

Distant Thunder

‘No one can know.’ Janne Daish’s words weren’t a warning. She didn’t glance around, scowling some threat of retribution. As far as she was concerned, there wasn’t the remotest possibility that someone might disobey her. As absolute in her certainty as either moon charting its course through the night, she was merely stating a fact,

Rekha Daish nodded, looking thoughtful. ‘Andit, tell Master Haslai to have the *Sun Bird* ready to sail south with the morning tide.’

Dyal watched the noble lady’s slave nod obediently and head for the ebony door. As he left the room, Andit was as expressionless as the remaining four men. Armed and armoured, they all stood with their backs against the honeywood panelled walls.

Three women, two older, one younger, and one young man faced each other across a low table of white-inlaid, polished red stone. Cushioned couches flanked it on all four sides beneath a lamp of opalescent ceramic hanging from a chain to cast a pool of soft light into the centre of the room.

‘You sail for Chazen?’ Janne’s scarlet-glossed lips tightened as if she’d bitten a sour sardberry even as she nodded her understanding, smoothing her crimson satin gown. ‘He owes us that much.’

‘Excuse me, Mother Janne, Mother Rekha, but any trade in pearls will be Itrac Chazen’s prerogative.’ Daish Sirket’s voice was taut with anger as he looked from his birth mother to her erstwhile sister-wife.

You’ve never sounded more like your absent father, my lord.

Dyal fought to keep his own face blank, grateful for the shadows in the distant corner where he stood. There were some advantages to being the newest and lowliest of those attendants privileged to guard the Daish domain’s noble ruler and his family.

‘Itrac Chazen is a sweet girl,’ Rekha reclined against azure embroidered cushions with a complacent half-smile, ‘as dear to me as any of my own blood—’

‘How do you propose to keep this a secret?’ Dau Daish interrupted, challenging her mother Janne with an unblinking gaze. ‘Our pearl divers, the boatmen, all those whose labour brings us pearls and nacre, all those who should be drilling and crafting the sea’s bounty by now – every single one knows that this year’s harvest is a disaster. That Daish’s reefs are barren.’

‘While Chazen’s pearl harvest is the most bounteous in living memory,’ spat Sirket. ‘You don’t think such twin omens are already debated around every village cook fire? How such auguries must surely prove that the Chazen domain will flourish under our father’s rule while we of Daish will bitterly regret his loss?’

‘You don’t think there’s the least possibility that you might have mistaken whatever portents persuaded you to encompass his exile?’ Dau’s ornate cosmetics made her face a mask as unreadable as the older women’s but nothing could disguise the bitterness in her voice.

‘No one outside Daish waters is to know of this as yet unexplained absence of pearl oysters across our southern reefs.’ Rekha Daish sat up and shook out her cobalt shawl with an audible snap. The vigour of her gesture set the gossamer hem of Dau’s white gown fluttering. ‘That’s what Janne means.’

Rekha settled the fine fabric back around her shoulders but remained sitting upright, slippered feet on the silken carpet. ‘Every man and woman of this domain, from the boldest merchant to the smallest child sifting the sand for seed pearls knows what a gift such news would be to our enemies. Our foes would insist this was confirmation that some taint of magic has drifted north to curse this domain.’

‘Nonsense, of course.’ She shrugged one cerulean satin shoulder. ‘Chazen’s good

fortune proves there's no lingering stain of sorcery in those waters and we are glad to see it. After all, that domain was wholly overrun by the wizards and much of their blood was spilled there. So if they are free of magic's taint, then we are too. Even more so. Daish bravely forbade the savages the least foothold in our waters, long before our ships helped reclaim the domain which Chazen Saril had abandoned in his cowardice.'

She continued with unmistakeable emphasis. 'That is a debt which I have no doubt Itrac Chazen will be only too eager to repay, as sole survivor of that tragedy whom we sheltered here without hesitation.'

'Quite so.' Janne Daish smiled, one ruby ringed hand adjusting the gold chains threaded through her intricate black braids. 'Precisely what the oddity of our barren reefs portends this year will doubtless become clear in time. You have more immediate concerns and duties, Sirket. Are you fully prepared to read the new year's stars and whatever omens may accompany them? All of Daish will be looking to you for reassurance.'

'I am—' the young man broke off and stood up. 'Some further review of my star charts cannot hurt.'

As he strode for the door, his personal slave followed. As soon as Telouet was close enough to be sure that Janne Daish's bodyguard Birut wouldn't see it, his dark eyes cut sharply to Dyal with an unmistakeable summons.

Dau rose in a shimmer of rustling draperies. 'Please excuse me, my mothers. It's late and I am weary.'

Dyal waited for the noble lady and her attendant to leave. Then the younger swordsman moved to follow. Whatever Janne and Rekha Daish were now discussing was lost to him when the door closed behind him.

Once outside, he had to hurry to catch up with Daish Sirket and his slave. As long-legged as his father, the young warlord was already heading down the outer steps of this broad, low-roofed building. Dyal hurried to follow Telouet along the pebble paths curving through the fragrant gardens.

An abrupt turn around a fountain's marble basin took the young warrior by surprise. He'd assumed they were heading for Sirket's pavilion; the warlord's personal sanctuary within the embrace of the massive, battlemented wall. But the nobleman was heading for the gate that led to the island's woodland beyond, Telouet a few paces behind.

'Open to your lord and master,' the slave growled at the captain of the watchful sentries.

The merest suggestion of movement caught Dyal's eye. Someone stood in the doorway of a storehouse that was built against the inner face of the wall. Andit, Rekha Daish's personal slave, just back from taking his mistress's message to her galley captain. So she would soon know that Sirket had left the compound, presumably to go to the observatory tower which his exiled father had built. Where he could consult the extensive library of records and interpretations left by the generations of star-gazing warlords from whom he was descended.

And tomorrow morning Andit would courteously invite Dyal to share whatever he might have seen and heard this night, as they faced each other on the sandy practise ground where the men sworn to give their lives for these nobles honed the sword skills that would hopefully see them slaughter Daish's enemies instead.

They stepped through the smaller door set into the massive double gates. As the guard captain closed it behind them, Dyal wished it wasn't quite so late. He needed to keep all his wits about him, to work out what Sirket would approve of him sharing in order to allay Rekha and Janne's curiosity, while making absolutely certain he didn't let slip the young warlord's most closely guarded secrets. For one thing, if he spoke out of turn, Dyal reckoned Telouet would split his skull from crown to chin the next time the two of them squared off

against each other. Even with a wooden training blade.

They soon reached the slopes overlooking the anchorage. Mud brick houses like the one Dyal had grown up in were scattered among these trees. Fires were quenched and shutters closed for the night, families within sleeping peacefully in their cotton quilts.

How straightforward life had been when he'd lived in such a hut. Dyal had never imagined the complexities of serving the Daish domain's ruling family. Not even when he had won a coveted place among those newly recruited to the warrior contingent guarding the distant island where he'd been born.

Always make sure you look for both moons and study the omens that each of them offers you, before you're too downcast by a single one's dire warning. There's every chance that the other will show you some hope to balance such foreboding.

Remembering his father's words, Dyal glanced up at the night sky. But the first sliver of the returning Lesser Moon was nowhere to be seen and while the Greater was scant days from its full, the pale disc was obscured by nut palms' tufted crowns.

Ahead, the vegetation retreated, leaving the domain's observatory tower standing alone on a spur of high ground overlooking the lagoon. The tower that Daish Kheda had rebuilt after the topmost storey collapsed unexpectedly, killing his own father. How about that for the most disastrous of omens? But the domain had seen more than two decades of peace and prosperity under Daish Kheda's rule. Nothing was ever as straightforward as it might seem at first glance.

On the favourable side of his personal scales, Dyal could never have dreamed that he would attain such sword mastery, even if he'd risen to captain a Daish guard contingent. The men who protected a warlord's family outstripped such warriors as the sun's light outstripped both moons'.

Between Telouet, Birut and Andit, along with Lemir who attended to Dau, and Hanyad who served shy and retiring Sain Daish, Dyal was ruthlessly drilled. These men were expert instructors in every sort of blade and fighting style used from these southern domains to the northernmost isles that faced the barbarous unbroken lands.

Though not because these skilled warriors were merely amusing themselves or relieving their boredom. Dyal knew he was being trained so their lord and master could use him to serve the domain. Sooner or later, he would have to call on such expertise when his choice was to kill or be killed. Or worse, to be captured. His mouth dried with apprehension as they reached the substantial stone tower.

Sirket unlocked the outer, iron-studded door. In the small lobby, he ignored the staircase that wound upwards around the tower's core and unlocked the entrance to the lowest of these rooms packed with books, astronomical instruments, and the paraphernalia required for countless methods of divination.

'Keep watch.' Sirket glanced at Dyal as Telouet snapped a sparkmaker against a twist of tow and used it to light an oil lamp. The young warlord took the lamp from the slave with a nod of thanks. 'Please find me my father's records of the heavenly compass at the last twelve shifts of the Topaz.'

Dyal didn't need the jerk of Telouet's head to tell him to stand watch. He stepped outside the tower to preserve his night sight from the lantern's glow. Breathing slow and steadily as he'd been taught, he expanded his senses to alert him to any approach. The wild men's wizards were supposed to all be dead, but coded messages carried by the courier doves being loosed by Janne Daish's spies said there were still brutal bands of savages lurking in the Chazen domain's remotest islands.

The chance of those murderous invaders venturing northwards might be unimaginably remote but since he'd been swept up in the wake of Daish Kheda's fateful trip to the Ulla domain, Dyal had seen too many wholly unexpected events to take anything for granted.

For a long while all he heard was the faint murmur of voices, the slap of leather-bound books on the table and the rustle of paper as the two men in the tower reviewed the positions of the stars and the heavenly jewels each time that the Topaz's shift to a new arc of the heavenly compass had marked the new year through the previous decade and more.

Then Dyal heard distant steps approaching, muted by leaf litter underfoot. He stiffened. No glimmer of light though. That should mean someone familiar with this island and its paths. All the same, he rested his hand on the hilt of a sword thrust through his double-looped belts. Motionless, he stood taut as a cat ready to pounce. All but invisible in his indigo cottons and deep in the tower's shadow where no moonlight could strike a glint from his chainmail.

Lemir stepped into the open space between the trees and the tower. Dyal breathed with discreet relief, took a pace forward into the faint light spilling from the door and bowed low. 'My lady Dau.'

She had discarded her iridescent gown, dressed instead in a pale tunic and cotton treads. With her face washed clean of cosmetics, her resemblance to her brother was visible even in the moonlight.

'Dyal.' She spared him the briefest of smiles before heading into the tower. Lemir followed and Dyal brought up the rear, closing and bolting the outer door to secure everyone within.

Sirket looked up from the book-strewn table and handed his sister a key. 'Well?'

Dau hissed wordless exasperation through her teeth as she unlocked a cupboard. 'Do you think they'd ever have told us the truth, if our father had never returned from that insane quest for barbarian lore to confound wizards? Would they have let us go on believing that he had drowned in some ominous accident, fleeing Ulla Safar's attempts to murder him?'

'Do you think they've told us the whole truth even now?' Sirket countered acidly.

'I need to recruit my own eyes and ears among the islanders and merchants.' Dau took a lacquered scroll case from the cupboard's shelf and twisted off the top. 'But how am I supposed to do that when they refuse to relinquish anything but the most trivial trade to me?'

She bit her lip and looked at her brother. 'That would have to change if you were to marry. They'd have to pass control of all the domain's trade to your wife. Custom would allow me a half share until I'm wed myself—'

'You think any woman I'd want to share my life with would risk taking my name at the moment?' Sirket demanded. 'Or are you prepared to welcome whichever of our enemies' daughters can be persuaded to spread her legs while their attendants spy on our every meeting and conversation?'

He raised a hand to forestall his sister. 'Forgive me. But we can't do that to the little ones, can we?'

He was barely asking a question and Dau didn't need to answer beyond a single shake of her head. The swordsmen exchanged a discreet glance of mutual relief. All these recent upheavals had provoked successive waves of tears and tantrums among the noble household's younger children. Sain Daish and her stolid slave Hanyad were the only ones capable of calming such storms. If Sirket's wedding prompted his father's youngest former wife to leave this domain, along with her erstwhile sisters in marriage, no one's life would be worth living the next time Efi flew into a fury.

'At least we've got Dyal.' Though Sirket was looking at Telouet. 'Are you sure they don't suspect anything?'

The slave nodded, unperturbed. 'Andit, Hanyad and Birut all believe that I'm training him as a favour to the guard contingent captain on Etise.' He looked intently at the youthful warrior. 'You'd better be convincing when you tell them about the recruits whose skills you've been testing on your trips back home.'

‘I am,’ Dyal assured him.

‘How far and how fast do you suppose news of our barren reefs will spread?’ Sirket was wondering aloud rather than asking anyone in particular. ‘What will our enemies make of it?’

‘Ulla Orhan could tell us.’ Dau smoothed a wisp of hair back from her forehead.

Sirket looked unblinking at her. ‘Or he could betray our misfortune to his murderous father.’

Dau shrugged. ‘Ulla Safar will know of it sooner or later. Would sooner make so very much difference? When knowing he’d betrayed our confidence would tell us beyond all doubt that Ulla Orhan is not to be trusted, whatever he may say about rejecting his father’s legacy of malice and cruelty?’

Sirket drew a slow, deep breath. ‘Our mothers will be furious with us.’

That didn’t sound like a “no” to Dyal.

‘Read the skies,’ urged Dau. ‘The heavenly Pearl, talisman for intuition as well as token for this domain, has left the arc of omens for parents to enter the arc where portents for children will rise. Our mothers do not rule here anymore. It’s time they understood that. The stars of the Winged Snake are waiting there, for courage and for the virtues of secrets being brought into the light of day. Diamond, that’s talisman gem for warlords, has just shifted into the arc of wealth—’

‘Where the Sea Serpent’s stars warn of hidden dangers amid dark secrets,’ argued Sirket.

Dau wasn’t to be deterred. ‘Not when they’re seen in direct opposition to the arc of death. The Sea Serpent is also an omen of self-reliance, an advocate of the benefits of seeking a new course through troubled waters. Look at the Ruby, for courage and initiative,’ she prompted. ‘That’s in the arc of health alongside the stars of the Spear for strength of purpose and the Emerald for good fortune.’

‘The Opal for truth and the Amethyst for humility both shine alongside the stars of the Walking Hawk, which is a warning of foes, advising watchfulness,’ Sirket pointed out. ‘All in the arc of marriage—’

‘Why else do you think I’m so resolved to test the truth of Orhan’s wish to court me?’ Dau was already unrolling the scroll she’d taken from the lacquered case. ‘Pen and paper, if you please, Lemir.’

Dyal held his breath as Sirket glowered at his sister, brows knotted in thought. Finally he nodded. ‘Very well.’

‘Thank you.’ Dau picked up her fine-nibbed pen. Dyal wondered if anyone else saw the faintest of tremors as she dipped it into the ink.

The swordsmen all stood silent as she traced the neat lines of writing on the scroll with a forefinger. She counted under her breath until she reached the next letter she needed for the particular word in whatever message she was encoding.

Dyal knew the only way to break such a cipher would be to get hold of an identical scroll to the one which Ulla Orhan had had copied, doubtless with a unique order for the poems in Haytar the Blind’s “Book of Animals”.

Even then, only three people knew the exact point where they’d started the cipher used in this correspondence: Orhan, Dau and Dyal. Not that he’d realised that, when he’d relayed Orhan’s first verbal message. Village boys knew nothing of such contrivances. Dau had understood at once though, and now Dyal was under no illusions. If she or Orhan ever suspected that any of their messages had been read, they would burn those scrolls the same day.

More than that, if he wasn’t already dead, murdered by Ulla Safar’s thugs for the sake of whatever he might be carrying, Dyal knew he would be handed over to Telouet and Lemir

until he confessed who he had betrayed them to.

Sirket returned to studying his star charts, shoulders hunched as he brooded over the convoluted possibilities of the heaven's portents.

Finally Dau sat up straight, brushing that wisp of hair away from her eyes. She laid down her reed pen and blew gently on the ink to dry the incomprehensible lines of numbers.

'You can go straight to the trading beach tonight.' Telouet was looking in the cupboard where the scroll case had been locked. 'Get on the first ship leaving with the morning tide.'

'Of course.' Dyal pulled his prized swords free of his looped belt and laid them carefully on the floor. As he loosened his hauberk's laces, Lemir dragged a chest out from under the table and opened it. Dyal leaned forward until his hands touched the floor and shook himself like a wet hound. The chainmail slid down his body and arms into a heap on the floor. When he stood up, red faced, Lemir was holding out a ragged, stained cotton tunic and treads. Dyal stripped off the finery that marked him as a warlord's man and donned clothing that no one in his home village would allow the most wretched unfortunate to wear.

Dau was folding the tiny sheet of onionskin paper. She handed the message to Telouet. The slave was loosening the long leather thong acting as a drawstring for a small leather pouch which he had taken from the cupboard. He took out a hinged brass rectangle as long as his little figure and as thick, from top to bottom. Opening it revealed a traveller's sundial on one side and a nocturnal dial on the other.

Any seafarer could use such an instrument to determine the local time and thus, the state of the tides. They would either read the sun's shadow cast by the pin across the engraved lines on one side, or rotate the nocturnal's reference discs around its central pivot to align with the stars of the Anvil and the Spider as they circled the Dagger thrust high in the centre of the night sky.

Only someone who knew precisely how to set the different brass discs and the sighting pointer in the correct positions could open the hidden compartment behind the nocturnal where Telouet now tucked the cipher before closing the hinged instrument.

'The stars of the Hoe are in the arc of travel, prophesying hard work rewarded.' Sirket looked up from his star charts with a brief smile. 'We can take that as a favourable omen for your journey.'

'Thank you, my lord.' Dyal let slip a relieved grin as he took the leather pouch from Telouet. He hung the thong around his neck and tucked the weight beneath his ragged tunic.

'Get on with you.' Telouet handed him a creased leather bag and a crude belt knife made from a forester's broken hacking tool. A beggar's blade. 'You want to reach the trading beach while there's no one awake to see where you've come from.'

I have done this before, you know. A handful of times over this past year.

Dyal swallowed the urge to remind the fearsome warrior and nodded meekly instead. 'What have I got to trade?'

'Pearls, what else?' With a wry smile, Sirket waved him onwards. 'Go carefully.'

'Come home safe,' Dau added as the young warrior left the tower room.

Outside, the night was silent and still. Dyal turned his back on the track leading to the lagoon below the warlord's compound. Only the warlord's triremes and the noble women's personal galleys ever anchored there. Heading inland instead, he took the longest of the curving paths, taking him furthest from the wall and well away from any watchful sentry.

He kept his eyes open for any hint of night hunters out in these wooded hills. Everyone on this island was loyal and no one local would know him in this guise. He couldn't afford the delay of being intercepted and challenged, held until someone like Telouet could be summoned to vouch for him. And he'd never hear the last of that from Telouet.

Thankfully, Dyal reached the crest of the rising land without incident. He paused to

breathe a sigh of relief. Looking down towards the trading beach bathed in moonlight, he counted the merchant galleys anchored with their sterns driven securely onto the sands. Close enough for Daish's wives to summon those whose wares they wished to barter for. Far enough away for any attack to be discovered before it could threaten the domain's noble household and their children.

There were fewer ships than he would have liked to see. Not just because that limited his options for travelling north unsuspected. Fewer ships meant that more merchants from other domains were losing confidence in Daish Sirket's fledgling rule.

When men of goodwill retreated, they left a void which those with ill intent would soon fill. Before long, the triremes guarding Daish sea lanes would have good reason to look suspiciously at every visitor. Their aggressive challenges would deter trustworthy mariners still further. Soon the islanders would have no one to trade the fruits of their labours with.

Dyal's father had told him of just such lean and uncertain times after Daish Reik's death, just before he'd been born. It had taken half a year for Daish Kheda's resolute leadership to reassure the honest and warn off those hovering to thief and scavenge like red tailed gulls.

He made his way carefully down to the beach, taking a long detour around the village sheltering below the high ground. Tents were scattered along the sand just above the high water line. Lamps glowed inside them and low voices here and there indicated crewmen or traders disinclined to sleep. Dyal stayed well away, sticking to the shadows beneath the fringe trees. He moved slowly and carefully, and not only for fear of snakes. Snores in the darkness indicated other travellers taking shelter. Finding an empty hollow, he slid the threadbare blanket out of his bag and settled down to get some rest.

Voices down by the waterline woke him in the predawn chill. As he scoured the sleep from his eyes, people around him were stirring. As fast as the sun rose, those looking for passage out of Daish made ready, waiting with all their meagre possessions before the first galley masters threw back their tent flaps to welcome the new day.

Dyal walked down to the stretch of tide-washed sand opposite a lean, single decked galley flying a Seik domain flag on its stern. Other pennants testified to its master's permission to sail Daish sea lanes and those of most of the domains in between. Anything like a direct course home would take this ship through Ulla waters, and it wasn't a ship he'd taken passage on before, which was a bonus. The stars were shining favourably on him so far.

A heavyset forester jostled him. Dyal swallowed the urge to challenge the man and not merely for the discourtesy.

Why are you deserting your lord and master? No, what was I thinking? Go! Daish has no use for men as cowardly as rats fleeing smoke pots set to cleanse a granary before the harvest is stored. You clearly have no more sense than vermin afraid they'll be trapped in a burning building.

The Seik galley master emerged from his tent, naked and blinking in the strengthening sunlight. He surveyed the handful of waiting men, grunted, non-committal, and walked away to take a copious piss into the surf at the far end of the beach. By the time he returned, his personal servant was waiting to hand him serviceable blue cotton trews and a tunic with intricate beadwork around the neck.

'Show me your hands.' Once all five men had shown him suitably calloused palms he nodded. 'I have two empty spaces on my benches. Fight it out among yourselves. I'll take the last two standing, Paso – provided they can still row,' he added with a sardonic grin before going back into his tent.

So this was definitely a boat used to sailing Ulla waters, Dyal noted. Such bouts were custom and practise on those beaches. Three of the other men dropped their bags and bundles onto the sand and sized each other up.

Dyal didn't move, snapping his fingers at the servant instead. 'Where are you headed?' He wasn't about to risk a beating only to find himself rowing for Jahal or Aedis waters.

'Ritsem, Ulla, Tule.' The servant, Paso, thrust his chin forward, belligerent. 'Well?'

No wonder your ship has rowers constantly slipping away wherever and whenever you make landfall. Good to know.

'That suits me.' Dyal lowered his bag as the other man still clutching his possessions to his chest shook his head and walked away. Better still.

The man who'd jostled him was already facing up to the leaner of the two who remained. That left Dyal to take the measure of the last hopeful. A few years his elder, he guessed, and broad-shouldered. A man well used to hard work in Daish fishing boats judging by the rope scars on his forearms.

Why are you fleeing Daish wate—

The fisherman made his move. His punch would have split Dyal's liver against his backbone if it had connected.

Dyal evaded the blow with an oblique sidestep and thumped the man hard on the side of his head. Telouet disdained any swordsman who couldn't hold his own in a bout with bare hands. More than that, he didn't believe in giving any attacker a second chance.

As the fisherman reeled from that blow, Dyal took a step behind him. He hooked one hand under the fisherman's upper arm while his other hand curled around the front of the man's neck to grab a handful of his tunic's collar. Dyal expanded his shoulders and pulled. The fisherman's back arched. He couldn't get his hand to the twist of cloth digging into his neck, not with Dyal forcing his arm straight outwards on that side. He tried to claw at Dyal's encircling forearm with the hooked fingers of his other hand but it was already too late.

As Dyal felt the man's legs buckle, he sank down to kneel on the sand, all the while maintaining the stranglehold. Once the man lay limp as any fish destined for the griddle, Dyal untangled his hand from the cloth. A few breaths later, the fisherman's eyelids fluttered. As Telouet explained, a bodyguard must sometimes defeat an enemy without actually killing him, to avoid causing undue offence in some other warlord's residence.

Dyal stood up and looked at the galley master's servant. 'Well?'

The man Paso scratched his straggly beard. 'Not what I was expecting.'

Dyal shrugged. 'I don't believe in wasting time.' Better to get this over and done with, to be safely on board the galley before anyone who might know him came to the beach to see the traders' offerings.

Paso pursed his lips and then nodded. 'You're in.'

They turned to the other bout. The forester was slower on his feet but whenever he landed a blow it was brutal. The lean man was tiring, hard pressed to evade further punches as his feet slipped in the sand. Falling to his knees, he tried to scoop up shattered sea shells to fling at the forester's eyes. That attempt was cut short as the forester sent him sprawling with a kick to the chest.

'Very well.' Paso gestured towards the galley's stern ladders. 'Get aboard.'

Dyal allowed the forester to go first. How much of his fight had the other man seen? Enough to convince him that his new shipmate wasn't a man to be trifled with? Hopefully. Besides, it wasn't as if Dyal looked to have anything much worth fighting for. Not besides the brass travel-dial he carried and he'd keep that hidden in its leather pouch. If someone got unduly curious, he'd show them it was nothing remarkable. After that, anyone who tried to take it off him would very rapidly regret their mistake.

As the forester swung his leg over the stern rail, Dyal began climbing the wooden rungs. Looking up, he saw several of the ship's crew looking warily down. They backed off before he reached the top of the ladder. Good. They'd witnessed enough to keep their distance. Word would soon spread as they headed out to sea, murmured from rower to rower

as they shared an oar along the three-man benches.

By the time they reached Ulla waters, Dyal was sick and tired of the galley crew's sour grumbling. He was also exhausted. Thank the heavens that Derasulla was sufficiently far south to be the galley's second landfall in this domain. Even so, eleven days had passed as he laboured at the shared oar. The new year's stars had come and gone.

Paso was up in the stern, and the *Spangled Heron's* permanent mariners leaned against the rails along both sides. They were scanning the banks for any vacant anchorage as the rowers slowly drove the lean galley up the estuary. These turbid waters were crowded. Not so very far upstream, Ulla domain triremes prowled to warn opportunist merchants off venturing any further.

With those eyes turned elsewhere, Dyal caught the resentful glances along the rowers' benches. He wouldn't be the only one not to come back once the captain gave grudging permission for the oarsmen to disembark to trade on their own account.

Good. The less noticeable his absence, the better. Still more in his favour, the sun was already low in the sky and dusk was gathering under fever trees ashore.

Paso spotted an opportunity and forced the steering sweep over to turn the prow. 'Row, for it!'

Along all the benches, the oarsmen leaned and hauled. Not for the shipmaster's sake. Just to put an end to this interminable day's work.

Did no one ever teach you to train hounds with kindness rather than kicks?

Whatever his flaws, Paso was a deft steersman. The *Spangled Heron* slipped ahead of a larger ship intent on the same berth.

'Sunwise!' Paso yelled.

The rowers on Dyal's side all dug deep into the river. Across the central aisle, the others reversed their stroke. The *Spangled Heron* spun around almost within its own length, soiled foam boiling up around the oars.

'Back!'

One last heave from all the rowers together drove the galley's stern into the muddy bank. Crewmen scrambled down the ladders to secure the anchors above the reach of the tide.

Dyal helped his bench mates draw their long oar inboard. Once it was secure, he reached under the bench to gather up his travelling bag and headed for the stern.

Paso barely spared him a glance. By now everyone knew who carried goods to trade as they travelled. 'If you're too long ashore, you won't get fed.'

Dyal nodded. 'I know.'

As if that's any great loss. My mother feeds a tastier mix of boiled grains and spices to her house ducks.

Once ashore, he dodged past the crew erecting the captain's tent. One caught his eye with something between a grin and a sneer. He'd expect to see Dyal return as disappointed as he'd been whenever he'd left the ship thus far. A small stash of dogtooth and other misshapen pearls weren't valuable enough to arouse anyone's interest, or so Dyal had grumbled each time he slunk back.

The sun had slipped behind high ground to the west and shadows thickened under the trees. Dyal headed further away from the river. Not towards the clusters of houses where Ulla islanders would welcome visiting traders. Far out into the saller fields and vegetable gardens.

Which meant he would be all the more noticeable to anyone still tending their crops in the largely deserted valley. And there seemed to be more swordsmen out and about each time he came here. Dyal looked warily all around, walking as fast as he dared from stand to stand of fruit trees. Without breaking into a run that would attract unwanted attention.

Finally reaching the scrubby bushes where the ground sloped upwards too steeply to till

and plant, he allowed himself a pause. Just a few moments to catch his breath and for the apprehensive pounding of his heart to slow before he made his way upstream.

He edged still further up the valley side and away from the river as he drew level with the first forbidding fortifications. One tower on each bank glowered across the waters at the other. Below them, Dyal knew that a vast chain stretched across the river, ready to bar passage to any ship upstream or down. Whenever Ulla Safar decreed, the links were winched taut by slaves whipped bloody to turn giant capstans inside those grim buildings.

Further onwards through the darkness and now Dyal was passing by the great fortress of Derasulla as it squatted in the middle of the river. Rushing water made wavering smears of reflections from lit windows and watchtower torches. The outer wall rose sheer from the flow, offering no foothold for any enemy. The only landing stage was heavily guarded. There was no way into or out of the Ulla warlord's sanctuary without his permission.

Or so Ulla Safar believes.

Dyal pressed on as the valley narrowed, trees spreading down from the slopes towards the river. Both moons were just past their half; the Greater waning to its days of darkness while the Lesser waxed to its full. Between them, the heavenly jewels gave enough light for Dyal to find the game trails cut through the undergrowth by hook-toothed hogs and striped forest deer.

At long last, looking ahead, he saw pale stone gleam against sharp-edged blackness rising up into the starry sky. A crag, dark as midnight, cut through the soft valley side to loom over the land below. It was home to the great silver eagles whose flights carved omens in these skies to guide warlord and farmer alike. One of the countless streams feeding the mighty river tumbled from its jagged summit, to fall in a thundering cascade and pool beneath the crag before spilling into a rivulet heading onwards downhill.

The pale shimmer in the night was the white stone wall circling a tower of silence built generations ago in this numinous place. The honoured dead of the Ulla domain were laid on the tower's open top for the breezes, the birds and insects to carry some trace of their virtue to every nook and cranny of these islands.

Dyal paused in the shadow of a flourishing nepethia tree, to be certain there was no one else here. Not that the humble islanders would ever draw near to the place. Trespassing within the tower's enclosing wall without permission would see them condemned to death. Mere suspicion that they might contemplate such intrusion was good enough for a flogging from Ulla Safar's men. Only the direst drought would convince them to draw water from this pool.

Unless of course they were youths just sprouting their first whiskers, goaded to take such a risk by their fellows. Dyal knew he'd never had backed down from such a dare.

Nothing stirred in the moist darkness. He was quite alone. Dyal approached the ebony gate in the wall. He didn't lift the bronze latch, dulled with verdigris. Tucking a sprig of nepethia through the heavy loop, he left the leaves pinned against the wood. Taking one last look over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't been followed, he hurried around the curved wall.

The waterfall's roar grew louder. As the crag blotted out the moonlight, Dyal picked his way carefully, reaching out into the darkness to trace the rock face with one hand. The ledge along the side of the pool grew steadily narrower. Spray soaked his clothing to chill him. More hazardous, the cold numbed his bare toes at the same time as the rock underfoot grew slick with moss. He moved more slowly and more cautiously still.

Finally he reached the hollow at the side of the cascade which offered access to an unsuspected cavern hidden behind the tumbling waters. Breathing a fervent sigh of relief, he cupped his hand into the falling water, quenched his thirst and then sat down in the darkness to wait.

Every time he had done this, the night seemed interminable. Hidden away from the stars, he couldn't even use the nocturnal dial to track the passing time. At long, long last, as he went to get another drink, he realised he could just make out the ever-shifting ruffles of foam in the pool below. Up above the crag, the sky must finally be paling towards dawn.

Dyal watched the wall around the tower intently as the night receded. He resented even having to blink as tension knotted his shoulders and churned in his empty stomach. Eventually a figure appeared, heading for the waterfall under the strengthening sun.

Curbing his desire to meet the newcomer halfway, Dyal retreated deeper into the cave. He couldn't risk being glimpsed, not until this solitary wanderer was close enough to recognise. When the figure did reach the rim of the pool and Dyal knew him for Inais, the young warrior didn't breathe much easier. The *zamorin* was portly and none too fit and even in the daylight, the narrow path to the cave was treacherous. Dyal braced himself for a dive into the pool if the eunuch fell in.

Inais chuckled as he reached the cave safely, silhouetted against the glittering waterfall. 'You should have more faith in me, lad.'

Dyal busied himself opening the leather pouch and wondered what the *zamorin* had seen in his expression, even in this gloom.

Though I shouldn't be surprised. It's his skill in reading faces for the most minute hint that keeps Inais alive.

'Forgive me,' he said stiffly, holding out the traveller's twin-dial.

'Oh, don't take a fat man's joke so seriously.' Inais took out the brass rectangle and tucked it away in the folds of his loose overmantle. 'We have more than enough more serious concerns.' He handed Dyal a small basket loosely wrapped in muslin.

Dyal accepted the bundle gratefully. 'Is Yshri—?'

'She's safe and well.' Though Inais grimaced. 'For the moment, like the rest of us.'

Does Ulla Safar suspect his son is writing to Daish? How about Mirrel or Shay Ulla? What do those paid to be the Ulla wives' eyes and ears tell them of comings and goings at the estuary? How closely do they monitor news reaching or leaving the fortress, under the guise of supervising the domain's trade?

How long was it before Yshri realised that winning her place in her warlord's household wasn't the blessing she'd longed for? How soon did she realise she was at the mercy of two women both as vicious and violent as their loathsome husband? Do any of them suspect such an insignificant maidservant is telling Orhan all that she learns of their vile plotting?

Dyal swallowed his questions. Inais wouldn't tell him, even if the *zamorin* knew. What Dyal didn't know, he couldn't betray. And he would die before he'd betray Yshri, who had saved his life when Daish Kheda was attacked. Did Inais feel the same about her?

Would I recognise betrayal in your face, my so-called friend, if one of these days you were to come here just to confirm my presence before you sent men to capture me?

He didn't ask that either. 'How long—?'

'With luck, sometime after sunset.' Inais didn't elaborate, turning to edge past the cascade once again.

Dyal clenched his fists. 'Go carefully.'

'Always,' Inais assured him before he vanished beyond the watery veil.

And that was that, the same as it was every time. Now all Dyal could do was wait out a long solitary day in this moist, noisy gloom.

At least he had some food. The lidded basket was lined with flat saller bread and filled with duck simmered so long with spiced lilla fruit that the meat was falling into succulent shreds. Dyal ate every scrap and only regretted that he wasn't a hound with a tongue long enough to lick the last tasty smears from the woven reeds.

The sun charted its leisurely course through the heavens, shifting the angle and intensity of the rainbows it struck from the waterfall's spray. From time to time, Dyal tried to sleep, using his bag as a pillow. Despite the lulling sound of the water, apprehension kept him wakeful. Surely Inais couldn't be the only servant inside Derasulla who knew this cave existed.

Eventually exhaustion overwhelmed him. When he woke abruptly, heart pounding as he scrambled to his feet, he saw the veil of water was now gilded by sunset. Edging closer to the narrow path, he kept watch on the wall around the tower once again. Inais reappeared when the sun had barely vanished behind the hills and its afterglow still filled the sky.

What reason have you given for your absence this evening? What excuse do you give for walking up here each morning? Or do you send some underling to see if a sprig of nepethia's tucked under the gate latch?

Not that Dyal would ever ask. What he didn't know, he couldn't betray.

The young warrior frowned. The *zamorin* was hurrying. By the time Inais entered the cave, he was audibly out of breath.

'You had better make for the anchorage as soon as it's dark.' The slave handed Dyal the brass twin-dial.

He tucked it back in its pouch. 'What's happened?'

'I'm not sure,' Inais said, strained. 'Safar and Orhan have had—' he hesitated '—a falling out. It could be something, it could be nothing. I think it is over Orhan's correspondence with Redigal Litai and Ritsem Zorat. I won't know until we get a chance to talk in private and that won't happen tonight. Safar will keep everyone, slave and servant, dancing attendance on him alone, out of sheer spite.'

What happens if Ulla Safar decides this supposedly loyal zamorin has become too devoted to his increasingly and inconveniently independent son? Whether Inais is killed or merely banished to some remote island, these letters, this link with Daish, all will be lost.

'Either way,' Inais continued, 'there's every chance that Safar will order patrols out along both banks, upstream and down before the night's out. The guard captains will know if they don't catch someone to accuse of a crime, real or imagined, Ulla Safar will slake his bad temper with their blood and screams. If they catch a stranger with no wealth and no friends here?'

Dyal shivered. The *zamorin* didn't need to go on. 'You had better get back before you're missed.'

Inais nodded and found a broken stone on the cave floor. He wrapped it in the muslin he was knotting around the empty food basket and tossed the whole bundle into the cascade. It vanished in the depths of the pool. 'Go as soon as the shadows are thick enough. Don't leave a trace,' he warned.

As the *zamorin* departed, Dyal caught up his travelling bag. He paused for a moment then opened it. He had to dig deep. The cotton pouch of misshapen pearls had slipped right down to the bottom, beneath his blanket, wooden bowl, horn cup and spoon.

Ulla swordsmen searching his belongings would soon find them. Mere suspicion that a travelling beggar had ties to Daish could be enough to condemn him. He threw the pouch into the waterfall.

Moving to the edge of the tumbling water, he assessed the deepening dusk. The sooner he left, the better. But how long should he wait? He watched Inais skirt the pale wall and vanish for a short while before reappearing some distance down the valley once the tower of silence no longer blocked his view of the path. The *zamorin* was still clearly visible.

Movement by some red lance canes snagged Dyal's eye. But there was no wind to stir leaves in the valley now that the day's sea breeze had fallen away into evening stillness. Dyal strained to see what was down there. An overly adventurous deer?

He stiffened. A man was using the redlance thicket as cover. Now he was circling around to keep the clustered canes between him and Inais. Dyal's apprehension grew. As the eunuch went on his way, this unknown shadow slipped through the undergrowth to use a sprawling line of ironwoods as concealment.

Whoever he might be, he was on Inais's trail. But he hadn't seen where the *zamorin* had gone, Dyal realised with a shiver of relief. The hunter clearly had no suspicion that there might be someone with a vantage point behind him, able to see him stalking the slave.

Who are you, friend or foe? What are you going to do? Attack Inais or merely betray him to whoever your master or mistress might be?

Dyal realised such questions were irrelevant. They couldn't risk either outcome. Whoever he was, this man had to be stopped. And he was the only one who could do it.

The young warrior had to force himself not to rush as he left the cave and skirted the rocky pool. If he slipped and drowned or broke an arm or a leg, he'd be no use to Inais.

Once he was safely on the path though, he ran as fast as he could. The tower would prevent the hunter from seeing him coming. Though that blade cut on both edges. Now Dyal couldn't see the stalker. All he could do was focus on the tops of the tall ironwood trees where he'd last seen the man. Would he be able to pick up the trail there? Apprehension set his heart racing even more than this unexpected exertion.

Passing the tower, he darted across to the redlance thicket, fleetingly, grimly amused at the thought of using the same concealment to hide his own pursuit. As he reached the feathery canes, he studied the ground. There was just enough light left to show him the hunter's footprints in the moist earth.

Dyal went onwards, glancing ahead to the ironwoods every few paces to keep his bearings. All the while scanning the path and the brush around him for signs that the hunter wasn't alone.

By the time he reached the ironwoods, he had seen no such trace. So he only had one foe to tackle. But what manner of opponent would this be? Moving as silently as his father ever taught him, to avoid putting fowl to flight, Dyal went onwards.

Soon he could see the man ahead of him. The hunter was still intent on Inais. Not a hunter precisely. Not an Ulla islander prowling these woods in search of meat for the pot. Dyal got a clear view of him when the man momentarily moved into the open where the daylight lingered, where all the brush had been harvested for firewood.

This was an Ulla swordsman. He wore chainmail under a loose mossy green tunic. One scabbarded sword was thrust through his belt. He carried the other drawn ready for use. Dyal wondered whether it was for cutting down the vegetation or for killing Inais.

No matter. He couldn't take that risk. Dyal flexed his hands and considered the broken beggar's blade in his bag. Worse than useless. So he'd have to see if Telouet was right. The slave scorned the notion that an unarmed warrior couldn't defeat a man with a sword.

And he had to do it before this hunter caught up with Inais. This path would soon take them closer to a curve of the river and open ground ideal for an attack. Dyal dropped his bag in the undergrowth. He'd never survive this, encumbered. He found a stubby stick fallen from some bundle of firewood and quickened his pace.

The hunter had slowed as he reached the first stand of fruit trees on the edge of saller farmland. Dyal could see Inais hurrying along the bank between two of the sunken fields. The hunter was judging his moment.

Dyal hurled the stick hard at his back. It struck the hunter squarely between the shoulder blades. The man instantly spun around, his hand held high, the sword blade angled with its point down low.

So he was well enough trained to turn ready to foil an attack coming at all possible heights. That meant Dyal had to close the distance between them before the Ulla man could

draw his second blade. Even Telouet had to admit an unarmed man would be hard pressed against twin swords. Dyal knew he'd have no hope.

He rushed forwards. The Ulla man grinned. He took a solid two-handed grip on his sword, feet firmly planted. When Dyal was within a few strides, he swept the blade up to cut this ragged peasant in half. Ulla steel was famous. It could cleave a man from brain to balls.

Dyal turned sideways so the gleaming sword missed him by less than a hand's width. Now he stood hip to hip with the swordsman, both of them facing back along the path. Dyal raised a fist to smash the man's nose with a backhanded punch.

Quick as thought, the Ulla man recoiled. Dyal had his instant of opportunity. Instead of landing the blow, he thrust his hand down to seize the sword hilt himself. Pressing the outstretched fingers of his other hand tight together, he reached for the back of the blade.

*You can only do this with a single edged sword. And never lay your hand across the blade. You **will** curl your fingers around it and then you'll be taking them home in a bag.*

With Telouet's words ringing in his mind, Dyal pivoted on his front foot. As he ripped the sword hilt upwards with his merciless grip, he forced the naked blade down and inwards with his other hand. In the next breath, the point was heading straight for the Ulla man's groin, curving up underneath the edge of his hauberk.

The swordsman let go of the hilt to stumble backwards. All he could think of was saving his manhood from the razor sharp steel.

Dyal swept the sword onwards and up, taking the hilt in both hands. Now the point was level with the Ulla man's face. Taking a step forward, all his weight behind the blade, Dyal thrust the tip into his enemy's eye. Another step, and he drove it as deep as he could.

The Ulla man collapsed backwards like a poleaxed hog. His arms and legs jerked in senseless spasms for a moment and then he lay still and dead. Dyal pulled the sword free and wiped it clean of blood and brains on his victim's trousered leg. As he did so, he looked around. Had anyone seen the death?

Not as far as Dyal could tell. He took a step to get a clearer view of the path by the river, looking for Inais.

There he was. Though the *zamorin* was now so far away that Dyal wouldn't have been able to name him, if he hadn't already known who he was looking for.

Far enough away to make any thought of calling him back quite pointless. And besides, what Inais didn't know, he couldn't betray.

Dyal looked down at the dead man. What now? As soon as this corpse was found, Ulla Safar's men would be beating the bushes all across this valley, desperate to find the killer and throw him to their murderous warlord, to satisfy his appetite for torture. What were the chances he'd have got back to the anchorage by then?

That wasn't a wager Dyal cared to make. This body had to disappear to buy him enough time to get clear away. And clean away? He looked down at his ragged clothes and was relieved to see a lack of bloodstains.

That was why Telouet advised the killing thrust to the face, of course, rather than a sweeping blow to behead the enemy. In the few breaths until the heart stopped pumping, a dead man's blood sprayed everywhere, if the great veins and vessels in his neck were cut.

Dyal looked down at the Ulla swordsman. The corpse's face was a mask of blood. One eye, ripped from its socket lay pale as a peeled egg amid the gore. Dyal stumbled a few paces off the path and heaved the last vestiges of the food left in his stomach over a sardberry bush. He coughed and choked on the acid taste of bile but he was helpless to stop the retching.

When the urge to vomit finally passed, he was soaked in rank, cold sweat and shaking from head to foot. He had killed a man. A man who probably had no choice but to serve Ulla Safar. There was no saying he'd approved his master's brutal cruelty. There was every chance he had a family who loved him.

Kill him or he'll kill you. That's all you need to know.

Telouet's words echoing in his head brought Dyal back to his senses. Still sick to his stomach, and sick at heart, he nevertheless gritted his teeth to quell further nausea. Now he recalled his father's words, as they had stood amid the devastation brought to their village by a monsoon storm.

What's done is done and cannot be undone. The stars, the travelling jewels and the whole heavenly compass only ever turns in one direction. We have to look forward. The only way to get through calamity is to go onwards.

Lifting the hem of his tunic, Dyal wiped tears and mucus from his face before looking around the valley. He had to get back to Daish. That meant he had to get out of here. To avoid pursuit, he had to get rid of this body.

There was still no one to be seen. Good. He judged the distance from the fruit trees to the bank, brought close by the curl of the river. An armoured corpse would sink soon enough. That was surely his best option.

Taking a deep breath, he stooped and seized the dead man's sandalled feet. His arms and legs felt stupidly weak and hauling the corpse backwards towards the water proved unexpectedly awkward. Dyal forced himself on regardless, step by step, snatching glances over his shoulder to try and avoid any trip and fall.

He had very nearly reached the rushes fringing the river when he looked back and saw a handful of Ulla islanders on the opposite bank. They were looking straight at him. At him and the corpse he was dragging. Two men stood open mouthed with horror while a woman pressed her hands to her face, wide-eyed. Her water jar bobbed away down the stream.

The remaining pair, a man and a woman, stood motionless for a moment. Then she seized her stricken companion's shoulder and spun her around, turning her back to the river. One of the men stepped close, his gestures eloquent, but Dyal couldn't hear what he said.

The two remaining men were still looking at him. One was aghast. The other? He merely looked thoughtful. Dyal watched as that islander turned to the others. He cut their words short with a vehement shake of his head. Whatever he said next brought them all together in a huddle. Now all four looked across the river, their faces drawn with apprehension.

The thoughtful man took a pace closer to the rushes on his side. He flicked his hands at Dyal, for all the world like a man shoos off yellow-winged finches come to eat his saller seedlings.

Just go away. We want nothing to do with this.

Was that his meaning? As Dyal wondered, the five Ulla islanders hurried away. Not running off to raise a hue and cry after this murderer though. Simply looking to put distance between themselves and his crime. Not looking back.

Would one of them betray him later? Maybe when the body was found? But that would be betraying themselves to Ulla Safar's guards, to explain why they hadn't spoken sooner.

No matter. Dyal would be long gone by then. At least he would, as long as he made haste now. He dragged the corpse the last short distance to the river bank and rolled it into the water. The dead man vanished to leave barely a ripple of foam and that was soon scattered by the current.

Dyal threw the bloodied sword into the river as well. He ran back to collect his travelling bag. No sense in leaving any clue that a stranger had been here. He scuffed dust over the blood soaked into the path as best he could and then headed downstream.

Would the *Spangled Heron* still be in the anchorage? If it wasn't, how soon could he get a seat on a rower's bench to leave here? Dau Daish was right. She needed her own eyes and ears; men and women with their own boats and detailed knowledge of every domain's sea lanes and back channels.

Whatever might be written in the new message which Dyal now carried hidden in the traveller's twin dial, Daish Sirket needed to get news like this far quicker than an itinerant rower could carry it.

The young warlord needed to know how little loyalty could be seen among Ulla Safar's own islanders. That they would rather see a stranger who killed a fortress guard go unpunished than risk the consequences of raising the alarm.

What omen was that for the fearsome warlord's future?