



The Senchai Mosaic

Book One of the Fadó Series

Joseph A.
Callan

Very slowly, Jordan brought the unsuspecting fly down low so Belinda could see it. The fly perched among the hairs on the back of Jordan's hand, working its way down to his skin. Belinda saw large yellow-green pupilless eyes looking at her or perhaps at the hand it was about to bite, she couldn't tell which.

"The fly takes time to ready its bite," he said. "If you are lucky, you will kill it before it bites the back of your hand. The fly must never suspect that any treachery is afoot!"

She never saw Jordan's right hand move. She heard the smack and the fly disappeared beneath his palm. When he lifted it, the fly rolled off onto the ground. Belinda squatted on her haunches. The deer fly didn't look as big now as it lay in the dust. The eyes hadn't changed, but she could tell there was no life in them.

"You took its life," she said.

"Yes, child." He took his hat from her and replaced it on his head. "You can't always reason with the one who will harm you."

Book One of the Fadó series

The Senchai Mosaic

Joseph A. Callan

Jigsaw Press
Sun River Valley, Montana

The Senchai Mosaic© copyright 2010 by Joseph A. Callan
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted by any means—including, but not limited to, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, audio or video—without express written consent by the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

For information address: Editor, Jigsaw Press, 784 US Hwy 89, Vaughn, Montana, 59487

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any similarities to actual events, locales, or persons, either living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 9781934340615 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781934340622 (eBook)

LCCN: 2010942021

Back cover photo of Mr. Callan by David Harris

Proudly published in the USA

For the missing pieces of your reading puzzle...

Jigsaw Press
www.jigsawpress.com

*To Paul Bagdon,
writer, friend,
and the meanest teacher I ever had.*

Acknowledgments

For me, writing this book, was a mixture of very hard work and tons of fun. There were times I felt brilliant and times I felt intimidated and inadequate. It was at those difficult times especially, that I was (and am) thankful to my wife, Mary Eileen, who encouraged me and kept me going. She remained resolute when I felt like quitting. She is my “Verdor.” Every man should be so lucky.

It was my great fortune to have a father who loved literature and words. I have never met a man who had as extensive a vocabulary. It is because of him that I write and enjoy doing so. Unfortunately he didn't live to see this book come to print, but he is in here. He is my beloved “Pater Nos.”

I acknowledge my children, all grown now, Meghan, Brendan, Sean and especially Devin, our youngest who inspired my story telling when she was a young child. I can still hear her saying: “And then what happened?” after the bed time story I was making up and thought I had finished.

Brendan, thanks for your edits and suggestions and encouragement.

Thanks to Meghan, who now has two “wee waners” of her own, (future writers, I hope) and Sean, you were both very kind and tolerant of my reading to you, trying out new chapters and plots at the dinner table.

Thanks to my sister, Teresa Valentine.

Writing is an art, rarely perfected. Writers seek that magical turn of a phrase like the word addicts they really are. For me, it took help and I had the best. I belong to two writing groups who gave me the most valuable of gifts: their time and honesty and their skill. The first

group was known as “Paul’s Group.” (Paul Bagdon to whom this book is dedicated) I will always cherish the time spent with these wonderful people, all great writers: Emily Altman, our POV police, brilliant with her comments, if she said she “loved it,” you knew you done good; Bonnie Frankenberger, who kept us organized and set the standard for writing natural dialogue; Blanca Mastbaum Kane, our fact checker, (outstanding cook too, her snacks kept us all feeling loved); John Karp and Louise Whitney have writing humor down to a tee; Willow Kirchner, who has a most insightful mind and an edgy and always interesting perspective on all things; Art Maurer, calm, methodical, and spot on with his criticisms; Peter Maurer, who brought the fresh young voice and insight this genre needs; Linda Pepe who told me in my early miserable attempts that I had imagination and the rest would come, thanks for that; and last but not least, Roz Pullara, who showed me the power of great imagery and metaphor, and who never wrote a dull scene.

And my second group called “Writing Pals”: Larry Belle, Cathy Salibian, Sue Vinocour, and Neil Frankel—Your exceeding generosity of valuable time and talent is humbling. Your intelligence was a boon to me and even though not one of you would purchase or take a fantasy book from the library, you gave me your best. I hope that I made you proud.

There is no substitute for a skillful editor. Because of the scheduling format of both these writing groups, it was impossible for either group to critique this book in a contiguous time frame. Therefore I would like to thank Mari L. Bushman of Jigsaw Press. She put the important finishing touches, strengthened the weaknesses, trimmed the fat, evened out the jagged places, and simply made this novel so much better.

—*Joseph A. Callan*

Prologue

“TO BECOME A SENCHAI is a lifetime of study. What does that mean, Thomar? *Reprose ne nihi ta!* Respond to me!” Pater Nos’ dark eyes peered out from under bushy white brows. With his right hand, he stroked his long white beard. In what he considered his most playful, imperious mood, he raised one eyebrow in mock parody of himself, as he had seen the students do when they thought he wouldn’t notice.

Thomar was on his feet, rigid as a candlestick. A bright lad of eight years, he was now in his fourth year of training, ahead of some of the others present, although it was not uncommon to mix the academic levels, especially for story time. A shock of brown hair fell over freckles that blended into one on a pug nose. He was the smallest of his class. Pater Nos enjoyed him and picked on him regularly. The girls in the class favored him also.

“It means that,” the words poured from Thomar in his haste to please, “it means you keep learning, but you are never learned; you can be grand, but never humble enough; that when you think you are wise, then you are a fool.”

Thomar studied his teacher with eyes so intense that no one could tell if he were about to burst out laughing or crying.

Pater Nos kept him in suspense for a few seconds with his arched brow, then said, “Good, Thomar. It is my hope that some day you will come to believe your words. For that, you may bring me my *drogha*,

as hot as you can carry. There's a lad, and put it on my chair. Now then, as for some of you, soon, perhaps tomorrow, you will begin your education in the divining arts."

A ripple of excitement flowed around the room with the creaking of chairs and the turning of smiling faces.

"All of you please me," Pater Nos said. "I see in your bright, young, faces, many rewarding tomorrows. But for today, I will sit with you a while longer and finish my story, as you wish, if you promise to return to your studies straight away when I am done. Kinlein, be dear and fetch my cloak. There is a chill in the air that wants to get the better of me."

Pater Nos studied the young faces in front of him wistfully. Only he knew what lay ahead of them. He wrapped his cloak about him, then slowly lowered his ancient frame into his chair. With cup in hand, he continued the story the students had begged of him.

"Yes, Onnie, to answer you, I did send a mouse to Darkin's lair, poor thing. It suffered because of my arrogance. So mind that you are careful about such things, when you become Grand. It is not a badge to do what you wish, I assure you."

He again tightened his cloak about his old shoulders, then sipped the steaming drogha. The hot liquid, made from the leaves of the Moo plant, always soothed him.

"It is cruel," he continued, "to enlist the innocent to fight evil, yet at times the pure are the only ones who can. The mouse's death bruised my soul, but nature, as you know, seeks a balance, and as for Putris Darkin, well, you will learn what happened to him, but all in good time."

The new girl sat on the floor furthest from Pater Nos, her legs crossed in front of her, her hands supporting her chin the way four-year-olds sit. She stared up at him, soaking in every word, every movement he made. She was a captivating child of surpassing beauty. Her blue eyes penetrated rather than looked; her composure hinted at one who takes interest in all things, yet hides her pain well. Her father had recently been killed. Pater Nos had been expecting her.

“But first, you must introduce me to your new friend.”

All the young heads turned toward the girl. Thomar stood. “Her name is—.”

The blond child cut short Thomar’s introduction.

“My name is Belinda, Grand Lord Pater Nos, and I want to go to school here.”

Pater Nos studied the child over the rim of his steaming cup. A quickening of hope stirred within him, his hands tightened their grip on the mug of tea.

Finally, he thought. *Finally*.

One

FLEN THE EXECUTIONER eased his large hand inside the leather bag that hung on a wall hook above his bed. He worked his fingers over the smooth surfaces of the spheres inside until he found the one he wanted, then withdrew it, massaging the obsidian orb in his palm, thrilled with the luster, the response to his touch.

He would kill her with this one.

Flen rubbed the globe along the outside of his nostril, imparting an oily sheen. The cleft at the end of his nose showed clearly on the stone. He grinned at his ugliness.

“You’re a handsome one, you are.”

He sneered, exposing corrupt teeth. “It is your turn, Bortal. The rest of you will have to wait and I’ll abide no jealousy among the lot of you.”

He shook the bag as if to discipline the remaining orbs, listening to them click against each other.

“I’ll wager it’s been a long time since you tasted the blood of a woman,” he teased the orb he called Bortal. “Let’s see if you are up to it. If not, I have a willing replacement in Testo or even Vord. Aha! And the nasty little Tro awaits to show all of you,”

He shook the bag again, then returned Bortal to its home. In his mind, he pitted one against the other, whipping them, he fancied, to a fever of envy. Finally, he tied the bag by its leather drawstring to his

belt and strode from his bedroom through a solitary house, out the back door where his executioner's block waited.

The execution block was no more than a great stump of cedar, three hands high and twenty across, with a hollow depression carved in its center. He had not covered the block of late, so scarce was the rain. If the others discovered his negligence, there would be reproach.

"The depths of Nye claim them all," he swore loudly. He hated them all and they, in turn, had little to do with him.

The young children of the city were terrified of him and cried out, so their mothers hid their faces until Flen's hulking form was well past. Older children dared taunt him, sometimes throwing stones from behind the safety of a wall, but he never gave chase. He wasn't stupid; he would never risk his office for a loutish child.

A poor example of the Giant's race, Flen was the kingdom's wart.

Again, he removed Bortal from the bag, placed it gently in a nest of dead grass on the ground next to the stump, and grabbed a battered seed sack full of sand that slouched over the top of a nearby fence post. On the sack he had painted a crude pair of eyes, a nose and mouth.

"Come along," he scolded the face. "Let's not bring shame to yourself by cowering like a hairless rat."

He roughly placed the sack down in the hollow of the stump, then knelt beside it.

"That's just so," he coaxed. "Put your head down and keep your eyes on the block. If you do, I'll be kind to you."

Flen began to caress the sack, gently stroking the makeshift cheeks, pretending to move hair or braids away from its neck. The trembling he imagined beneath his touch excited him.

"There you are, you witch," he murmured. "What do you have to say for yourself now? Not so high and mighty without your purple hat then, are you?"

He rose up to pace about the stump, lecturing the sandbag that was now, in his imagination, the person of Governor Lorca. He fell silent for a time, strutting about as one preoccupied with some detail of office, then began to chastise her again. With a swift kick to her

side, as if she lay a prone supplicant, her head resting on the stump, he punctuated his remonstrance.

“Let this be a lesson to all of you,” he bellowed angrily at the dry air. He knelt again, plucking the orb from its nest.

“Do your job, Bortal my love.”

His excitement grew, engorging him.

Flen rested the orb gently on what would be the nape of Lorca’s neck. He gained his feet and strolled leisurely toward the fence post, where his hammer leaned. Looking down at his arms and legs he watched the swell and give of his muscles, admiring the tone of them. His sweat made them glisten like newly tanned leather. He opened and closed his palms, watching the play of tension along his forearms, fascinated with his protruding veins.

He would sweep her legs with his great hammer. When she lay crippled and moaning, he would drag her to the block and give her to Bortal. The swelling in his loincloth pinched, demanding to break free.

In a tremulous whisper, he said, “I tried to tell you now, didn’t I, Lorca? But you would never hearken to me, would you? He’s just an ox, isn’t he? No one asks me. And now you’ve invited a foreigner, a Senchai. You are a fool and you will pay the fool’s price.”

Flen grasped the long-handled hammer, then returned to hover over the sandbag that lay unaware. Some of its threads had detached themselves and lay awkwardly frazzled. The sight of them, for some reason, caused him the irksome disappointment of not seeing the head of Lorca any more. The victim of his virulence was only a sandbag.

His thoughts turned sour, the excitement deserted him. Deflated, the disappointment hung on his face. Feeling weak, he bent and retrieved the sphere, returning it to the bag.

Flen had never executed anyone.

He tossed the hammer and it slid across the barren ground toward the fence post from whence he had retrieved it. Before it rested in place, Flen turned and shuffled, head down, back into his house. He returned the leather pouch of globes to their hook above his bed and threw himself across the tick. He would try to sleep.

The house shook with a pounding at his front door.

A visitor?

Flen quickly came to his feet, immediately suspicious. He glanced at the bag to see that his treasured orbs were safe. It struck him that whoever was at his door might see the block uncovered in his back yard and his hammer poorly regarded. He would say he was earnestly practicing and had just now come inside for refreshment.

I'll have to be more careful, he rebuked himself, but who would think that I would ever have a guest?

“Peace to this house.”

He recognized the voice of the assistant governor. He knew what she wanted.

Flen opened the door and replied, “And peace to those who enter it. Welcome, Hisash. Come in. You find me unprepared for visitors, as I was working my trade out back.”

He made a show of wiping his brow with the back of his forearm. *Hisash—in my home? Her plans must be more urgent than I thought.*

She had been attending him of late. Twice within this month, she had “run into” him by the town’s deep well on his way back from the Library of Tomes. She had been flattering and conversational.

“I have noggin, but no wine,” he lied. “Will you partake?”

“Joyfully,” she lied in return. “There is nothing like the drink of the commoner to remove the dust from the parched throat of even the highest born.”

Flen eyed her momentarily. Had he just been insulted? He pointed to the only table through a doorway into his scullery.

“Sit there,” he said before retreating to the basement for a flask of the bitter drink.

“High-born, my red round bottom,” he grumbled, out of Hisash’s hearing. “Who does she think she is? I know you, you vixen. You are the daughter of Dep the Soaper, as lowborn as a toad.”

Flen pushed bottles of good wine aside on the dusty shelves to lay his hand on a flask of noggin. Satisfied that it wasn’t his most recent, he returned to the kitchen.

Hisash sitting in his chair needled him. He would have none of it. *The darkness take bad manners.* “You are in my chair,” he said, scowling at her.

“Your pardon, good friend, I meant no insult.” She removed herself to a seat on a bench opposite the table.

“None taken.”

He took two mugs from a cupboard shelf, blew the dust from inside them and placed them on the table.

“To what do I owe the honor of this visit, good Hisash? Are you lonely for the company of a good man?” He snorted derisively. What could she do to him, anyway? *In one month she’ll be laboring at the soap works.*

It wasn’t romance, he was sure. He knew, as did anyone, that she was Lorca’s lover, at least up until last season’s pitiful harvest. She would have little to do with men. Flen, being a quiet listener, relied on gossip to glean his knowledge. His position as executioner gave him not only voting rights at the council, but access to the Governor’s hall as well. It was there by the shadowed door that he overheard the whispers.

The last council meeting was of particular interest. Governor Lorca had decided to invite the Senchai wizard to the valley. The decision was not well met—with some, including Hisash, openly hostile toward it.

Six days ago, a pigeon had brought the news from the Mosaic. A female wizard called Verdor would be sent. Flen was sure she was due any day now.

Hisash grabbed one of the mugs just as Flen filled it, and had it to her lips before the blessing. She grimaced at the taste of it.

Flen sensed the urgency in her. He liked it better. *Get to it and state your mind.* He was no good at the social protocols anyway, having little opportunity to practice them.

“You know the law of Troca, good Flen?”

“And if I do?”

“Then I can make you governor if you have the hair for it.”

Flen noticed a glint of fear in her eyes. She had crossed a line and knew it. Hisash had goods to sell now and, if refused, her fate in the

soap works would be assured. She had come too far and was too accustomed to the life of an assistant governor. She was ready to die rather than go back to being a commoner.

“I have been thinking about Troca lately,” Flen said. Hisash, herself, had germinated this seedling in his head at their last meeting by the well in a conversation that had stimulated his avid rash of practice sessions of late. “What is it that you could offer me?”

“Power.” She let the word linger in the air as if she had spilled perfume on the table before him.

“I am quite satisfied with my humble office. I have no needs. Besides, how could you, who in one month will be swabbing soap scum for your daily bread, help me, already an officer of the council?”

Hisash winced, recovered herself swiftly, and said, “Think, Flen, you could be governor. Think what that will mean to you. You will be powerful beyond your wildest dreams; you will be an emissary to the Mosaic. The name Flen will be respected. And, with my help, you will turn our valley back to prosperity. Your name will be scrolled in the Tome of Governors. You will be forever revered as the one who saved us.”

“If I challenge Lorca and kill her, why should I need you?” Flen poured the noggin again, carelessly spilling some on the table. He liked what he was hearing.

“You will need me for very important reasons,” she said, retrieving her filled mug. “You will need an assistant with experience, since you know nothing about the legalities of governing, or how to approach the Mosaic. You cannot look the fool to them or they will shun our kingdom. Look around you, Flen. The drought is drying us to slow extinction. The oxen, even our most hale lines, are about to collapse. The women in the valley are barren. A child has not been born in more than twenty moons. You could change that with my help, Flen. You could be our Deddimus.” Her voice barely above a whisper, she breathed the god’s name.

The two conspirators bowed their heads, more from habit than any reverence.

Hisash slurped her noggin. Flen looked about him with feigned indifference as she continued.

“I could gain support for you. Already Entwias is angry. He believes nothing but a change of governor will save his precious animals. Several others are incensed that Lorca has asked for the wizard. What can the wizard do that we haven’t done for ourselves these many centuries? And the people of the valley need someone to blame for their hardships. I can place the blame right in the lap of Lorca, where it belongs. At the same time, I can make you a hero. They will be hungry for her blood. I can do this for you, Flen, and no one else can, or will.”

“Why not just poison her and relieve us, wouldn’t that be easier?”

“Easier, yes, but why risk an election when the Troca has given us a means to kill her legally and establish a rightful successor, namely you? Think, Flen, when will this opportunity come again for you? The time is right. You will challenge her, kill her and then you will be in her mansion before this month is over.”

Flen traced the rim of his cup with his thumb. He regarded Hisash, who was now leaning toward him, awaiting his reply, a reply that could save or condemn her. She was correct. He had no expertise in matters of the Mosaic or the inner workings of councils. He sat at the same table with all of the Burba Council, pretending aloofness by his silence. His votes were often cast on the basis of which buttock he scratched or which way his feather quill would fall from vertical.

He couldn’t seem to follow the complexities of kinship or oxen lineage or the economics of the soap works. Taking his cues from some of the other members, he timed his grunts of approval or disapproval on his best guess of the mood of the rest of the council. He never volunteered an opinion or argument. His contribution was to sit and await the vote, which he would then scribe boldly with head shaking or loud sighing as he folded the ballot. He might deposit it in the box with emphasis added by bold arm movements or a sound thumping on the lid after the vote disappeared into the slot. The burdens of government always showed heavily on his face, but in his head were thoughts of which of the members present he would like to mount or

how one might look prostrate before his executioner's block. That he fooled no one rarely entered his mind.

"What of the wizard, the Senchai?" Flen said. "She may be here tomorrow. What if she sides with Lorca and invokes some magic or trick on Lorca's behalf?"

"Like what? What could she do to you?"

"I know not what," he replied. "Perhaps some spell or potion to befuddle me. What say you to that?"

"Impossible! She can never harm you. She is sworn to that. A Senchai is mandated to never interfere with the government of any kingdom. All was discussed at the council meeting, surely you remember that."

Flen didn't remember.

"She comes here as an advisor only," Hisash said. "She can do nothing to you. She cannot hurt you or she violates her oath."

"What's an oath but so many words," Flen said with a sneer.

"True, Flen, true, to mortals such as we, but through all of time, never has a Senchai foresworn. You are safe from her, be assured of that."

Save for the momentary silences that punctuated their earnest conversation, the two might have missed the noise. Not a thump exactly, more like a rubbing sound, as if an intruder listening at the door had lost balance and moved more heavily than prudence would allow.

Flen put a finger to his lips, but the warning was wasted on Hisash, who sat frozen in silence, her mug part way to her lips. He moved quietly to the door and, with a quick movement, opened it to no one there.

He raced into the yard, moving to his right, across the path to his house, then around to the back where his executioner's block remained undisturbed. He hurried to his hammer and stood it against the fence post. Turning back, he nearly bumped into Hisash.

"See anyone?" she whispered

"No one. If someone was here, he is very fast, or just disappeared. Mayhap the Senchai, arrived early?" A chill spread across Flen's broad shoulders. "They can disappear, mind you. They dart about unseen."

"Mayhap, but I am doubtful."

“Why?”

“A SENCHAI would not have been heard. If it were someone, it was like to be one of Lorca’s spies.”

“One thing is sure, this meeting is over. Go and come here no more.”

Hisash hesitated. “I will go, good friend. But I would go with certain information.”

“Like what? Woman, you wear my patience.”

“Like if you are disposed to my plan.”

Hisash leaned toward him, poised on the balls of her feet. Perspiration had bloomed just above her upper lip, betraying her. She must have invested everything into this meeting, her future as she saw it, and, indeed, her life.

Flen nursed the silence that hung between them. He knew what he wanted to do, yet enjoyed seeing her squirm. These plans were best started and once governor he would deal with Hisash at his leisure. He would control many things then.

“I am agreed,” he said finally. “I will kill Lorca and be governor and you will be my assistant. Now go.”

A comely woman, Flen thought, *a stretch too broad in the hips for my liking and with ears too big for her face*. But in Hisash’s smile he saw what Lorca must have seen at one time.

“To us then, good friend,” Hisash said, “and may DEDDIMUS bless this plan. I will contact you soon about when and how to make your challenge under the laws of The Troca.”

The afternoon was fading. She would finish her journey home in the dark but she left him with a buoyant step.

Flen turned toward his door and was about to enter when a movement startled him. A crippled bird lay next to his stoop. If it hadn’t moved he might have missed it completely; its brown color blended with the dust.

“Ah little one,” he said, “so you are the intruder. And why would you come knocking at my door?”

Flen looked around again considering the lack of breeze. The bird couldn’t have been blown into the door. He gently picked the creature

up. In his great hand, it looked no larger than a brown nut. It stared at him through black, cabochon-like eyes. He felt the trembling life beneath its brown feathers, the warmth of it in his hand. He stroked the bird softly under its beak with his thumb.

“Were you sent, then? Or did you just lose your way?”

He continued to stroke the bird’s chest until the trembling began to subside.

“There, there,” his voice was low and mild, “nothing to fear. Did the Senchai send you? They can be tricky like that. And what did you see? Just two friends gossiping, verily. Nothing more, neh?”

He pushed his thumbnail into the throat of the bird and popped its head off as if it were the hat of an acorn he was about to eat.

The bird’s head thudded against the doorframe and fell into the dust next to the stoop. He threw the carcass up on the arched roof over his doorway and went inside. He didn’t give the bird another thought, but as he headed for his wine cellar, the Senchai was very much on his mind.

Two

WHEN VERDOR FIRST crossed the Mohr Mountains into the Valley of the Giants, she was a six-year old child and Lord Pater Nos had carried her most of the way on his shoulders. Her energy and excitement, enough to sustain both of them during the long walk and difficult climbing, quickly surrendered to quiet trepidation when she saw how large, in every way, the Giants were.

“I’m afraid, Master.”

“What do you fear, child?”

The Giants’ eyes seemed gentle, but their big noses and large hands and the way they towered over her teacher intimidated the girl.

She was Pater Nos’ apprentice back then, starting her second year at the Mosaic School. Her name was Belinda—Belinda with the golden hair. Already she knew more science and numbers than her parents ever would, had they lived. Much of that first visit to the Giants, she now recalled, had been spent peering out from behind Pater Nos’ black cloak.

Today, she would see the Giants again, not as a young child, but thirty-three-years old and with a new name. A thread of fear from her earlier visit still tugged at her, challenging her courage. Still, a Senchai wizard goes wherever he or she is needed. Since the Giants had summoned such help—although her honor would have remained unblemished in declining—she, Verdor, wizard of the Senchai, Grand

by all accounts, would never allow considerations for her safety to hinder a mission.

“They may be a doomed race,” Pater Nos had told her on that first journey.

“Why, Master?”

“None of the other five kingdoms will associate with them, except in commerce.”

“Why?”

“They are too large physically. Intermingling would be impossible.”

Pater Nos had spoken to her like this always, as if she was an adult student, and she loved him for it. He was ever tender with her and patient, never condescending, other than perhaps with her name, which he shortened.

“You see, Bell...” They were sitting on a fallen tree to rest. Pater Nos was waxing pompous as he would when he thought there was something important for her to grasp. He pointed his forefinger at the canopy of leafy trees overhead. “There are fewer than ten thousand living giants. They persist in applying to our Mosaic for changes in kinship laws. But that, I think, will prove futile. They are, my love, running out of breeding stock. Even now they are almost all blood related. That’s not good.”

“Why, Master?”

“That answer will come later in your education. For now, do you remember what I told you happened to the Cauldea in the time of the Wolf?”

“Why, yes, Master. They were all swept away by a plague.”

Pater Nos had waved his hand in front of him as if in dismissal. “It could be a matter of time before a similar fate befalls the Giants.”

So today, in the time of the Stag, Belinda, now called Verdor, crossed the last mountain of Mohr to begin the long descent to the valley below, the valley of the Giants. She had grown to a svelte six feet tall. Her hair still golden blond, she was not only very beautiful, but also possessed of a quiet self-assurance. She was poised, and not in a studied way; her gifts were as natural as the petals of a flower.

The rising sun cast magenta daggers across the distant peaks of the Saget Mountains that defined the Valley's eastern boundary. The brilliant sky might have portended a weather change, but she knew there would be no rain. The valley had been in drought for two years.

Verdor found a large, smooth rock at the apex of the mountain on which to place her mantle and, sitting on it, she lay her Cept—a willow staff as tall as she—over her right shoulder so that its length crossed in front of her, the worn tip touching the ground to her left. She removed the strap of her bag from about her neck, made obeisance to the new sun, then placed the brown, leather sack in the cradle of her crossed legs.

She sat for two reasons: one, to drink in through her very pores the beauty that Deddimus had surrounded her with this morning; and two, because a Senchai should never bolt into any territory, be it the Giants', or Catsyu, or even the peaceful Dardyea.

"Remember that," Pater Nos had once told her. "Hover like the falcon before you alight. Learn all that your six senses can teach you before you approach, for as you know, the Senchai are not loved or respected equally in all kingdoms."

Verdor's delay also afforded her the warmth and comfort of the new sun, having the spent the night in a deep and drafty cave with only her cloak to cover her.

Already the air was drying, yet there was a hint of tincture, which she couldn't name. It smelled at first like foul spue or chide or sassafore, very faint, just touching the edges of the air. She concentrated on the odor, as she knew it would soon be lost to her once she became accustomed.

Before her, and to a far distance, stretched the Giants' valley, a desolate scene, and not as she remembered it.

The Grune River, just a trickle now, sparkled like a chain of diamonds under the already bright sun, winding through brown grasses and leafless trees as if searching for a reason to exist. The shrunken river, Verdor assumed, could offer little to the Giants.

Even the evergreens had only new growth, as if the sawfly had infested them. The bright green tips on their bare branches seemed a valiant effort to greet the new season despite the odds. The tilled fields that bordered the blanched woods were barren and dust blown. Planting had been postponed or given up altogether. No animals grazed the blighted pastures or firebreaks.

Verdor had not heard of famine here, but from what she could see it wouldn't be far off. The valley was ill and she sent to heal it, but where to start?

A noisy flock of ravens that suddenly jabbed and darted above the trees an arrow's flight below her interrupted her deliberations. *I have been seen. Remarkable how well the Giants hide, despite their size.* She sat a while longer, giving the sentry time to inform the others.

Preparations would be made, a table set in a home vacated for her or likely one of their libraries. On this table, a feast of cured meats and dried fruits and other delicacies cut in portions to fit her hands, but in quantities sufficient to gorge a Giant's appetite. The sacrifice they would make to feed her, when their own may soon go hungry, was not lost on her. But to refuse the largess would be an insufferable insult to the Giants.

Verdor was hungry, eating little in the five days, but the biscuits and wine she carried, and occasionally a handful of early mountain berries, since leaving her home, the Mosaic School.

The sun was higher and smaller, the brazen colors of the early sky blended to a bright blue. She gathered her mantle and slung the strap of her bag around her neck. She left her seat on the rock, tapped her Cept on the ground before her to warn insects of her footfalls, and set out to meet the Giants.

The path was sometimes steep, causing her to lean heavily on her staff as an old woman might, and, at times, gently sloping, but ever downward, straining her knees. She stopped often. The mysterious smell she had noticed upon cresting the mountains gave way to dust and pine pollen, and the odor of the city below: cooking fires and the manure of their beasts of burden called oxen. Her nose detected bee's

wax, compost mold, and new cut lumber. There was a rendering fire, no doubt cooking lard to make their prized soap.

Verdor could easily detect the stink of their bodies. They were by now, she suspected, grudgingly unaccustomed to bathing, because of the drought.

There were aromas missing—the fragrance of spring flowers such as trillium and myrtle and hyacinth. But most disturbing wasn't the smells or lack of them, it was the silence. Except for the bark of one of their great dogs or the cackling of ravens, the valley was quiet. She had no fond memory of the music of the Giants, the thumping drums and shrill lute, but its lack echoed deeply within her.

They should have sent for me sooner.

By the time the sun was at its peak, Verdor was approaching the gate of their city called Burba. She had stopped to make water in the privacy of the woods. She suspected the introductions might take a while and her modesty would prohibit her from taking care of that matter in the open, as the Giants were accustomed to doing.

The gate was only a swinging pine pole before a bridge spanning a nearly waterless gully, the bed of the River Grune in better times. The barrier was of little more use than to keep the oxen out of the town. Giants had little to fear from invaders, for although their city was rumored to store great treasure—a rumor Verdor doubted—no army had any interest in challenging them. The practice of war had disappeared from their lives, but no one doubted that they could do more damage with a hay hook, if so inclined, than any aggressor might accomplish with a sword. They were big, many nine feet in height or better, and very strong.

The Giants were content to stay in their valley. No one dared change that. Verdor wondered how much longer that would be.

She ducked under the gate, crossed the bridge and continued along a cobblestone street toward the city center.

Twelve adult giants had gathered in a small group to watch her approach, some shielding their eyes from the sun's glare. Young children, too, milled about, many of these youngsters likely had never

seen an outsider before. It amused Verdor to think what they might have expected.

I look only a stripling adolescent to them. What have they been told by elders, or exaggerated amongst themselves in their child-like ways, concerning me?

The city of Burba looked more like a town with a circle rather than a typical town square. Streets fanned outward from a round well, like spokes of a wagon wheel. The twelve, apparently of some civil rank or other, stood with their backs to the stone wellhead that, more than the houses, whispered of antiquity. Each Giant, male and female, assumed a benign posture with their prodigious hands at their sides, showing her their palms in welcome, as if preparing to embrace, though she knew they would not touch her.

They were dressed in the earth tones of their tribe, olive-green sleeveless jerkins and sand-colored, baggy pantaloons, girded by great straps knotted in the front of their bellies, not nearly as ponderous as Verdor remembered them to be. Their pantaloons extended down to their knees, leaving thickset, sinuous legs exposed to the tops of their ankle-high leather boots. There was little variation in dress among them, which accentuated the strong familial appearance.

Each shared features that seemed to distort the symmetry of their face—brown hair and eyes, and overly large ears, tumid noses over thickened lips that pouted, making them appear dull of wit. They were an ugly lot at first look, and frightening to a novitiate outsider, but as with all races, what beauty they must possess cannot always be seen with eyes.

Verdor studied each face as she approached. Some appeared compliant. Some sulked. In the eyes of others burned a quiet hostility. *I must be cautious.*

The female governor was foremost and took to one knee, bowing deeply so that the brim of her purple hat, the distinguishing symbol of her office, dusted the ground. Verdor too, knelt briefly on one knee and bowed, though not as deeply in deference to her own station. Excessive humility by a Senchai would be embarrassing to them.

The governor, still on her knee, said, “I am Lorca, governor of Burba, chief counsel and keeper of the tomes of the Green Tribe. I am principle emissary to the Mosaic. There is none higher.” She stated this not as a boast, but to assure Verdor of their regard for her. “All inhabitants of this blessed valley, the high, the middle, and the low, welcome you.”

So, there had been a change in governors. *Did old Maysi die or was it the turmoil of the times that replaced him?*

Lorca rose to her feet, awaiting a formal reply. Though no taller than the others, Verdor divined from the aura of competence that the governor ruled by a strong presence of will. She had her charges’ respect, though it appeared given only grudgingly by some.

“I am Verdor, Grand Wizard of the Senchai Order. I accept your welcome and, in return, offer you fond greetings from Pater Nos, Grand Lord of the Mosaic, who wishes you prosperity.”

Verdor had omitted that she was summoned, which had the desired effect—a general grunting of approval. Lorca had referred to the Green Tribe, but once in the Giants’ history, Verdor knew from her studies, there had been many tribes. Kinship lines had blurred over the centuries. Only the Green Tribe was mentioned now, though the name had little meaning. History was very important to them and well recorded. Belonging to a tribe placed the Giants solidly within the scrolls of their storied past.

Lorca introduced the others one by one: the Counselors—Chops, Osah, Osish, and Piash; Duron, keeper of the water; Hisash, assistant governor, historian and minder of the lineage. Hisash avoided Verdor’s gaze. Next, Lorca introduced the keeper of the soap works, Noish; Entwas, the herder, and Pusah, the grainer. Finally, Lorca acquainted her with the woods keeper, Telf and the scribe, Nakus, who doubled as Lorca’s cook.

All bowed deeply and offered blessings, most with sincerity, some with pride, a few with cold formality. *It appears that not all are of one mind regarding my summons.*

The formalities behind them, Lorca dismissed everyone except the scribe, Nakus, whom Lorca had instructed to accompany both her

and Verdor from the wellhead along one of the broad streets. Verdor lengthened her stride so as to not encumber them.

“You are tired,” Lorca stated, as if Verdor had no opinion of the matter. “I will take you to your home where you shall eat and rest. Tomorrow is soon enough for us to solve the problems of the world.” She grinned, contorting her lips to a sneer, yet the humor was clearly in her eyes; intense eyes, though locked in a permanent squint from the weight of flaccid lids, sparkled with wisdom. In them, Verdor could see the burdens of leadership, of holding together the multiplied opinions, denunciations, while reaping the few rewards of public office in troubled times. Verdor judged Lorca to be at least ten years older and there was power in her. She could feel it and the comfort of it. *Would that we become friends.*

After a short walk, they stopped outside a library.

“Before you leave,” Verdor asked, “can you say if you have noticed any new smells in the valley of late?”

Lorca studied Verdor with interest. “Smells like what?” she asked.

“Like a hint of sassafore or spue. I can’t say for sure, but I noticed it as I crossed the Mohrs, when my nose was new to your valley.”

Lorca’s keen gaze intensified. She knew the question wasn’t asked to make conversation. “No,” she answered and turned to her scribe. “You have a good nose on that face of yours, Nakus, what do you say?”

Nakus sniffed and said, “None.”

“I am alerted,” Lorca said to Verdor. “I will find out what I can. Enjoy your house and I will see you tomorrow. Nakus will stay with you, to reach you things, or help you with the records, as you may need them. You can trust her.”

She departed without a backward glance, leaving Nakus and Verdor at the threshold of the library, Verdor’s home for the near future anyway.

Three

HISASH WAS IN FULL STRIDE now, heading back to her home. She was enjoying the twilight air as the setting sun relinquished its hold on the earth. Her mind went back to the meeting with Flen, the evening before the wizard's arrival. Flen had not been at the city center to greet the wizard. Hisash smirked. *What might Lorca say to that insult?*

Her plan was going well, she thought, even if she was now partners with an oaf.

What a beast Flen is, as ignorant as dirt.

She could handle the dolt with ease. Yet, for the briefest of moments in facing the wizard, she had lost control.

Had my fear shown?

She had plotted the course of her life quite satisfactorily up until now. Hisash was determined to never go back to the soap works. She shivered just thinking about her years there, about her father, Dep, another beast. Since her mother died when she was small, her most vivid memories were of the late evenings when Dep came from work, stinking of lard or dried oxen blood. Hisash had learned one thing from Lorca—one either worked or governed and governors never smelled like her father.

Now twenty years old, Hisash had labored in the soap works for much of her young life. Her last job, before what she referred to as her liberation, was tending the scum boiled to the top of the great clods

in the massive iron caldrons. She would scoop the scum, called brack, from the top of the hot lard, an important job, in order to keep the evaporation going smoothly.

“This way, flip, then over and flip, then dump here. Then again, so you see.” That was all the instruction she had received from the Seer teaching her to brack, but that was all that was really needed.

If the brack—hence her title as Bracker—became too deep, the evaporation of the water would slow. This slowing would have a ripple effect, eventually stalling the entire system.

Each clod was large enough to fit the remains of ten oxen. After the oxen were butchered and the meat salted for food or for shipment, the fat, the blood, the skin and bones, were carted to the clodding basins. These were partially filled by the water carriers who tied large vessels to the backs of oxen and transported water in an unceasing chain from the Grune River to the soap works. During the process of clodding, the rendered lard would be changed from one caldron to the next in sequence, purifying the lard under the constant care of the Bracker. There were seven changes in all. More ingredients were added toward the end: bees wax, liver oils and in some, the fragrant oil derived from the Sweet Nule flower. Finally, the end product was poured into molds.

The brack was not wasted. Once cooled, it was carried to the fields to be spread on the ground as fertilizer for the next season’s hay crop, which, because of the drought, was in danger. Hisash didn’t need to be a farmer, to know that dry soil and sparse grass didn’t bode well for the oxen.

Tending the fires, called fiercing, was left to the men. A Fiercer could be deep in the forest one day chopping wood or, on another day, working in the drying house, a vast structure where the wood was stacked and dated for curing before being transported to the fire pits beneath the clodding cauldrons.

The fires could never go out, so a Fiercer’s life was tied to the flames. It would be hard to say if the Fiercer controlled the fire’s life or the other way around.

It fell to the Fiercer to plan which sections to cut from the surrounding forest. He would do this in a way as to not exhaust the nearby trees, forcing him to go deeper and farther away for his load.

Hisash loved to hear the men talk about their job. She strained to understand their peculiar language:

“Menshun, will mine cut the high or the nay, th-morn?” A Fiercer was questioning his boss.

“The nay it is, Jon, to the breaks. Then the high on the high. Twain the aixen, in the blithers. The ruffs be neken.”

Theirs was a fascinating speech that few other than a Fiercer born to the woods would understand.

Hisash had asked, “What are they saying, Seer?”

“I don’t know much of it, but Jon wants to know should he cut close or deep into the woods in the morning. Menshun told him to cut close in the cool of the day then deeper in when it gets hot. He told Jon to take a team only. He said that stumps have yet to be cleared by the firebreak and to take more than a two-up could risk injury to the animals.”

“He said all that?”

“Sure he did, girl. A Fiercer’s life is about the work, not the talkin’.”

A Fiercer’s job also included planting and pruning to ensure a constant supply of fuel for the coming generations. Hisash envied them. They were outdoors under the open sky and smelled like, well, like they should, and not like boiled fat.

Once she had begged for a job collecting the petals of the Sweet Nule. She had to get away from the clods.

“Please, Seer. If I walk this ring any longer, you’ll be makin’ soap of me by week’s end.”

She would be outside, like the Fiercers, in the sunlight, gathering the sweet smelling petals. What could be easier?

It didn’t work out as she had thought. The Sweet Nule grows only in the bogs. Gathering these petals was brutal work. Her feet were wet from morning ‘till night. She was constantly prying off giant leeches.

The water beetles, though not as prevalent as the leeches, were nasty biters and the clothing that she needed to wear to keep the biting flies at bay made her life under the sun as hot as her feet when walking the ring of planks around the clodding cauldrons. After three days she was begging for her old job back. The Seer quickly relented, because he liked her, he said.

“You were my best bracker, Hizy. I’ll see what I can do for yer.”

The Seer had worked her job as bracker in her short absence, and was thankful to have her back. No job in the soap works, it seemed, was any more or less pleasant.

Scaffolds were built to surround the cauldrons at the top to enable the water carrier to add, or the Bracker to take away. The job was dangerous work, made more so by its unvarying tedium.

Hisash’s mother had been a Bracker. None could say why, but she fell in one sad afternoon and became part of that week’s pouring. Seer had watched her go in, but she never made a sound, he said.

The night was closing down over Hisash and she quickened her pace. She remembered walking the ring, as it was called, scooping and dumping incessantly, arms aching, perspiring from the heat and steam that rose all around her, burning her feet if the water carriers weren’t timely in soaking the walkways. The constant play of heat and high humidity in the factory caused the supporting planks beneath her to warp and twist. The lumber was changed on a regular schedule. Hisash had dared to think that perhaps her mother’s death was no accident. Maybe her mother just let go and fell in, unable any longer to put one foot in front of the other.

Hisash had caught herself several times mesmerized by the churning and bubbling just below her feet. At times, woozy from dehydration and stiff with sore arms that could hardly carry her bracking scoop, she had considered how easy it would be to just step out and drop. But she hung on to a life of grueling days and, after her mother’s death, frightening nights when her father would come to her room stinking of smoke and boiled blood to demand favors of her, which she was neither prepared to give nor able to refuse. The darkness still made her fearful.

Hisash spat on the ground, thinking of her father. She stamped her feet on the road for several paces. She had crushed his skull one night while he slept with her bracking scoop and, that same night, unseen, dumped his body in the bog to be claimed by the water beetles. She told the others that in his grief he had followed his wife into the clods. Since he was no friend to anyone, and because she put up such a show of grief, no one cared to question the orphan on the sad matter.

Being seventeen then, and employed, she was allowed to keep her home and though her days were no less a drudgery, her nights were her own. She taught herself to read. The letters were difficult at first, but she possessed a quick mind and never had to be shown anything twice. She was stunned by her first visit to the libraries. The books there and the knowledge in them were intimidating. But once discovered, the library was where, when not bracking, Hisash spent her free time.

She'd flirted with one of the young foppish keepers, promising with her eyes and smile what she would never deliver with her body. He'd helped her eagerly through difficult words or passages and let her take volumes home. At times like these, while isolated in her home with a book and a tallow, she could relegate walking the ring to a distant tomorrow. Through the magic of reading, she could go outside the valley, over the mountains, and into strange lands where even stranger inhabitants lived. Her father would have never let her do this, just one more reason she was happily rid of him.

A waxing moon was already high. She hadn't noticed its rising, but was grateful for the light. It silvered everything around her, the road before her, the trees that rose up some distance back from the road on each side. She couldn't distinguish individual trees exactly, but she knew the woods. She was now where, this week, the Fiercers had gone to trim and harvest. Occasionally there was a break in the wall of trees for a cart path or a lesser access road.

Hisash's home was just outside the city, not far from the soap works. An easy walk, but one she rarely made after dark. Moon shadows cast by the tree trunks began to take shapes, one a wolf, another

a bear. Her mother had told her stories of the deep woods when she was younger, and although she knew they were just fables, she couldn't deny the prickly bumps rising on her arms and neck.

She had left home this morning with a cloak over her arm, and was now glad she had thought to bring it. She hadn't intended to return in darkness. Hisash redoubled her pace.

Behind her now was the black skyline of the houses of Burba. Ahead of her, Hisash could see the dark peak of her home against the wind born sparks and glow of the soap work fires.

Night fears began to weigh on her spirit. Loneliness reached out to her. She fought the sad grip by turning her thoughts to anger. "You'll pay, you hag." Tears welled to the edges of her eyes. She wiped them away viciously with her sleeve.

Even the night was once tolerable when Lorca loved her. How beautiful everything seemed to her then. At days end, Lorca set aside her never ending work and the two of them would sit close together sipping wine and not talking, gazing up to the night sky, absorbing its twinkling mysteries.

Sometimes the night air awakened a deep ache in her left leg, the vestige of an injury years before at the soap works. She thought that day to be the luckiest of her life. She had fallen from her scaffold and, by rare good luck, she didn't fry in the fires under the clods. When she fell, her leg struck a standing plank, a replacement due to be installed. The lumber was there only because the Fiercer who carried it had stopped to view a crowd of visitors to the soap works and had rested the board against the scaffolding on which Hisash stood. The plank broke her leg and the bone jutted from her thigh like a boar's tooth, but had the board not been where it was, she would have dropped to her death in the fire.

Governor's Day in Burba, the one day each year Lorca visited the soap works. Hisash was walking the ring as usual, bracking scoop in hand, when she heard the entourage approaching below her. She leaned out to watch the nobles pass, and fell. The pain was horrible, worse than any whipping at the hand of her father. She was so embarrassed

to fall in the midst of these royals that she held her tongue, a marvel as much to her as the crowd that quickly gathered about her.

She never heard what Lorca said, but she remembered seeing her lips move as Lorca bent over her. Mostly, Hisash remembered Lorca's eyes. They seemed to flow gentleness toward her like a river. She stared back into them as long as she could. The current washed over her. Hisash gave herself to it, falling upon it, as if she were a leaf being carried along in a tender rivulet.

She awoke two days later in Lorca's home. There was a dull throbbing in her leg, but no real pain. She had never known such comfort. Lorca didn't sleep on a tick stuffed with straw, but a feather mattress cornered by the four posts of a real bed. Covering Hisash were luxurious quilts, a solace unknown to her.

She stayed with Lorca three years. At first she was to stay only while she recuperated, but then one afternoon, Lorca found her reading in the library on the second floor of her home. The governor was surprised at her youthful exuberance and probing questions. They found themselves locked in conversations that, as time went on and Hisash healed, became mutually challenging and beneficial. As Hisash had nothing but idle time, she read from Lorca's books on government, law and agriculture. Soon Lorca began to rely on her for details and finer points of the law. Lorca arranged for her to be a full time paid assistant, which stunned Hisash. *You can make a living by reading and talking?*

Later, Lorca put Hisash's name up for assistant governor. With Lorca's endorsement, there was no contest. Within that third year, Hisash learned to write. It was also in their year together that they became lovers.

At first, Hisash was a reluctant partner in the joys and mysteries of physical love. Lorca taught her with gentle skill to take delight in her body and give pleasure in return. Their bodies and minds melded in physical and emotional release; Hisash discovered fulfillment beyond imagining; her life was perfect. Until Lorca brought Nakus into their home and everything changed.