

chapter 1
I'm here now

Verdu stood stock-still on the warehouse floor looking into the dark water below. The ripples from his friends' escape vanished in an instant. Not a single bubble rose to the surface to mark their passing. No evidence that they had ever existed in his world remained with him, and he felt more alone than ever. It was like someone had died, or maybe *he* had died and passed on to a place he never thought he would be. Perhaps he was damned. He thought to himself that he may have just been braver than he had ever been, but staying in the Tugrulian Empire felt more like the mistake of a lifetime.

He licked his lips nervously, trying to think about his next move. The lingering taste of the Pramuc's lips distracted him for a moment, but he was more sidetracked by the thought that, somewhere in that final kiss, he had lost the idea of Chenda as a desirable woman, and now only thought of her as the Pramuc, the spiritual savior of his people, the One who came to free the Tugrulians. The savior had been found. She was gone, and he remained.

He pondered that final kiss for a moment. Until this point, Verdu had firmly believed a kiss, even with the wrong woman, was better than no kiss at all. He could have enjoyed

kissing her for a lifetime, but no matter how great it felt, he could tell she knew he was not the one for her, not the love of a soul mate. For all they had been through, the trials and dangers, the intimate spaces and the infinity of the wide open sky, she would love him always, but not in *that* way.

Even through his disappointment, he felt a touch of relief. She had walked with the gods. How could he compete with that? What kind of lover, protector, or partner could he be by comparison? He felt a little embarrassed to have even tried.

Approaching footsteps brought Verdu's attention back to the considerable dangers at hand. He dropped to his belly and reached his hands through the opening in the warehouse floor and pulled his body silently over the edge. He dangled above the brackish water for a moment then swung his legs up to the supporting beams between the pier pilings. As heavy boots signaled the search of the warehouse overhead, Verdu wedged himself between the slime-covered boards, his back pressed against the underside of the warehouse floor.

"There's nothing here!" a guard barked.

"I know I heard something," another guard answered. "We've already caught one intruder tonight. Maybe that crazy old man wasn't alone. Keep looking; there must be something."

The heavy footsteps of the Tugrulian guards looped all around the warehouse. Verdu tried to not even breathe as one poked his head through the hole in the warehouse floor and looked at the water below. Verdu, hidden in the shadows, remained unnoticed, and the guard sat up and complained, "Nothing here! Probably what you heard was just some stinking rat looking for scraps. It's almost dawn—let's go!"

“Fine, fine. They don’t pay us enough to chase rats. Go then.”

The soldiers tromped out of the warehouse, and Verdu relaxed against the crossbeams while he thought. *So, Pranav Erato was indeed caught by the Tugrulian guards.* Verdu wondered if the old man would still be alive when the sun came up. Not if they figured out who he was. Pranav Erato had been a thorn in the side of the Tugrulians for the last thirty years at least, and the spiritual guide of the resistance movement even longer. In the hands of the emperor’s guards, his life expectancy was not particularly long.

Verdu considered his next move. He could simply slip into the water and see if he could make a swim for it—he might be able to find his way out of the port of Nivarta and into the countryside. He could bide his time and sneak his way onto a Mae-Lyn trading vessel and sail back out into neutral territory. He figured it couldn’t be more than a four-mile swim to get out of the bay, through heavily patrolled waters at daybreak—piece of cake. Yes, he thought, the odds of getting smashed to bits on the rocky coastline as he tried to come ashore were pretty high, too, but what was life without a few high-stakes risks?

Is fleeing the Tugrulian Empire what I really want to do? Part of him longed to follow his friends straight out of this gods-forsaken lump of parched soil. Turn westward and never look back. He hated this land, and it, him. The empire had wanted to kill him at birth. The people here had been beaten and starved so long, they had started to believe they deserved it. The earth was hard, dry, and hot. The people would kill for a few mouthfuls of moss bread and fish. He hated life here, and considered selling his soul to be anywhere else.

Alas, there were no buyers.

If he had been standing, he would have stomped his foot like a petulant child. If there had been someone near, he would have complained incessantly. If he had a hint of an escape route, he would have followed it. In the absence of those things, Verdu climbed back into the warehouse and silently crawled over to sit on a small crate near a collection of giant pickle barrels. Resting his elbows on his knees, he began to silently pray, fervently wishing for someone to hear his plea.

Here I am, most giving gods. Here. You have seen it that I should be in this place—that you have taken me from the Pramuc. I don't mean to sound ungrateful, as I am pleased that she, and the professor and Fenimore, were blessed by you in their escape. But why am I here? I am your servant, my gods, I am yours to mold, to use. What is your will?

Verdu sat for a moment, waiting, but no reply came. *Thanks for all the help*, he thought sarcastically, and he had the vague feeling that someone was sniggering at him.

Right, I'm on my own.

He ran his fingers through his long dark hair and decided to let the gods deal with this problem. After all, they had gotten Chenda and her companions this far. Pranav Erato had decided that his getting caught would be the key to getting Chenda and the others out of the empire, and the diversion had worked. Verdu was willing to make the same deal with any gods who were listening.

“I'm walking out of here, just the same as I walked in,” he said softly. “If I'm heading the right way, then plow the road for me. Fair enough?” He cocked his head to one side, listening, and took a few hesitant strides toward the door. He felt a little foolish about talking to no one, but Chenda's message from the gods rang in his head, “What god you

have faith in is not important, only that you *have* faith.” He had faith in his plan. Some faith. At least a little.

As Verdu stepped out of the warehouse and onto the pier, there wasn't a soul in sight. He could just make out the first purple clouds on the horizon to the east. A few birds were singing in the scraggly, salt-stressed trees just beyond the port's gates, and Verdu took running steps toward the iron gates that separated the docks from the town of Nivarta. Each step brought with it the next thread of his plan: the gates to the street, the street to the alley, the alley to the safe house at Ma-Took's pickle shop, to Ahy-Me, to the resistance. She would help him, and they would rejoin those fighting to undermine the brutality of the empire, the controlling through starvation, the corruption, the servitude of the people. The run pumped the blood through his chest and he felt his own lean strength, conditioned by the weeks of hard travel, too little sleep, and less-than-nourishing meals. He hungered to toil, even until the point of death, to spread the message of the Pramuc: All the gods are one god, and each god is part of all the gods, and they are with you—have faith. Faith in the gods, in one another, in one'self.

Verdu felt a new sense of purpose as his legs ate up the ground on the way to the gates. He was so filled with promise that he hardly noticed the arrow that sliced through him from behind and emerged from his right shoulder. The shot in his left leg, however, fully caught his attention as the barbs cut through muscle and tendon. The wounded limb gave way, and he sprawled in a bloody heap just shy of the Nivarta Port gates. He tried to pull himself forward, and managed only to leave a smear of blood on the sun-bleached boards of the pier as he reached toward the town, his spirit willing him to go on as his body gave out. As Verdu lost

consciousness, the sound of sniggering echoed in his mind as the thought came to him, *No, it's not going to be that easy.*

Pranav Erato waited. Another drop of blood dribbled from his split eyebrow to the inside corner of his left eye. He blinked it out again, and the mixture of tears and blood raced down his sharp nose. The droplet held there for a moment and finally fell the last few inches to splash onto the dusty boardwalk. The emaciated man lay as still as possible outside the pier's guardhouse, counting the drips and keeping docile as the guards argued among themselves as to what the next course of action should be with this most wanted of fugitives.

"Execute him!" the first brute shouted. "Dead or alive—that's what the emperor said. Dead is a lot easier to handle. I say we separate head and neck and deliver the skinny rebel back to Kotal." The man brushed his palms far away from his orange-and-red uniform, as if sloughing off something nasty from his hands.

"You have no sense of value, Sergeant," the second one said. "You have heard the news from the capital, yes? Maybe it was *he* who masterminded the destruction of the Dia Orella. What does he know? What can he be compelled to say? He is the *pranav* Erato, so he must know about the Pramuc's return!"

Three or four of the guards began to shout at the utterance of the title *Pramuc*. "What are you saying? Keep it down with that—you never know who might hear you, and then we'll each have our head on a pike by the gate!"

The grumbling and shushing was mixed with sidelong glances toward the dirty jumble of knees and elbows lying beaten at their feet. The penalty for speaking of the Pramuc's return was death. True or not, people were talking about the

girl: “She performed miracles.” “She travels the countryside.” Rumors of her return were fueling the resistance. They had heard enough to believe that *something* was happening in their world—some change was coming. A few were even smart enough to doubt they were on the winning side, but, for now, their allegiance to the emperor kept their bellies filled, and if the emperor said there was no Pramuc, there was no Pramuc. It hardly mattered what their ears heard and their eyes saw.

Pranav Erato counted twelve more drips of blood as each splattered onto the rough boards, and began to smile. All this hemming and hawing among the guards meant that no one had noticed Chenda’s escape from the pier. She and her fabled Companions, the Scholar — Candice Mortimer and the Soldier Fenimore Dulal, were surely far below the surface of the Kohlian Sea by now, slipping undetected beneath the Tugrulian patrol boats. He would have giggled, but he was pretty sure that the guards had given him a few cracked ribs and he didn’t want to garner any more from the edgy thugs.

Escape was an option for him, and a fairly easy one, but he hesitated, listening and hoping he didn’t fall victim to the sergeant’s decapitation desires. He could feel the unease among the guards mixed with doubt and confusion.

The sound of footsteps and something heavy being dragged along the boards came toward the guardhouse. Pranav Erato surreptitiously moved to turn his eyes toward the noises to see what approached.

“We’ve caught another!” came a cry from the shadowy boardwalk. Two orange-and-red-uniformed guards were dragging Verdu toward the men assembled at the guardhouse. The *pranav*’s heart sank as he saw the slick of blood trailing from the big man’s body and his dark head

bobbing listlessly as he was pulled along, the feathers of the arrow sticking out of his back plainly visible in the first rays of the morning. Pranav Erato risked turning and sitting up slightly to get a better look at Verdu. Was he alive? Was he still breathing? His previous joy at hiding the Pramuc crumbled as the guards dropped Verdu's limp body on the ground.

The sergeant turned on Pranav Erato. "What's going on here?" he barked. He pulled back his heavy black boot and kicked a limp Verdu in the side. A whoosh of air escaped him along with a weak groan. Relief filled Pranav Erato as his plan suddenly changed. Alone, he could escape in a heartbeat, but with a badly injured Verdu, all bets were off.

The snarling soldier growled again, "Speak up, old man! What's the meaning of this?" He kicked Verdu again, and Pranav Erato scuttled like a crab to the sergeant's feet, bowing down and pressing his face to the floor.

"My good man," he begged. "I implore you: wait. Not so much for his sake but for yours, as surely the emperor will look upon you unkindly if you continue to pour forth retributions upon his long-lost nephew."

Professor Candice Mortimer shifted in her sleep. The tangy, metallic smell from the pickle tub in which she was enclosed had crept into her dreams, giving her visions a sharper quality than normal. Or perhaps it was the brine of the sea just a hair's breadth away from her. She could feel the salt water pressing in from all sides even as she slept. The waters of the Kohlian Sea sealed out the rest of the world so completely that Candice's entire universe consisted of the innards of Ma-Took's vat.

At the time, choosing to escape the empire by traveling underwater—past, or more precisely under, the

patrol boats—had seemed like a stroke of brilliance, but the reality of this conveyance proved most uncomfortable. Lying with her back against the cold metal of the makeshift ship, she could feel the chill starting to cramp her muscles. The ever-flowing seawater wicked away any heat her slight body could produce. Still, she felt safer than she had in weeks. It was quiet under the waves, and enclosed in the small space—just her, Chenda, and Fenimore—she knew there was no one waiting around the next corner, no ambush in the shadows. Hiding in the blissful depths, chilly as they were, was as good a sleep aid as a firm mattress and a down feather bed. More than anything, Candice wanted to go home: back to her office, back to her studies and students, back to her tiny faculty apartment and back to civilization. Of the Tugrulian Empire, she had had quite enough, thank you *very* much. Just a stinking, broken-down, backward country—that was her firm opinion. Even with the miracles she had witnessed and the friendships she had made, Candice’s greatest joy was simply being alive.

And yet, one wriggling doubt wormed its way through her thoughts: Verdu. It had been a mistake to leave Verdu behind. They should have backtracked, regrouped, and made a clean break—*together*. Now, she thought, *we are incomplete—both in our mission and as Companions*. She started to get annoyed and began to work herself up into a fit of righteous indignation. But with no one to vent to in her drowsing state, she began to sink deeper into her dreams, where Verdu kept calling to her and her friends.

Candice slept on as Chenda and Fenimore crouched together farther back in the pickle tub. The little craft plowed through the sea below the waves, water bending to Chenda’s will. The power of the Pramuc, the gods-given gift, itched inside her. Letting it trickle out slowly enough to push the

buoyant tub along deeply enough to remain unnoticed took incredible concentration. At the moment, the space inside Chenda's head felt too small. Her thoughts elbowed one another to make their way to the front of her mind.

Rationally, she understood why she was here, steering the pickle tub away from the Tugrulian coast and, to her way of thinking, running like a coward. The resistance needed her as a symbol, not a martyr. It was better all around for her to be in hiding than to get caught, or worse, killed. She needed time to learn to master her new gifts, to practice controlling water, fire, earth, and air. The Pramuc needed to share the gods' message with the peoples of the world. Yes, as Pramuc, she felt those things. As Chenda, she wanted to see her friends returned to safety, which meant getting as far from the Tugrulian Empire as possible.

These thoughts fought with others in Chenda's head. What kind of friend was she to leave Verdu behind? Pranav Erato? Her mother . . .

She had had a mother for almost an hour. After a lifetime of thinking herself orphaned, she had found the one person left to whom she belonged, and she had, unwillingly, let her go. Chenda felt unforgiveable. She wanted her mother. Needed her. She wanted to go back for her, for Verdu, and even more so, for the Tugrulian people. She berated herself, *When they still needed a leader, how dare you go?*

The urge to go back warred with her commitment to the escape plan, and her commitment to get Fenimore and Candice to safety. Her desires wrestled: run or stay, live or die. Home. Family. Friends. Mission. There were too many responsibilities working at cross-purposes within her. Keeping the fight within from spilling out of her head was taking a lot of effort, and she wanted to scream. In her heart,

she knew that letting a tiny whimper escape would betray her resolve. *Best just to keep moving . . .*

Fenimore, his inner thighs resting on each of her hips and his chest pressing against her back, shifted slightly, his hands holding her to him more tightly. The intimacy of the moment pushed down the traffic in her head temporarily. His scent was as reassuring as his touch.

Are you all right? she asked directly into his mind.

Fenimore shifted again and didn't answer right away. His thoughts were distant as well. A pain in his left leg had been distracting him, and an ache in the right side of his chest made him wish for a chance to stand up and stretch. He suspected that these twinges weren't his at all, and that Verdu had been hurt—bad. The connection between himself and Verdu had begun when they met on the *Brofman* years before. After struggling against it in the beginning, the pair gradually began to accept the connection between them, and their tandem movements eventually became just another quirk among many in the *Brofman's* crew. But lately, the connection between Fenimore and Verdu had become strained. The two had found themselves in conflict over Chenda. Fenimore was not sure how he knew, but he was certain the phantom wounds were echoes of real injuries in his best friend. Fenimore kept his thoughts to himself. If it was true, and Verdu was hurt, there was nothing he could do about it. They had run too far to turn back now. He had to see Chenda and Candice to safety, to the *Brofman*.

"I'm fine," Fenimore whispered, his lips brushing her ear. "It's just a few aches and pains. Nothing that a good night's rest on the *Brofman* won't cure."

At the mention of Captain Endicott's airship, Chenda's heart skipped a beat. It was the only place that had ever felt

like a true home to her. *Yes, that will make everything feel better.*

Chenda gave one last glance at the warring thoughts in her head and then pushed them all down, banishing them to the spaces between her cells, where she could choose to ignore them if she really tried. *Enough.*

She pressed herself deeper into Fenimore's arms and turned all her attention to the water surrounding her. All she really had control of now was getting her remaining friends to safety.