowbound palace, shackled to a spoilt, wilful Paga who had taken it into her head to study philology.

"Well, that's alright then," Andre said, offering her hand. "We'll start tomorrow. You must be tired after your journey. I'll show you to your room."

Trembling, Moran levered herself up, refusing to look into Andre's face. "Thank you." It came out in a hoarse, choked whisper and she turned away, blinking back tears.

"Moran! In the name of all spirits, come on!" Carin's shout broke the spell of snow, ice and books, and she found herself some distance behind the others who had

stopped to rest at the base of a ring of pines, chewing on the cold remains of a rabbit that Carin had snared the previous day.

She picked her way up to them, slumping down beside Muna. "How much further?"

"We may reach the edge of the plains by nightfall." Carin tore off a strip of meat and handed it to her, but she shook her head. Her stomach had still not recovered from the morning's assault.

"Well, perhaps we should cross it by cover of darkness, Carin. During the day, we'll be easy targets."

Carin shook her head. "Without a full moon we'll get lost out there, sister. And the weather's on the change, or were you so lost to your own thoughts you hadn't noticed?"

Moran leant back on her elbows and peered up through tree tops which now swayed on a raw westerly breeze, clouds massing on the currents, barely a sliver of blue left in sight.

"What's she saying?" Muna wrapped a protective arm around her brother and drew him close.

"She says we'll camp on the edge of the plains, Muna."

"Moran, I *must* show you something." Muna unhooked the map from her shoulder, scrolling it out across the forest floor. "Look. You both ignored it once. You can't make the same mistake again."

Moran stared down at the faded stretch of vellum, fear gathering and massing within like the clouds above. She had expected it of course, but had stalled her dread, persuading herself that such concerns were the product of her own troubled mind. Now she looked at the map with a sense of utter hopelessness which seemed to grip her by the shoulders, to punch her in the stomach. "Carin," she gasped. "They're here."

"Who are?"

"All of them. Look!"

Carin bowed her head to peer at the map. The Angust straits now appeared thick with sails. Water churned around the prows of boats; wind whipping around cleats and against sails. Moran sensed the din and confusion on shore too, where the Ahi must be landing in their droves, hauling supplies up the beach, wrestling with horses that bucked and screamed, legs flailing above the breaking foam.

Cursing, Carin stamped away, swiping viciously at the undergrowth with her trident, but Moran's eyes were drawn to another part of the map. For between the plains and the city of Ol Terenzo to their east, the forest parted to the thud of footsteps. She caught the muttered call of orders, smelt smoke from a thousand campfires. Moran turned at last to stare, horrified, at Muna. "The Pagi!"

"We'll be caught between them, Moran. It's hopeless. We have to turn around."

"What's she saying?" Snarling, Carin seized the map, rolled it up and thrust it into Muna's hands.

"Carin, didn't you see? The Pagi must know. They're on the march. They'll have reached the plains before long. It'll end in a battle, and we'll be stuck in its midst! We can't carry on!"

Hori whimpered, flinging his arms around Muna.

"No!" Carin brought her face up close to Moran's, her eyes hard now - harder than Moran had ever seen them. "We've come this far. We're not going back. We'll slip between them under cover of night."

"But you just said...."

"Never mind what I said! That was then, when we only had one army to contend with. Now there are two of them - Ahi and Pagi scum! And we have the Firefarer, don't forget." She jerked a thumb at Hori, who shrank further away. "We have the chance to dispose of all our enemies in an instant! To turn them to ash and be accounted the saviours of our people. Get them up. We're moving on."

The storm, when it came, blew in from the straits in a sudden eruption of hail and lightning. Treetops swayed beneath the wind's weight, spraying branches and leaves down onto the path before them. When at last the track began its long descent to the plains, night was descending, the Harars vanishing into the gathering darkness, and below them lights punctured the greenish gloom of the evening in a thousand pinpricks as the Ahi set up camps in land.

Trudging downwards, dread curling and curdling in the pit of her being, Moran saw Carin raise a hand, bidding them halt.

"We'll sit out the rest of the storm, wait for full cover of night, then cross. Tell them to get some rest. They'll need it. No sleep later until we reach the Harars." Carin yelled against the wind's roar, her words lost to the snap and rip of thunder.

It was no more than a hollow amongst the rocks carpeted with stray tufts of grass, but it was the closest thing to shelter they could find. The storm screamed itself out,

the wind dropped to a low moan, and one by one they fell asleep, exhaustion surmounting fear. All of them, that was, except Moran who sat - frozen, watchful - staring down at the Ahi, now lined in row after serried row like driftwood washed up on shore.

Was this where it all ended, then? Caught up in the maelstrom of invasion, trapped between Ol Terenzo's forces and the Ahi, mere miles from her own people and shelter. And what if, their enemies closing in and all hope of escape lost, the Firefarer did unleash a wave of destruction powerful enough to ignite the very plains, to ensure that ash coated the grasslands for years to come?

Rising stiffly, she shook Muna awake, pressing frozen fingers to her lips to stifle the girl's groan. "Muna, wake Hori. We're leaving."

"But what..." Muna twisted her head towards Carin's sleeping form. "What about your sister?"

Moran shook her head. That bond had all but broken, she told herself. She would pay for the betrayal, of course. Carin would track them, hunt them, and even if she never caught them, guilt would fester within like a disease. But continue across the plains, and death would welcome them with arms outstretched.

Hori woke beside his sister, shivering - cold and fearful. Moran cast a swift glance back up the bank towards the forest. Their path was clear.

"Come on, Muna," she whispered. "Run!"

PART EIGHT: CHAPTER TWO
THE GREEN MAN

It was so quiet here. Like a crypt or a vault. How could Andre bear it? Moran peered across the table at the Paga who sat, quill in hand, studiously copying out verse in ancient Pagese.

Perhaps that was what had made Andre walk out into a summer's day rich with the promise of adventure - of a life beyond the library and the silence of her parents' palace. A desire to push at the boundaries of her little world, to discover the stories that lay beyond those walls - stories that took place in villages and towns, in fields and on river banks. Not those stories which had long been sealed in ink and on vellum: narratives to which the endings were always already known and would never change.

Andre raised her head and smiled at Moran who turned, embarrassed, back to her own book. It was impossible to steal so much as a glance at the girl without her knowing. And with every passing minute those stolen glances became barbs and blades, cutting and wounding, for soon enough Andre would master these old languages and then there would be nothing to do but pack, leave, trudge back to her parents and Carin with a hollow heart, her illusions dried, shrivelled, sapped of colour like husks of maize following the harvest.

"Moran, let's go into the garden. I've learnt all I can for today." Laying down the quill, Andre stretched as a cat might do, with long, drawn-out grace.

"As you wish." They pulled on heavy leather boots, wrapped themselves in furs and trudged outside.

Winter was finally at a thaw. A few beads of water dripped from the frozen fountain in the courtyard, and when they passed into the garden snow slid from the olive branches, pocking the ground with soft, swift thuds. Andre took her hand, leading her into a small, stonewalled orchard, the gnarled trunks of fruit trees black as ink against the porous whiteness about their roots.

"Moran, there's something I need to tell you." Andre pulled back her hood to reveal her hair, loose as it had been that summer's day, falling in long folds about her shoulders.

"I know." Moran looked away. The cold, wet morning seeped into her very skin, numbing her to the heart. "You're a good student, Andre." She forced a smile. "Of course, there's always more to learn. But I've taught you all I can."

"So what will you do now?" Andre studied her, her grey eyes inscrutable.

"I'll go back to my village." Tears threatened to break. She swallowed hard. "To my parents. My sister."

"Stay."

Andre grasped her arm with sudden fierceness. She jumped. "Why?"

"You know why."

And that was the moment, in that orchard with its black, barren trees and the steady melt of snow. Andre leant forward, laying her frozen lips against Moran's. It seemed as if she were water: her body as fluid, as free as the soul of a stream. And then she felt herself light as the air itself, before her heart became a furnace, the heat melting and searing until she was unsure where she ended and Andre began. But then her body found a new form, rooting itself to the earth, burying deep until she was as ancient and deep and true as the orchard in which they stood.

They broke apart, Andre sinking down against the wall, her cheeks flushed, her skirts fanning out around her in the snow.

"I thought that I had to be free," she whispered, half to herself. "I was such a fool."

Moran crouched down beside her, taking her hand. "Free from what?"

"From you, Moran. I wanted to believe that I could distance myself from you." She slid a gloved hand down Moran's face. "After we met by the river I ached to see you again. But I was fearful of being trapped."

"Trapped?" Moran rose, trembling.

"Yes. Trapped - ensnared, reeled in like a fish on a line." She looked up at Moran, her eyelashes beaded with frozen tears. "But it was too much for me. I felt it too much. Every day I thought of you. And so then I had the idea of asking you to teach me. Because I believed it would be a test of my strength - having you here and yet resisting you."

"Has this all been some kind of game for you, then Andre? A contest of will?"

"No!" She rose and pulled Moran close again, kissing her urgently. "It was never a game, Moran." They stood, their foreheads touching, breathing out icy clouds of vapour which mingled in the air between them. "If you leave now, I will follow you, I swear. Don't you remember those words - those ancient words? *Run where you*

please - I will find you. On sea, on land, through the air or amongst the smoke and fire of hell, I will search for you."

"Moran, she's gaining on us!"

"Down here. Come on!"

The forest petered out on the brink of a horseshoe-shaped bank. Seizing Hori's hand, Moran pulled the boy back amongst a brace of leafy saplings. Muna plunged in after her.

"Did she see us?" she gasped, breathless.

"I don't think so."

Carin had been tracking them all morning. At first, Moran believed they had the advantage, creeping away in the gloom and haze following the storm, her sister still fast asleep. But she hadn't counted on Carin's relentless energy, her agility and speed when it came to travelling cross country. Hori could run but only in fits and starts, his strength exhausted after a few minutes. Then they had to carry him between them, the effort wearing them down. And all the time, Carin gained ground: Moran would shudder as another howl of rage shook the undergrowth, and after it came the screams and threats: "Traitor! You're a stranger to me, Moran. A stranger, not a sister!"

Moran peered down the bank. A few scrawly trees clung to its side, but it was for the most part sharp rock and shingle - a painful climb. Or fall. And at its base, a stream and then... she gazed at the Pagi palace below them: grand stucco reliefs gracing its facade, a maze of yews stretching - as far as she could see - round the entire building.

"What's down there?" Muna peered over her shoulder.

"Pagi territory. Dangerous."

Muna shuddered. "I don't want to go down there."

Moran opened her mouth to object but trees rustled on the opposite bank and she dragged Muna down beside her. A hand emerged, sliding out from between branches and leaves. Moran caught her breath. The hand was followed by an arm, then a shoulder and...she gasped. It was not Carin!

Instead, a young Ahi scout crawled from the scrub, his face smudged with daubs of forest mud, a spear in his hand. He was followed by two other scouts, who picked their way out onto the edge of the bank, scanning the grand gardens below.

"They might have killed Carin," Hori whispered.

Muna clamped a hand over his mouth. "Shh. They'll hear us."

"But they might have! And now they'll kill us too." His words came out in a muffled squeak. With an excited shout, the Ahi scouts span round, one of them jabbing at the air with his spear before running back into the forest.

"He'll tell them where we are," Muna groaned. "We'll have an entire army on top of us!"

The two remaining Ahi were already moving in their direction, grappling with creepers and briars as they hacked their way around the bank. "We'll have to go down," Moran whispered.

"No! That's a Pagi palace. It's too dangerous!"

"Well what else do you suggest, Muna? Should we sit here and wait for them to catch us?"

The Ahi were mere yards away. Moran readied herself to dive headlong down the bank when there was a sudden howl of pain and one of the young men toppled forwards, the prongs of a trident protruding from his chest, the remainder buried to its hilt in his back. His companion turned, drawing a knife, but was too slow. Screaming, wild-eyed, her face awash with sweat, Carin had already driven her fist into the base of his skull. As he sank to his knees she tugged the knife from his hand and tore it across his throat, blood pluming over the surrounding woodland, spraying Carin's face and shirt.

"Carin! Stop!" Moran struggled to her feet, only to witness Carin charge towards her, bull like in her rage. Grabbing Muna and Hori, Moran flung herself backwards off the ridge, and then it were as if the entire world had vaulted away. She saw sky, then earth, then sky again, her skin grazed and gashed on rocks, Hori and Muna shrieking and yelling as they fell, until breathless, they landed in the stream at the base of the bank. Water rushed into her eyes, cascading over her face. Gasping and wheezing, she dragged herself onto a patch of grass. Muna was already out and running, bearing Hori in her arms. Behind them Carin thundered through the stream, her trident once more in her hand, blood flooding down her face.

"Run!" Moran screamed.

"Where?"

"The maze!" Her lungs tight, still choking down water, she made for a tall line of yews, a break between them offering an obvious entrance. A few paces ahead, Muna slipped between the trees, the threat of Carin outweighing her fear of Pageses magic.

It was dark within. The yews had been trimmed into long winding channels which towered above them, blocking out the light. Roots veined the ground and leaves twitched to a strange wind - a wind which hadn't blown outside the maze. She span round just in time to see Carin bolt inside, her trident raised above her head.

"Give up the Firefarer and I'll let you live the rest of your treacherous life in peace, Moran."

"So you and the Golach can annihilate the Pagi? What kind of an animal have you become?"

With a scream, Carin hurled the trident and Moran ran, the weapon plunging into roots just a few paces before her. She leaped over them in time to witness one of the roots writhe beneath her feet like a snake, angrily lashing the air as it shook itself free of the trident.

Had she really seen that? Moran turned a corner and fled, her sister howling at her through the hedge, as furious and frustrated as a baited bear. There was no sign of Muna - she must surely have run deeper into the maze. And every step brought with it a knowledge that sickened and pained. The labyrinth was alive.

Faced with a series of spiralling tunnels she chose the first, only to find her way blocked, the yews bending and bowing across her path. Moran pivoted around, branches scratching her face, clawing at her arms and legs as she plunged backwards, mere feet from Carin.

"Pageses witchery!" her sister spat.

"Well you forced us in here, Carin."

"And I'll see to it that you don't leave." She swiped at Moran who ducked just in time, dragging herself out of range and stumbling on into the next passage. As Carin turned to follow the trees shifted again, blocking her path, leaving her screaming and cursing through a twisted gate of bark and leaves.

"Moran, we're here!" Muna's voice was distant and splintered, as if reaching her from several places at once.

"Where?"

"Over here!"

Up ahead, leaves swarmed like bees, hovering and floating on the air, merging into some kind of shape. Moran retreated, stumbling backwards over a root which rose and clutched at her ankle as the yew tree before her took on human form, brandishing the heavy weight of a branch and staggering forwards in great, clumsy strides.

She kicked at the root, desperate to shake it off, but it curled tighter around her leg, cutting into her skin. Gasping with pain, Moran grabbed it between both hands and squeezed. The root twisted and squirmed, loosening its hold but shaking with such violence that she nearly left the ground. Unable to hold on any longer, she flung the root at the man of yew just as he loomed above her. It twisted around his legs, sending him crashing downwards in a spray of leaves and twigs. Moran scrambled to her feet, half-crawling, half-running as she made her way back out of the tunnel, only to find herself facing her sister.

"Where are they?" The prongs of Carin's trident pressed into the skin at the base of her throat. She froze.

"I don't know. Trapped in the maze, somewhere."

"I should have believed Keles, you bitch. Once a traitor, always a traitor."

Moran closed her eyes, waiting for the end. Wind rustled lightly over her cheeks and through her hair. *If this is how it all finishes, I have nothing to fear*, she told herself. When she opened her eyes again, Carin was wrestling with the trident, which had transformed into wood and leaves, its creepers spreading and twisting up her arms entangling her in a web of foliage. Seizing her chance, Moran ran, tearing down first one green tunnel and then the next, until at last she spied Hori and Muna slipping around a corner.

"Muna! Hori!"

There was no reply and as she gained ground, trees sprouted before her, blocking her path. She could barely move now, her legs leaden weights, her arms and face crisscrossed with cuts, her heart pounding until all she could hear was the blood beating inside her ears. A sudden wave of rage surged through her entire body. She ran straight into the hedgerow, beating her fists against branches and creepers as they twisted and wormed around her like a nest of vipers. The maze was swallowing her, she realised, horrified: draining her, feeding off her. She screamed and then choked as tendrils slithered inside her mouth. There was no more air. She couldn't breathe!

And then she felt hands touching her - human hands. Someone was pulling her from the maze. Moran pushed forwards, her limbs almost wrenched from their sockets as the labyrinth did all it could to hold her back. She clung to her rescuer, sensing a strange heat burn its way up her skin, while around her the branches recoiled, hissing: slithering away, until at last she was on the ground, drinking in air, and looking into up into the frightened faces of Muna and Hori.

"Thank you," she spluttered, but they backed away. She tried to rise but couldn't, her legs giving way beneath her just as Carin charged them, her trident now returned to bronze.

"Moran!" Muna screamed, but she could not move. Carin raised the trident above her head, only to release a roar of anger as the ground swelled beneath her, hundreds of roots crossing each other, gliding around her feet, dragging her downwards. She was sinking, Moran realised, horrified: the maze eating her inch by grinding inch, swallowing first her ankles, then her knees.

By the time she was waist deep in roots and leaves, Carin was screaming, her face contorted in terror as the maze sucked her down. "Help me!" she gasped.

"The trident, Carin. Hold out the trident!"

Moran caught it by the hilt, dragging and heaving, but Carin continued to disappear beneath the writhing knot of bark and earth.

"Muna, help me!"

Darting forwards, Muna wrapped her hands around the lower end of the trident, pulling, and in that briefest of moments Moran was certain that the labyrinth backed away: that its spell had, somehow been broken. She stared at the Ahi girl who, now sweating now with exertion, strained to drag Carin from the ground. It was not, Moran realised with sudden insight, that Carin was moving upwards, but rather that the earth was sinking back down again, shrivelling and shrinking away from Muna. Gradually, her sister re-emerged: roots and creepers releasing their grip on her legs, until at last she was lying, stretched out and face down, sobbing with relief.

"What did you just do, Muna?" Moran turned to the girl.

"Nothing." She looked away.

"Don't lie."

"I said it's nothing, Moran. Quick! She's getting up again!"

Carin was already on her hands and knees, spitting out leaves and splinters, shaking herself free of the few remaining twigs and chips of bark.

"Run!" Moran plucked up Hori, enfolding him in her arms, the boy's face pressed against her shoulder. But now, it were almost as if the maze were trying to reject them, to spit them out as if it had chewed them and found them distasteful. And Moran could not help but notice that, wherever Muna went, the labyrinth parted, leading her down brighter, wider avenues: sunlight creeping in where before there had been nothing but the verdant darkness of the trees. Still trapped within the maze, Carin raged and railed against her, no doubt hacking her way through the hedges. But ahead, Moran spied open countryside - bare hills and streams, the palace now far behind them. And she ran.

PART EIGHT: CHAPTER THREE

ALCHEMY

It was the mornings that Moran liked best. Waking up beside Andre while she still slept: her face buried in her hair and her pale, slim body draped across the bed, swathed in silk and linen. Now the winter had finally passed and the sun's rays already carried some heat as they broke in between the curtains, the morning air rich with birdcall and the scent of blossom. Stretching, Moran rose, poured water from a jug into the washbasin and splashed her face. A loud rap on the door had her flinch and freeze.

"What is it?" Stirring, still half-asleep, Andre groaned, pointing towards the heavy drapes around the window. Moran slipped behind them.

"A visitor for Moran." Moran recognised the deep voice of Andre's brother, Estachien. "But she doesn't appear to be in her room. Would you know where she is?"

His words carried through the keyhole with a light, amused ring. He knew about them: Moran was certain of it. But Estachien was loyal to his sister. And, besides that, an unbroken chain of young women seemed to wind their way into his own bed at night, no doubt succumbing to his delicately handsome good looks and his winsome way with words.

"I'll go and find her." Andre sat up in bed and raked a brush through her long, brown hair. "Who wants to see her?"

"Her sister."

Moran heard him leave - humming to himself as he walked down the corridor - and stepped back into the room, watching Andre as she continued to brush her hair, the locks spilling down over her shoulders and breasts.

"I should go to speak to her." She slumped down on the bed, kissing Andre's sleep-warm lips.

"I suppose so. She's come a long way, so whatever she has to say, it must be important."

Moran slipped a dress on over her head, putting her ear to the door to check that no one was outside. Then she eased her way into the corridor, its carpet warm and soft beneath her bare feet. A maze of twisting, book lined passages led her downwards

until at last she reached the same small solar that she had arrived in on that first wintry night in Adama.

Carin had made herself comfortable, evidently keen to display all the contempt for the Pagi she could possibly muster. One knee cocked up against the arm of a chair she sprawled, munching on an apple, a book open across her knee.

"I see you've made yourself at home."

With a smirk, Carin rose, allowing the book to slide to the floor, its cover creasing as it fell. "Sister." She caught Moran in a rough embrace. Then, releasing her, she gazed with narrowed, suspicious eyes around the room. "What are you doing here?"

"Carin, I'm...I'm staying here."

"As the lowly servant - sorry, the lowly tutor of a Paga?"

"No," Moran said carefully. "As her lover."

Carin hawked and spat into the empty fire pit. Shaking her head, she threw herself back into the chair. "You really don't know anything, do you, Moran?"

"What is there to know?"

"Have you any idea what is happening out there? In those lands you used to call your home?"

"Of what?" A cold skein of unease unravelled like thread around a spool.

"Moran," Carin rose again, threw the apple core into the hearth and gripped Moran's shoulders beneath powerful hands. She winced. "The Elector of Ol Terenzo has taken it into his head that we're vermin. Scum. A scourge upon the Pagi."

Bewildered, Moran stared into her face. "Who? Us? Our village? Our family?"

"No, idiot!" Carin prodded Moran's forehead with a short, stubby finger. "Not just us! *All* of us. The Ruach."

Icy fingers clawed at her back. She shivered. "But why?"

Carin shook her head. "Who knows why. The man's a conniving bastard and he knows there are elements amongst the Pagi who already hate us. Many say he sows dissension to secure his own power. Moran listen to me," she gripped Moran's arms again, squeezing so hard it hurt. "You're not safe here. The Pagi are moving north burning Ruach homes, murdering and enslaving, and our old Pagese neighbours just look on. Or even help. I'm fearful for our parents. I've tried to persuade them to leave but they won't. And people are saying things about...about you."

"What? What things are they saying?"

"That you're a traitor. A Pagi lover."

"Because I am. A lover - not a traitor," she added hastily.

"That's not going to help you, Moran. Come back with me now. Come back and save our people before it's too late." She stepped back, turning her head towards the doorway with a sudden scowl. Moran followed her gaze.

"Your sister, Moran? Welcome." Stepping over the threshold, Andre held out her hand, but Carin crossed her arms.

Andre shrugged. "Please make yourself at home."

"I was just leaving. With Moran."

A shadow darkened Andre's face. Crossing the room, she wrapped her arms around Moran's waist. Carin hissed, her expression souring even further.

"Is this true, Moran?" Andre whispered. "Don't go." She tightened her embrace, resting her head on Moran's shoulder.

Her mind flooded with memories: she recalled a young child, forever following Carin around the village, desperate for her approval. In the eye of her mind, two girls snared rabbits and hares in the woods, picked blackberries, fought with sticks. One child looked on with jealous eyes as her sister talked to spirits unseen.

Andre's lips brushed against the nape of her neck.

"I cannot go with you, Carin. I'm sorry."

Carin stood, staring, her cheeks pale with anger, her lips curling into a thin line. "Very well, Moran." She turned to go. "I'll let our parents know you are content with your Pagesese whore."

Andre froze, her hands curling into fists as she darted towards Carin, but Moran held her back. "Don't, Andre. Please."

When Carin reached the door, she turned one last time, the dark brown of her irises flashing gold with rage. "If I ever see her again," she jabbed a finger at Andre, "I'll kill her."

"Do you know where we're going, Moran?"

So exhausted she could barely move, Moran slumped against the wall of the abandoned farm house beside Muna. Between them, Hori curled into a ball, catching a few precious moments of sleep. The sun was at its peak and the building's stonework had absorbed so much warmth it scorched her back. Heat rose in humid

waves from the surrounding fields and cypress groves: a lonely river slithering amongst them, taunting their thirst.

"Show me the map."

Kneeling, Muna coaxed the parchment from its tube and spread it across the ground. Moran trailed her finger down its right half. "My guess is that the maze was part of the famed gardens of Ambages. Petro Ol Diacom, the Elector of Labrenum is renowned for his skills as a great architect - for constructing palaces and pleasure gardens which first charm...and then ensnare. And so if we are in Labrenum, we have no choice but to continue south. To the north lies the electorate of Terenzo. The last place we want to be. Ol Lauro's dominions are to the west. Yes. The only choice is south."

"And what lies south?"

Moran frowned. "I'm not even sure. I've heard that those are wastelands. Barren and rocky. But one thing I do know for certain is that the Pagi have no influence there. And why should they? There's nothing for them to enchant or transform."

"And no shelter or food for us, either?" Muna stared out into the haze and heat. The Ahi girl was close to breaking, Moran realised. Her courage had carried them so far, but even that was nearly sapped.

"We'll manage, Muna. We've come all this way. We have to survive."

She glanced down at the map again, running a hand through her hair. Fear blistered beneath her skin. Squinting against the sunlight, Moran seized the parchment and stared, ignoring the way its enchantment pulsed beneath her fingertips.

"What? What is it?" Muna strained to peer over her shoulder.

"Here." Moran rested a trembling finger upon the map, indicating the old farm buildings beside which they now sat. Then she traced an invisible line east.

Beside her, Muna flinched and groaned. "Pagi?" she whispered.

"Who else?"

They were close now - marching, moving. Grass crushed beneath hundreds of boots as the Pageese army filed downwards, their vanguard already level with the maze. If Carin were still alive in there, Moran thought, it would not be for much longer. She looked further north, almost crying in despair. For the Ahi had also left the plains and were now pushing relentlessly through the forest.

"The scout," Muna whispered.

"He must have reported back. But how would the Pagi know where to look for us?"

Muna shook her head. "I don't know. And I'm past caring. We need to move on. Hori, get up."

The boy moaned and struggled as Muna pulled him to his feet, so tired now that he seemed barely able to distinguish between his conscious hours and dreams. Often, as he stumbled forwards, he would mutter to himself as if half asleep, speaking to people who were long dead - to his mother, his father. It unnerved Moran, and she wondered for how much longer he could continue.

They passed from the shade and shelter of the farmhouse into the sun. Moran shaded her eyes with her hands, pulling the cape of her dress over her head, but it did little to protect her from the heat. They kept - so far as they could - to the clusters of cypress which offered scant but welcome cover, and when they finally reached the river they drank greedily, Hori sinking his entire body below its surface. He would have stayed there, had his sister not dragged him out. Before them, the landscape funnelled into a wide valley bordered by low, rolling hillsides, the river running its course amongst them. They followed it, grateful for its presence as it flowed on ever southwards, the surge and play of its waters promising safety. At last, as the sun's heat ebbed and the sky bled gold and crimson, they rested in a hollow beside its bank, tree roots webbing its roof.

Muna poked at the sand of the river bank with a stick. "They'll find us if we stop."

"We can't continue, Muna. Look at your brother. He's ... he's close to death!"

With a sudden sob, Muna hauled Hori into her lap. The boy's skin had been scourged raw by the sun's rays, his breath rattling in his throat as he breathed. "He's eaten nothing," Muna cried, her voice cracking with the weight of despair. "He's sick."

Moran laid a hand on Muna's shoulder, but she shook it off.

"He's going to die. And it's our fault! We should never have run from Carin!"

"What, and just walked into the arms of your enemy? The very people you were running from?" Moran choked on her own angry words. Perhaps she had been wrong. Perhaps they should have pressed on towards the Ruach. At least if the Ahi had caught them, their death would have been brutal but short. Not like the one they now endured: lingering, torturous. She had lost everything - everything for the Firefarer, she thought, bitter fury brewing like bile. Hunted like a wild animal across country, outcast by her own people with no hope of return, her sister now her enemy - possibly her dead enemy.

Splashing her face with water from the stream she rose, observing the surrounding hillsides as the sun hovered above them and then sank, its dying rays gracing the grasslands and treetops. Her heart shuddered. Perched on an outcrop, scanning the scenery below, two silhouettes punctured the evening's harmony. They appeared to be arguing, their heads pressed close together. One of them, she now saw, was a man grown - clothed like a Pagi. The other seemed frailer, perhaps a boy. She turned to find that Muna had passed out with exhaustion. Hori's breath rattled in his lungs as he slept. "Muna, get up!" she whispered, but the girl wouldn't stir.

Carin would have crept up on the two strangers, trident in hand, waiting until they were just within reach and then with one swift, merciless thrust, she would have brought them down like hunted prey. But now Carin was gone and her trident with her, and Moran possessed nothing resembling a weapon. And so she watched and waited, fixed to the ground with fear as the two figures slid from the outcrop and ran lightly down the bank of the hill.

She caught her breath. There was something she could not quite grasp. Something familiar about the smaller figure - about the way he moved, the way he passed with fluid ease through the grass, his body rakishly thin, a satchel bouncing at his side as he moved. A memory stirred - of river banks, long locks of hair and a girl reading a book. She put her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. Perhaps this was fever brought on by the sun, by lack of food and sleep. But when she opened her eyes again, the figures were closer, and her heart seemed to birth an incredible hope. Raising the hem of her dress, Moran stepped into the stream and waded across it.

They had seen her now. One of them called her name. This was surely a dream, she told herself, for the voice she heard... She began to run, and the slighter figure ran too: sprinting, bounding, burning across the fields. Moran stopped suddenly. This was another of those taunting, torturing dreams. Could that poor, shorn figure, could it really be Andre? She stood in the gathering darkness and waited, her heart pounding, feet rustling through the grass as they ran towards her. A few stars had pierced the dusk, and the evening brought with it a coolness that made her shiver.

And then the figures stopped running. Just a few paces away. The man was tall and well built, with deep set, dark brown eyes - his hair and beard lank and untidy, framing a gaunt, sunburnt face.

"Moran? Do you not know me?"

The evening splintered - broke apart - its shades and colours merging until the sky's darkness fed the grasslands, the green of the hills became the sky, and she realised that she was crying. Moran sank to the ground, burying her face in the earth, clawing at stalks and soil with her fingers, until someone raised her up and a voice whispered into her ear - "I said I'd find you."

Moran clung to Andre, wrapping her arms around the girl's body, pressing her lips to her warmth. The man edged silently away to stoop by the river, his back to them as he splashed his face free of dirt.

Darkness rolled in, until the hills around them could be felt but not seen, and the only source of heat was their own bodies. Limbs twisting, lips meeting, they sat, rooted to the earth and waited.

PART NINE: THE VALE

PART NINE: CHAPTER ONE

KINGFISHER

"What happened? What did you do?" Koka fled across the beach, the wind catching at her dark hair, sand dusting her calves.

This was a dream. Muna knew that, even as she slept. After all, her mother was long gone: led to her death by a mapmaker's treachery, she had bled out in some distant Pageese valley or canyon. Yet this all seemed so real, so vivid - the salt smell of sea, the suck and hiss of waves as they hit the shore, the bleat of gulls overhead. If it were a dream, it was weighted with memory. She sat, wriggling infant toes into the sand and watched Koka run.

"What happened?" Breathless, her mother finally reached her, raising her in strong, weather-bronzed arms. Another scent mingled with that of the brine. A hot smell: pungent, sweet, it caught in her throat. She coughed and spluttered.

"Come on." Koka ran back along the beach towards the village with its squat, stone dwellings and thatched roofs, some of which were already aflame. Screaming, Ahi emerged from their homes with buckets and raced towards the sea. She caught a glimpse of her father as he too ran, dragging a canoe behind him, filling it with seal pelts and skins. Dropping the boat at the water's edge he shouted to Koka, his voice hoarse from the smoke. Muna heard nothing above the din of fire and confusion. Still yelling, now running, Erland turned and pointed back towards the land.

She squirmed in her mother's arms, twisting her head away from the sea and the village until she was facing the dunes. They were gone. Flames consumed the grasses. Rabbits and foxes streamed down onto the beach, driven from their burrows. She raised her head. A single gull screamed overhead, its wings burning as it plunged to the ground.

Gasping for breath, Muna woke with the gritty taste of ash still in her mouth. That could not have been a memory, she told herself. Or if it were, perhaps in some dark recess of her mind, she had stored her parents' tales of Hori's earliest years: of how they had been forced to flee their village for fear of his uncontrolled power. Perhaps they had told her that, once. And perhaps that story had fused with her own feverish

imagination as she slept, released in a dream of such clarity that she could believe it real. But now she was awake and the morning brought its own terrors. If her map saw true, the Ahi were in pursuit. So were the Pagi. And Hori was sick.

He still lay, curled half beneath her, his breathing fitful, his face and arms blistered from the sun. She shook him gently. "Hori? Are you awake?"

The boy groaned but did not stir.

"Hori, wake up. We have to move on!"

He would not even raise his head. She forced back a sudden urge to scream at him, to shake him: to beg him to stay alive. This wasn't her fault. All she had wanted was to escape the Ahi. How could she have known how treacherous the lands of the Pagi would be?

But that would not serve. To break down now, to cry and rail at Moran or the Pagi or the world in general - it would not help. If Hori were to survive, she must gather her wits, think her way out of this. Perhaps, together with Moran, they would find a good place to hide in those lands beyond the borders of the Pagi: maybe even build a home there. Yes, there was still hope so long as Hori remained alive.

She rose, surprised that Moran was not lying beside them. Perhaps she was collecting water from the river. Or, she thought with a shudder, perhaps she had given them up for lost: was now making her own lonely way back in search of her crazed sister.

Muna's hands and feet were streaked with dirt, her skin eaten raw by the sun. She wondered vaguely how burnt and swollen her face must now be, but that did not really matter. Survival mattered, nothing else. Her boots sank into the soft sandy-clay of the river bank and she blinked into the light, crawling out the tiny cave with its vaulted roof of tree roots.

A breath caught in her throat. Moran was nowhere to be seen. But beside the river a young man sat, his legs drawn up to his chest, his chin resting on his knees. She edged back towards the hollow but he looked up, shook his head, put his hand to his chest and said, "*pralo*."

Pralo. She knew that word. Moran had taught her a few expressions in Pagese - simple terms for food, or greetings. *Pralo, pralo*. What did it mean?

The young man rose. His face, too, was weather-beaten - scorched by wind and sun. His hair and beard were knotted, his shirt and trousers ragged. And his eyes, she noticed, were rimmed with red as if he had been crying. "*Pralo*," he whispered again.

Of course! It meant *friend*. Putting a hand to her own chest, she too whispered, "pralo."

"Mio imiu Vito." With a tired smile, he stretched out a dirt-ingrained hand.

So many of these Pagi had proven false. But now, it seemed, she really had nothing left to lose. Vito appeared as exhausted, as sick and weary a traveller as she was herself. And so, reaching forward, she threaded her fingers through his. "Muna."

There was still no sign of Moran. She pitched around, scanning the river bank until Vito laid a palm on her shoulder and pointed across the water. The grasslands of the valley swayed on the morning breeze, the air was rich with bee hum and as she watched, a kingfisher soared and swooped, shedding crystals as it broke the river's surface with a silver sliver of fish writhing in its beak. It hovered between the slim columns of a cypress copse and Muna watched it go, her eyes rounding in surprise. For lying entwined at the base of one of the trees were two figures. And one of the figures was Moran.

Shaking leaves from his hair, a reed-thin boy rose beside the sleeping Ruach woman. Then he leant over her with great gentleness and kissed her. Muna continued to stare, now open mouthed, as Moran responded, snaking her arms around the boy's shoulders to draw him closer. Slender of limb, he sprang to his feet with almost unearthly grace and offered her his hand. Moran took it and they headed back towards the riverside camp.

A cough startled Muna. Hori! She cupped her palms into the stream's coolness and then ran back towards the hollow, the water leaking out uselessly between her fingers. Vito was already kneeling beside her brother. Pressing a water skin to Hori's dry, flaking lips, he turned to her with troubled eyes.

"Save him," she whispered, half to herself, in Ahi. Vito appeared to understand - if not her words then at least her desperation. With a nod, he propped Hori up against his own chest, dripping water into the boy's mouth.

Vito uttered a few words in Pageese, and Muna realised he was talking to Moran and her lover, who had now crossed the river and were crouching just behind her, peering inside the hollow.

"He says that Hori may recover," Moran translated. "But he must rest. We cannot move him from this place."

"But the Ahi...and the Pagi! We have to move South."

"Muna, if we move him, he'll die."

She slumped down against the damp, earthy wall of the hollow, biting back the urge to sob and scream once again. Moran's lover uttered a few words in Pagesese, his accent high and melodic.

"She says she'll catch some fish," Moran said. "He needs to eat."

"She?" The world unravelled at such pace that she no longer seemed a part of it: merely watching and wondering as trees took on human form, boys became girls, the youthful aged in minutes and art ensnared victim after victim.

"I told you once that there was someone dear to me amongst the Pagi, Muna. This is Andretta Ermetena Ol Adama - Andre. And she has travelled through the smoke and fire of hell to find me."

Andre inclined her head, her smile strangely weighted with sadness.

"I think the fires of hell may yet be before us, Moran," Muna said.

Biting her lip, Moran slid an arm around Andre's waist and drew her close. "Let's hope not."

It was growing cramped and stuffy inside the hollow. She had borne responsibility for her brother's life now for weeks, and as he ebbed away she felt helpless, the strength that had carried her so far now draining from her body. Desperate for air, she slipped out past Andre and Moran and headed back towards the river. On a sudden instinct she turned around, gazing westwards at the line of treeless, windswept plateaux behind them. But they were no longer lifeless. Her legs shook and buckled, and she found herself kneeling in the sand of the riverbank as Andre and Moran rushed outside to join her.

High, high up amongst the hills, warriors sat astride their horses in rows so dense and dark they resembled lines of ink. Hooves pawed the ground, voices carried on the morning air, axes glinted against the light of the rising sun.

"No!" Muna wailed. Andre threaded an arm around her shoulders, but she shrugged it off and scrambled to her feet. "They won't have him. They can't take him. Moran, tell Vito to carry my brother. We'll take him far from here. Far away."

"Muna, it's impossible. You know that."

"Nothing is impossible. We've come this far, we'll carry on."

"Muna." This time, it was Andre who spoke. Placing her hands on Muna's shoulders, she turned her round until she was facing east. The sun had now fully risen above the slopes which framed the opposite side of the valley. Beneath it the Pagesese army

waited, already sweltering in their armour, the morning's peace now ruptured and forgotten.

"Everything is lost," Muna whispered. Andre slid from her side, resting her head on Moran's shoulder. Behind them, Vito crawled from the hollow, shielding his eyes against the sun's glare, his expression grim.

"Your final chance, Muna!" Someone called down from the ranks of the Ahi. "Give up your brother, redeem yourself and watch as we annihilate the Pagi."

"It's too late. He's dying."

A swell of voices broke the stillness as the Ahi absorbed her words, the air brimming with their rage.

"It's not too late," a voice barked back. "We'll save him."

"You'll destroy him!"

"You have no choice, Muna. We'll step over your corpse to claim him if we have to. And those of your Pageses allies."

From amongst the ranks someone barked out an order to move and the Ahi began their descent - no mad charge but a measured, disciplined march down the valley. She stared wildly at Moran. "What now?"

But Moran was not watching the Ahi. Or the Pagi. Instead, she was staring down the valley's length back towards the ruined farmhouse, her lips opening and closing around a stifled scream.

"What is it, Moran? What is out there?" Muna shaded her eyes against the sun's glare, unable to see more than the grasslands, to hear the Ahi's steady, insistent steps, her body beating to the rhythm of fear.

Moran suddenly span, seizing Andre by the shoulders, pleading with her: begging, imploring, her words a garbled rush of Pageses. Unable to understand a word, Muna watched, helpless, as Vito also turned to the Pagi, pointing down the valley away from whoever or whatever was coming towards them. Their efforts were useless. Andre shook her head and crossed her arms, refusing to be moved.

"What's happening?"

The Ahi had neared the valley floor. With a screech of cornets and a thud of drums, the Pagi pushed downwards to engage them. She cast a swift glance towards the farmhouse, and understood immediately the source of Moran's terror. For Carin was powering towards them in great springs and leaps, her trident raised in one hand and

... Muna covered her eyes. Had she seen that? Was her own mind now hovering on the very brink of sanity? Had the Pagi driven her mad?

She forced herself to look once more. Still, Moran and Vito screamed at Andre, and still she refused to run. And still Carin raced down the valley. But this was not the Carin who had borne Hori on her shoulders, nor even the Carin who had tracked them with such skill through the forest. Now she ran naked, creepers writhing about her stomach and legs, her skin the shade of bark, her eyes the verdant green of the maze, as if it had somehow mingled with her blood before spitting her out.

The Pagi and Ahi halted their descents, a stillness embracing the valley as she came screaming and howling amongst them. And Andre suddenly broke and ran, tearing away in a chaotic spin of arms and legs, but it was too late. It was just too late. Carin was upon her, striking the butt of her trident across Andre's back, felling her with a sudden blow. Moran lunged at her sister, Vito clinging to Carin's arm, but she brushed them off with savage strength.

Clearly winded and in pain, Andre clawed her way through the grass, Carin looming over her. Again Moran ran, this time throwing herself between Andre and her sister. The trident flashed against the sun's light. Muna closed her eyes. Someone was begging in Pagesese, there was a sudden scream. She found herself buried in Vito's arms, heard him say, over and over, "No! No!"

There was a roar, the splash of steps as someone charged through the river. And when she opened her eyes, Carin was running, howling and unarmed towards the Pagi, only to be brought down in a hail of arrows, her arms splayed as she fell. Grief-wracked, Moran knelt, rocking on the ground, her arms crossed before her face. And Andre lay beside her, her hands crimsoned with her own blood, Carin's trident plunged to its hilt below her chest.

PART NINE: CHAPTER TWO
FIRE FOR BLOOD

"Ne mi zostalo, Andre. Ne mi zostalo." Gripped with grief and still on her knees, Moran stroked Andre's hair as the girl's groans grew fainter. Vito knelt beside her, his face buried in his hands.

The two armies had resumed their descents, briefly distracted by those few, brutal moments in which Carin had wrought such suffering. But now she was dead and Andre dying, and so they cascaded downwards to the valley floor in a chaos of Ahi warriors and Pagi knights, of trumpet blares, battle cries and oaths sworn to maim, kill, and destroy.

"Mio serel, Andre." Dazed, his sun-scorched face now wet with tears, Vito stumbled to his feet and seized the trident, dragging it from Andre's pain-wracked body. Her scream was fierce. She bucked, her fingers clutching uselessly at the blades of grass as blood wept across her shirt. Sliding his arms beneath her, Vito raised her tenderly and bore her back to the hollow to lie beside Hori.

It were as if Muna had seen everything through a haze, as if this were a story she might tell Hori to while away the time - a tale she could twist and change to suit her mood, to entertain or please at will. But that distance from reality, that cloudiness through which she had seen such terrible things, she knew it for what it truly was. It was a wall behind which she hid as she struggled to keep her mind intact. And soon it would crack, break, shatter into a thousand pieces to leave her naked and alone.

Moran continued to sit rooted to the ground, Andre's blood soaking into the torn plaid of her dress. Beside her, the Paga's satchel lay discarded. Muna picked it up, wondering at its weight and the thrill of magic which seared her fingers' ends when she touched it.

Pale of face, her eyes tear-glazed and red, Moran looked up at Muna who offered her a hand. "The Ahi are here, Moran. So are the Pagi. We must protect Hori and Andre as best we can."

Moran stared at her for a moment. Then she rose, allowing Muna to guide her from the river bank just as the vanguard of both armies collided to the screaming and

thrashing of wounded horses and the ring of steel on iron. A release of arrows sliced the air to shreds.

The river's silty reek mingled with the odours of blood and earth. Muna curled an arm around Moran's waist, dragging her beneath the hollow's roof of roots. A string of horses vaulted over them, sand, clay and water spraying out beneath their hooves.

The earth shook with sudden violence, threatening to give way beneath the weight of warriors and their mounts. Muna pulled Hori close, sensing the inconstant rise and fall of his chest against her own. His skin was hot and feverish to the touch, his clothes drenched with sweat. Moran lay beside Andre, one arm curled around her in a lover's embrace, while Vito sat with Carin's trident stretched across his knees.

Boots blocked the light. They were here. There was to be no more hiding.

"Give me that." Muna snatched the trident from Vito's hands, rose and clawed her way back outside.

They had surrounded the hollow: a tight crescent of horsemen. Sun streamed into her eyes and she saw them only as a line of dark shades. Muna planted the butt end of the trident into the earth before her. "You can't have him."

"He's not yours to keep, Muna."

"Give him up and end all of this."

"It won't end." Her fingers curled around Carin's weapon. "You'll destroy them all - Pagi, Ruach. And when they're gone, you'll use him upon each other. It will never end."

The battle raged on, but it seemed far away: all time and space condensed into this single moment. A horse pawed the ground and snorted. Behind her, Vito emerged from the hollow, blinking into the sunlight. She looked to him and he nodded, his eyes thick with sorrow. Andre was dead. The world still turned, but its axis had changed.

With a hoarse howl of grief, Vito leapt at one of the Ahi, knocking him from his horse and dragging him to the ground before the man had chance to raise his axe. They rolled down the bank, Vito throwing furious punches at the warrior's tattooed face and chest as several of his comrades leapt to his aid.

"No!" Muna hurled the trident at a naked back. It hit home. The Ahi howled as he went down, the weapon's teeth piercing his spine. Vito staggered from the river which frothed red, his victim's body face down in the water. Running head long into another warrior, he wrested the man's spear from him. Three more Ahi moved in armed with

axe, knife and battle hammer. His face streaked with filth and blood, Vito waited, his body shaking as he breathed, the spear levelled at the enemy.

The horsemen encircled Muna ever closer. Now bereft of the trident, she edged back towards the hollow, dimly aware of Vito engaging his assailants: of shouts thrown and the ring of blades. The mounts obscured her view and she could see nothing. From behind came the dry rattle of her brother's breaths as he fought to live. "You can't have him," she whispered through her tears.

With the grimmest ghost of a smile an Ahi slid from his horse, his chest a wild whirl of signs and symbols: of hawks and vultures, lions and wolves, storm clouds and fire mountains, a hundred human faces etched across his cheeks, his chin and forehead. The outer roots of the hollow bit into her back. She shuddered.

"Muna..." he raised his hand and she flinched.

"Muna..." the hand cupped her face, resting beneath her chin. "You were misguided. Brave, I can see that. But wrong. So very wrong. The Firefarer belongs to his people, not to his family."

All strength now at an ebb, she pushed his hand away. He frowned, his eyes hardened, and then he hit her. As she fell she saw him stoop, pass beneath the bank and reach inside the hollow. Blood leaked in a thin trail from her upper lip. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, vaguely wondering if Vito were still alive, or whether Moran's grief had killed her too. And from deep, deep within, her father's words came back to her, uttered with such clarity that she believed him beside her. She twisted around, confused, searching for him, but of course he wasn't there. And again, his voice. *You see what this is, Muna. Control it.*

"How? How am I to control it?"

There was no reply. She watched the Ahi emerge from the hollow, bearing her brother aloft.

Hori appeared to struggle, his thin limbs catching at the air, but his head lolled to one side, his eyes remained closed and his skin was somehow paler, almost translucent as they held him up to the light. The Ahi before him dropped to their knees and a whisper carried on the wind: "Firefarer." As word rippled out onto the battlefield the warring slowed, some of the Ahi pausing only to be cut down by the Pagi who froze in turn, paralysed with fear.

At last silence hung on the air, the only sound that of the morning breeze whipping the grass lands. The eyes of the world itself seemed turned towards the figure of this

frail boy hanging limply in the Ahi's arms. "Firefarer, our enemies are here," the warrior called, his words echoing around the valley. "Take these Pagi lands for us. Destroy them."

Aware of Erland's voice once more, Muna listened to the wind. His words carried faintly, as if reaching her across time: *you see what this is*. She tried to rise, but hands forced her down.

Something was prising her apart, and it was not grief. She was aware of a heat, a heat she now knew she had always carried within: a heat which ignited at the very core of her being. She felt it unfurl and spread, watching with dispassion as her brother opened his eyes which flickered with flame. Something burned beneath his skin: fire for blood coursing through his veins. Spasms contorted the child's weak frame and then he stiffened. The Ahi's bold stare grew fiercer, and he raised the boy higher above his head. Some of the Pagi turned and fled the field. Others scrambled over the bodies of the slain, clawing their way to safety.

Hori was incandescent, his skin a rippling surge of colour: amber, ochre and then scarlet, each shade brighter than the last. The Ahi beat out victory on their drums, laughing at the Pagi as they ran, loosing arrows at will into the departing, undefended backs of the enemy.

Another vicious spasm wracked the boy's body, fissures scarring his skin like the hardened crust of lava splitting over molten magma. That was when the Ahi warrior began to scream. Muna knew what was happening. The agony of holding such heat had become too great. He shook himself free of the boy, his own hands glowing, burning; fire creeping up his arms. Roaring with pain, he ran towards the river but it was too late. As his skin broke apart, flames shot out from between the cracks and he crashed to his knees, Ahi fleeing from him in their horror.

Muna reached for her brother, crawling towards him, aware of those jubilant cheers transformed to groans, of the ensuing confusion, of celebration morphing into dread. For now Hori's fire ebbed and waned, the colour left his half-charred body, and he was just a small child: lifeless, lying upon the ground, his eyes closed as if in sleep.

She lay beside him and placed her ear to his lips, but felt no breath.

"Hori!" She shook him, but he would not stir. "Hori!"

She was aware of someone crouching next to her - someone whose hands were slippery with blood as he put fingers to the boy's thin wrist. "Umata," he said in Pagese.

Muna stared at Vito, refusing to understand. He shook his head. "Umata," he said again.

She continued to stare. At last, the word sank home and she nodded. "Umata," she whispered, putting her lips to Hori's forehead. "When you see our parents, little brother, tell them I'm sorry. But now I see what this is. And I can no longer control it."

PART NINE: CHAPTER THREE
THE FIREFARER

She stood on the battle field, aware of a sudden communing of the winds. They teased and whipped her hair, plucked at her dress, danced in a violent gyre about her body. She inhaled the air, scenting the entire world: the bitter tang of the sea, the dry hot dust of deserts, the mist of the lowlands and the foul stench of distant cities.

She observed the battlefield with heightened sight - with a vision which penetrated the bodies and minds of men and women, which saw through the clouds to the stars, which took in lands far beyond the valley, stretching back across the Pagi, the Harar mountains and the Angust straits to the Ahi and the source of her power - the fire mountain.

And words carried to her in a jumbled rush. Words in Ahi, in Pagesese, Ruach, and in languages which she could not even recognise. She caught the corrupted speech of the mad, children's first faltering words, the harsh curses of murderers, the flattering praises of Pagi and the desperate pleas of the dying. Assaulted with the weight of words, Muna covered her ears.

Vito stood before her, reaching out as the battle raged on. "Hide!" she heard herself say. But that voice was not her own. It was a voice forged of all other voices. It shook her body to speak. His eyes rounded in fear, and he ran.

Alone now, passing through the maelstrom of battle, she looked down to the earth. A chasm dropped away beneath her feet, and below her was a gaping, glowing void. When she looked up, it were as if she hung suspended amongst the dizzying spin of distant stars. She stared back down at the earth and watched the battle play out beneath her - tiny Pagesese knights astride ant-like steeds streaming down the valley towards miniature Ahi. That made her throw back her head and laugh.

Her laughter rippled out over the field of war. She was amongst them again, she realised, and they were watching her. Some had lain their weapons down and were already running. Others stared, fear-struck, spears and bows dangling uselessly from their hands. Muna took a step forward. Warriors fled from her path. She was at the very heart of the battle now: unharmed, calm, cleansed of her grief. "I know what this is," she told herself. "And I can control it."

When she closed her eyes, she saw Artemisia's remains smoking on the floor of her studio. She recalled the destruction of Pere and the Ahi camp in the forest. And those words came back to her - the words that Ol Lauro had charmed from her as she lay in his arms on a night lit with fireflies. *My parents once told me that I have a gift. A terrible one. They told me that I have more power than my brother. More power than any Firefarer before me. But I did not believe them. It cannot be true. I have never hurt anyone.*

That child on the beach. That had been her, not Hori. She knew that now. She had destroyed their village, had burnt the dunes and the huts, set fire to the sand itself. That was why they had moved from one settlement to the next, avoiding discovery, her parents teaching her to bury her gift so deeply within her own heart that she could not retrieve it.

But that time was over. To know was to control. Without knowledge her power loosed itself, seeping out of her as she slept or slipped unconscious. Now she was awake, alive to it. She was one with the fire mountain. Its molten rivers ran through her veins, her breath was its smoke, her body its scorched rocks and boulders. She was its fire. Muna opened her eyes and released it.

PART TEN: THE SOURCE

PART TEN: CHAPTER ONE

VITO

Something was tickling Vito's upper lip. He stirred, grunting lightly, and brushed it away. Cloying and feverish, his dreams refused to release him.

Andre was calling his name. They were in a high-walled garden. He looked up to gold-rimmed clouds and a sky of kingfisher blue. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of olive trees. Andre moved through the long grass, her hair in plaits as it had once been, the hem of her gown brushing the ground.

Again that light, feathery something brushed across his face. Coughing, spluttering, Vito spat it away, jerking free of sleep. Then he rubbed his hand across his skin and squinted at his palm. It was black with soot.

He was suddenly aware of painful smoke-stung eyes and the stink of ash. His head swam with a bitter rush of memories. There had been a battle and the Ahi girl, Muna, had walked through its very midst. At first, he had thought the death of her young brother had left her crazed, her mind tipping from grief into madness. But then he saw how fire danced beneath her skin, how her eyes were two bright suns, how flames seeped like sweat from her face. And when she opened her mouth and uttered one terrible word, she had spoken with a thousand voices as if the whole world inhabited her body.

That was when he had run. He could remember nothing else.

He could not lie here forever. Eventually he would have to sit up, to see what, if anything, the Firefarer had left in her wake - if she or Moran had survived. Because it was too late for...

Vito rolled queasily onto his side, screwing shut his eyes. There was a hollowness within; his body drained of everything that he had ever known or believed or understood, his existence reduced to an awful, agonising ache and in place of his heart, a hard husk, as if it too had shrivelled up in the heat. With arms curled around his head, Vito drew his knees to his chest and wept like a child.

He had no idea what time it was, where he was, or even if he were still alive. A part of him prayed that the fires had taken him too, had absorbed him into the Mystery. But if that were the case, why did he still think of Andre? Surely the Mystery was pure

knowledge. There was no place there, the brothers had taught him, for happiness or grief or any other human instinct. But here he lay, his hair and skin coated in cinders and the pain of Andre's death so keen it cut like a blade. So, no, he couldn't be dead.

He had cried himself dry. That brought a faint relief - at least there were no more tears to be shed for now. Pushing himself from the ground, his body as stiff and cramped as an old man's, Vito staggered to his feet. Charred fragments floated down through the air like black snow. Frowning, he caught one in his hand, staring at it dumbly. As light as feathers, as fragile as ancient parchment it fell apart, crumbling between his fingers and slipping to the ground. He looked up to a silent storm of blackened shreds spiralling downwards, coating his hair, his clothing. They collected in small heaps amongst the grass, nestled on the branches of trees, the river now running black with ash. As far as he could see, the valley resembled the cold grate of a fireplace with palls of smoke wafting like low lying clouds and not a person in sight: not a voice, not a groan or a whisper, the Pagi and Ahi reduced to dust.

Kicking through the ashes, he stumbled over sword hilts and axe heads, while the steel rings of charred harnesses or armour clinked beneath his boots: the only proof that two great armies had, on a sunlit morning, torn each other apart with all the ferocity of savage dogs. But that morning was now gone, and with it the world as he had known it. He had no idea of the time: a few straggling rays of sunshine pierced the smoke-choked air, but whether it were afternoon or evening, he couldn't tell.

Nor was there any sign of Muna. Perhaps, he thought wearily, in expending such raw power, she had destroyed herself. Her face came to him then - not as she had been, as the Firefarer reducing a battlefield to dust - but as a young woman, her skin streaked with the filth of the road, her slender limbs trembling with exhaustion. He suspected that beneath the ragged clothing and the dirt, she had been beautiful.

And her love for her brother...to the end, she had defended him, protected him, risked her life when all the time it had been her dark gift the Ahi and Pagi had unwittingly sought. How could she have borne such destruction within and not have known? And what a curse to carry - the knowledge that she had taken so much life. How would she even survive it?

Vito picked his way back across the field of war to the stream. He crossed it, splashing his hair and face as he went. Resting on the opposite bank, he cupped water in his hand and raised it to his lips. In spite of his dry mouth and parched throat, he still tasted his own blood. Because he too, he remembered, had stolen life. After

Andre's death, overcome by rage and grief, he had wanted to do nothing more than inflict pain on others. He remembered holding the young warrior down below the surface, pummeling his face and body, the waters running red as the man weakened and sank. What did that make him? Worse than Muna - for she had not chosen to carry fire. But he, a former monk, had beaten men to death in the streets of Animum. And here in this lonely valley he had taken life to ease his own loss. That, he decided, was proof enough of the bond he shared with Ol Terenzo. They were vengeful in their grief. Both shared the same bad blood.

It was time to say goodbye. He had promised himself that he must do so. He owed it to her. She had led him astray - he smiled weakly at that thought. Both in action as in belief she had led him far, far from home, with her thieving and her barbed words and her immoral Pageese ways. So far astray in fact that he was no longer the naive young zealot, keen to put the world straight, to set it right, to preach and to convert. She had taught him that there was much to be unlearned about the world, much to be questioned. But at the end, it had been Moran's name on her lips as she died. Not...not his. Fearful of breaking down once again he rose, wiped wet hands upon the remains of his shirt, and made his way back to the hollow.

He laid two fingers to Moran's neck, sensing the faint beat of a pulse. She was asleep then, or unconscious, resting with one arm still coiled around her lover's body. Either way, it would be a cruelty to revive her. To have found and lost again so soon - the pain must be unbearable. At least he had spent the last days in Andre's company, wandering country roads and tracks as she read to him from *The People of the Pagi*, convinced that this was where her treasure lay. A part of him had secretly hoped the book was false - that this would be just another swathe of green pastures. Then he would have Andre to himself and perhaps in time she would learn to forget Moran, perhaps even to see him with a lover's eyes.

But the closer they had drawn to the valley the more he felt in his heart that this was the end of their journey. And when at last he spotted Moran beside the river on that evening heavy with heat, he knew that Andre was home in a way that he would never be. He had left them together, maintaining a lonely vigil at the water's edge, the dusk brewing and with it the knowledge that Ol Terenzo's army was not far behind.

Andre looked so peaceful. Had it not been for the blood fanning out across her shirt, for the three wounds just below her heart, he could have thought her asleep. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted slightly as if she might speak at any moment.

"I love you," he said. The words slipped out before he was even aware of them. And once out, they could not be unsaid.

Her lips were cold when he kissed them. Grief welled within like a river in flood, threatening to break its banks. Vito rested with his back to the hollow's earthy wall, his face cupped between his hands and stared at her. She had somehow seemed less of a physical being in those few final days, more spirit than human, perhaps already hovering on the borderlands between life and death.

That had been Ol Terenzo's doing, he thought with eager bitterness. With the loss of her family, a piece of Andre had also gone. But his brother would pay for that - for all the poison he had spread, for all the malice he had stored since their parents' death. He would pay for the destruction of Fons, the persecution of the Ruach, for the deaths of the Libarum dukes and for the morning's slaughter. At that moment, Vito decided he would end his brother's life.

Her satchel still lay beside the entrance to the hollow, dropped in haste by Muna. Vito grimaced as he reached for it, his muscles raw, stiff and tired. It were almost as if she had punished herself, bearing that book around the country, for what reason he could not imagine. What purpose had it served? After all, its warning of her family's deaths had come too late. Perhaps he ought to throw it to the flames too, revolting piece of Page-se magic that it was.

Vito unbuckled the bag and drew out *The People of The Pagi*. It seemed innocent enough, bound in a cover of blue leather, the title ingrained in a dull gold font. He examined the first pages with their maps of the Pagi electorates and duchies, the Angust Straits and the Source Isles and the lands of the Ahi - the fire mountain pulsing at their midst. Then he turned to the first chapter and almost dropped the book in shock.

Sweat broke across Vito's brow. He closed the book and opened it again, praying that what he had just read was the product of his own half-delirious imagination. But the words were still there:

When Vito checked the dovecote that morning, he was astonished to find two birds missing.

Perhaps that was a different Vito. Perhaps the world was populated by thousands of Vitos, and perhaps their fates were not the same as his. Perhaps, at another time and in another place he still worked at Fons, tending to his doves and prayers. He read on, hoping for some twist in the story, some detail which would make everything change.

But this Vito's doves had been stolen too, he read - stolen by a mysterious girl who wore a jacket of kingfisher blue.

His hands now trembling, barely able to hold the book, he read on. Ahi were surrounding the monastery, raising it to the ground with fire and axe. Vito was running with the girl. She called herself...no. She called herself Andre.

But how...how could Andre have carried this with her and not have known? Had she, in reading it, fallen under its spell? Had she, not knowing the book's power, chosen to enact her own story until it led her to her death? Or had her own thoughts in some way fed *The People of the Pagi*: her desires or fears transformed to action and sealed forever in ink and on vellum, recorded by some invisible narrator?

Perhaps, if he read more, he would find out. The tale turned, and now he followed Moran and Carin as they faced the Golach and set out on their mission to find the Firefarer. And then he was back at the gates of Animum with Andre, and so the story unfolded and ensnared, laying all their decisions before him, merging mere chance with intention until at last they arrived back in the valley, the two armies destroyed and Andre dead.

The day had passed in reading: the light was fading. But if *The People of the Pagi* had led them so far, perhaps its story continued into the future, into days which had not yet come to pass. Perhaps, in reading on, he would learn what he must do - how he could avenge his brother's crimes, find his place in a world which he no longer recognised.

There was nothing. The remaining pages were yellow and time-stained, but they were blank. A sob caught in Vito's throat. He flicked through the empty leaves of parchment. Nothing - there was no end, no final words which might offer some meaning, some moral, some sudden hopeful twist. But as he turned the very last leaf, he noticed a sentence scrawled in a very different hand across the base of the page:

Death is but a locked door. And I am the key.

He stared at the sentence. He read it from left to right, and back again. He coaxed anagrams from its letters, delivered it aloud as if it were a spell or prayer. Nothing. It did not make sense.

And beside him, Moran groaned and stirred awake.

PART TEN: CHAPTER TWO

MORAN

If there is a hell, then this is it.

Moran would have done anything - anything not to waken. She would have surrendered to Muna's fire. She would have endured an eternity of Carin's reproof. But it seemed as if she were to be the last butt of death's sick joke. For here she still lay, one arm stretched around Andre's body, outsurviving the Ahi, the Pagi, perhaps even the Firefarer herself.

And yet...she raised her head, peering through the smoke and haze of the hollow. She was not alone. Vito sat at Andre's side, reading. Reading! At such a time and in such a place. Moran stifled a high, hysterical laugh. Famished and thirsty, her body bruised, her clothing torn and stained with Andre's blood, she dragged herself upright.

"How can you read, Vito?" The words cracked in her parched, dry throat.

"Moran?" He raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot and ringed with shadow. His hands shook. "Moran, I think I understand."

"Understand what?"

He rose, crouched down at her side and rested his book across her legs. "Read." His finger trailed beneath two sentences scrawled in Pagine across the base of a timeworn page. She stared down, straining against the grainy light, but her eyes refused to focus.

"I...I can't." She pushed it away.

"I'll read it for you then, Moran. It says: 'Death is but a locked door. And I am the key.'"

She stared at him. "What book is this?"

"*The People of the Pagi*. She took it from her parents' library. The book is magic."

"I know." Poor, naive Andre. Why? Why of all those books had she chosen this one, unaware of its power?

"You've heard of it?"

Moran drew her knees up to her chest and hugged her arms around them. "My father told me of it once. There are few books like it. It has its own spirit. It feeds upon its readers' thoughts, their memories, their fears and hopes."

"So do you mean that if Andre feared for her family, it could have read and realised her nightmares?"

"It's possible. Her memories, her emotions and her imagination would have fed its stories. And its stories in turn would have shaped her reality. The book is...it is a prophecy which fulfils itself. In destroying, it creates."

"And could it give back what it has taken?"

Though it was not cold, she shivered.

"Moran, I asked you..."

"Yes. I heard you, Vito." She turned to him. His face was gaunt, his hair and beard matted, but a faint hope had seeded in his eyes. "Vito, what you speak of is Pagese blasphemy."

"I am a Paga."

"Andre told me you are a monk."

"I was. But now I know that I am a Paga. She taught me that. She and...one other." He frowned, his face clouding. Moran knew better than to ask what he meant. Let him keep a few sorrows to himself. She had enough of her own.

She remembered something then - something dredged from her memories of the morning's horrors. Something Andre had whispered as she lay dying.

"She wanted me to give you something. She asked me...it's in her satchel."

He handed her the bag. Moran took a deep breath and then plunged her hand inside, refusing to look. Her fingers brushed against some coils, soft like strands of silken rope. And then she felt a cold disc of metal against her skin and drew it out.

In spite of the descending darkness, the seal of Libarum shone with its own gleaming light. On one side, she made out the duchy's crest - an unrolled scroll. She turned it over in the palm of her hand. Its reverse glittered with the engraving of the Libarum palace nestling amongst its foothills. Tears glazed her eyes and the image weakened and dissolved. "Here. Take it."

"What is it?" Vito held it up. It illuminated the hollow like a candle.

"She told me what Ol Terenzo did to her family, Vito. Andre was the last of the Libara."

"But her cousin, Dario?"

Moran snorted in indignation. "Do you honestly think she would pass the dukedom on to him?"

"And do *you* honestly think I can walk into Libarum with a strip of metal and proclaim myself their Duke? Please, Moran. They'd run me out of town!"

"Not if you tell them who has the other seals."

"What do you mean?"

She sighed. "Vito, they all had seals - her mother, father, Estachien. And now who's got them?"

In spite of the dirt, the sunburn and the dried blood, he paled. "Ol Terenzo?"

"Of course. Libarum won't rest easy knowing that."

He studied the seal again, twisting it between his fingers, passing it from one palm to the other. "I can't take it." He forced it back into her hands.

"You have to! She wanted you to have it."

"But what about you?"

"I'm a Ruach, not a Paga. And it's time for me to return to my people...to their justice." That last word rang with bitterness. "If they give me a chance, I can explain to them what happened here. Perhaps then, the Golach will understand. If we are to take back our lands, we will do it alone. The Firefarer has her own path to follow."

He looked at her sharply. "Is she still alive?"

"I don't know. I will wait here for her to see if she returns. You should be on your own way, Vito. It's a long journey North." She held out the seal. He reached for it, hesitated and then at last he took it.

"If there's no other way."

"There isn't."

"Then at least let me take *The People of the Pagi*."

That satchel. The book. It was all that remained of Andre. But then, how could she expect to stumble back into the caves at Mearah with a work of Pagesese magic tucked beneath her arm? "Take it," she said. "But Vito, don't trust it. And don't let it trick you. I loved her. I love her..." her voice broke and she fought to steady it. "I hope to see her again. But the spirits have their realm, we have ours. And some doors should remain locked."

He inclined his head as if considering this possibility, and then nodded. "Very well."

But it was not a promise. And as he rose at last to leave, uneasiness swirled like bitter bile in the seat of her stomach.

Vito leant forward and kissed her forehead. "I loved her too."

Startled, Moran looked up, but he had already turned and was ducking beneath the low roof of the hollow, Andre's satchel slung across his shoulder. She watched him go, his figure diminishing and then disappearing altogether as he crossed the stream and headed north. It was growing cold: an entire day had now passed and darkness rolled down the valley, the evening's silence broken by the hiss of crickets and the sharp screech of an owl.

"Moran!"

She could not have said from where the voice came, but she knew immediately that it was Andre who had spoken. Moran forced herself to look at the girl's body. She still lay, alabaster pale and lifeless as marble.

"Fool!" Moran cursed herself. Was madness now creeping in to join the grief?

"Moran!"

Again? Moran rose dizzily and forced her way outside. That hollow was now a tomb. And what good had ever come from the living making their home amongst the dead? She shivered, wrapping her arms around her waist as the wind whispered through the grasslands. That must have been it: the air's sigh. Nothing more.

"Moran! Speak to me!"

Moran shook her head to rid it of the voice and put her hands to her ears. Kneeling beside the stream she drank, grateful for the fluid chill of water as it slid towards her stomach. She was overwrought, that was all. She needed to leave this death-ridden valley, to eat, to sleep for a long, long time. This was just a momentary madness.

Her thirst quenched, she splashed water across her face and rested with her back to the bank. But a memory plagued her thoughts: a memory of the journey she had shared with Carin as they sought the Firefarer. She pushed it aside. It was impossible. She was cursed, forsaken. Carin had reminded her of that enough times. So, even, had her parents. It could not be.

Don't you ever listen to the spirits, girl? The old woman had peered keenly into her face, she remembered, her eyes hard and bright.

I can't...I can't see them. I can't hear them.

You will, child. One day you will hear them. It will cost you dearly, but you will hear them all. The old woman had edged towards her: wheezing, panting with age. *She looks for you, Moran. She searches for you everywhere.*

Was it possible? After so many years an outcast, a freak, a Ruach in no more than name, was this the sacrifice of which the old woman had spoken?

"On sea, on land, through the air or amongst the smoke and fire of hell, I will search for you."

The words were whispered in her ear, this time. Hot breath flickered across her skin. She turned to catch whoever or whatever had spoken. But she was alone. The wind still sobbed down the valley and the dusk was punctured by a single star.

She stood. "Andre?" she called. Nothing. "Andre?"

No. This was madness. She sank back to the ground and howled and screamed against the heartless grasslands, against Carin for a love so mad it had spawned hatred, against Ol Terenzo and the Pagi for their greed, and against the Ruach: so blinded by their lust for revenge.

"Moran, please. Don't cry." The voice called from every corner of the valley. It was the sound of grass stalks swaying on the shifting winds. The water bore it as it rippled over the stream bed. It was whispered on the air. She even sensed it in the dying heat of the ashes.

"Andre," she raised her head, her face drenched with tears. "Andre, where are you?"

"I...I don't know. I can see you. But it's as if there were a screen of smoky glass between us, Moran. You're so far away."

"I'll join you!"

"No!" Andre's voice veered into a scream. The branches of the cypress waved and thrashed as if someone were shaking them in anger. "No!" She repeated. "You might never find me again. I feel quite...quite lost."

"Are you in pain, Andre?" Tears now rolling down her face, Moran walked over to the grove but the trees were now still. All was calm once more.

"No. That's gone. I feel...nothing."

"And are you alone?"

There was silence. A bat flickered through the leaves. Ash swirled about her feet, picked up on the breeze.

"No." Andre said at last. "I think there are others here with me. The boy - Muna's brother. He's crying for her, I can hear him. And...Moran, Carin is somewhere. I sense her. I sense her fury."

"Oh, Andre, why didn't you run? I begged you."

There was no reply. The last lines of light faded on the horizon. She craned back her neck and peered up at a fine sliver of moon as it slipped into view.

"I'm here, Moran." Andre's voice reached her again, fainter this time. "I'm always here."

On the opposite bank, grasses rustled, parted by the faintest of footfalls. Her heart quickened and she stole a breath, not knowing who, or what, she expected to see.

"Moran?"

Trembling, Moran turned. That wasn't Andre now calling to her across the river. It was Muna.

PART TEN: CHAPTER THREE

MUNA

She barely recognised Moran. The Ruach woman's face was smudged with soot and streaked with tears. Her dress hung limply from her shoulders: a worn, threadbare rag.

"I can't find him, Moran."

Trembling, Moran edged closer. *She's afraid of me*, Muna thought, surrendering to a sudden rush of shame. "Moran, it's alright. It's all over. I...I'm not going to hurt you."

Moran's dry, cracked lips broke into the ghastly remnant of a smile. "I'm beyond that, Muna."

"I know." She remembered Andre bleeding out, Moran pleading with her to live. That had been just one of three deaths she could not claim. Just three. "I'm sorry."

Moran watched her warily. Then, hitching up the remains of her dress, she splashed across the stream. They faced each other at last, Moran's eyes retaining a trace of fear. Never in her life had Muna craved the closeness of another human being as she now did. Just the simple truth of skin against skin. But as she reached for Moran, the Ruach woman stepped away.

"Moran, please."

"What do you want, Muna? You knew. You carried this with you all the time. You hid behind Hori."

"No! Don't say such things, Moran. I didn't know. It was buried so deeply within me that...I didn't know."

"How could you not? Don't lie, Muna. You didn't want to believe it. There's a difference."

"I'm not a liar!"

"You are. You lied to yourself!"

She hadn't lied. That was not fair of Moran. How could *she* know what it meant to carry the shameful weight of such destructive power?

Its release had left her empty, hollow, sucked dry of emotion. Now, like blood swelling through cramped limbs, feelings returned to her. Confusion, horror, grief were the first to strike. But with them came a sense of power, of potency. It clung to her, wrapped itself around her, refused to release her. And once it had taken hold, she realised that she had always known it.

She no longer felt hungry or thirsty, tired or weak. It were as if the flames had consumed such physical needs - for now, at least. The day had passed in sleep; she had woken as the sun set, far from the field of battle. And then had begun her search for Hori, for his body. But all she found was ash.

"I can't find him," she whispered. "Perhaps he's still alive." Perhaps he had merely passed out, sick and exhausted. Perhaps he was searching for her too: wandering the valley, calling her name. But then she saw the pity in Moran's gaze and knew her hope to be false.

"Muna," Moran wound her arms around Muna's shoulders, drawing her close. Having craved the embrace of another human being for so long, Muna clung to Moran, burying her face against her shoulder. "Muna, Hori is dead."

"How do you know?" she whispered.

"I...I buried him."

She knew it was a lie. But it was intended to comfort, not to hurt. And for that, she was grateful. "Where?"

"Beneath the cypress." Moran took her hand and led her towards the river. They sat down together and Muna removed her boots, cold water lapping at her feet. Moran moistened a stretch of her dress and then put it to Muna's face. She flinched.

"Muna, please. You were... you are so beautiful beneath all that ash."

"Beneath all that ash, Moran, I'm a monster."

"No. No that's not true. You are a channel, Muna. A living portal. I read, long ago, of such phenomena. I believe you may not be alone. And I also believe that you can learn to control your gift." She dabbed at Muna's forehead with the wet plaid. This time, Muna did not resist.

"But how can I control it? My parents taught me to suppress it. I remember..."

"What did they tell you, Muna?"

In the darkness she made out the curls of Moran's hair, the pale limits of her skin. She sensed the other woman's warmth. The moon's reflection broke and fragmented on the rippling surface of the river.

"It happened only once before. I was...perhaps two years old, maybe three. Something must have angered me or made me afraid. I destroyed our village. Nothing remained." She swallowed hard, the destruction of that day now realised afresh when she spoke of it. She remembered the screaming villagers and squalling gulls, her father lowering her into the canoe, Koka climbing in and their mad, frantic race to safety.

"We fled from one village to the next. They did everything to hide me from harm, knowing that the elders would recognise my power for what it was, that they would use me as their weapon. And so they persuaded me to hide it even from myself. They taught me that it had all been a dream, nothing more. And after some time, I believed them." Now she understood why she had never accompanied her mother on raids amongst the Pagi. Why she bore no tattoos, the signature of a warrior. Her mother had done everything to ensure that Muna never experienced the rage or fear of battle. While other boys and girls her age had earned their ink, she had been left at home, staring out to sea and dreaming of adventure. Their island, the isle of their ancestors had been almost a prison for her, with its plunging cliffs and the endless roar of the waves. But for Erland and Koka she realised, it must have been a haven, cut off from threat by the endless water.

"But what about Hori?" Moran broke through her thoughts. "Why did people believe him to be the Firefarer? From what I have read, there can only be one in a generation, if at all."

Poor Hori. Unable to suppress his gift, as she had done. She remembered her parents speaking one night, when they thought her asleep. The fire ebbing in the grate, and Hori snoring soundly at her side. *Could her power have remained within me, Erland? After she was born, could some traces of it have stayed inside me?*

"He was not meant to be a Firefarer. As you said, there can be only one. But once I heard my mother tell my father that Hori had been born of fire. What she meant was that my gift had overflowed. It carried so much force that it had tainted her womb. I remember Hori's birth. I was nine years old then. My father held him up to the sky, rejoicing in his new son. His limbs were stained with dark patches, as if they had been singed. And, although the Ahi pride themselves in having many children, my parents had no more. I think they were too afraid."

The night air was chill. She drew closer to Moran, grateful for her warmth. "I don't want this power, Moran," she whispered. "I never asked for it. I have laid waste an

entire field of war. I slaughtered, destroyed - how many families now are missing fathers, mothers...as I did. I know what it's like. I can't live with this awful, awful thing inside me."

"Muna, I don't know what to tell you." Moran cupped Muna's chin in her hand and kissed her forehead. "Perhaps there is a way of learning to channel your power, of truly mastering it. Maybe it is possible to quench your fires forever. But I don't think you will find the answers to your questions here, amongst the Pagi. They will only seek to use you, to abuse you, as they sought Hori."

"And so where must I go?"

"Muna, I can't say for certain. But I believe that if you wish to understand who you are, you must return to your source - to the fire mountain itself. You must go back to your people, as I am going back to mine."

"You're returning to the Ruach? They'll destroy you!"

Moran sighed. "It's possible. But perhaps they are ready to learn that there is another way. We lived alongside the Pagi for millennia. I believe we will do so again. But that will require our strength. And our forgiveness. If the world were made of Carins and Ol Terenzos alone, I would say such union were impossible. But I believe that we are capable of more, much more than hatred. And I will try to teach them that."

"And Vito?" *Pralo*, he had said to her. *Friend*. His eyes had been red from weeping, his hair tangled, his face dirty and burnt. But he *had* been a friend, she realised that now. When the battle had begun he had fought at her side, desperate in his grief for Andre. Perhaps she would not need to make the journey to the fire mountain alone. She would feel safe if Vito were with her. He could teach her Pagesese, she would learn quickly. She was certain of it.

"He had his own path to follow," Moran said. "Andre left him the seal of Libarum. He has gone north. I persuaded him. If my people are to reconcile with the Pagi, we will need allies amongst them."

"So I am alone." She picked up a stone from the bank and hurled it into the river. It hit the surface somewhere with a brief splash. She imagined ripples spreading out across the water.

"We are here, Muna. Vito and I. Don't forget that. One day, you'll come back to us. I'm sure of it."

Muna frowned into the darkness. Moran was so certain. So certain that, in spite of all the suffering and death, in spite of all the destruction, the world could be rebuilt. Life could begin afresh and sing to a new melody.

"You think it's possible, Moran? You think that we can heal and be healed, after all of this?"

"I don't know." The Ruach woman's voice was soft and low. "But I believe we should at least try."

They rose together. Muna sensed rather than saw the hills to the west: hills down which, that very morning, thousands of her own people had streamed like water as they rode to war. "Just over those hills," she said. "The sea. It's where I began...my home."

"So return to it. You have Hieronimo's map to guide you. My way lies north. Goodbye, Muna." Moran pulled her close in a sudden, fierce embrace. "Return to your source. And once you've found it, return to us."

"I will."

Muna tugged on her boots, watching as Moran headed back up the valley, the moon lighting her path. And as she went, it seemed as if she spoke to someone. But that was impossible. There was no one left. They were alone.

"Goodbye, brother. Forgive me." She stood, listening. Nothing. Just a quickening of the night breeze amongst the trees. The hills waited, and then the sea. And beyond them the searing, fluid source of her power. Muna inhaled the air, rich with the scents of silty water, of fertile earth and of smoke. She was going home.

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