

## Chapter One

Maryam ran through the jungle, her heart rapping against her ribs, but she dared not stop. Ruth was gaining on her, and if she caught her now all would be lost. She veered off into the lush undergrowth, the crunch of Ruth's sandals on the shell pathway loud in her ears. Ahead, a whimbrel burst from the shelter of a pandanus palm, its flight up through the dense canopy of palms and breadfruit trees haphazard as it sought the sun. *Tet-tet-tet*, it cried, the rhythm building on the percussion of Ruth's pounding steps and the pulse of blood that forced its way through Maryam's veins.

The piercing scent of the pandanus leaves crushed underfoot arrested her and she dropped to her haunches for a moment to regain her breath, closing her eyes, allowing the heady aroma to calm her down. Not far behind, Ruth was now wading through the undergrowth and Maryam imagined her — her arms spread wide to sweep the leaves aside, small prickly burrs of the kakang weed clinging to her thick black

hair. She was fast, Ruth, and no one yet had slipped her grasp. But there was always a first time.

Maryam drew on all her strength, ready to sprint forward once again, but a sharp pain shot through her abdomen. She stifled a cry, clutching a palm trunk as a wave of nausea rocked her. *No! Not now!* Then the pain dulled to a dragging cramp, and she gulped down deep lungfuls of the muggy air. If she didn't make a break for it now she would be caught.

No longer caring if Ruth heard, she rose and flung herself towards the far-off opening in the trees. If she could only make it to the beach then she could race along the heat-baked sand to the safety of the mangroves by the deep lagoon. But the cramps persisted, leaching her energy.

'I can see you!' Ruth shrieked, and Maryam turned to the voice, unable to resist looking around.

Ruth was there, right by Maryam's resting place, and her teeth flashed white against her skin as her grin grew wider and more determined. Maryam tried one final reckless dash but her foot caught in the exposed roots of a beach naupaka and tripped her, sending her sprawling onto the soft sandy ground. Prone amidst the cool green understorey of the jungle, she realised there was no escape. She rolled onto her back, resigned to yielding as the village dogs did when Zakariya raised his heavy stick and yelled abuse. And there was Ruth's triumphant face, looming up above her like a hungry shark.

'Enough now. I admit defeat.' There was no point denying it. She had dared to challenge Ruth and lost.

Her pursuer reached out a strong brown hand,

jerked Maryam to her feet so quickly that her brain swam around inside her head. 'You never should have tried,' she laughed, 'I always win.' Her smile disappeared as she saw Maryam pale and wince. 'Are you all right?'

'My stomach hurts,' Maryam said.

Ruth wrapped her arm around Maryam then, her chest still heaving from the prolonged chase. 'Excuses, excuses,' she joked, squeezing reassuringly. 'Let's get you back to Mother Elizabeth and tell her you are sick from shame!'

'I would've beaten you if I'd been well,' Maryam sighed. She poked her friend in her well-covered ribs. 'Beware: the Lord is granting your prayers for abundance by placing it around your waist!'

'Just because you were born a tiny anti-ma-aomata don't blame me!'

Maryam snorted. 'If I *was* a fairy, you never would have caught me — no matter how intense the pain!'

They made their way back along the track, arms linked as they headed for the village compound — the only home either had known since their memories had first formed and fixed. Ruth towered above her, even though Maryam was older by a good two years, and Maryam's charcoal-bright eyes, round and dark-lashed like those of the baby seals that sometimes surfaced in the main lagoon, just added to the vulnerability that others presumed. Despite her fifteen years, her fragile frame unfailingly caused jokes among the other Blessed Sisters, who labelled her 'te bebi', while Mother Elizabeth and the other House Mothers tutted and fussed, and forced extra goat's milk on her in a fruitless

bid to help her grow. They worried, the Mothers, that she never would receive the Lord's blessing and take up His Call. And their worry had rubbed off on her. Each night she prayed for the Lamb to reveal to her His wondrous plan.

But now the pains were upon Maryam her hopes lifted. They all knew of this, how the Blood was heralded by pain and cramps — Te Teinako, the miraculous Calling to surrender all to the overwhelming power of the Blood of the Lamb.

By the time they reached the compound, the other Blessed Sisters already milled around the shingled borders of the maneaba, the sacred meeting house, in time for prayers. Mother Elizabeth, her long hair wrapped up into a crowning bundle on her head, glanced up at them sharply from her seat before the restless group.

'Late again?'

Ruth blushed the colour of ripe pomegranate seeds and slunk into the crowd, while Maryam crossed to Mother Elizabeth and bowed her head.

'I'm sorry, Mother,' she apologised. 'It was my fault. I challenged Ruth to a race and we'd nearly reached the mangroves before she caught me up.'

Mother Elizabeth's face softened and she smiled, fine lines gathering at the corners of her honey-coloured eyes. 'When will you learn, te bebi? Ruth has twice the length of legs as you. You were bound to lose.'

'But I nearly had her,' Maryam protested. 'If my pains had not come upon me hard I would've won.'

'Your pains?' Mother Elizabeth's gaze shot up to Maryam's face. 'That's news indeed.' She took Maryam

by the hand and squeezed it reassuringly. 'The Lord be praised.'

She rose then, calling out as Maryam rushed away to take her place. 'Come to my sleeping hut before bed tonight, child. We will speak some more.'

With this, she ushered the first of the Blessed Sisters into the maneaba as Maryam returned to her rightful position at the rear of the group. Mother Elizabeth stooped beneath the low eaves of the colossal pandanus-thatched roof and disappeared inside, followed first by the smallest Blessed Sisters: the toddlers who arrived after last summer's Judgement, still confused and grieving at the loss of their birth parents; then came the five-year-olds; sixes; sevens . . . One by one the girls entered until at last Maryam — the eldest — dipped beneath the low-slung eaves and bowed as she passed the pillars of white coral that held the giant roof aloft.

Inside, a brooding brown coolness shed a calming air across the Blessed Sisters, as they sat before the altar so lovingly erected by the first Apostles of the Lamb. There, a life-size figure of the crucified Lamb stared mournfully down upon them, pain bleeding from His eyes as surely as the trails of bright red blood that leaked from the terrible gashes in His body and the telltale wounds at hand and feet. The golden wood had softened to a dusky tan, the knots and whorls adding to the illusion that the flesh was real. He was so lifelike, in fact — His ribs and muscles so clearly defined by the master who had sculpted him — that Maryam could never quite look Him in the eye, scared of what she might discover in His ageless gaze.

The maneaba whispered with the all-pervading voices of sea, wind and trees. Between the soaring pillars the Blessed Sisters sat cross-legged in their ranks, silent as their ancestors, whose carved images peered back down at them, hollow-eyed yet all-seeing, from their resting places high up above the flimsy flaxen walls, in the darkened beams.

Finally, the other six House Mothers filed in, plus Zakariya (leaning hard upon his stick), the helper Simon and the new man James. As they took their places either side of Mother Elizabeth, she raised her hands and Simon strummed the opening bars of their first song on an aging ukulele.

*When the Bridegroom cometh will your robes be white?*

*Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?*

*Will your soul be ready for the mansion bright,*

*And be washed in the Blood of the Lamb? . . .*

As they sang, the pains intruded into Maryam's consciousness even more intensely than before. She stifled a gasp, breathing through her mouth until they faded to a hot dull ache, as if an ember had been cast in there and smouldered on. She looked up, to see Mother Elizabeth's eyes upon her. Mother Elizabeth nodded ever so slightly and slid her gaze towards the door. Maryam understood and mouthed her thanks, backing out of the maneaba so slowly that none bar the kindly Blessed Mother noticed her silent retreat.

She crossed the compound to the sleeping hut she shared with Ruth, far less majestic than the maneaba

although the basic building materials were the same. Inside, she made to lie down but the cramps again gripped her, and she felt the desperate need to run. She charged for the outhouses, past the other sleeping huts and down the fig-tree-screened pathway. This was so unlike her: although petite and slow to mature, she had strong health. But then, on her undergarments, she saw the telltale stain of blood. So this, it seemed, was the end of her childhood. Her moment to serve had finally come.

The singing had died down by the time she made her way back to her hut. Mother Elizabeth would be reading from the Holy Book now, the little ones restless as they tried to fix on a past they were yet to understand — about an angel, and hail and fire mingling with blood, and a star that fell upon the waters as the sun and moon were devoured by the poisoned dark. Maryam remembered how confusing such lessons had been when she first came — how, although she had been taught the rudiments of English by her birth parents, the words seemed harsh and complicated, compared to the soft flowing language of her native past. It had been so hard, not understanding why she'd been wrenched from the family who had borne her, and still upset by the strange ritual of the Judgement which had sealed her fate.

When they'd drawn her blood with the sharp needle and mixed it with the blood of Father Joshua to see if it would clot or flow, she could still recall the warmth with which the Apostles had received the news that she'd been Blessed. How they'd smiled; Father Joshua himself had scooped her up to hold her high above

his head as he sang his praises to the Lord. He had frightened her, this tall white man, and she'd screamed with fear — not understanding the laughter that had rippled through the gathered flock at her response. Each time she watched the Judgement now it brought this back. The fear and, most of all, the terrible pain that swept across her birth mother's face as they carried Maryam away and rowed her to this tiny atoll off the coast.

It haunted Maryam, this woman's face. A face that seemed to meld into her own now, as she studied herself in the patchy mirror back in her hut. Delicate nose, round black eyes, and lips that turned up like ripe bananas on her small thin face. Would they tell her birth mother of her first Blood? Or was she dead, a victim of the dreadful Te Matee Iai that devoured the population of the island at alarming rates?

Perhaps she could ask Mother Elizabeth? It was she — still a girl herself, Maryam now realised — who had been there to soothe her when Maryam had first arrived. And Mother Elizabeth was still the one she ran to in times of great uncertainty or fear. For there were nights the Lord seemed to leave her side, and the looming unknown in her future preyed upon her mind far more, it seemed, than it bothered any of the other Sisters here. While they seemed to wait upon their fate with calm acceptance — even joy — she had the burning desire to know just what really lay in store. She would find out now her Bloods had come.

The conch shell sounded for the end of prayers, and Maryam left her bed and sought out Mother Evodia for the sea sponges to stem her blood. As well, the

kind hunchbacked old Mother gave her bitter-tasting plant potions to ease the pains. Then Maryam joined the other Blessed Sisters for their evening meal. Ruth sidled up beside her and squeezed her hand.

'Has the pain settled?' she asked.

'A little,' Maryam replied. The uncertainty about her fate had left her pensive, and she struggled to shake off the mood. Ruth would never understand: it was all so clear to her — her life one joyful journey in her service to the Lord. 'What was the Lesson?'

'The Rules of course! Number Eight.' Ruth skipped on the spot, her thick hair shining in the last of the sun as she recited, 'As with the Lamb who went so willingly to slaughter, we too must sacrifice up our lives in readiness and joy.'

Maryam, too, knew the Rules backwards — had heard them every day since memory began. But now, this minute in this hour of this suddenly transforming day, the words took on new meaning. *Readiness and joy.*

These words stayed with her as she collected her food and joined the other Sisters in their prayer of thanks. She was ready, sure enough — relieved, in fact, this day had come. It quelled the nagging sense of shame she'd felt at being the oldest of the Blessed Sisters by at least two years. Never in the memory of the Mothers had a Sister taken quite so long to shed her Blood. There was worry, to be sure, that the sickness which still plagued the islands might have defiled her — not outwardly, like the stooped, disfigured villagers she saw each summer at the Judgements, but somewhere deep inside the place where children grew.

And that uncertainty — humiliation — had constantly accompanied her these past two years. Even faithful Ruth, herself already budding up and showing signs of readiness, had taken now to praying nightly that her Bloods would come.

The meal, freshly caught snapper doused in mangoes with steamed swamp taro, slipped down easily enough, but Maryam hardly tasted it. Neither did she really hear the happy chatter of the other girls. Instead, Rule Six from Captain Saul, the founding father of the Apostles of the Lamb, took form and sang inside her head: *By the Blood's great power, the most humble of us may Cross to the Holy City into the Lamb's presence and live there Always.* It reassured and soothed her just to think of this. To live in the Holy City, the awe-inspiring Star of the Sea, would surely be a joy. There, she hoped, all fears about her future life would drop away.

Later, at Mother Elizabeth's sleeping hut, she found her mentor deep in prayer, on her knees — her hair set free from its thick plait to tumble down her back and sweep the floor. Maryam knocked on the carved doorframe and waited to be called inside.

Mother Elizabeth, looking like an angel in the spluttering lamp light, finished her prayer and rose gracefully to her feet, turning to Maryam with a welcoming smile. 'Come in, Sister,' she invited, taking Maryam's small brown hand. 'No more can we call you our bebi, eh? Evodia tells me that your Bloods have come.' She sat down on her sleeping mat and patted the space beside her. 'Come, sit here.'

Maryam obeyed, smelling the same rich scent of pandanus on Mother Elizabeth's skin as she had smelt

in her jungle hiding place that afternoon. She must have bathed in the crushed leaves, Maryam realised, noticing the oily sheen upon the older woman's skin.

'And so, at last, you are to leave us.' Mother Elizabeth's gaze swept her face. 'Are you ready, child?'

Maryam nodded, not trusting her voice.

'We will summon the boat at first light, then. I will come to your hut and help prepare you for the Crossing.'

Again Maryam nodded, hoping Mother Elizabeth would forgive her for her lack of words. It was all so big — so sudden — and the realisation that she was to leave her home, her friends, hit hard. 'I will be ready,' she eventually croaked, and Mother Elizabeth responded with a warm embrace.

'Don't be sad, my dear. This should be a time of great celebration!'

'But I will miss you all,' Maryam said, fighting to hold back her tears.

Mother Elizabeth sighed, holding Maryam at arm's length to read her eyes. 'But Rebekah will be there, and Sarah too — they will not have forgotten you in the two years since their Crossing. And Miriam and Abigail: surely you remember them?'

'Of course I do, but it's not the same. Ruth is like my real sister, and you . . .' She could not continue, her throat closing up in her effort not to cry.

'Come now, I will see you soon enough.' A blush crept up Mother Elizabeth's neck and consumed her face. 'You mustn't tell the others this, but I am—' she stopped, swallowing as if the words were choking her, '— I am, you see, newly with child, and will make the

Crossing soon myself.'

Despite the news that Maryam would see Mother Elizabeth again, this other admission left her deeply shocked. With child? She had never heard of such a thing, in all the time that she'd been here. 'But how?'

Mother Elizabeth rose from the sleeping mat and paced the room, more like a nervous girl than the leader of the Blessed Mothers. She spun to face Maryam, her eyes dark with dread. 'I should not have told you, and you must promise me your lips are sealed.'

Maryam nodded mutely, even as her mind swirled at the news.

'Go to bed now,' Mother Elizabeth said. 'You will need your strength for tomorrow's ceremony, take my word.' With that, she swept Maryam's mass of hair away from her forehead and gently kissed her there. 'Go well.'

Maryam embraced her one last time, unable quite to meet those eyes, and left the hut. By now the night had grown black, with just the twinkle of the torches beside each sleeping hut to light her way. How could she sleep, with the promise of the Crossing so soon upon her? It seemed impossible. And now with this other secret to carry . . . would the Apostles of the Lamb meet Mother Elizabeth with open arms or anger? She had no idea. But she felt a surge of protectiveness towards the woman who had raised her with a kindly hand and sureness of faith.

Too full of turmoil to take to her bed, Maryam traversed the silent compound and made her way down to the shore. She passed the scrubby ground where the chickens roosted underneath the breadfruit

trees, the musty scent of their droppings spicing the crisp evening air, and took the beaten path through the taro patch to avoid any encounter with the village goats. They were tame enough, but she did not want to disturb the sleeping Sisters by startling the noisy troublemakers. Above her head, a giant fruitbat glided from palm to palm on the gentle breeze. Torchlight washed its pale underbelly, glowing much as angels might in Heaven's sky.

A half moon floated high above the bay, lighting up the busy foraging of the translucent, bandy-legged tairiki crabs. She tiptoed through them, careful not to disturb their nightly hunt for food, until she stood at the water's edge with the sea lapping playfully at her toes.

And there, across the water, connected to the main island by the causeway, shone the Holy City. The sight was so familiar, she knew its outer detail as well as her own skin. The impenetrable sides, ten times as high as the tallest jungle trees, were streaked with rust where time had weathered them. The tier upon tier of little windows, some lit with such a steady light it must surely be radiating straight from the Lord. And the crowning cap that bore its name: Star of the Sea.

Tomorrow she would Cross. And from that time on, Maryam suspected, her life would never be the same.