



The Pagalan Chronicles

Book 1

Search for Morganuke's Roots



Andrew Houlston

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CHAPTER 1

The Island

Morganuke sat on the beach, listening to the waves crashing against the rocks and contemplating his life on the island of Banton. It was midday, and the sun felt warm on his pale young face. Seabirds circled above him, screeching their call.

He looked out over the bay and spotted a group of small fishing boats a little way out to sea. Fishing was important for the island, as it was the main source of food for the people. Most of the coastal homes engaged in fishing in some way. The boats bobbed up and down as the waves washed beneath them. It seemed to Morganuke that they were dancing to a tune of their own making. *What would it be like to sail on the open sea?* Morganuke thought. *There must be so many things to see and strange to visit if I went to sea.*

He watched two children playing beside the sea a little further along the coast. They danced around the waves, laughing whilst they splashed each other with the salty water. He remembered the times when he was a boy doing similar things, although he was usually by himself. He often would hunt for crabs in the rock pools close to where he was sitting now. With a bucket in one hand and a small net in the other, he would look earnestly in each pool, hoping to find a crab or two to take home. He breathed a big sigh and tasted the salty air. Oh, what it was to live beside the sea and enjoy the sights and sounds of the beach life!

Morganuke had lived on the island for nearly eighteen years, after being found abandoned as a baby by Fraytar, his friend and mentor. Not knowing Morganuke's origins or who his parents were, Fraytar had taken Morganuke to a kindly couple on the island. Stovin and Plarem could not have children of their own and so had taken him in gladly. They had loved and cared for him over the years, adopting him as their own son and ensuring that they brought him up as best they could. With the help of a retired Professor, who was an old family friend, Morganuke's adopted parents made sure he had a good education.

Morganuke had found it difficult to fit in with the other island people. With silver hair, pale skin, and red eyes, he looked very different from the other locals and had often felt awkward around them. He had been very miserable through his schooling years, as the other children often taunted him, making fun of his looks. On one occasion, when a group of children were being particularly hostile, the name-calling and poking fun at him had gone on for most of the day. One of the bigger boys seemed to be the ringleader, coaxing the other children to make fun of Morganuke. His rage built up slowly at first, but with the constant ridicule from the other children, Morganuke soon felt that he was going to burst. He focused his thoughts on the ringleader, feeling a warmth growing inside his body, and intensely imagined the boy falling flat on his face. At that moment the big boy suddenly tripped, as if a rope had been tied to his feet. Morganuke thought it very strange and coincidental but laughed along with the other children; relieved at no longer being the centre of attention.

But in many other ways, the island was idyllic; with beautiful, varied countryside and easy access to the beach. But Morganuke had wanted to see more of the world; to visit the different lands that Fraytar had told him about.

Morganuke stood up and clasped a handful of round smooth pebbles in his hand. Walking up to the sea edge where the waves lapped the soft sand, he started throwing the pebbles one by one into the water. Each pebble splashed against the waves with a gentle plop. He often did this as a boy and considered himself a fair shot with the stone. Sometimes he would challenge Fraytar to a competition to see

who could throw the furthest. But these competitions never came often enough for Morganuke, as Fraytar would spend many months at sea and only came to visit between voyages. Lately, his visits to the island had become even less frequent as his voyages took him further and further out to sea. Fraytar had promised to take Morganuke out on his ship sometime. As much as he loved the island, Morganuke was very keen to travel and see more of the world.

Morganuke looked at how high the sun was in the sky. It was midday already. He remembered that his father had insisted he collect the scythe that Tomlin, the local blacksmith, had repaired and return it that morning. He also wanted to make sure that the blacksmith's daughter was still at home. He had been sweet on her for some time but had not had the opportunity to get to know her properly. *Oh, sweet Calarel*, he thought as he ran up the path leading from the beach. *She is so beautiful and perfect, but I just know that she wouldn't be interested in someone like me.* He had often tried to introduce himself to her in as confident a manner as he could, but something always went wrong. Either he would get tongue-tied or do something clumsy. It was so frustrating, but he thought her so lovely that he was determined not to give up.

It was about two stances to the village of Peblock, and Morganuke did not relish the fast-paced walk in the midday sun. He foolishly had forgotten to bring any water with him, and he was getting quite thirsty. He hoped old Tomlin would give him a mug of water or, even better, of nice cool ale. The track became quite steep the further he got from the beach, and his mouth felt very dry. Fortunately, it was a well-worn track with no boulders to stumble on, due to the many feet (human and animal) that had trampled over it through the years.

The sounds of the sea and the seabirds calling were now in the distance, replaced with the sounds of songbirds and the occasional bee buzzing around the wild summer flowers that bordered the track. The sandy dunes gradually gave way to green fields, with clumps of trees here and there. The path levelled out, and thoughts of Calarel and how cross his father would be about him being late spurred him to run faster. He

was quite out of breath when he reached the village, and sweat dripped down his face.

Now I'm sweaty and stinky. What will Calarel think about that?

All seemed quiet. Very few people were in the streets, and he preferred it that way to avoid their stares. He walked along the dusty road winding through the village, small cob cottages with small well-tended gardens lining each side.

Morganuke came to the crossroad that marked the centre of the village. Tomlin's smithy was a little way down a lane. As he walked into the smithy's shop, the heat from the forge hit him like a wall. Tomlin was pumping large bellows that fed the fire. Sweat dripping from his forehead, he had a determined look as he focused on the forge. His face and balding head were covered in charcoal dust. He was short but made up for it with a stocky, muscular build.

"Hello, Tomlin," Morganuke shouted over the din of the bellows and fire in the forge. Tomlin didn't seem to notice, still intent on pumping the bellows. "Hello, Tomlin! I have come to pick up my father's scythe."

This time Tomlin heard, swinging his head around to see who was shouting but continuing to pump the bellows. His puzzled look quickly changed to a pleasant smile.

"Ah, young masser Morg, what can I do for he?"

"I've come for my father's scythe."

"Yes, your father's scythe, 'tis ready."

Tomlin reluctantly stopped pumping the forge bellows, leaving Morganuke feeling a little guilty for interrupting. The effort to sustain the heat of the forge now would be wasted.

Tomlin was one of the few islanders who made Morganuke feel accepted for who he was, and so he was a frequent visitor to the forge. He liked to watch the smithy work his magic with metal.

"Spec your father will mek good use of this here, as I'm sure he's a lot of hay to get een," said Tomlin as he brought down the scythe from a hook on the wall.

"Yes, there is a lot of hay still to get in, and we need to make the best of this dry weather," answered Morganuke. He took the scythe

from Tomlin and propped it against the wall whilst he rummaged in his baggy pockets to find a small purse with the money his father had given him that morning for the repair. Morganuke hoped it was enough.

"That'll be two flants please, as 'tis fur yer father," stated Tomlin.

Morganuke scabbled in the purse and was relieved to discover he had enough. He then remembered how thirsty he was, and hoping he would get to meet Calarel inside Tomlin's cottage, he asked, "Could I have a drink of water please? It's been so hot today, and I left the house with no drink this morning."

A wry smile came over Tomlin's face. "Is he sure 'tis just water you're wanting, young masser Morg? I've some nice cool ale int cottage if he rather."

Morganuke blushed, hoping that he had not made it too obvious how fond he was of Tomlin's daughter. "Yes, please, that'll be lovely."

They entered the blacksmith's cottage, and Morganuke was delighted to see that Calarel was sitting at the table, eating. He blushed again as she glanced up to see who was with her father. *She is so very pretty*, he thought. Her high cheekbones, olive skin, long dark-brown hair and inviting brown eyes made Morganuke a little dizzy. *She is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen*, he thought.

"H-h-h-hello, Calarel," said Morganuke clumsily in the best voice he could muster. "Er, um ... how are you?" The more he tried to sound confident, the more his voice came out squeaky and hesitant.

Calarel just gave a low indistinguishable grunt in answer.

"Now, Calarel, 'tis no way to treat our guest, and he be a paying one at that," said Tomlin.

"It's okay, I'm sure Calarel is very b—" and in mid-sentence Morganuke tripped on the edge of the table leg, toppling head over heels and landing just beside Calarel.

Oh no, why am I such a fool round this girl? Please let the ground open and swallow me, thought Morganuke, looking up to see the amusement on her face.

Calarel got up from her chair and left the room with the words, "I'll leave you men to talk your business in peace."

Morganuke could not have been more devastated at how badly their

meeting went, but at least she had spoken more words to him than she had ever uttered in his direction before.

Tomlin placed two freshly poured mugs of ale on the kitchen table. "There you be, me lad. Gatt, take no notice of Calarel, she can be a little froilly sometimes. Now, tell us yer plans. He knows you're welcome to work apprenticeship eer, don't he? I knows ee's ard worker and ave a good eye for working metal."

Morganuke took a long sip from his mug of cool ale. It tasted good and made him feel refreshed. "That's very kind, but I still have commitments on father's farm. Besides, Calarel would hate the thought of me working here, she really dislikes me."

"Steady on, masser Morg, don't take what her ses to heart. I think she's a soft spot for he, but you'll need to keep trying and not be a sissy. Try being more confident and look out fur yer actions, that way you won't stumble and mumble."

"Thank you, Tomlin, I take your advice. I'll think on it for a bit if you please."

Morganuke finished his ale, forgetting for a while how angry his father would be about him being late. Then he quickly got up, said his goodbye to Tomlin, and continued his journey home, remembering to pick up the scythe from the blacksmith's shop on the way.

The walk home from Tomlin's was uneventful and slightly easier now that Morganuke was refreshed with the ale. He kept a fast pace, as he wanted to get home as quickly as possible, and hoped that his father would not be too angry with him. As he got nearer to the farm, the countryside became richer and more diverse. Trees lined the lane, providing shade from the sun, which was still very warm mid-afternoon. The scythe he was carrying made things a little bit awkward. He tried using it as a walking stick, taking care that he didn't cut off his head in the process. The long blade did come close more than once.

As he walked down the final stretch of the lane, Morganuke could see his home, the small farmhouse nestled between two outhouses of fair size, all made of cob with thatched roofs, and a gentle spire of smoke rising from the chimney. A few fields of bright yellows and greens surrounded the farm buildings with crops at different stages of growth.

There were some cows and sheep in other fields, providing a chorus of animal song. The smells and sounds of the farm was a pleasing welcome.

Morganuke walked through the gates and headed to the nearest outhouse. Inside, he placed the scythe against the wall, ready for his father to use later that day. The building was full of dust and crammed with well-worn farm implements. At one end was a partitioned area where hay had been stored ready for the animals' winter feed.

The path leading from the outhouse to the door of the farmhouse was dry and dusty but offered a welcome familiar sight after the long hot run home. Morganuke entered the little farmhouse, cluttered with furniture and kitchen utensils, and saw Plarem busily cooking at the stove. The room was filled with the fragrance of burnt wood and mutton stew.

He walked over to his mother and gently hugged her, "Hello, Mother!"

Although she was not exceptionally short for island people, she came only up to Morganuke's shoulders. Her dark olive skin, dark hair, and brown eyes were typical for the island population. Her face was homely and kindly, with few signs of her true age. She gave Morganuke a wide smile. "Hello, Morg, how's your day been? Did he remember to collect the scythe from Tomlin? You're later than expected, and your father has been asking after he."

"Yes, I remembered. It's in the outhouse. It only cost two Flants and I got a mug of ale from old Tomlin as well."

"That's good because your father wanted to finish cutting rest of grass meadow t'day. Hope you're not too fuddled from that ale as you'll need to help him".

Morganuke looked over at the pot that his mother had been stirring. The rich odour of his favourite mutton stew hit him as he bent over to smell the contents, making him feel very hungry, though dinner was several hours away.

"How was your day, mother? I see you've been cooking something tasty for dinner."

"Yes, I've been busy. This morning I've been tending animals before starting to cook the meal. Sheep'll need shearing soon, and one has an

injured leg that'll need seeing to. Cows were a handful milking today, and Popple kept trying to kick milk pail over and swishing me in the face with her tail."

Morganuke gave a deep sigh and sat down at the small table in the kitchen area. "Nothing's ever straightforward. We already lost one sheep from that wild animal attack the other day."

"We've a lot to be thankful for," his mother declared. "At least we can feed ourselves and make something from what's left over. Things be difficult, but we'll get through. The important thing 'tis to support each other."

At that moment Morganuke's father burst into the little farmhouse. "That sheep with injured leg needs ointment!" Stovin blurted out angrily. "It must have done it on a damaged fence. We'll need to fix that. Do we have any ointment left, Plarem?"

"Yes. I kept it from when t'other sheep got injured," she answered.

"Then get it, and I'll tend to sheep now," demanded Stovin. "You can come with me, Morg, I'll need you to hold the sheep whilst I see to it, and I want to finish cutting the meadow t'day. Expected you to be home earlier, why you be so late? I've told he before 'bout your daydreaming, boy. 'Tis not good enough, and you'll have to change your ways if you want to get on in world."

Like Plarem, Stovin had olive skin and dark hair with brown eyes. He stood just a hand above Plarem and so was shorter than Morganuke. However, his stocky build presented as strength, and his deep voice had the sound of authority to it.

"Did you at least remember to get scythe from Tomlin?" Stovin asked Morganuke as they walked out of the farmhouse door.

"Yes, it's in the outhouse."

"Then bring it with the hay fork. We can go straight to the meadow to cut grass after tending sheep and fixing the fence."

The injured sheep was in a field close to the farmhouse, and so it didn't take them long to reach the place where it was bedded in hay at the corner of the field. They walked over to it, quickly counting the other sheep as they went.

"I count all ten sheep," Stovin said. "That's good. At least we've

not lost any more.” He knelt beside the injured sheep and applied the ointment. “Hopefully that’ll do.” He placed the bottle of ointment back into his bag. “Thank goodness for Taplin root. I don’t know what we’d do without it, hard finding ’tis, but heals well. Now let’s see to that fence, can’t afford to lose any more sheep so need to make sure wild animals are kept away.”

They worked quickly to fix the fence with wooden props cut from a neighbouring hedge. “That’ll do for now,” Stovin said finally as he got to his feet and looked around the field. “Now, let’s go finish off cutting the meadow. Morg, you turn the hay already cut, and I’ll cut the remaining grass.”

“Father, you seem upset today, is there anything wrong?” Morganuke asked as they walked along the grassy field, taking in the fragrance of the sweet-smelling hay.

“You really must stop y’ur daydreaming, son. These losses ain’t good, and you need to pay attention to your farm work. We don’t know how much longer we’ll stay isolated from the mainland war. I’ve heard there’s been some changes on the mainland, and something funny’s going on offshore. I’m worried it may muck up island in some way.”

Morganuke looked pensively at his father. “How can the war affect us here on island? The mainland is far away and there is nothing here that could interest the mainland folk.”

“Shouldn’t be so sure of that, Morg. We can’t be careless ’bout protecting what we’ve got. I ’eard that warring tribes be out to take as much as they can, never mind who it is or who it belongs to.”

Morganuke thought about what his father had said but still couldn’t imagine the mainland troubles affecting their way of life. Nothing bad had ever happened on the island, not that he knew at least, and the mainland was so far away.

No, he thought, the island is always staying as it is. Surely, we are safe here.

They continued to walk along the border between two fields before jumping over the stone wall into a meadow, half cut and half with long grass swaying in the gentle breeze. They worked the field without

speaking, although Morganuke couldn't take his mind off what his father had said.

What if the mainland war does spread to the island? What shall we do?

The daylight slowly began to fade, but not before they had finished their work for the day. They walked back to the farmhouse in silence, contemplating what might be. The day's toil and the disappointment with Calarel had taken it out of Morganuke, and once he had eaten his long-anticipated dinner, he went to bed and quickly fell asleep.