

Chapter One

For the first hour after they escaped Onewēre, the sea fought the boat and its fledgling crew as if it was trying to break their resolve and send them fleeing back to land.

But as the craft finally found its centre of gravity and settled into the rollicking motion of the swell, Maryam relaxed back against the carved aft-rail and took in the enormity of what they'd done. Never in known history, old Hushai had said, had anyone successfully escaped the Apostles' tight controls. Yet here they were — four disparate travellers, two brown Blessed Sisters, two white Apostles — heading off across the ocean with only scrappy vestiges of faith and this untested sailing craft to aid their flight.

Poor Ruth, so reluctant to set forth, clung miserably to the side railing and purged streams of bitter bile into the sea. Yet not once since they'd crossed the reef that separated their small island home from this dark sea had her lips stopped forming the protective incantations of her prayers. She feared they sailed into nothingness, a world destroyed by the Lord when He sent forth his punishing wrath.

Maryam longed to comfort her, but she knew the time was not yet right — nothing she could say now would allay Ruth's fears. Her friend must find a place of peace within herself if she was to survive this reckless voyage. And if that peace was found through prayer, then Maryam was pleased for her, even if she could not find the same accommodation for Him in her own heart.

Joseph adjusted the position of the tiller and hunkered down next to Maryam, briefly freeing up his left hand to wrap his arm around her shoulders with a reassuring squeeze. 'Are you all right?'

She turned to him, brushing streaming lengths of hair from her eyes, and nodded. 'Are you?'

His short dismissive laugh was scooped up by the wind and carried off into the night. 'I feel like I'm in a crazy dream — that any moment now I'll wake up strapped to that bed again and realise my uncle Joshua has unearthed our plan.'

Lazarus, who had earlier retreated to the sheltered canopy that spanned the two hulls of the boat, now poked his head back out into the wind, his fine sand-coloured hair catching the moon's cool light. 'Don't underestimate my father. If he sets his mind to come in search of us, we *will* be caught.'

Ruth groaned, shooting Lazarus a horrified glance before she returned to her prayers.

'Keep your musings to yourself,' Maryam snapped. Her fury at Lazarus's hijacking of their plans seethed in her still. 'Your presence here has put us even

more at risk.' *How dare he?* That he could have treated Ruth so — held a knife to her throat and threatened to use it if they did not let him come — only fuelled her hatred of him. He was cruel and arrogant, already too close in spirit to his controlling father ever to change. *How did they get stuck with him?* If the Lord had wanted to punish her for her wilful disobedience, Lazarus's forced inclusion in their escape plan did the trick.

'You've picked the thorn instead of the flower, Cousin.' Lazarus laughed as he sought out Joseph's eye and jerked his head towards Maryam. 'If I was you I'd watch your back. This one really is a witch.'

'It's *your* back that is still at risk,' Maryam shot back. 'You are not welcome here and if you think that distance from Onewēre will dull our memories and poor opinion of you, think again.'

Beside her, Joseph sighed and dipped down to whisper in her ear. 'Don't waste your energy,' he urged. 'This is a very small and unstable platform on which to conduct an all-out war.'

His reproach stung her, though she knew he was right. This anger sipped on what little strength she had left after the Apostles of the Lamb had taken so much of her blood. Still, she drew away from him.

'I'm *not* a witch.'

Joseph grinned at her, tension playing hide-and-seek behind his eyes. 'Well, I don't know about that. I think you put a spell on me!'

She softened at this, relieved by his lightness of tone. He was still on her side. Even now, she was amazed that Joseph had thrown away his chances for privilege and comfort and chosen, instead, to join her in flight from the Holy City. His kindness shone from him like the miraculous globes that lit the rooms in the great hulk from which they'd run.

She glanced back over her shoulder, scanning the dark horizon for one last glimpse of Onewēre, the only home she'd ever known. But there was nothing now to mark the place they'd come from, merely the lumpy outline where sky met sea — where the stars were swallowed by deep inky darkness and, below, the moonlight fractured on the breaking peaks of swell. They were truly alone out here, perhaps the first to have sailed this route since the immediate aftermath of The Tribulation that consumed the earth. Her heart registered her fear and tension in a jittery dance.

'Are we on course?' she asked, trying to focus on the few small things they could still control.

Joseph flung his head back, pointing to the familiar stars that formed the Maiaki Cross in the southern sky. 'If we keep the Cross aligned to our left throughout

the night, we should be fine.’ He fumbled in his pocket, drawing forth a circular object that he pressed into her palm. ‘Here. This compass shows the direction we’re heading. If we use it with the map, we’re sure to find our way.’

Maryam studied the compass in the wan light of the moon. A delicate arrow-like needle swivelled from a centre point, while around the border of the enclosed face a calibrated measure marked off north, east, south and west. She turned it in her hand, watching as the arrow swung towards an invisible force to starboard of the boat. ‘How does it work?’

‘Give it here!’ Lazarus rushed from the shelter of the canopy and snatched the compass from Maryam’s hand. ‘It has a way of finding north,’ he said, ignoring the fury in Maryam’s eyes. ‘Something to do with magnetic force.’

Maryam turned back to Joseph. ‘But why then did your mother make me study the book of stars?’

‘Back-up,’ Joseph replied. ‘Besides, she thought you needed something to occupy your mind while you waited to escape.’

For a moment Maryam felt outraged, remembering the strain and effort it had taken her to learn the patterns of the stars. She’d been so drained from blood-loss it was difficult to think at all. But perhaps Mother Deborah’s intuition was right — if Maryam hadn’t had to focus her energies on the star guide, she truly would have gone mad with worry that their plan would fail.

Joseph seized the compass back from Lazarus now, returning it safely to his pocket as he called to Ruth. ‘Do you feel up to coming over here? It’s time we talked.’

Ruth bit down on her bottom lip as though damming back her nausea, and nodded. She crawled across the cramped deck space and tucked herself down next to Maryam as Joseph began to speak.

‘If I’ve worked things out correctly from the map, we should be heading straight for Marawa Island, the closest landfall to our own. My father discovered its existence years ago, when he first started planning our escape.’

Lazarus cut in again, seemingly unconcerned that he re-ignited Maryam’s hostility each time he spoke. ‘Now I understand why he would lock himself inside the library for days on end. I thought he was just avoiding Father.’

‘Who cares what you thought,’ Maryam nipped back at him. ‘Let Joseph speak.’

Joseph looked from Maryam to Lazarus and shook his head. ‘Peace now,’ he murmured, tiredness sweeping his pale face. He glanced up to check the angle of the string of feathers flying from the tip of the forward mast, and adjusted the tiller to

ease the twin hulls a fraction more downwind. At once the boat settled into a more comfortable roll.

He began to flesh out the details of the boat's creation for Ruth and Lazarus: how his father Jonah had built it, using sketches from an ancient book. How he had hidden the craft within the sacred cave, desperate that one day he, his wife and son would escape the clutches of his power-hungry brother, the Holy Father Joshua.

'Uncle Jonah and me as well!' Lazarus interrupted. 'I take it they had no plans to return?'

Joseph merely shook his head.

'And you? Do you ever plan to go back?'

Maryam snorted. 'Go back? For what? For your mother to bleed me dry of life? Your father to take my dear friend Ruth here and defile her again?'

Joseph gasped and turned shocked eyes to Ruth 'I had no idea. I'm so sorry,' he said, as though the sin was his and not his uncle's to resolve.

'Don't speak of it again,' Ruth mumbled, firing a resentful glare at Maryam. She swallowed hard, as if struggling past a sea-sick lump inside her throat. 'What's past is past.'

Maryam was not surprised by Ruth's desire to wipe the sins of the Apostles from her mind. Ruth had always been the docile and accepting one; while she, Maryam, was much slower to forgive. Her anger and disgust at what Ruth and she had endured would never abate. They had *believed*; been raised to hold the Holy Fathers up as sacred spokesmen of the Lord. That the Apostles had deceived them both, abused their trust and bodies as if they were nothing more than slaves — than animals — churned around inside her still. She might have escaped the island physically, but the memory of it was etched for ever in her brain. And the fact that Lazarus had forced his way aboard just made it worse. The son of Father Joshua was tainted by his father's blood.

She breathed in deeply, calling on the strong salty scent that rose off the sea to calm her. It was all-pervading, free of any verdant hint of land, and so oxygen-rich she was ambushed by a yawn before returning her attention back to Joseph. 'How long until we reach this place, this Marawa Island?'

Joseph shrugged. 'I think perhaps three or four days.'

Ruth groaned. 'Four whole days?' She was struggling to keep her eyes open, the motion of the boat and the after-effects of their flight from the Holy City now taking their toll.

Maryam, too, felt the lulling call of sleep. She stifled another yawn and shifted to awaken her leaden limbs. 'Then we should plan to sail in shifts, two on, two off, to get some rest.' But no sooner had she spoken than she realised she could hardly pair Lazarus with Ruth. Nor were she and Ruth experienced or strong enough to take on a shift together — they'd need either Joseph or Lazarus on hand to help control the two huge woven sails. The only alternative — to co-operate with Lazarus, to work with him while Joseph and Ruth were sound asleep — filled her with dread. She'd never forget the way he'd dosed that poor female server with the stupefying anga kerea toddy, and most certainly would have abused her had he not been stopped by Brother Mark. Or her own terror at his attempts to overpower her at the pool near Joseph's home. She did not trust him and had no idea how she was going to keep her fear of him at bay.

'You rest now,' she told Joseph, worried he'd taken the most strain during their wild flight across the reef. The killer plague, Te Matee lai, still stalked somewhere inside him, and although the transfusion of her blood to him had slowed its march, she knew his body still was frail. 'And Ruthie, you go rest as well.'

'But that would mean —'

She brushed Joseph's arm with her hand. 'Believe me, I'll call you if I need your help!' Now she turned to Lazarus, all playfulness fading from her voice. 'Just keep away from me. I'll work the tiller; you do the ropes and sails.'

He saluted, mocking her resolve, but quickly scrambled to the place at the prow where the deck between the two hulls narrowed to a thin walkway, only two planks wide, that cantilevered out over the oily black sea. At the walkway's end he nestled against the carved figurehead of a warrior, whose inset shell eyes stared off towards the unfathomable west. Instantly, Maryam felt the in her chest diminish a little.

Joseph and Ruth struggled to their feet and retreated to the shelter that straddled the two sturdy hulls. A dense thatch of pandanus leaves shrouded the tightly lashed bamboo frame, forming a roof and walls to hold out wind and rain — a dry place to sleep and shelter for the stores Joseph and his mother, Deborah, had packed inside.

Maryam shifted into the seat Joseph had vacated, huddling down as she took possession of the tiller for this first night shift. It fought against her, as if wanting to swing the boat around, and she had to lean into it, using her body-weight to hold it firm.

Up to the south, the Maiaki Cross was the only familiar marker in the cloud-rinsed sky. She tried to recall the constellations she'd studied in Mother Deborah's book, as well as the lessons from old Hushai's tales of their ancestors' fabled travels. But she couldn't recognise any other feature in the vast network of stars. What kind

of navigator was she, to sit beneath uma ni borau — her ancestors' great roof of voyaging — and not even recall the simplest of stars?

Yet as she willed her panicked pulse to slow, some of the familiar blueprints of the stars emerged and grew more solid, like the peaks of Onewēre's highest mountains when the mist that cloaked them in the squally months began to clear. There was the crab-like constellation Tairiki off to the north; that hungry shark Te Bakoa, with his gaping mouth and glowering red eye, lurking around the reef of stars in the north-east. And there, flowing between them all like a silted tidal stream, the wash of stars the Apostles called the Milky Way.

That these ancient markers had not altered since time first began, and even now had not deserted her, was somehow soothing. When all else around her was uncertain and unknown, at least she could rely on these shining beacons to guide their way.

Maryam could just make out Ruth and Joseph inside the shelter as they tried to settle on the sleeping mats. Poor Ruth. She was so scared, and so reluctant to take on this voyage, it was impossible for Maryam not to feel responsible for her safety now. For a wild moment she was tempted to push the tiller hard around to head them safely back to land. But then the horrors of the previous weeks returned to her, and she knew the only escape from the Apostles' cruel control lay in fleeing the Holy City and never looking back.

How innocent she and Ruth had once been: to believe they were the special ones — the Lord's Chosen, Blessed Sisters raised to obey the Apostles' stringent Rules and to think of sacrifice as the fulfilment of devotion to a loving Lord. How foolish that thinking seemed, when all the time those same Apostles planned to steal her blood to save themselves from Te Matee lai, all the time proclaiming that it was the Lord, and not the life-blood of the Blessed Sisters, who was protecting them from the plague's harsh grip. As for Ruth, destined to a life of shame, her body used to serve her masters as nothing more than breeding stock... no! No matter what hardships now lay ahead, nothing could be worse than that.

As the night wore on, Maryam fought the ever-growing compulsion to drift off to sleep. She had not yet regained her strength after the last transfusion, feeling the way it sapped her, and resenting it even though the last donation was of her own making to save Joseph's life. Even now she was unsure whether she had given enough blood to cure him — his frailty still worried her. If he should succumb to Te Matee lai again... she dared not think of the fight she'd have on her hands to save him then, knowing how angry he had grown when she'd been bled that second time. It nearly killed their fledgling friendship on the spot. And if he knew she had hidden within her small bundle of clothes the very instruments of torture used to take her blood, just in case he needed more, she doubted she could stem his rage. Lazarus would undoubtedly steal her blood without a care, but Joseph was far more

compassionate — a special quality in a world where ‘goodness’ was merely a word used by the Apostles to maintain control.

Suddenly the sails started flapping and both booms swung madly across the deck. The tips of the hulls dug deep into the swell and the whole vessel pitched and reeled off its course.

‘What are you doing?’ Lazarus shrieked, water surging over him. He scrambled down the deck, shaking himself like a village dog after a dip, as Maryam tried to bring the tiller around and the stern rudders fought against the forward momentum of the swell. But they refused to respond, and Maryam had no idea what to do next. It was Lazarus, hauling on the sturdy woven jute ropes, who finally reined the sails in and edged the prow back around towards the west.

‘Idiot,’ he cried, his features reduced to a sharp mask of derision in the night’s dull light. ‘If you can’t stay awake, then leave the tiller work to me.’

He stood over her now, a threatening silhouette against the sky, and Maryam felt consumed by shame. She knew he thought of girls as lesser beings, and it mortified her to have proved him right. But she tightened her hand on the tiller, quickly checking the heavens to confirm their course. ‘I’m sorry,’ she conceded. ‘It won’t happen again.’

He snorted at her words. ‘If you’re as good at sailing as you are of keeping secrets, then I fear we’re doomed.’

She looked up at him sharply. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Come on,’ he jeered. ‘Do you *really* think I just accidentally spotted you and your faithful lap-dog Ruth as you stole away? Are you really that stupid?’

Still she did not understand. She’d presumed Lazarus had simply happened on them as she and Ruth fled past on their way to join Joseph at the boat. Was he now saying this was not the case? Much as she hated reacting to his mocking, she had to find out what he meant. ‘You already knew?’

Lazarus slowly adjusted a rope, dragging out her uncertainty with obvious relish. Finally he squatted down next to her, replying in a voice spliced through with scorn. ‘I’ve been watching you,’ he drawled. ‘You’re different from the other Blessed Sisters. Trouble.’

‘I don’t care what you think of me,’ she struck back, ‘when you had so much, and yet you chose to use it to cause others pain.’

For a split second her words stalled him, but then he regained himself. ‘Is the master blamed for beating the stupidity out of his dog?’ He shook his head. ‘You people beg for pain — you crave it — all in the name of sacrifice to the Lord.’

‘You think we have a choice in this?’

‘Yes I do!’ He caught her gaze and held it. ‘And you, prickly little stonefish, are my proof of that blind stupidity!’ He laughed, applauding himself, the percussive sound of his hands loud in the night. ‘When I found you at Joseph’s house after your first ridiculous attempt to escape, I knew there was something up. I’ve followed you, sweet Maryam. Stood outside the door while you lay there drunk on toddy as you let my mother give Joseph more of your blood. I’ve listened to your secret conversations and know your fears. Believe me, I know more about you now than you know of yourself.’

‘But—’ Maryam’s words died on her lips. He’d known of their escape plans and yet not revealed them to Father Joshua? *Why was that?* And why, come to think of it, had he fought so hard to come aboard? He had everything back in Onewēre’s Holy City: status as the son of the Holy Father, freedom, health. *Why would he give it all away?* She lowered her eyelids to avoid his brash stare, secretly studying his face through her long dark lashes. He was handsome, no doubt of that, but the sheer meanness of his spirit bled out through his eyes and curled his lip in a perpetual sneer.

‘I know what you’re wondering,’ Lazarus smirked. ‘You can’t comprehend how anyone would shun such privilege and luxury. Am I right?’

Despite herself, she had to nod.

‘Then think on this. Before this night, I knew what every day would bring. I knew I’d someday take over the reins of my dear father and that, thanks to the sacred blood of Blessed Sisters like you, I could cheat the Lord of my death until I felt the time was right.’ He shrugged. ‘Well, I’m sorry, Sister, I want *more*.’

‘More?’ *Just how far did his greed extend?*

He stood up abruptly, turning his back on her to scan the sea. ‘I doubt you’ve got the imagination to understand.’

Maryam dug her fingernails into the timber tiller. He made her feel so — so — *beneath* him. That was it. As if she was worth nothing.

‘I understand that you are no better than your father,’ she said. ‘That everything you touch is poison in your hands.’

Lazarus spun back around to face her then, looming so close she could smell his stale breath. For a moment she feared he would strike her, but instead a seductive smile stole across his face. ‘Now, now, Sister. Allow me to prove you wrong.’ He reached out, brushing his damp hand down the side of her face as tenderly as a man in love.

She flinched, her arm rising of its own accord to knock his hand away. 'Never touch me again,' she hissed at him, furious heat spiralling up her body until it burned her ears. 'The Lord forgive me, but I hate you more than words can say.'

'Hate?' he said. Then he shrugged. 'Then this should make for an exciting voyage. You see, the thing with hate, dear Sister, is that it needs love to define it, like night needs day.'

With that he turned on his heel, leaving her alone now to digest his words.