

Eric Morgan

## DOWN THE SAMUR RIVER TO THE CASPIAN SEA

*[A transition piece, a bridge between two stories where the surviving wreckage from one is fed into the past of another.]*

A rowboat slips with little guidance down the silvery ribbon, passing barely visible into new lands. Pim stands in the stern, both hands on the single paddle, counting the ways his boat is like a crucifix, a game to help be rid of the nightmare he fled. For a start, below the horizon on his right the stars of the southern cross also lie beyond sight.

But the nightmare, no dream, has left Pim nauseous with the smell of burnt flesh and he drops to his knees. Worse, echoing in his ears is the voice of the girl ordering him out the huge wooden door. With the steely conviction of the very young, she had demanded he run, promising him she would make sure they burn. 'Go now,' was her order and he had obeyed and fled. Faded into the distance behind him the burning church still sends its ash to the heavens, reddening the stars of Scorpio. Pim's hand is shaking, clutching the boat timber and there he finds another parallel, for it is definitely of the same wood as the splinter of the true cross he saw at Dečani in Kosovo. He is clutching at straws, he knows it is just wood and he should get serious with his game.

In the stern of the little boat, Pim, in his mind, places himself as the base of the cross and faces what is in front of him. There, wedged in the bow lies the body of Chloe, her pale face making the top of the cross. Her outstretched hands clutching the gunwales make the horizontal bar while below, in the shadows her legs are twisted beyond their limits. Guilty as hell and of all the one that most deserved to die in the flames, Pim realises she should be an antichrist, inverted on his imaginary cross. But that would put him at the head and, deep down, Pim knows he is no more saviour than she a devil. Even now with those beautiful dark eyes fixed on him, he is in danger of forgiving her.

He decides she is most fittingly a scorpion. That way, her stars are setting behind him in the west, and as any who look to the sky will know, as Scorpio sets, Orion will be rising in the east.

'I will make sure they burn,' the girl had assured him at the door. Pim already regrets letting her fulfil her promise; in his wanderings yet to come he will be haunted, seeking out her strength in others and failing to find it. Only when years later he comes upon Violet in the desert will he find in her that same intensity of spirit. Stranger still is the first thing Violet says to him. She will tell him she is Orion the hunter, not Scorpio nor any other of Greek mythology, but Orion. To provide proof as well as to seduce him, she will open the front of her dress, baring the stigmata laid out in the pattern of the constellation from her shoulders to her belly. Pim is intrigued to find the meaning behind the puncture wounds, precise as a map of the heavens. Even so, when she reaches her hand out to him for help, he hesitates. He has too little to share with this filthy emaciated creature, but he will find that once he gives her his hand, she will hold it so tight that he cannot bear to let her go.

But that is waiting for him through the shifty waters ahead. Right now he looks to his boat and finds the best likening of it to the cross, one which embodies hope in his present darkness. He imagines the shadow of the girl, arms outstretched as Christ, her halo shedding phosphorescence around the boat. He considers the possibility of her resurrection in the days to come. But Pim shakes his head, realising she is no Christ figure, for he would have let them live. That brings another unsettling thought; that the girl is more worthy of his veneration.

The little rowboat slips them silently along its silver ribbon, from Scorpio towards Orion. But Scorpio has not yet set and Pim has not noticed Chloe's right hand slipping into shadow as she calls him to her. He shuffles towards Chloe, about to be stripped of the only remaining thing he has, his faith, and then torn between two Greek myths in the stars.