

"Riveting. . . . Gripping and hard to put down."

—PORTLAND BOOK REVIEW

BLOOD OF
THE LAMB
BOOK TWO

INTO THE WILDERNESS

MANDY
HAGER

Blood of the Lamb Book One: *The Crossing*

If you haven't already read Book One of the trilogy, here is a plot summary:

On a tiny atoll off the coast of the small Pacific island, Onewēre, Maryam is raised to believe that she and the other Blessed Sisters are special: that when they Cross to the Holy City (the rotting cruise ship Star of the Sea) at the onset of puberty they will serve the Lord and His Apostles with willingness and joy. But Maryam is wracked with doubts, alone, it seems, among her peers questioning the Apostles' power and control. She finds herself cast in the role of human sacrifice—her blood siphoned from her body to save the lives of the Apostles from the deadly plague, Te Matee Iai. Her realization that she and her fellow native servers are nothing more than expendable slaves to the white elite forces her to question everything she once held true—her faith, her allegiances, and her desire to serve.

Weakened by blood loss, she tries to escape back to the village where she was born, aided by the very person who received her blood: Joseph, who is as shocked as Maryam by the Apostles' bloodthirsty deeds. But her father, faithful servant of the Apostles, rejects Maryam, and it is only Joseph's quick thinking that saves her from his violent response. Now gravely ill with Te Matee Iai, Joseph, along with his mother Deborah, convinces Maryam to flee the island, revealing their most precious secret: a boat built by Joseph's late father to aid his family's escape. Maryam, although terrified by the prospect of sailing into the "void" created by the Tribulation that consumed the Earth, reluctantly agrees—but only if Joseph and his mother will accompany her, and if she can take her best friend Ruth.

She hatches a plan, allowing herself to be recaptured by Joseph's cousin Lazarus, the cruel and unpredictable son of Father Joshua, and is taken back to the Holy City, where she is publicly humiliated, then bled again, then locked up and left to die. Escaping through her great determination, and the help of her good friends Joseph, Ruth, and blind old Hushai, she and Ruth flee the Holy City in the night and rendezvous with Joseph at the boat. Just as they are about to leave, Lazarus takes Ruth hostage, insisting that they take him, too. With the pursuing villagers nearly upon them, Joseph and Maryam reluctantly agree, and the four set off together—sailing forth into the void...

Now read Into the Wilderness, the second book in the trilogy, to find out what happens next in this gripping and powerful series.

BLOOD OF
THE LAMB
BOOK TWO

INTO THE WILDERNESS

MANDY
HAGER



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To Brian, with all my gratitude and love

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Satan's successes are the greatest when he appears with the name of God on his lips.

Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi

CHAPTER ONE

For the first hour after they escaped Onewēre, the sea fought the boat and its fledgling crew as if 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 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 plan 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 retorted. "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 sapped 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 Onewēr—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 had 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. The 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 stars as a 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 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 Marav 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 sneak aboard and lock himself inside the library for days on end. I thought he was just toying with 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, tiredly 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 Jonathan had built it, using sketches from an ancient book. How he had hidden the craft within the sacred caverns, 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 seasick 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 forever in her brain. And the fact that Lazarus had forced his way aboard just made it worse. The soul 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 soon 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 hold 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 Iai, 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 Ruth, 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 tightness in her chest diminish a little.

Joseph and Ruth struggled to their feet and retreated to the shelter that straddled the two stur-

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 O'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; the 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 their 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 week 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 Iai, proclaiming that she was the Lord, and not the lifeblood 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 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 Iai 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 steering 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 in the sails 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 at keeping secrets, then I feel we're doomed.”

She looked up at him sharply. “What do you mean?”

“Come on,” he jeered. “Do you *really* think I just accidently 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—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 percussion 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. I know 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 of 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 only 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.

CHAPTER TWO

The rest of Maryam's shift passed in a tired blur. She struggled to stay focused through the darkest hours of the night, and with great relief relinquished the tiller to Joseph as the first tinges of pink tickled the horizon in the east. Then, despite the cramped conditions in the small covered shelter and her proximity to Lazarus, she fell asleep almost as soon as she crawled onto the sleeping mat. The steady motion of the sea rocked her, and the exhaustion she'd been fighting now swept her away.

Mid-morning light was streaming in when Joseph shook her by the shoulder. "Wake up," he urged. "There's something you have to see!" He seemed lit by excitement as he tugged her by the hand.

"Wait," she whispered, fearing Lazarus would hear. But when she looked about she saw that he was already risen and was at the tiller. She smiled at Joseph. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine." He beckoned her. "Come on!"

She reached out to stop him. "No, really. Are you well?"

He sighed and his eyes lost their focus for a moment, as if he'd turned their gaze inward to assess his state. Then he slowly grinned. "I promise you, I feel great!" He tugged her hand again. "Now please—come or you might miss them!"

Them?

Maryam scabbled from the shelter after Joseph, struggling to shake off the fog of sleep. The light that bounced off the sea was dazzling, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the glare. When she'd slept the boisterous wind had dropped away, and they were now sailing on a warm light breeze.

"Maryam, look!" Ruth's excited call drew Maryam to the front of the boat.

Ruth pointed down into the spray of water churned up by the bows. Scuffing just beneath the surface, playing with the air bubbles the hulls threw up, a pair of enormous fish sped along in tandem, their dorsal fins slicing through the water as they raised their rounded snouts to breathe. They were roughly the size and shape of sharks, but shared none of their leering, sinister presence.

"Are they dolphins?" she asked, riveted as the creatures swivelled their heads to the side, studying her with intelligent eyes, their mouths curved upwards in what could only be a friendly smile. She had seen their fins cut through the sea before, way out from land, but never observed them up this close.

"I'm fairly sure," Joseph answered. "My mother spoke of seeing them when she was learning how to sail beyond the reef and—oh, look!"

One of the dolphins sped ahead, flinging itself out of the water in a graceful arc. It seemed to hang in the air for a long moment, then dived into the swell again, spiralling deep, out of view. Maryam leaned over the bow and watched as the slick dark shadow of it re-emerged from the opalescent depths and the creature returned to its playmate with a flick of its powerful tail.

Behind them, at the tiller, Lazarus whistled to attract their attention. "Look behind!" he yelled, and pointed to the boat's dual wake. There, bringing up the rear in a joyous procession, another dozen or so dolphins tracked their progress through the sea.

Maryam felt her spirits lift. "You see!" She turned to Ruth. "There *is* life out here, beyond our shores."

She threw herself flat onto the deck and dangled her arm over the side of the hull, sifting through the refreshing spray of the water through her fingers. Beneath her, the closest of the dolphins rose on the peak of the swell and nudged her hand, brushing the full length of its sleek body along her touch. Its skin felt as velvety and firm as melon flesh, and Maryam found tears prickling her eyes as she received this unexpected proof of life.

She looked at Joseph, excitement lifting her voice. "Did you see that?"

"It doesn't seem afraid at all," he said.

"Why would it, when it has free rein of this vast ocean?" *Fear is something you have to learn firsthand*, she thought, remembering her own shocking swing from bliss to dread after she had Crossed

from the atoll to the Holy City. Could anything be worse than knowing those you most trusted had betrayed you? She reckoned not.

Joseph nodded thoughtfully, then slapped his belly. "Come on," he said, offering Maryam his hand to help her to her feet. "I'm starving! Now we're all rested, let's have some food."

There was no argument with this. Together they reefed in the two sails while Lazarus lashed the tiller to hold the boat steady on its westward course. Now all four climbed into the shelter to unpack the stores. There was bread enough to last five days and they fell upon it hungrily, wrapping salted fish into the thick chewy slabs they broke off from a crusty loaf. Lazarus was uncharacteristically quiet, intent on his food as the others speculated on the scene back in the Holy City when it was discovered they were gone.

"I fear for Hushai," Maryam said. "If they find out how much he aided us, they'll make him pay. The old blind man held a special place in her heart, and the thought of him suffering on her account churned her stomach.

"My mother promised she'll try to temper Uncle Joshua's rage," Joseph assured her. "Besides," he laughed, "unless those villagers who followed us actually saw the boat, they'll have to scour the whole of Onewēre before they realise we have gone."

"And if they saw the boat?" Ruth pressed. "Is it possible they have the means to follow us?"

All four turned as one to scan the sea behind them, but there was nothing out on the horizon line to suggest anyone was giving chase. Nothing at all, in fact, but sea and sky.

"I don't know for sure," Joseph said, "but it seems unlikely they'd think it necessary. They're so arrogant, I doubt it would occur to them we could escape without killing ourselves." He turned to Lazarus. "What do you think?"

Lazarus finished chewing before he replied. "I doubt they'd do it openly, even if they do have such a craft as this—and I've never heard word of one if they do. But my father will be furious that I have gone. If he comes after anyone, it will be me."

"And you didn't consider this before you forced your way aboard?" Maryam turned to him angrily. "They may well have been content to pray that Ruth and I were swallowed by the sea, but you...don't you see how your selfishness has risked us all?"

Lazarus's eyes narrowed. "Selfish! Were you not already forcing your dear friend Ruth here to accompany you? I did you a big favour—she was ready to retreat."

"Stop it!" Ruth broke in. "I am not a scrap of bait for you to fight over. We are here now—all of us—and if we don't work together we all could die."

"Tell that to your crazy friend. *I'm* not the one who keeps this up," Lazarus said.

"How dare you!" Maryam spat. "Your very presence here—"

"Enough!" Joseph raised his hands. "You two are going to drive me mad! You have to form some kind of truce." He ignored Maryam's furious glare. "However it came to be, we're here now and we work together, like Ruth said." He leaned back and rummaged in the shelter. "Let me show you the map. It's where we're going now that matters most—not where we've left."

The map was pocked with age, its corners tattered and the ink degraded. In the seams where the paper had been folded, the writing had faded clean away. Joseph pointed to a tiny speck within a wash of blue. "This is Onewēre here."

They pored over the fragile chart, amazed. Here, at last, was evidence of the world outside the small island home and its minute satellite atoll. Hardly visible amid the blue that signified the sea lay strings of tiny dots that spoke of land elsewhere, and there, dominating a good half of the map, was a shape that seemed to be a huge landform. Maryam tapped her finger on it, leaning in to read its name. *Australia*.

"What place is this?"

"I once saw pictures of it in a book," Joseph replied. "A dry land, with earth as red as pomegranate seeds."

seeds. They had many great cities there, with buildings reaching right up to the sky.”

“Why, then, aren't we heading there?” Lazarus asked. “Surely it's so big that, even with the fall of the Tribulation, the people there must have survived.”

“My parents were wary of it—they knew so little of its customs they did not think it worth the risk.” Joseph pointed to a little island west of Onewēre. “This is Marawa Island, here. It's spoken of fondly in the old legends—was known once as a place of trade.”

“Your parents thought that made it safe?” Ruth asked.

Joseph shrugged. “I guess.” He drew a line with his finger between the two islands. “The best thing is it's directly west of Onewēre, so we should be able to find it, even though it's still quite small.”

There was sense in this, Maryam realised. She'd always known the ocean was unimaginably vast, but to see it laid out like this—as if the Lord had looked down and mapped it from His throne—underlined how insubstantial they and their sailing craft really were. “Do you remember how the legends went?”

“Not really. Only that they claimed the two islands were once so close in their dealings they were like brother and sister. Then the missionaries arrived on Onewēre and drove the siblings apart. When the people of Onewēre took up the Lord's sacred word, their brothers and sisters on Marawa Island chose to turn away.”

“We're heading for an island where heathens rule?” Ruth's eyes grew as round as cockle shells.

“Who knows?” Joseph replied. “The Tribulation changed everything. Besides, I'd rather heathen than my uncle's Rules.”

“How can you say that?” Tears swelled in Ruth's eyes. “Do you not still love the Lord?”

“Enough of this,” Maryam broke in. “We've set our course and now must wait to see what the Lord delivers up.” To get into an argument with Ruth over her faith would achieve nothing but hurt around. Nor did she want to reply directly to Ruth's question, knowing in her heart that her answer would only cause her friend pain. Instead she reached over and patted Ruth's back. “It's okay, Ruthie,” she whispered. “No one will wrench you from the Lord.”

Ruth brushed the tears from her eyes and forced a smile. “It's just that all this is so—big...”

“I know.” Bigger and scarier than Maryam could imagine. She turned her mind from it. “But we are here—you and me, together. Safe. And the dolphins prove there is life beyond our shores. We have food to eat, a map and that strange compass thing to guide our way. What could possibly go wrong?”

Ruth merely shrugged.

* * *

Throughout the day they all took turns to steer the boat, working hard at learning how the sails responded to the shifting winds. It was hot work. The sky was cloudless; the sun's heat sapped their strength and drove their thirst. Maryam and Joseph checked through the stores and doled out the fresh water as frugally as possible, just in case their journey lasted longer than they'd planned.

Yet, despite the hospitable sea conditions, there was an inescapable awkwardness among the group. With no space for privacy, even the most natural of acts proved stressful, the girls insisting that the boys turn their backs when they needed to relieve themselves—leaning out in an ungainly fashion from the deck—one standing guard for the other, making sure the boys kept to their word. But there was no such modesty from the boys: Maryam and Ruth learned only through excruciating experience to turn away the moment Joseph or Lazarus made his way up to the front deck between hulls.

The lack of privacy impacted in other ways as well. Whenever Joseph settled down beside Maryam, Lazarus was there too, as if he could not leave them be. It did not help that Joseph seemed to welcome his cousin's company, laughing with him about old friends and shared experiences. She felt cut off from him, sensing that the person she had known was occupied elsewhere. At times he tried to draw Maryam into their conversation, but he seemed not to appreciate her fear of Lazarus, and looked confused and wounded when she turned away.

This unspoken wedge was further widened by Ruth's constant anxiety. She could not seem to shield her dread. Late in the afternoon, the two girls retreated to the shade of the pandanus thatch and Maryam tried again to reassure Ruth about what might lie ahead.

"I'm sure Joseph's parents wouldn't have chosen Marawa Island unless they thought they would welcome there."

"How would they know? The Apostles said—"

"The Apostles lied to us, over and over again. They said there was nothing out here, that all of it had been consumed, yet here we are."

"Here? We're nowhere, Maryam. Perhaps this is exactly what they meant? We could be stuck on this stupid boat for ever, with no sight of land."

Her words hit Maryam harder than she dared to show. She had not thought of this. What if the voice the Apostles spoke of was this endless sea? They could be trapped on board until their reserves of food and water were all gone. What then? "But the map..."

"What of it? It was drawn back before the Tribulation destroyed it all. Besides, the Lord said those who turned away from Him would not be saved. At least at home we knew the Lord watched over us. Now that we have turned our backs on His Apostles, surely He will punish us?"

"But He *didn't* watch over us, Ruthie, that's my point." Maryam began peeling a ripe mango, the sweet sticky juice running down her wrist right to her elbow. "And if He did, then He allowed all those terrible things to take place. To go unpunished."

Ruth clapped her hands over her ears, shaking her head wildly from side to side. "Don't say such things...really, don't—"

"I'm sorry, Ruthie. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you so." Maryam reached over and wrapped her arms around Ruth's heaving frame. "I promise I will keep you safe."

"How can you?" Ruth wailed. "I know you've tried..." Her next few words were indistinct, washed away by shaky sobs. "...from Father Joshua and he still—took—me against my will."

For one heart-stopping moment Ruth raised her head, her bloodshot eyes meeting Maryam's. The pain in there was so intense it struck at Maryam like a fist. So *this* was where all Ruth's turmoil stemmed from. So much had happened in the hours since Ruth had confided in her as they fled the Holy City, Maryam hadn't fully processed it. How stupid of her not to have realised that Father Joshua had taken Ruth and left her broken, filled with shame. How Maryam hated him. Wished him to Hell.

She took one of the softened kunnikai leaves that wrapped the fruit and pressed it into Ruth's hair so that she could wipe her tears. Then she shifted slightly, until she could see more clearly into her friend's face. "Tell me of it," she whispered, remembering how it had eased her own aching heart to tell Mother Elizabeth of her abuse at the hands of the Apostles—though she would offer Ruth comfort and understanding in return, not betrayal as her beloved mentor had.

"I can't," Ruth wailed. "It was so—so—"

"Speaking it aloud will help," Maryam insisted. She knew how these things festered inside if they were left unsaid.

Ruth blew her nose loudly on another kunnikai leaf and took a few deep calming breaths. "He told me to go down to the storeroom to collect more toddy." Her voice quivered like the call of a wandering tattler bird. "Then he followed me. He locked the door from the inside so no one could enter, and then he came at me..."

As Ruth spoke, Maryam felt her heartbeat gaining speed, as if she was in the room alongside Ruth. She knew the kind of arrogant sneer that would have lit his face—had seen it as he'd beaten and humiliated her before the entire congregation after her first foiled escape.

"He told me the Lord had picked me for his bride. That I should—" Ruth wrung the sodden leaf between her hands. "That I should...surrender to him...with willingness and joy, just like the Rules."

Oh Lord. "Did he hurt you, Ruthie?"

"Hurt? He pushed me up against a wall." A deep crimson blush flared up her neck. "He—forced—his way inside me, and when I cried out at the pain he clamped his hand over my mouth." Now Ruth was overwhelmed by sobs, and hid her face in her hands.

Maryam felt sick to her stomach. Was she wrong to have pressed Ruth to speak of such horrors when to do so might have caused further distress? She was out of her depth.

"It's all my fault," Ruth mumbled now. "I must have done something to anger the Lord."

This Maryam understood. She had wrestled with similar doubts when she first realised that life with the Apostles was not as she had always dreamed. But she knew now that to take responsibility for the cruel actions of others was wrong—kind old Hushai had made that clear. "It's *not* your fault! The man is evil, plain as that."

"But he's the Lord's chosen one—"

"No he's not! He's not chosen by the Lord at all—he just uses this to force his will." She remembered Mother Deborah's words the day she showed Maryam the boat. *The thing that you must know is this: the Apostles of the Lamb were formed from a desire for power, based on greed.* Ruth's treatment at the hands of Father Joshua was proof of that. Then there was the stealing of Maryam's blood; the deaths of Sarah, Rebekah and kind Brother Mark. Proof upon proof, mounting up.

Ruth let out a shaky sigh and raised her head. "Every time I close my eyes I see his face," she whispered. "How am I supposed to live with this?"

"By fighting back." The words were out even before Maryam had thought them through. But it was true. "The best revenge is our escape."

"And if he should come after us?"

"I really don't believe he will. We're nothing to him, merely slaves. I reckon he'll be glad we're gone."

"Who'll be glad?" Joseph squatted at the entrance to the shelter.

Ruth shot Maryam a frantic look, warning her. "No one—just the talk of girls," Maryam said.

Joseph grinned. "Well, then stop your chatter now—it's time the two of you sailed this boat alone!"

"Ruth and me together?"

"Yes, why not?" Joseph pulled a serious face. "All of us need to know how to operate tiller and sails, in case one of us should get hurt."

Maryam looked over at Ruth, uncertain if she was recovered enough to do as Joseph asked, but Ruth was already getting to her feet, a bright smile pasted on her tear-streaked face.

"I claim the tiller," Ruth said, refusing to make eye contact with Maryam. "You're on sails."

There was nothing to be done but play along with her, but Maryam feared that Ruth would still have to face her demons if she was ever to regain her peace of mind.

There were times during the following days when Maryam almost forgot they were fleeing from danger into an unknown world. They broke the monotony of the sailing shifts with fishing competitions that quickly turned into all-out gender war. The girls had the knack for teasing the monstrous fish onto their lines, though often lost their bounty as they tried to pull it in; the boys' strike rate was lower, but they hauled their lines in with such efficiency the fish had no chance of escape. Neither side would concede inferiority, however: it fell to the losers to gut the fish—and they would often still be arguing over technicalities long after the sun had set.

Mostly Lazarus pointedly steered clear of Maryam, and his arrogant dismissal galled her, but she tried as best she could to keep the lid on her animosity, hoping her forbearance would win Joseph's regard. Her heart thumped painfully whenever she bit back her instinct to shout at him, but the worst of it was that she couldn't tell if Joseph even appreciated her effort. They never seemed to have

moment alone.

At times the boat glided so effortlessly through the ocean Maryam could close her eyes and try to convince herself into believing they were on nothing more challenging than a pleasant outing, and would return to the comforts of home at the close of each long hot day. After weeks of fear and tension, this mood of calm relaxation was magical. Even Ruth showed signs of unwinding, laughing to the point of choking over Joseph's disappointment when he excitedly hauled in a streamer of seaweed he had mistaken for a fish.

As the afternoon of their third full day at sea drew towards its end, Maryam leaned against the forward mast and watched as Lazarus scaled and gutted an ingimea, the giant yellowfin tuna she and Ruth had reluctantly asked the boys to help drag on board. Lazarus was agile with the knife, there was no doubt, and his long strokes through the ingimea's flesh were bold and sure. She shuddered. To think that only three nights ago he'd held this same sharp blade to Ruthie's throat.

The ingimea was as large as a small dog, with enough flesh on it to last for several days. When Lazarus had finished carving it up, Maryam soured some of the fillets in lime juice for their evening meal. The rest she packed in salt to preserve from spoiling in the days ahead: there was still no sign of land, and already, with an extra mouth to feed, their fresh stores were starting to run low.

As they gathered together in the last of the light to share their feast of fish, a line of thick black rainclouds boiled and rolled together on the western horizon, the lowering sun streaking the dark vapours with fine shots of silver.

"I think we'd better reef the main right in," Joseph said. "They're heading straight for us. Maryam, can you give me a hand?"

Pleased to have been singled out, Maryam rose to help him untie the ropes that held the massive sail aloft. As Lazarus and Ruth hurriedly stowed away their abandoned meal, she and Joseph lashed the good half of the redundant sail back to the boom, their eyes sliding constantly towards the menace on the west. The clouds were not approaching, but hung with a foreboding presence as the travellers sailed towards them: it was only a matter of time before the boat and rainclouds met.

At the tiller hours later, Maryam's brain whirled hopelessly round and round the problem of Ruth's fragile mental state, and she hardly registered the approaching storm until a shift in the motion of the boat drew all her attention back to the task at hand. The wind seemed to be coming from all directions, buffeting the sails and making the tiller hard to control. The sea churned in a sloppy chop and, at the ropes, Lazarus fought to keep his footing as he hauled the mainsail right down to the boom. The dark bank of clouds loomed overhead now, blotting out all trace of stars, and the air grew thick and charged around her. Yet still the rain refused to come.

Joseph appeared from the shelter, early for his shift, and gingerly made his way along the deck to Lazarus's side. "You go and rest now," he told him. "I can't sleep."

Lazarus did not argue. He staggered down the swaying deck and crawled into the shelter to settle down next to Ruth.

Thank goodness she's still fast asleep, Maryam thought.

Joseph busied himself re-securing all the ropes, then edged his way back to Maryam's side. He smiled at her through the gloom. "Finally, we have a chance to be alone."

Maryam's heart skipped a beat. So he was missing their old closeness too. She inclined her head towards the clouds. "I think we might be in for a good soaking soon."

Joseph grinned. "Nothing can put a dampener on things when I'm with you!"

"Wait until you've sat till dawn in pouring rain and then say that!"

"You're on," he said, gently wrapping his hand over hers to help adjust the tiller as a squall of backwind slewed the boat.

Warmth radiated through her from his touch. She sneaked a look at him as he raised his head to

check the unpredictable wind in the stream of feathers atop the mast. His features were straight and fine, his nose so much more defined and sharp than hers, and his fine blond hair could not have been more different from her own thick curtain of wiry black curls. She thought him beautiful, as striking as the ancient European kings painted in the murals on the walls of the dining room in the Holy City.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" she asked, her heart galloping as he rubbed his thumb along the line of her little finger.

"Can't you guess?" He turned his eyes to her, and even in the darkness she could feel the intensity of his gaze.

She nodded. "I'm worried too."

"Bad guess!" He laughed, the sound a point of brightness in the night. "Every time I close my eyes, all I can picture is kissing you!"

Maryam was glad the shadows hid her tingling blush as the memory of their stolen kisses back on Onewēre filled her mind. She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly very dry as he leaned in close. "I have thought—"

His boldness swept her words away and for one long moment nothing else existed except the concentrated merging of their mouths. Maryam felt her body melting, her bones transformed into whirlpools as his tongue met hers. When finally she pulled away to draw a breath, she could hear the race of blood thrum through her ears.

"You know how much I care for you, don't you?" Joseph whispered. "I think I knew it from the first time I saw you at my father's funeral." He ran a finger down her arm, lowering his gaze as he traced his name against her skin. "And what about you? Do you like me too?"

"Of course!" she laughed, amazed by the uncertainty in his voice. "We agreed already that we're friends, remember?"

"No," he said, his brow creased to a frown. "I mean, do you *really* like me?"

How could he even ask it when only moments ago she had given herself over to his kiss? "I do," she confessed, terror and excitement competing inside. She didn't know what else to say. It was the truth, but she felt as if she teetered on the edge of a precipice, and there was only a perilous, uncharted region far below. Instead, she wrapped her arms around Joseph's shoulders and pressed him close.

He littered her hair with tiny kisses, his breath panting out hard and fast, and she closed her eyes, allowing the pressures of the outside world to fall away once more. But a predatory face intruded on the swirling pleasure in her head—Father Joshua as he forced himself on Ruth. She pulled back abruptly, guilt competing with pleasure in a confusing dance.

"I'm sorry," she babbled, "but I can't stop thinking of poor Ruth."

"Ruth?" A hint of impatience crept into Joseph's voice.

"She suffers cruelly from the assault by Father Joshua. I don't know how to ease her hurt." It was totally the wrong time to be telling him this, she knew—their intimacy was retreating like the tide—but she badly needed to share the worry. She wanted Joseph's help.

Joseph stared at her intently before sighing. He released her from his embrace. "I suspect it's something only time will heal," he said. "I've heard my mother speak of the fallout from such an— He held his hand aloft as the clouds finally decided to release their load. "Oh-oh...It's here."

Plump drops splashed around them, bursting like tiny explosions as they hit the deck. Within seconds both Joseph and Maryam were soaked.

"Quickly," Joseph ordered, "get under the shelter now and try to sleep. I'll man the boat."

It pained her to break their precious moment, but the rain was falling more steadily now, running off her hair and weeping down her face. She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed the wet tip of his nose. "Shall I wake Ruth for her shift?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, let her sleep. Perhaps with rest her mind will find some kind

peace.”

Maryam sent him one last smile, warmed, despite the rain, by Joseph's kind and thoughtful heart.

CHAPTER THREE

The downpour lasted until dawn. Maryam hardly slept, tossing and turning as she replayed the conversation and the unsettling kiss from the night before. Why, oh why had she raised Ruth's problem with Joseph then? After so few opportunities to be alone with him, she'd distracted him from the little time they had.

When, finally, the rain had stopped and the sky was growing light, she could stand her swirling thoughts no longer, and crawled out of the shelter to press a nourishing ball of te kabubu paste into Joseph's hand.

"Please, eat this," she said. "It'll help to warm you and keep up your strength." Then she handed him her one spare shirt. "Here. Use this to dry yourself."

He looked wet and miserable, his skin paled to a stony grey and wrinkled from the long exposure to the rain. Purple pools of tiredness smudged beneath his eyes. As he stripped off his own soaked shirt he sneezed a spray of te kabubu out across the deck and shrugged.

"Well, the good news is it looks as though the rain has passed." He pointed east, to where the bank of clouds had retreated. To the west, the sky transformed to vivid blue.

Maryam scanned the western horizon and spied a flock of birds reeling in the distance, far ahead. "Look! Doesn't that mean we're nearing land?"

Joseph shielded his eyes against the glare. His face lit up. "You could be right!" Again he sneezed the force rocking his whole body. "Keep a good watch on them—it could mean Marawa Island is up ahead."

Despite her relief, Maryam was swept by a terrible foreboding. "Is it protected by a reef?" she asked. She thought back to their wild flight from Onewēre. Even when they'd known the position of the corridor between the deadly shelves of coral, they'd struggled to manoeuvre the big boat safely through. Just how would they navigate a completely unfamiliar reef?

He guessed her thoughts. "If we approach in daylight we should be right. I'm fairly sure it's just a case of watching for changes in the colour of the sea."

Fairly sure? She didn't want to question Joseph's authority, but his words failed to comfort her. They were sailing as blind as old Hushai, in a boat so large it seemed to have a mind of its own. If they should make even the tiniest error of judgement...

Joseph rubbed his hair as dry as possible with Maryam's shirt and stretched his arms towards the heavens with a tired yawn. "Thanks for your help. Can you take the tiller now? I need some rest." He draped the two damp shirts across the pandanus thatch to dry. "Keep an eye out for the wind, it's stronger than it looks—and wake me if you see anything that remotely looks like land! I'll get the other two to help you."

When Ruth emerged from the shelter, Maryam noticed immediately how much less strained she looked. She had more colour in her face, and even smiled when Maryam pointed out the flock of birds.

"I dreamed we landed in the Lord's own realm, and the Lamb greeted us Himself and made us welcome."

Lazarus, refreshed too, laughed. "And just what did He look like, oh great oracle of the high seas?"

His sneering slapped Ruth's cheeks with pink but she did not falter in her answer. "Like He looked upon the cross. His hands and feet were marked with blood, yet from Him shone a sacred light."

There was such awe and longing in her voice it made Maryam want to cry. Despite what Father Joshua had done to her, Ruth's faith was secure. The familiar touchstones of the Holy Book helped keep her sane.

"It's a sign, Ruthie," Maryam reassured her. "The Lord is telling you all will be well."

"Either that or He's telling her she's soon to meet her maker because we're doomed," Lazarus drawled.

Always ready with a put-down.

“Take the tiller, Ruth,” Maryam ordered, seizing Lazarus by the arm and towing him up to the front of the boat. Some things could not be left unsaid. “Don't toy with her,” she whispered to him furiously. “I don't care what you say to me, but leave Ruth be.”

He rubbed the place where her fingers had dug into his elbow, and a caustic smile twisted his mouth. “Let me get this straight. If I leave your friend alone, then I can say whatever I like to you?”

She nodded reluctantly, realising she'd backed herself into a corner. There was nothing she could do but take the hand he now held out to her. Still, she conceded only one half-hearted shake before tugging her hand back quickly from his grasp.

“We have a deal then,” he said.

“I guess we do.” She hated how he looked at her, like a hunter eyeing up his prey.

“Then right now I have this to say—” He rubbed his toe along a join between the timbers of the deck. “I saw you kissing my cousin in the night.”

She found she could not look at him, and studied instead his restless foot. His toes were long, each joint clearly delineated beneath his pale skin. “What of it?” she challenged him, knowing there was no point in denial. But it infuriated her that he seemed to know what she was doing or thinking at every turn.

“Nothing, little Sister. Nothing.” He leaned in towards her, his voice now serious and hushed. “Be careful where you rest your heart. Your blood may have given him a boost, but, believe me, Te Matee Iai does not give up its own so easily.”

Her gaze flew up to his, but she could not read the content of his eyes. “What is it you're trying to say?”

“Only this: those who use the Blessed Sisters' blood to halt Te Matee Iai's progress are not cured, merely given a reprieve.”

“Reprieve?”

He ran his hand almost tenderly down one of the ropes, and sighed. “Have you not wondered why so many of your Sisters have already died? Or why more and more are picked each Judgement time to fill the ranks? The need for blood—*ongoing* need—is as endless as this sea.”

“You mean—” Her question died as the meaning of his words struck her full force. He was saying Joseph still could die. But even as she processed this, out of the corner of her eye she saw an unfathomable emotion ripple across Lazarus's face. Of course! He was teasing her, knowing full well how much his prediction would cause her grief. “You're lying,” she accused him. “I heard your own mother say she could maintain his strength.”

“Maintain, yes. Keep him alive without more blood? Not a chance.” He looked pleased with himself, as though he believed he'd dealt her a mortal blow.

“You really *are* detestable. What kind of person would wish his cousin dead merely to score a point with me?” The answer came easily enough: *a liar and heartless beast*.

She turned her back on his deceit, hurrying down the deck to join Ruth at the tiller. From now on she vowed, she would not rise to his bait, no matter how he taunted her. And if he thought he could lay hands on her—well, he was wrong.

* * *

The wind rose to a gusty westerly, hitting the boat head on and making a hard slog of progress. As they tacked from side to side to make leeway towards the west, Maryam and Lazarus were forced to work together, adjusting the heavy sails each time they made a turn. It was arduous and concentrated work, and by noon the sun blazed directly overhead, the harsh rays bouncing off the water and striking at Lazarus's pale unprotected skin like open flames.

Maryam had just ducked into the shelter for a drink of water when she heard Ruth give a strangled cry from her station at the tiller.

“Sweet Lord in Heaven! Come and see this.”

Maryam rushed to her, following the line of Ruth's arm as she pointed out in front of them to the south-west. There, at the very edge of the horizon, something broke the regularity of the hazy border between sea and sky.

“Can you see it too?” Ruth demanded.

Maryam blinked and looked again, clambering to the very prow of the boat to see if she could gain a better view. There *was* something there, she was sure of it.

“I can!” she called back, her heart banging out its excitement despite the wilting effects of the sun. But the shadowy apparition was further to the south than any land they'd plotted on the map. *Time to wake Joseph*, she thought. *He will know.*

She charged back down the deck and ducked into the shelter, where Joseph lay sprawled across the bedding, his face flushed and his breathing thick and laboured in the stifling heat. She shook him by the shoulder.

“Joseph! Wake up! We think we might have sight of land!”

His eyes shot open but took a moment to focus on her face. “What?”

“Land!” she repeated. “Come take a look.”

He stirred himself, reaching for the map as he followed her outside.

She pointed to the mysterious lump on the horizon. “See? Right there!”

He cupped his hand over his eyes, peering intently into the distance before turning his attention to the map. “It *has* to be Marawa Island,” he agreed. “There's nothing else even remotely near us.”

“Praise the Lord!” Ruth cried, her anxiety extinguished by the joy that swept the group.

“We'll need to sail harder on to the wind if we're to reach it before nightfall,” Lazarus said.

Maryam knew he was right, but even now could not bring herself to acknowledge him. Instead she turned to Joseph. “How long, do you reckon, until we're there?”

Joseph shrugged. “Hard to tell. But we'll need to leave at least an hour of light to find a safe way through the reef.”

“And if we don't?”

“Then we'll have to circle it all night, well out at sea, and wait till morning.”

“You're joking,” Ruth wailed. “You mean we'd have to wait all night?”

“If you want to reach land safely, we really have no other choice.”

“In that case, let's get moving,” Maryam said, looking up to check the position of the sun. “I figure we have about seven hours of good light.” She studied Joseph, who still looked flushed. “I'll make some lunch, then let's see if we can move this boat more quickly.”

He grinned at her. “All right. You're on!”

Never was a meal prepared and eaten in such haste. It was as if they'd been infested by a swarm of gongolo bugs, the itch to reach land so great that sitting still was all but impossible. The race was on as soon as they had swallowed their last mouthfuls of the stale bread.

Joseph, Lazarus and Ruth took charge of the ropes, while Maryam swung the tiller in an endless cycle of hard tacks. Their concentration was palpable; no one spoke bar the odd curt call for help. After an hour the heat and sustained effort began to sap their enthusiasm, and still the island remained a teasing shadow at the far edge of their world. But they slogged on, breaking only for much-needed water, and by the passing of the second hour the island was clearly outlined against the sky.

“Have you thought about our tactics once we land the boat?” Maryam asked Joseph during a brief break for water rations. Now that the island lay before them, thoughts of their likely reception weighed heavily upon her. What if the people of Marawa were hostile to strangers? What on earth would they do then?

“I'm sure when they've heard our plight they'll take us in.”

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