

chapter one

It's Gawatha time, early wet season. The sky is heavy and low, and the sea is grey and turbulent, when Yolŋu people return to their encampment at Bolartji Bay. Batjani and her sister-wives refresh their rain houses, clear the debris from the sand, and call out to greet their neighbours. As the day fades, Batjani slips out of the encampment alone and climbs to the top of Wayli'roy sand dune. A cool breeze ruffles her white hair as she builds a small fire and prepares to cook. She presses her legs into the sand to make full contact with the earth and recites the songs and kinship lines that make her this Country, make her Bolartji Bay. As she leans forward to turn a fish wrapped in paperbark, a flock of crested terns sweeps into the bay. She smiles and looks up to greet them. The birds lift as one. Then with a *karrak*, *karrak*, they dive towards her.

'Wah!' She ducks. 'What?' she yells at their backs, her skin tingling.

The birds lift again, circle above her, then they head out to sea like a volley of three-pronged spears.

What is wrong? Batjani thinks. *They say the Foreigners are coming. But we know the Foreigners are coming. We meet them here every Gawatha time. Why be so menacing? What are they trying to tell me?*

A sudden shadow appears beside her and she jerks around.

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It's her brother-in-law, Waditju, standing a little distance away, waiting for her to acknowledge him. His beard is stained red and cut to a point in the Foreigner's style.

She turns her face away. *You think that ochre beard makes you look exotic, you vain, arrogant, stupid man.* He is responsible for her and her co-wives at the moment while her husband is away on business. But by Law, he should only speak to her through his wife, not in person, so she ignores him.

He moves closer, his shadow stiff with impatience, insisting. She'd like to defy him, but he is a brutal man and, if her husband dies, Batjani and her co-wives will become Waditju's wives. Any slight he feels now will be punished with vengeance when he gets the chance, so she forces herself to lift her gaze and let him enter.

He walks in, his handsome face averted slightly in deference to the Law. 'Your granddaughter Garritji will marry soon,' he says.

Rage rears up inside Batjani. *How dare you speak to me as if I am your wife? My husband is not dead.* But she answers evenly. 'Garritji is not yet bleeding,' she says.

'Women can marry before they bleed,' he says. 'Djapalitjarri is expecting it.'

He's spoken to Djapalitjarri? Her anger spikes again. But then a prickle of fear. *Why is he interested in Garritji's marriage? He can't gain from it. It was finalised years ago.*

'Your husband will not be back,' Waditju says, encouraged by her silence. 'He may be gone still many moons, so I will officiate.'

'I expect my husband tomorrow,' Batjani lies, her voice confident, wishing it was true.

Waditju starts, 'He came to you?' he asks, trying to catch Batjani's eyes, to see if she is telling the truth. She will not break the Law and meet his gaze, but she turns a composed honest face in his direction. Sweat glistens on Waditju's forehead and cheeks, his movements are quick and uncertain. Batjani can smell his fear, but before she can inquire, he says, 'We will start marriage proceedings when the

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Foreigners arrive,' and walks away without ending the conversation in the formal way.

Probably too ignorant to know the proper protocol, Batjani scoffs, but she shivers and a shroud of unease settles over her.

chapter two

Out in the Timor Sea, a bissu stands at the bow of the prau. He opens his arms and turns his face, reverent and submissive, to the elements. The wind whips the ceremonial batik about his legs and rustles the blangkon tied around his head. The crew watch and wait. Theirs is the lead prau in a sixty-strong fleet from the islands of the north, bound for Marege, the great southern land. Marege is invisible. Only a bissu can expose it.

Bissu Su'sula faces the horizon. 'You are impatient today, Musimbayu,' he tells the wind, and motions to Kommandan to lower the sail. They must not run aground on Amba Islands. His grandfather captured slaves from Amba. He had no choice; he had a quota to fill for the Portuguese and the tribesmen would not sell their kin. But the slaves refused to live without their home and jumped overboard before they reached Timor. Now the tribesmen kill anyone who runs aground on Amba Islands, no exceptions.

The bissu brings his thoughts back to the present. He closes his eyes and breathes to still his mind. The chant begins in his chest. It is like a moan at first, but it builds, swells, lifts itself into the air and spreads out across the ocean, calling to the stone and earth of Marege. Behind him sixty praus wait, thirty men in each, their breath tight in their chests.

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Behind his eyelids, colours float like ribbons across his vision: pink, green, purple. Red becomes dominant . . . then ochre.

There. He focuses on the ochre, and builds from memory, piece by remembered piece, the battered cliffs of red stone, the white beaches, the mangrove forests. He opens his eyes, and squints. He can see a faint red haze on the horizon.

Bissu Su'sula lifts his hand and signals, first holding his fingers apart to show the distance and then pointing with a flat hand to indicate the direction.

'Hoist the sail,' Kommandan yells. 'South-east.' The wind fills the rectangular sail with a crack and the wooden planks groan as the prau changes course. Shouts ring out as each nakhoda orders his crew to turn the rudders and raise sails.

The praus move past Amba Islands, and soon the dull red rocky cliffs of Marege show themselves.

'Is this Marege, Uncle?' a young man asks the bissu, staring horrified at the barren dry land; not a tree, a bird, a movement, just hot red stone.

'Don't be alarmed,' the bissu says. 'It is a trick played on your eye. The shamans of Marege are very skilled.'

'Are they dangerous?'

'They are powerful,' his uncle says. 'But it is their power that keeps my position secure. And yours, too, if you walk in my footsteps.' He drops his voice, looking around to make sure no one is listening. 'Now that King I Manraqbia has accepted the one god of the Arabs,' he says, refusing to call the king by his new name, Sultan Ala'uddin, 'he will support the Muslim captains. The merchants also favour them because they are self-righteous and work hard for profit. But only we bissu can find Marege.' He lifts his head with pride. 'Only we have supernatural power. Only we can converse with the natural world. While the shamans of Marege are strong, we bissu will always lead the fleets who search for trepang in Marege.'

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‘Fly the flags,’ Kommandan yells, and the bissu’s nephew climbs up the tripod mast and sets long red flags flying. High above the prau, the young man can see beyond the red cliffs into the endless barren interior of Marege. The dryness makes him feel hollow inside.