

If there is no peace between man, and animals, and the land, there will be no fertility and the Oromo will cease to exist. If there is peace between man, and animals, and the land, Waqqa who lives in the sky will send rain and great abundance - Oromo proverb.

Chapter One

Abe stroked his mule's neck: the beast threw up his head, the white of his eye flashing, a sure sign something had spooked him. 'Hold up, Moses. Steady, boy.'

Moses's nostrils expanded and quivered, blowing soft, nervous breath across the silver hairs on his master's forearm: his long ears went back, flat to his mane.

'Yes, I smell it too.' He pushed the wide, floppy brim of his hat back from his eyes, with the back of the hand that held his staff, and hauled the reluctant mule forward. A damp smell of burning clung to the air.

The track wound along the bottom of the narrow gorge, among sparse trees at the river's edge. Where were the people of the village, the children? He rounded a bend in the trail and stopped, heart in mouth. The house before him lay in ruins, its walls blackened and crumbling, smoke still wisping from the windows. The body of a young woman lay at the foot of a tree. She lay curled on her side, the handle of a knife protruding from her belly. He drew closer, the breeze lifting the sickly-sweet smell of death into the air. She'd been dead a day, maybe more.

He tied Moses to a branch and bent to make the sign of the cross on her forehead. 'May God in his mercy forgive your sins.'

The mule let out a strangled squeal, wild eyed and terrified. Cold fingers crept up his spine as his eyes were drawn inexorably where Moses looked, up into the tree to which he'd tethered the mule. Above them was a child, a small girl: her dress, once a pale blue, was dark with blood, her black curls framed her face in matted locks, her head hung forward on her chest and her thin arms were outstretched. Through her hands, wooden spikes pinned her to the tree's branches and through her heart was a wooden stake; a cruel parody of Christ's crucifixion.

'Holy Mary...' His staff clattered to the stony ground and his fingers reached for the crucifix worn beneath his shirt. He swallowed bile and forced himself to look at her, to see the dark stain caking the insides of her legs, and the blood that had run from her wounds: she'd been raped, and had been alive when they'd hung her from this tree. His breath came in harsh sobs and he raised his eyes to the heavens, fists clenched. 'My God, why? Strike me! The fault is mine not theirs.'

Stumbling away, blind with tears, he puked his guts in the road. He wiped a sleeve across his eyes and mouth, untied Moses and hobbled him, letting him graze a short distance away, then he climbed the tree to take down the dead child. Cradling her in his arms, he laid the little girl by the woman. He remembered them from a previous visit, a year or more ago. They were mother and daughter, and it was clear from the woman's position, from the tracks of crusted tears across her cheeks, that she'd taken her own life.

He tore his hat from his head and dropped it beside him, bowing his head. God's reasons weren't for him to question. He'd been spared... God's will... these deaths were shown to him for a reason and all would be made clear with the coming of the Messiah. He struggled to remember the words for the dead, his voice barely able to speak them. 'O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, Treasury of good things, and Giver of life: come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every sin, and save our souls.' He crossed himself again, drawing some comfort from the action and the words. He had interceded on their behalf and God would save their immortal souls.

He grasped his hat and staff, rubbed his head behind one ear distractedly, and turned a full circle to take in the scene around him. Other dwellings lay blackened and in ruins. The remains of a sheep or goat, roasted whole and picked clean, showed the attackers had feasted well before they left. They'd been confident enough in their strength not to worry about being caught unawares, or they were confident in the peaceful nature of these defenceless people south of the mountains.

'Who's done this, Moses? The Northmen?' But the Northmen lived across the High Atlas, far to the north and defending their own borders. They shouldn't be here... at the very least, the mountain passes should have stopped them. 'But why would they risk such a hazardous journey. Could they have found out? This child... did they think she was the one? Is that why they killed her?'

The voice of reason answered him. *If they know about the child, they'd know it would be a boy they're looking for, Brother Abraham.*

A boy... yes. Had the Northmen discovered something the brethren knew nothing of? Was this a sign? He was being paranoid: crucifixions had happened in Morocco in the past. He pushed back straggling silver hair, captured it beneath his hat, and struggled to make sense of the scene.

Old age had made him complacent, content to watch the amusing power struggle between the Northmen's two high priests. Their in-fighting had kept their minds occupied, and their eyes away from their southern border, and that suited the brethren very well. He had a shrewd idea which of them was at the root of this present evil: he should have killed him when he had the chance. Whichever way he looked at it he'd failed and, if his cover had been discovered, their spies could be anywhere. They could be watching him even now.

He trudged further into the village, fearing what he'd find. All the houses were burned and the charred bodies inside them showed no sign of a fight. They'd been attacked at night, killed in their beds, apart from the one woman who'd killed herself with her own kitchen knife, and the one child hung up as a macabre warning.

A warning... He wasn't paranoid; the Northmen were showing him they knew the brethren's secret purpose, taunting him.

He searched the ground for tracks but couldn't make sense of them. M'Gouna, the small community in the Valley of the Roses, was further to the south-west. If the Northmen were going that way, they had a head start and would be there long before he could warn the town or any of the isolated settlements on the way. The dusty streets of M'Gouna, more than a day's travel away, lay before him as if in a dream, covered with the red of blood not roses.

His heart thumped wildly as God's message became clear. 'Guddaa Mana! Sweet Jesus... This could have been Jalene and Kiya.' He crossed himself. M'Gouna and the villages in that direction were beyond his aid but he could reach Guddaa Mana, the remote upland village he'd left that morning, before nightfall. It lay to the east, back the way he'd come. He hadn't passed the attackers on the road so, unless they'd taken a shorter route over the mountainous terrain, he should reach Kiya's village in time. Kiya was like a daughter to him: she reminded him of his Marika.

'We're heading back to Guddaa Mana. We have to warn them the Northmen are on the loose, Moses. The brethren should send ships to harry Deep Haven, and the sooner the better.'

The voice of reason agreed with him but pointed out that it wasn't a thing that could be done quickly. Men and ships would have to be assembled, recalled, repaired and provisioned, the Mediterranean crossed, and the submerged rocks that peppered the sea off the West African coast negotiated safely.

He huffed his impatience. 'The balance of power must be restored.' He unhobbled the mule and tugged on his rope. 'Come on, you stubborn brute. Hurry, if you don't want us both to be roasted alive.' The overladen mule protested noisily, but followed him as he hurried back along the track.

A mile further and he knew he wouldn't make it before dark, on foot. He was old, even for a Keeper, older than any of his friends at Guddaa Mana could guess, and the road to their village was hard and tortuous as it snaked back and forth like a serpent through the twisting gorge and on high into the barren mountains.

He stroked his wispy beard and sucked in his cheeks. If he left the track once clear of the gorge, and headed directly for higher ground, he could take a short cut. It would be harder, steeper going but would shave miles off his journey: there was no time to worry about being seen above the tree line and, if he dumped his packs, he could ride where it wasn't too steep for Moses to carry him.

The sheer walls of the gorge dropped away as the road climbed. He transferred essential supplies to his backpack and unloaded Moses. He hid his remaining worldly goods, including his only change of clothes which were unadventurously identical to the ones he was wearing, beneath scrubby undergrowth. Hauling the mule closer to a rocky outcrop, he climbed onto the animal's narrow back and urged him up the rock-strewn hillside.

Riding Moses, and walking where it was steep, he climbed ever upwards, crossing and re-crossing the easier route, dangerously exposed on the bare hillside but not daring to slow his pace. At last, he crested the rise: Guddaa Mana lay huddled in the valley and on the dry slopes below him, its warm, square adobe buildings blending with the red earth from which they were built. His heart rose at the sight: one day, God willing, he would come here and never leave again. A ribbon of green followed the river in the valley bottom and beckoned him onwards: water and shade and soft green grass and, best of all, good friends.

He rubbed sweat from the back of his neck. 'No sign of the Northmen yet, Moses. Come on. Last push.' He hung on to the mule's neck as he slithered and stumbled down the steep scree, following a dry creek formed by winter run-off and sending loose rocks skittering down the hillside ahead of them.

A figure saw him coming and waved: judging by the bent back, and the shock of white beard against dark skin, it was Moti, an Abbaa Bokku, a village elder. He staggered closer, breaking into a shambling run. ‘Moti! Gather the people! Northmen!’

‘Abe. Slow down, my old friend. Take a breath. What’s happened?’ Moti’s brown wizened face peered up at him. ‘Come, sit down.’

‘No time.’ He drew breath in deep gasps, his legs buckled and he clung to the mule’s halter. ‘Northmen attacked... next village... killed everyone.’

Moti’s dark-brown eyes widened. ‘Northmen... what Northmen?’

He waved a thin arm to the white-clad peaks, only now realising how ignorant, helpless and defenceless the work of the brethren had left these people. ‘From across the mountains.’

‘Why? Why would anyone do this?’

‘We must get everyone to safety, now. The cavern... Tell them to leave everything except essentials... blankets and food... and water. Provision it for several days... bring animals... goats... for meat and milk. Goats will squeeze through the entrance.’

Moti stared at him, mouth open, showing worn teeth green from chewing khat. ‘Goats?’

How could this gentle, peaceful man envisage the savagery of the Northmen’s raiding party? That they would come back to ruins, if they lived to return. He grabbed the front of Moti’s striped robe with a fisted hand, using strength he didn’t know he had, and almost lifted the smaller man from his feet. ‘Now, Moti, unless you want your wife and daughter raped and slaughtered, and your sons butchered. And tell them when they go to the cavern, step only on the rocks. Leave no tracks. I don’t know what’s brought the Northmen here but, if they find us, they’ll kill us.’

Kiya froze: it had barely been a noise. An elusive sound; a twig breaking underfoot, the quiet brushing of an animal against the undergrowth. Antelope would be a delicacy she could send the older boys out to retrieve for her. She melted into the thicket, her slight form, nut-brown skin and russet travelling clothes blending with her surroundings. Crouched down to wait, knife at the ready, she balanced on the balls of her feet and slowed her breathing, mouth slightly open.

She waited, still as a breezeless day, until fire cramped her muscles. The air brought the scents of rotting leaves underfoot, of wild boar, of dust, now wind-dry off the exposed and broken mountain slopes. The whisper of sound came again and a Screwhorn antelope crossed the path in front of her, a calf at foot. She lowered her knife: to kill a suckling mother left the calf to die, too, and was an affront to Waqqa who lived in the sky.

Crossing the steep-sided narrow ravine, she picked her way over the bones of the ancient bridge thanking Waqqa for the gift of water in this arid land, as she did each time she crossed the tumbling river. The track wound upwards through the wooded cleft in the hills and she strode easily, her bag swinging at her side. She paused at the top of the rise and let her eyes

feast on the view across the lands of legend to the south where, it was told, lay Boorana, the homeland of the Oromo peoples.

Beyond the harsh rolling mountains to the west, towards the sea her people had never seen, the sun sank in a lowering sky, edging the clouds with fire and painting the first snow of the waning year orange on the summits. Snow meant spring-melt, and spring-melt meant water for crops and good grazing for cattle in the narrow strips of pasture that bordered the river. The tallest peaks were white even in summer, and Abe said there were rivers of ice in the higher passes. She hoped Abe would be there when she got home, that she hadn't missed his visit and his stories of distant lands and strange people.

Her eyes were drawn south again, across a sparse country of low hills, dotted with stunted cork oaks and juniper: stories said desert lay out there beyond the feet of the mountains, vast and uncrossable. No-one ventured that way now, and from that direction none had come for many generations.

A slight wind lifted her finely-braided hair from the nape of her neck, bringing with it the smell of smoke. She breathed in the smell: wood smoke? Ahead of her lay Guddaa Mana, a straggle of ancient mud-brick dwellings and newer mud and thatched homes that nestled in the side of the hill. Home. She raised her head, scenting also the damp in the air: Waqqa had sent rain.

She lengthened her stride, eager to be home before dark: she'd been away too long and she missed Raphel and Jalene. She smiled. Her baby daughter had her dark, almost black eyes, but not her dark Oromo skin. She favoured Raphel more: not only did she have his curly black hair, an inheritance from their Oromo ancestors, but also his paler skin, finer features and deep-set eyes that spoke of their shared Berber heritage.

Jalene's name meant *we loved*. She longed to hold her, longed to lie with Raphel after nights away. She sighed, tiring now after three days walking: her own needs must wait. She brought herbs she couldn't find close to home, including fresh rosemary for her sister, Genet, also blessed by the goddess and almost due with her first child.

The track turned east again. The smell of smoke was stronger now: odd that she could smell it so far from home. Someone in the woods? Abe, maybe, if she'd missed his visit and he'd left the village already? She trod with greater care, uncertain why she felt wary, aware of every rustle as the light failed, jumping at every shadowy wing-beat of birds flying in to roost. Smoke wreathed above the orchard ahead and, with it, came the sound of voices shouting, screaming... the crackling of flames. She broke into a run. 'No, please, no.'