

The PATH *of*
ANGER

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Translated from the French by Tom Clegg

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*To Greg, my friend, my brother,
whose unfailing support and friendship,
despite the distances between us, let me keep writing.*

PART I

A SCENT OF LAVENDER

There comes a day in every life,
 A meeting point of what we were,
 What we are and what we will be.
 At that moment,
 As all things draw to a close,
 We decide our fate.
 Proud or ashamed of the road travelled ...

Es it allae, Es it alle en, Es it allarae.

What you were, what you are, what you shall be. It was the port city's motto. Its true meaning mattered little when even the humblest traveller knew the saying without ever visiting the city. Here, in the South of the former Kingdoms, Masalia had always been the city where all things were possible.

Possible because, positioned far from the Imperial capital, at the end of the world, it represented the last outpost of civilisation before the so-far-unexplored expanse of the Western Ocean. Large numbers of trading ships ventured from its port, sailing to the Sudies Islands or following the coastline to the cities of the North. And possible because Masalia had been conquered so many times, by so many Kingdoms, that it no longer possessed an architecture it could call its own. Each neighbourhood bore the traces of its successive rulers, from the tall square towers of the Aztene period, with their characteristic dragonhorn crowns, to the proud mansions of the Cagliari dynasty and their flower-filled balconies, not to mention the three cathedrals of the Fangolin faith, two of which had been built on the still-smoking remains of pagan temples. In this city it mattered little where you came from, who you were, or what

you might become. Masalia was the product of the history of all the former Kingdoms. As the saying went: 'Rich or poor, weak or powerful, you who are fleeing from other parts of the world, rest assured that here, at the crossroads of peoples, you shall find what you are seeking.'

Nothing could dampen the hopes and dreams evoked by the mere mention of Masalia. Not the heavy rain pouring down upon the red tiled rooftops. Not the mud it carried along the gutters in the narrow alleys. And not even the worn stone façade of this particular tavern, from whose open windows came the muffled sounds of men drinking.

'Are you sure this is the place?' asked a hoarse voice.

From beneath her ample hood, Viola peered at the tavern door. A few raindrops slid slowly down her round spectacles, blurring the brightly lit windows. She nodded, stepped forward and her boots sank into the mud with an unpleasant squelch. Her slender shadow, which fell across the wooden door, was suddenly engulfed by the much larger one of the person walking behind her. She hesitated, her hand poised over the heavy iron door handle. Trickle of rain ran over the black metal flecked with rust . . .

'You who are fleeing from other parts of the world . . .'

There was no going back now. Her mouth was terribly dry but there was no question of giving up at this stage. The sound of her companion clearing his throat drew her out of her reverie. With a brusque gesture, she seized the handle and pressed down.

'Rest assured that here you shall find what you are seeking.'

The fresh air they brought in with them dissipated quickly in the coils of acrid smoke which rose up to the ceiling, while the rhythmic drumming of the raindrops on the ground outside almost vanished beneath the hubbub of loud voices, bursts of laughter and the clinking of tankards. A bolt of lightning briefly silhouetted the massive shoulders and bald skull of the man with her. He closed the door behind him before following in Viola's footsteps and emerging into the light cast by the oil lamps. A serving wench came to a sudden halt, almost dropping her tray as she saw the tattoos covering his olive skin. They snaked their way gracefully over the most minute features of his face. For an instant he locked eyes with her before she ducked away to serve a table nearby. The drab, elderly merchants seated there applauded her arrival.

Times had changed and the Nâaga were no longer such frightening figures. It was becoming less surprising to see a *savage* here, in the city, and still less in a dive like this. While the Empire had included only civilised folk, the Republic prided itself on opening its doors to anyone ... or anything.

The Nâaga took in the room with a wary eye. Most of those present were traders from the small towns of the West, here in Masalia on business, but there were also travellers of a very different sort. When he saw Viola was already forging through the crowd without waiting for him, he let out a groan. He knew the kind of brigands who tended to hide in a place like this, where even a simple glance taken the wrong way led to trouble.

She had already reached the counter when he caught up with her and she was holding a wrinkled piece of paper out to a round-faced man. As he smoothed it out on the countertop to decipher it, the tavern keeper ran a hand over his balding, sweat-beaded head. His mouth fell open as he puzzled over it, revealing his three remaining teeth.

‘Dun ... Dun ...’ he said out loud. ‘Ah yes, that must be pronounced like “Deune”! He’s a fellow from the West? Yes, yes. That’s why I didn’t understand ... Written Dun, but pronounced Deune. Typical of the Westies, that is. Go figure, they’re not like us.’

‘This Dun ... is he here?’ asked Viola.

The tavern keeper raised an eyebrow and gave both the young woman and the Nâaga leaning against the counter to her right an appraising look. The dark face with the black serpents dancing across the smooth skin made him feel uncomfortable and he patted down a tangled tuft of pepper-and-salt hair sticking out over one ear. The woman was still hooded and shadow masked the upper part of her face. He only caught the gleam of a pair of spectacles reflecting the lamplight.

‘And who are you, exactly?’ he grumbled, peering at the protruding handle of the mace which the giant carried on his back. ‘I don’t want any trouble here.’

‘We don’t intend to cause any,’ Viola assured him. ‘Rogant here is merely my ... protector,’ she added as she slowly lowered her hood, her lips curled in a slight smile.

The tavern keeper’s recalcitrance vanished as to he took in the delicate features of her face. Behind the small round lenses of her

spectacles two deep green, almond-shaped eyes gazed back at him. Above her cheeks, freckles dotted her milky-white skin, accentuated by bright red hair which was gathered into a chignon, two stray locks dangling before her ears.

‘As you might imagine, without him, in these neighbourhoods, I’d be the one risking trouble.’

She was beautiful, and barely twenty years of age. Easy prey for any cutthroat lurking in the shadowy alleyways outside. A fine golden pattern had been carefully stitched on the hem of her shoulder cape. If she wasn’t a noblewoman who’d survived the purges after the fall of the Empire, then she must belong to the new breed of Republican upstarts.

‘Dun’s just an old man,’ explained the tavern keeper wiping his damp hands with a dirty rag. ‘He’s a bit touched in the head, but he’s never hurt anyone.’

‘I told you, we’re not here to cause any trouble ...’

‘All right then. He was once a soldier as he tells it, but he’s not dangerous, you know.’

‘I simply wish to speak with him,’ insisted Viola, carefully enunciating each word in a soft voice.

‘I remember the last time, about five years ago, somebody “simply” wanted to speak to a fellow like Dun,’ retorted the tavern keeper with a hard expression. ‘And you know what? The next day he was hanged in the square, in front of a cheering crowd.’

‘The purges are over,’ the young woman assured him in a tight voice.

The tavern keeper exchanged a glance with the Nâaga. The latter’s black eyes gave no indication of deceit.

‘So it seems,’ the man muttered.

He mopped his brow, as if weighing the consequences of pointing out the man they sought. As if he were wondering if lying would help matters. When he lifted his head again he wore a rueful expression. He had already given the old man away by alluding to his past.

‘You’re from Emeris, I’d stake my head on it.’

‘We don’t chop off heads,’ replied Viola, holding back a smile. ‘Nor do we hang people any more without a trial.’

‘But there are some Imperials still being hunted ...’ the tavern keeper said cagily.

‘That’s right,’ she acknowledged in a tone intended to be soothing. ‘There are some. But as it happens, that isn’t what brings me here. I don’t believe Dun committed any crimes other than following orders. I simply wish to speak with him. So just tell us if he’s here, and you won’t be bothered further, I swear to you.’

‘No problems, hmm ...?’ said the tavern keeper, glancing pointedly at Rogant.

‘Just speak with him,’ Viola repeated.

The tavern keeper flung his rag over his shoulder and hunted for a familiar figure among his customers. When he caught sight of the man, sitting at a table, he pointed him out with a swift nod of the head. Viola turned and spent several seconds trying to ascertain which man he was indicating. She exchanged glances with the Nâaga, but he was of no assistance. Rogant limited himself to keeping a watchful eye on the movements and actions of those present. She dismissed the tavern keeper with a wave of her hand and plunged back into the crowd, braving the men who stared wide-eyed at her and whistled in her wake. Serving wenches were rushing to and fro around her, carrying jugs in either hand. Raucous laughter rose from the seated merchants. The odour of sweat mixed with the pall of smoke hanging over the entire taproom. It grew sharper as she reached Dun’s table.

‘Just a few coppers, Dun ... I’ll pay ya back double,’ begged a small man, holding an upturned hat in his hands.

‘An’ I told you, I don’t want to see yer ugly mug again,’ grouched the old man.

His grey hair was spattered with filth and there was a black smudge on the back of his neck. If his shirt had once been white, only the sleeves preserved any evidence of that, here and there beneath a layer of grey grime and brown spots. His leather vest was so worn that thin cracks ran across the back.

‘I can win it all back, there’s four of ’em come from Serray. They don’t know nothin’ ’bout playin’ fraps. Ya know me, I can beat ’em two ta one.’

‘If you hadn’t spoken to me that way, I might’ve advanced you a stake. Never speak to me like that. Never.’

He jabbed an accusing finger and, with a sweep of the arm which caused the small man to stumble, pointed to another table where

four lively fellows wearing broad purple cloaks were singing at the top of their lungs.

‘Go speak to yer mates from Serray the way you spoke to me,’ he growled. ‘And you’ll get yer head stuffed up yer arse. Maybe then you’ll see what a generous sod I am. Now get away ...’

Head bowed, the small man turned on his heel and scuttled into the crowd of customers. Viola sensed Rogant at her back. She turned her head slightly and caught his eye over her shoulder. The Nâaga nodded. She lost no time in moving around the table to stand in front of the old man. His hands gripping a large tankard, he raised an eyebrow to peer at her. His face was weathered and stubble surrounded his chapped lips, while a ridged scar traced a curve beneath his right eye. He fit the description she had.

‘Dun?’

He gave no reply.

‘May I?’ she asked, placing a hand on the back of the chair.

Still no response.

‘I won’t take up too much of your time.’

He took a swallow from his tankard as she sat down, but almost choked when he saw the Nâaga taking a seat to his right.

‘What’s this savage doing at my table?’ he growled, giving Viola a black look.

‘Rogant is a Nâaga,’ she told him curtly. ‘Not a savage. Most of them are sedentary now, you know. Just like you and me.’

She pushed her spectacles up with the tip of her index finger before adding:

‘And he’s with me.’

‘So this tattooed creature is sedentary now, is he?’ the old man snapped. ‘And how does that excuse his sitting at my table without being invited?’

Viola withstood the soldier’s glare with such a determined air that he finally turned away to glance at the Nâaga. He had fought the Nâaga so many times that he found the Republic’s tolerance of them unbearable. These uncouth barbarians had burnt cities ... and were now settling down in them without anyone objecting. They were working their way in, just like the serpents they venerated. And one of them was sitting next to him. He balled his fist.

‘It’s said, here and there, that you served in the Empire’s army.’

‘Plenty of things are said in Masalia,’ muttered Dun before emptying his tankard.

‘I’m not from Masalia,’ replied Viola.

A serving girl came over to replace his jug and deposited two tankards in front of Rogant and Viola before disappearing into the milling crowd.

‘No . . . to be sure,’ said Dun, still glaring at her. ‘Your clothing is fine, carefully made, but covered with a thin layer of dust. So you’ve been travelling . . . and you’re well-born.’

‘There is no such thing as “well-born” since the end of the Empire,’ Viola corrected him sharply.

‘Oh, that’s right!’ sneered the old man. ‘Blood doesn’t count in the Republic. Anyone with the necessary drive can rise to the top . . . I’ve heard all that—’ he took a gulp ‘—drivel before,’ he concluded with a snort.

Viola exchanged a weary gaze with her companion. A faint smile played beneath Rogant’s tattoos.

‘My name is Viola. I am a historian working at the Great College of Emeris.’

‘What of it?’ Dun leaned towards her with a mocking expression. ‘You could at least wait until I’m dead and buried before studying me like some relic. In my day people were less impatient.’

‘It’s not *you* I’ve come here to study.’ Viola scowled.

Dun wagged his head, eyebrows raised. The girl was pretty, although a little too young for his taste. But her academic’s spectacles and her blood-red hair with the two stray locks trailing down over her ivory skin were appealing to the eye. Moreover, she carried a faint, delicious scent of lavender which awoke gentler memories. His drunken state overrode his good sense and for an instant he wanted to charm her. He let his guard slip.

‘I’m searching for something and I believe you can help me find it,’ Viola explained. ‘I have crossed the former Kingdoms and spoken with many traders and travellers . . . and one of them mentioned an old soldier he met in Masalia.’

The old man let out a sigh, both hands gripping his tankard, with a glassy look in his eye. But when he turned his head towards the Nâaga his face grew rigid again. Rogant was so discreet he’d almost forgotten the barbarian’s presence.

‘And?’ hissed Dun.

‘And he said this soldier told the most astonishing story,’ she continued. ‘That during the final hours of the Empire, when you were posted in Emeris, you fled the Imperial capital ...’

She drew in a breath and lowered her eyes, as if searching for the right words. Dun stared at her as he took another gulp.

‘... and that you took the Emperor’s sword with you.’

The old man remained still, tankard concealing the lower part of his face, the wine trickling gently through his lips. There was a fleeting glimpse of something like sadness in his eyes. The hubbub within the tavern seemed to fade away, replaced by the tumult of a battle echoing in his head. The bustling surroundings drew him back to here and now, but his heart beat more quickly and more forcefully. He felt a sharp stab of pain in his chest and breathed deeply as he lowered his tankard to the table, his gaze drifting over the grainy wooden surface.

‘You’re seeking Eraëd—’

‘We’re seeking Eraëd,’ agreed Viola.

‘And you think I have it,’ said Dun with a wry smile.

‘No.’

She shook her head, lifting one of her locks with a gloved hand. Then she took hold of the jug and started to fill the tankards the serving girl had left them. The red wine poured into the ochre tankards like blood upon the ground. Dun ran his hand through his beard, his eyes vague.

‘But you know where you hid it—’

‘And what if I were lying that evening; boasting to make myself seem more important?’ suggested Dun, scratching his chin.

‘I don’t think so,’ Viola replied.

‘You don’t know that.’

‘I am certain of it. I was told you spoke of the Eastern territories, beyond the Vershan mountains. That’s where you hid it, didn’t you?’

‘Even admitting I ever had Eraëd in my possession, why would it be of interest to the Republic?’

‘The sword served the Imperial family for years, and before that, the royal dynasties of the Caglieri, the Perthuis, the Majoranes ... I can go back even further if you like.’

‘I’ve never been fond of history lessons.’

‘I didn’t think so.’

Dun looked away, not sure what to make of her.

‘That sword represents everything your Republic hates,’ he said, meeting Viola’s eyes once more.

‘That sword is reputed to be magical. It has been wielded by many heroes ... it has even fought dragons. It’s part of the history of this world, regardless of whether an Empire or a Republic currently determines its destiny.’

Dun’s eyes narrowed and his lips began to twitch. He leaned back and gave a thunderous roar of laughter which drew attention from the neighbouring tables. A plump woman sitting on the lap of an old merchant who looked as fragile as a dry twig, visibly pricked up her ears. But one baleful gaze from the Nâaga quickly discouraged her from eavesdropping.

‘Heroes?’ Dun guffawed. ‘Dragons? Listen to yourself. There’s nothing easier than being a hero. Or slaying dragons. Do you know what a dragon is? Have you ever come across one?’

Viola hesitated before shaking her head, looking ill at ease. The old soldier’s sneering tone did not sit well with her. But she would have to put up with it. She’d been forewarned, after all.

‘They’re just lizards,’ Dun continued. ‘Big stupid lizards like the ones your guard dog here venerates.’

He tilted his head towards Rogant.

‘Now, let me guess. You and your friend here are going to ask me to accompany you to the Eastern territories in search of Eraëd. And what dangers shall we face along the way?’ His tone wavered between mockery and contempt. ‘Fighting monsters no one has ever heard of, saving besieged castles, slaying dragons? Ha! You’re young. And you remind me of someone else I knew who was always dreaming, always believing in great deeds, always imagining a *destiny*. That’s exactly what you’ve got with your ... Republic. The world belongs to you, eh? You have nothing to fear, you can just forge ahead. But in the end you know nothing about the world that surrounds you ... and when reality comes rushing in—’

He clapped his hands suddenly and gritted his teeth.

‘It will crush you like a bug. You believe all the legends and waste your energy trying to write your own. You think you can succeed at anything, at the dawn of your life, because you possess *the truth*. Well, here’s some truth for you.’

With a wave of his hand, he beckoned Viola to draw closer. And leaning forward, he whispered:

‘You don’t get to choose. No, no. You’re not that important. You’ve convinced yourself that your destiny belongs to you, that you just have to create the right opportunities. Well, know this: men’s destiny has never been anything but the murmur of the gods.’

Keeping his gaze locked on Viola’s he straightened up, nodding.

‘Nothing but a murmur . . . The gods sealed our fates when they created this world. But you, with all your grand ideas, have forgotten that, haven’t you? You don’t believe in anything. I’m surprised you haven’t burnt all the churches.’

‘The Order of Fangol is respected, despite what you may think.’

‘You don’t know the meaning of the word respect,’ Dun scoffed, shaking his head in contempt. ‘You’ve forsaken the Book, renounced it.’

‘Each individual may choose to believe or not. It’s a new world.’

‘It’s not mine,’ the old man said with a grimace, glancing at the Nâaga.

Viola did not doubt for a single instant that he was the man she’d been looking for. But perhaps she needed a different strategy to find a way to prod him into giving up his secrets.

‘Who’s speaking now? The soldier skulking far behind the battle lines, or the drunk old man?’ she asked. ‘Both, perhaps? I have trouble telling them apart, they’re so alike in their cowardice.’

The old man’s face stiffened.

‘You insult me,’ he muttered.

‘Really, Dun? What do I know about you, apart from the fact that you fled Emeris after stealing Eraëd?’

Dun wasn’t drunk enough to succumb to his anger, but nor was he lucid enough to consider the consequences of his next act. He stretched out his hand towards the jug and, without his fingers touching it, it began to slide across the table towards him. Viola was speechless, her eyes widening in astonishment. She slowly pushed her spectacles up to the bridge of her nose with the tip of her index finger as if to reassure herself that she was seeing clearly. His arms crossed, Rogant grew very still.

The *animus*. Only the great knights of the Empire knew how to use it. And since the Empire's fall, there were few left who could have given such a demonstration. The gift had been lost.

The carousing in the tavern had become a distant buzz, the customers no more than ghostly silhouettes. Viola and Rogant only had eyes for the jug before them. It had well and truly moved and Dun suddenly realised what his simple gesture, born of annoyance, would cost him. Here, where he had always acted the part of an ordinary soldier, he had revealed his true face to a chit of a girl just graduated from the Great College of Emeris. She had barely known the Empire. How would she judge him? As one of the butchers of the former Kingdoms, an enemy of the Republic she served? How could she, escorted by a barbarian, an enemy from his previous life, possibly understand him?

'You're n-not simply a s-soldier,' stammered Viola. 'You're a knight.'

'Bah!' said Dun dismissively, looking away. 'The Knighthood died along with the Empire ...'

Dun. She repeated the name to herself, trying to recall as much as possible from her history classes. *Dun* ... the name was familiar to her.

'Dun-Cadal,' she whispered.

The old man's eyes shone with sadness.

'You're Dun-Cadal, General Dun-Cadal of the House of Daermon,' Viola continued. 'Dun-Cadal, the commander at the battle of the Saltmarsh, you—'

'And was I cowering far behind the battle lines, then?' the old man interrupted her.

Viola was at a loss for words. The battle of the Saltmarsh was noteworthy in history for its consequences, but above all for its terrible violence. Few had survived. Dun-Cadal had been trapped in enemy territory for months before he managed to slip through the lines and return to Emeris. He'd accomplished his fair share of great deeds, but, of them all, his escape was the feat that stuck in people's memories.

'The sword is in the Eastern territories. Go and look for it there and stop pestering me. Go ahead, take what's left of the Empire and expose it for all to see.'

'So you admit you carried it—'

Dun looked distracted, his gaze lost in the distance, his eyelids beginning to droop.

‘I say many things when I’ve been drinking,’ he fumed. ‘You’ll spill your venom on that blade and its guard will seem quite dull compared to your arrogance,’ he added in a low mutter.

He wanted nothing to do with her, or with the Nâaga, or with what he had once been. Here, he was simply Dun and that was enough. Viola observed him closely, noting the details of his time-worn face, the brown wrinkles marking his cheeks. Dun-Cadal, the glorious general, now gone to ground in the slums of Masalia. He had not come here looking to make a new life for himself, but in search of death. She then noticed he was seated with his back to the door, so that any cutthroat could take him by surprise. If he was recounting, night after night, how he had been a soldier of the Empire, perhaps he hoped that someone seeking vengeance would finally put an end to his torment.

‘You await death here,’ Viola said.

‘I await whatever is given to me. Another jug, for example?’

With a sad expression, he upturned the empty container on the table with a trembling hand and gave the Nâaga to his right a twisted scowl. As was his wont, Rogant did not react.

‘Help us,’ pleaded Viola. ‘That sword is more important than you can imagine. I must find it.’

But amidst the raucous noise of the tavern her request seemed to go unheard. The smoke from the pipe of a fat man seated at an adjoining table drifted between the old general and herself.

‘I beg you, Dun-Cadal ...’

He slowly waved away the cloud of smoke, lost in his thoughts. She was wasting her breath. He wasn’t listening any more. Rogant leaned towards her and the look he gave her was eloquent enough to need no words. She swallowed and ran her gloved hands over her cape which had barely had time to dry. Then she stood up.

‘Very well,’ she declared. ‘I suppose it’s useless to plead with you.’

She slowly drew up her hood so that only the sparkle of her green eyes penetrated the darkness masking her face.

‘I thought I was speaking to the great General Dun-Cadal but I’m forced to conclude I was mistaken. Look at you ... you’re not even the shadow of what you once were. You’re an empty husk without

any dignity, only fit to raise a glass in bitterness. I can scarcely believe the legend of your deeds at the battle of the Saltmarsh can be true. Seeing you like this, I'm forced to doubt you ever had greatness in you.'

He did not once lift his eyes to hers while she spoke.

'Yes ... you came here to find death. You haven't understood: you're *already* dead. You can try to hide your true identity, to protect your reputation, but you're wasting your time. When the world learns what has become of Dun-Cadal Daermon ... the only tears shed will be of pity, not of sorrow.'

She disappeared into the crowd without waiting for a reply, followed by the Nâaga. As the fresher air in the alley cleared away the stale smell of sweat and alcohol, she was still asking herself if she had found the right words, and she slowed her stride as they walked through the pouring rain.

'Have faith,' Rogant advised.

Have faith? When she hadn't even been warned she'd be dealing with Dun-Cadal Daermon, not some ordinary soldier.

'I've known *him* longer than you have,' Rogant was saying. '*He* knows what he's doing.'

As if to confirm this statement, a voice called out from behind them.

'Hey!'

Viola turned round slowly. Dun-Cadal was an even more miserable sight standing on the tavern step than he had been seated at his table. The rain dripped down his face and it was possible there were tears mixed in with it.

'What do you know of Dun-Cadal?' he snarled with a quaver in his voice. 'You come *here*, you sit at my table and you spit all over what I was. What I am ... what I will still be ...' He balled his fists, tottering on his feet. 'But what do you know?' he raged. 'What has the Republic taught you?'

He took a few paces and then slumped against a wall. A flash of lightning illuminated his wrinkled face. He seemed so ... ravaged.

'What do you know of my story?' he asked, lifting his eyes to the sky. 'What I've seen, what I've done? What do you know about the battle of the Saltmarsh?'

Viola did not move a muscle. She simply looked at him leaning

against the façade of a house, his boots covered in mud, his cracked leather vest, his wine-stained shirt sleeves soaking in the rain.
'So tell me.'