

PROLOGUE

To begin with there was one of us, and now – if the news from Crucible is to be believed – there may soon be one of us again.

Lately I have been spending more time down at the shore, watching the arrival and departure of the sailing ships. I like the sound of their wind-whipped rigging, the quick and nimble business of the sailors, the lubbers and the merfolk, united in their fearlessness and strange ways of speaking. I watch the seagulls spoiling for scraps, and listen to their squabblesome cries. Sometimes I even flatter myself that I might be on the cusp of understanding them. Very occasionally, they share the sky with a dirigible or some other flying thing.

For a long time, though, it was difficult to return to this place. It is not that I have ever felt uncomfortable in Lisbon, even after the changes. True, there were hardships. But the city has endured worse, and doubtless, given enough time, it will endure worse again. I have many friends here, and, through the classes that I have organised, the children and adults I have helped with the learning of Portuguese, a surprising number of people have come to rely on me.

No, the city itself was not the problem and I cannot say that it has been unkind to me. But there were parts of it that for long years I felt obliged to avoid, tainted as they were by unpleasant association. The Baixa and the Santa Justa elevator, the long-established café at the top of the elevator, the tower at Belém, the Monument to the Discoveries. Not because bad things happened at all these places, but because they were the points where settled lives took sudden and unexpected turns, and (it must be said) not always for the better. But without these turns, I do not suppose I would be here now, with a mouth and a voice. Looking back on the chain of events that brought me to Lisbon, I can say with some conviction that nothing is ever entirely for good or ill. The city would concur, I think. I have strode its wide thoroughfares, enjoyed the benevolent shade of its grand imperial buildings. But before the city could be relaid out like this, it had first to be consumed in one terrible

morning of water and fire. On another day, my sister ended the world so that the world could keep living.

I finger the charm that she gave me that morning. It is a simple wooden thing, worn around my neck on an equally simple strand of leather. Someone might look at this charm and think nothing of it, and in a sense they would be right in their assessment. It has little value and certainly no power. I am not a believer in such things, even though there is more superstition in the world than when I was a girl. People have begun to think of gods and ghosts again, although I am not one of them. But it cannot be denied that there is a small quiet miracle in the mere fact of the charm's continued existence. It has come through an astonishing amount of time, tunnelling its way through history and into my care. It was my great-grandmother's once, and that is far enough back for most people. But I suppose the charm would have seemed inscrutably old even to my great-grandmother, and just as old to *her* great-grandmother, whoever that woman was. There must have been so many times when the charm was almost lost, almost destroyed, but it slipped through those moments of crisis and somehow found its way into the present, a blessing from history.

I have been fortunate as well. By rights, I should not be standing here at all. I should have died, centuries ago, in deep space. In one sense, that is exactly what happened to me. I wagered myself against time and distance and lost the wager. Of course, I remember very little of what it was like to be me before the accident. What I remember now, or think I remember, is mostly what I was told by my sister. She spoke of a meeting under a candelabra tree, of the drawing of coloured lots, of the selecting of individual fates. Our lives decided. She was jealous of me, then. She thought my fate offered more glory than her own.

She was right, in her way, but the things that happened to us made a mockery of our plans and ambitions. Chiku Green did get to stand on Crucible and breathe the alien airs of another world. Chiku Red did reach that tiny drifting spacecraft, and she did learn something of its contents. Chiku Yellow did get to stay behind, where (it was hoped) she would stay out of harm's way, leading a life of quiet unadventurousness.

So it was, for a time. As I have said, people did not as a rule believe in ghosts in those enlightened days. But there are ghosts and there are ghosts. If it had not been for a particular haunting, Chiku Yellow would never have come to the interest of the merfolk, and if she had not snared their attention, my eventual part in this chain of events would be, to say the least, greatly diminished.

So I am not sorry about the ghost. Sorry about everything else, yes.

But I am glad that the phantom came to worry my sister out of her happy complacency. She had a good life, back then, if only she had known it.

But then so did everyone else.

CHAPTER ONE

She was on her way to the Santa Justa elevator when she saw the ghost again.

It was down in the Baixa, not far from the river. A street juggler had gathered onlookers, a party of tourists canopied under coloured umbrellas. When a gap opened in the group the ghost was with them, reaching out to Chiku. The ghost wore black clothes and a black hat with a wide brim. The ghost kept saying something, her expression becoming steadily more tormented. Then the tourists closed in again. The juggler did some more tricks and then made the mistake of asking for money. Disgruntled by this development, the party began to disperse. Chiku waited a moment but the ghost was gone.

Riding the iron elevator, she wondered what she was going to do about the apparitions. They were becoming more frequent. She knew the ghost could do her no harm, but that was not the same thing as accepting its presence.

‘You look troubled,’ a voice said. ‘Why would you look troubled on such a lovely afternoon?’

The speaker was one of three merfolk jammed in next to her near the elevator’s doors. They had squeezed in at the last moment, offending her with their briny smell and the hard edges of their mobility exos. She had wondered where they were going. It was said that merfolk disliked confined spaces, and heights, and being too far from the sea.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I shouldn’t have spoken.’

‘No, you shouldn’t.’

‘But it *is* a lovely afternoon, isn’t it? We like rain. We admire the reflectivity of wet surfaces. The particular way the sun splinters and refracts. The glossiness of things that were formerly matte. The heaviness of the sky.’

‘I’m not interested in joining you. Go and recruit someone else.’

'Oh, we're not recruiting. That's not something we need to do any more. Are you going to the café?'

'What café?'

'The one at the top.'

Chiku had indeed been on her way to the café but the question had blindsided her. How did the merperson know her habits? Not everyone in the elevator would be going to the café, nor even a majority of them. They might stop there on their way back from the Carmo Convent, but the café was seldom the point of their elevation up from the Rua do Ouro.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'A friend of the family.'

'Leave me alone.'

The doors opened. Chiku shuffled out alongside the tourists and headed straight to the café, taking her usual seat near the window. She watched seagulls raucously, recklessly helter-skeltering on the updraught of a thermal. The clouds had begun to break, sunlight splintering off the tumble of wet red rooftops that ferried the eye down to the platinum ribbon of the Tagus.

She ordered coffee. She had been considering a pastry, but the ghost and the strange conversation in the elevator had taken the edge off her appetite. She wondered if she was starting to dislike Lisbon.

She had brought her book with her. It was an old looking thing, cased in marbled covers. Inside were pages and pages of handwritten text. Her letters all sloped to the right like windblown trees. Chiku saw an omission on one page and touched the nib of her fountain pen to the vellum. The inked words budged up, forming a space in which she could insert the missing word. Elsewhere she struck through two superfluous lines and the text on either side of the deleted passage married itself together.

Feeling eyes on her, she glanced up.

The merfolk had entered the café, forcing the proprietor to move tables and chairs to accommodate their exos. They were sitting in a loose triangle around a small, low circular table, a big pot of tea steaming between them.

One of the merfolk met her gaze. She thought it might have been the one who had spoken to her in the elevator. The aquatic – she thought it likely now that it was a male – held a teacup in his blubbery grey fingers and elevated it to the lipless gash of his mouth. His eyes were unblinking black voids. From the cup the aquatic sipped a watery preparation. He lowered the cup to the table then employed the back of his hand to wipe a green smear from his mouth. His skin had the gleam of

wet pebbles. On land they were forever rubbing oils and perfumes into themselves.

The aquatic's eyes never left hers.

Fed up, Chiku voked payment and prepared to leave. The ghost had ruined her afternoon and now the merfolk had ruined her day. She thought about walking out without saying a word. That would have been the dignified thing.

'I have no interest in you or your seasteeds, and I don't care a damn about your stupid plans for colonising the universe. And you don't know me or my family.'

'Are you certain of that fact?' Definitely the one who had spoken to her before. 'Truth be told, you've been taking a definite interest in us – the United Aquatic Nations, the Panspermian Initiative. That makes us take an interest in you. Whether you like it or not.'

Beyond the merfolk, through another window, the suspension bridge glittered like a piece of brand-new jewellery. A silver spitball of reconstructive machinery had been inching its way along the ancient structure for weeks, digesting and renewing metal parts that were nearly as old as Santa Justa herself. Supervising this delicate work, towering over the bridge on their preposterous stilt-legs, were a pair of mantis-like Providers.

'Whether I like it or not? Who the hell do you think you are?'

'I am Mecufi. You have been probing our public and private history – why are you taking such an interest in the past?'

'It's none of your business.'

'This is the Surveilled World,' Mecufi said sternly, the way one might explain some exceedingly simple thing to a child. 'Everything is everyone's business in the Surveilled World. That's the point.'

Tourists strode the distant castle battlements. Along the banks of the Tagus, cyberclippers made landfall after transatlantic crossings, elegant sleek sails ruffling in a stiff river breeze. Dirigibles and airpods slid under clouds, colourful as balloons.

'What would you know about the Surveilled World? You're not even part of it.'

'Its influence extends into our realm more than we'd wish. And we're good at detecting data searches, especially when they happen to concern us.'

The odd exchange was beginning to draw the interest of the café's other customers. Chiku's skin crawled at the attention. She liked it here. She enjoyed the anonymity.

'I'm a historian. That's all.'

‘Writing a private history of the Akinya clan? Eunice Akinya and all that stuff? Geoffrey and the elephants? The dusty goings-on of two hundred years ago? Is that what’s in this book of yours?’

‘Like I said, it’s none of your business either way.’

‘Well, that’s a ringing denial.’

The other two made froglike chuckling sounds.

‘This is harassment,’ Chiku said. ‘As a free citizen, I’m entitled to make any enquiries I wish. If you’ve got a problem with that, take it up with the Mechanism.’

Mecufi held up a placating hand. ‘We might be in a position to help you. But we’ll need some – shall we say reciprocity?’

‘What do I need your help with?’

‘The ghost, for a start – we can definitely help you with that. But we need something from you first.’ Mecufi reached into a pouch in his exo and drew out a slim wooden box, the kind that might have held a collection of pencils or drawing compasses. Mecufi worked a little catch and slid out an interior compartment. It contained a dozen felt-lined partitions, in each of which nestled a coloured marble about the size of a glass eye. His hand dithered over the marbles. They were a variety of pale colours, glittering and swirling, save for one at the back, which was either a very dark purple or a pure black.

He settled on a sphere of fire-flecked amber. He held it between his fingers, closed his eyes. It took him a few seconds to achieve a clean formulation, and to make the necessary assignment.

‘Take my mote,’ Mecufi said.

‘I don’t—’ Chiku began.

‘Take my mote.’ Mecufi pushed the amber marble into her palm and made her fingers close around the marble. ‘If it convinces you of my basic good intentions, be at the Monument to the Discoveries no later than ten o’ clock tomorrow morning. Then we shall visit the Atlantic seasteads. Only a small adventure – you’ll be back in time for tea.’

Pedro Braga was humming quietly to himself as he cleaned brushes. His studio reeked of varnishes and lacquers. Beneath that pungency lay the permanent tang of wood shavings, sawdust, expensive traditional resins.

‘Something odd happened to me today,’ Chiku said.

‘Odd in what way?’

‘To do with the ghost. Only odder than that. I met a merman. Named Mecufi.’

Guitars, in various states of assembly, hung from the ceiling’s bare

rafters by their necks. Some were only embryonic outlines, bounded in crotchet-like curves. Others were nearly done save for stringing or the final touches of decorative work. It was complicated, baffling work, but the guitars sold well. In a world in which assemblers and Providers could furnish almost any artefact at almost no cost, there was a premium in imperfection.

‘I didn’t think you wanted anything to do with them.’

‘I didn’t. Mecufi made the contact, not me – in the elevator, on the way to the café. There were three of them. They knew who I was. They also knew about the ghost.’

‘That *is* weird.’ Pedro had finished cleaning his brushes, leaving them to dry in a wooden frame. ‘Can they do something about it?’

‘I don’t know. They want me to go to the seasteads.’

‘Lucky you. There are millions who’d kill for an invitation.’

‘Good for them. I don’t happen to feel that way.’

Pedro opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. They kissed briefly, took the glasses out onto the balcony and sat either side of a gently rusting table flaky with white paint. They could not see the sea unless they leaned out at the very end of the balcony, where it offered itself up coyly for inspection in the gap between two nearby tenements. At night, when the glow from windows and street lamps buttered the city yellow, Chiku never missed the sight of the sea.

‘You really don’t like them, do you?’

‘They took my son. That’s reason enough, isn’t it?’

They had hardly ever spoken of her life before the day they met in Belém. It was what they had both agreed on, a relationship built on a solid foundation of mutual ignorance. Pedro knew of her siblings and that Chiku had a son, and that the son had joined the seasteaders – become, in effect, a member of a new species. Chiku, in turn, knew that Pedro had travelled widely before settling in Lisbon and that he had not always been a luthier. He had money she could not quite square with the modest income from his business – the studio rental alone should have been beyond his means. But she had no desire to dig for the details.

‘Perhaps you need to get over it.’

‘Get over it?’ Feeling a flush of irritation Chiku leaned on the table, making it rock on its uneven metal legs. ‘You don’t get over something like that. Plus that’s just the start of it – they’ve been messing with my family’s business for far too long.’

‘But if they can make the ghost go away—’

‘He said “help me with that”. That might mean being able to answer the ghost. To find out what Chiku Green wants.’

‘Would you want that?’

‘I’d like the option. I think maybe ...’ But Chiku chose not to finish her sentence. She drank some wine. A woman bellowed the same three lines of *Fado* from the open doorway of one of the bars in the street below, rehearsing for an evening performance. ‘I don’t know if I can trust them. But Mecufi gave me this.’

She placed the little marble on the table between them.

Pedro reached out and pinched it between thumb and forefinger with a faint sneer of distaste. He did not approve, Chiku knew. He thought motes somehow short-circuited an essential element of human discourse.

‘These aren’t foolproof.’

She took back the amber marble. It would not work for Pedro anyway. Motes were always keyed to a specific recipient.

‘I know. But I’m willing to try it.’

Chiku crushed the mote. The glassy orb shattered into harmless self-dissolving shards as the mote’s payload – its cargo of emotions – unfolded inside her head like a flower. The mote spoke of caution and hopefulness and a singular desire to be trusted. There were no dark notes in the chorus.

I was right about Mecufi being a he,’ Chiku decided. ‘That came through clearly.’

‘What else?’

‘He wants me to go to the seasteads very badly. They need me at least as much as I need them. And it’s not just about the ghost. There’s something else.’

The woman singing *Fado* ran through the same three phrases again and her voice cracked on the last syllable. The woman laughed.