

Eastern Tide

Book Four of the Aldabreshin Compass

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Chapter One

'If you tell yourself beforehand how hard the task ahead is going to be, when you actually set your hand to it, it generally turns out to be far easier than you imagined.'

I suspect some aged and respected philosopher first said that sitting comfortably on a cushion under a shady tree. I wouldn't mind having him here now, to make him eat his words and choke on them.

The white light surrounding Kheda dissolved piecemeal, drifting away like pale smoke. He felt solid ground under his feet and breathed warm dry air redolent of slowly rotting leaves overlain with hints of spice, familiar and unfamiliar.

It smells like home. Only it isn't home. Still, it's closer than I've been since the last dark of the Lesser Moon. But where exactly are we? And where is the dragon?

Opening his eyes, he found himself standing in the shade of tall ironwood trees, logen vines draped thickly over their lower branches. The vines were dessicated, their leaves withered. The moss covering the buttress roots of the ironwoods was dry, crumbling away around the edges where it had retreated and finally died. The sparse undergrowth was parched and dusty.

Will another cycle of the Pearl see me home again? What kind of reception can I expect, returning in rags and wielding a hunter's blade fit for hacking paths through forests instead of a warlord's fine swords? Will anyone care about such things, if I have rid another domain of a dragon? Will that success outweigh my lies and evasions?

Kheda shook his head to banish a strange lassitude that seemed to linger after the slowly fading spell. 'Can you see it?' He looked up at a chattering noise in the branches, gripping the long handle of his broad, blunt-ended blade. It was only a loal. 'Risala?'

'No.' A slim girl was circling slowly around. 'There's no sign of it.' She wore a grey cotton tunic and trousers as faded as his own garments. Letting the strap of the leather bag slung over one shoulder slip down her arm, she lowered the burden silently to the dull dead leaves. 'I can't hear any birds. Can you? And that loal is terrified.' Her wrist heavily bandaged, she brushed a stray lock of fine black hair out of vivid blue eyes as she looked up.

Kheda realised a tense silence held the forest breathless in all directions. He studied the small furred creature clinging to the branch of the ironwood, its pelt as grey as the bark. The man-like hands had longer fingers than those he was used to seeing on such beasts while its snout was longer and sharper, as were its ears. Tufted with white, those ears were flattened like a startled jungle cat's and the animal's black lips drew back from a sharp-toothed silent snarl. 'I wonder where the rest of its clan is.' He couldn't recall when he'd last seen a solitary loal.

A hot dry breeze stirred the withered vines, brushing across Kheda's forehead and tousling Risala's hair.

'Velindre?' Risala looked around urgently.

As the magewoman appeared, the loose fabric of her worn tunic hung motionless in midair, as if she had turned in sudden haste and been frozen in that moment. The she gasped and the unbleached cotton fell loose around her long-boned frame, the wind ruffling her short-cropped hair. 'It hasn't felt us,' she breathed with relief.

'Velindre! Where is it?' Kheda wasn't sure she had heard him. 'The dragon?'

'I don't know precisely.' Velindre shook her head, more to rid herself of the magic's after

effects than to answer Kheda's question. 'I can't search for it with magic.' Her finality brooked no argument. 'I brought us here using as stealthy a working as I could devise. If I look for it now, it'll sense my affinity and it'll be on us before we know it.'

Kheda nodded grudging acknowledgement. 'We have precious few advantages; let's not squander the element of surprise.'

'We're not here to attack it,' Velindre said sharply.

'It's not as if we could, not if you're not willing.' Ambivalence clouded Risala's words.

'Are you certain you can drive it off or lure it away, all on your own?' Kheda asked Velindre bluntly. 'With some stratagem that doesn't leave chaos and death in its wake?'

Because the last time you tried this, even with another wizard to help you, the upheaval sent the beast flying away from its distant home where we might have hoped to ignore it. Now its come to plague these islands.

'Get rid of it one way or another and we can all go home,' Risala said softly.

'That's what we're here to find out.' Velindre's attempt at optimism was unconvincing, given the strain shadowing her hazel eyes. Her angular face was as grim as Kheda had ever seen it.

'But where is here, precisely?' He looked up to try to find the sun, to get his bearings. 'How far are we from Chazen?'

My home domain. Where my lady wife Itrac thinks I have spent these past few turns of the moons secluded in peaceful meditation, contemplating the omens that should show me how best to raise our newborn daughters. How to meet the demands laid upon me as warlord of the Chazen domain with wisdom and justice.

When in truth I've been travelling to an unknown western shore and back again with a magewoman from the barbarian north. When one law that all the countless warlords of this vast Archipelago agree on is that suborning sorcery deserves death. Itrac would never deny that the crime of magic warrants agonising death for any wizard caught in an Aldabreshin domain. And more often than not, the same fate awaits anyone taken in the offender's company.

Such dangers didn't appear to be bothering Velindre. She scuffed aside the leaves with one bare and callused foot before hunkering down and picking up a stick. 'This is the Archipelago.' Scowling, she scratched harder to score a broad curling outline in the dry earth. 'And there's the unbroken lands, the mainland.' She sketched in a coastline thrusting down to nearly touch the northernmost domains. 'So, Chazen is all the way down here.' Reaching out, she found a scrap of bark and set it at the southernmost end of the faint scraping. 'We're in the western domains, though I'm not entirely sure which one.' She arranged more fragments about halfway down the outer edge of the sweeping curve. The cluster was somewhat separated from the rest of the outline.

'I don't think I'll ever get used to your northerner map-making.' Kheda calculated the distances according to what he knew of the mariners' route records customarily compiled by the galley captains who plied the sea lanes the length and breadth of the Archipelago.

Supposing we're somewhere in the midst of those western domains, it would take twenty-five days hard rowing for the fastest trireme to reach Chazen. And probably as long for the same ship to reach the mainland. We're both as far from home as each other.

'Those domains are the most westerly islands in the whole Archipelago.' Risala was gazing thoughtfully at the rough sketch in the dust. 'So how far have we come? Where's that great isle in the western ocean where the dragons were living?'

Velindre had to sweep more leaves away. 'It would be about here, as close as I can judge.'

'That far?' Kheda was astonished.

Velindre nodded. 'It's about a thousand leagues away, near enough.'

Kheda shook his head, bemused. ‘And it was no more than a step, with your magic.’ *And the barbarians wonder why we hate magic. All other considerations aside, how could any warlord allow any other to have such advantages over the rest?*

Risala frowned. ‘That land is quite some way further south, nowhere near due west of here. Why did the dragon fly here, instead of going to Chazen or some other southern domain?’

‘Like last time,’ Kheda agreed. ‘That’s what the wild men did, when they invaded us.’

What would these western warlords have done if they had been the first ones with those challengers landing on their beaches?

‘Even with their wizards’ magic, the wild men were still largely at the mercy of the ocean currents.’ As Velindre stood up and looked around, avid interest brightened her hazel eyes. ‘A dragon can fly where it wants. There must be something around here that attracted it.’

Kheda drew a deep breath. ‘Whatever it’s interested in, we’re here to deter it.’

‘You said it’s a dragon born of water, most specifically of the sea,’ Risala commented. ‘Let’s make our way to the shore and start searching the beaches.’

‘That sounds sensible,’ Velindre agreed, sweeping away her rough map.

Kheda licked a forefinger to test the breeze, peering upwards to find the sun through the dark green canopy of ironwood leaves. The light was yellowing but there was no hint of dusk as yet. ‘The wind will still be coming off the sea. Let’s try this way.’

What will Itrac say when I tell her I sailed to an unknown island in the far western ocean? That I found the homeland of those wild men who came out of the night on rafts of logs to murder and maim the people of the Chazen domain? Her warriors fought bravely but they couldn’t fight the savage magic that the wild wizards wielded. Will she understand when I tell her their magic depends on dragons? That the beasts have grown accustomed to dining on the dead slaughtered in the savages’ wars, on that distant isle stained with long ages of blood and sorcery? When I explain that’s why those invaders were followed by the first dragon to set foot on Aldabreshin soil within time of memory?

Will she forgive my deceptions, when I tell her we broke the hold those wild wizards had on their people? That they no longer live like animals in thrall to the magic drawn from the presence of dragons in that land? Can I honestly assure her no such slaughter as Chazen suffered can ever be visited on an Archipelagan domain again? I can’t, not while there’s a dragon in any Aldabreshin domain. This won’t be finished until we’re rid of this beast.

He brushed aside an inconvenient branch and fragments of crumbling leaves stuck to the sweat coating his face.

Will Itrac understand if I tell her that we didn’t exact vengeance on those distant wild men for all the sufferings of her people? What will she say if I explain that the only way we could free them was by ridding their island of the dragons? That we achieved that through alliance with wizards from the barbarian north. Because only magic can fight magic. Will she forgive me, because that magic was suborned outside Aldabreshin waters? Do I want to rely on such a fine point of law to save my head and my hide.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Risala following close, her intent gaze searching the forest on either side. The magewoman bringing up the rear, her head half-turned, alert for anything that might be following their trail. Kheda looked ahead once more.

My lady Itrac’s young but she’s no fool. She’ll realise this alliance must go back further than this voyage. She’ll guess northern magic facilitated my victories when I reclaimed Chazen from the wild men and the first dragon. Will she call in the captain of my own guard to behead me there and then? Would anyone say I didn’t deserve such a death? Not if they learn that driving off the dragons to free the wild men set the beasts free to fly here, to bring new misery and destruction to innocent Archipelagans?

Clarity in the sunlight ahead warned Kheda that they were approaching the edge of the

trees. He could hear soft surf on a shelving beach. He ran an apprehensive hand over his tightly curled brown hair, finding it uncomfortably gritty. His eyes felt dry and the parched skin of his lips threatened to crack. ‘How good is a dragon’s hearing?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Velindre said tightly. ‘I’ve generally been more concerned with assessing its magical senses.’

Risala looked up into the gently swaying nut palms. ‘There are still no birds.’

Kheda nodded as he slowly edged forward through the trees fringing the shore.

Before I involved myself with magic I would have been searching for the omen in such silence. I would have been ransacking my recollection of endless portents carefully recorded by warlords who ruled before me. How can I ever tell Itrac that I no longer have any faith in such things? That my doubts had been growing long before I sailed for that unknown western shore.

Philosophers would say that my association with magic was to blame. Just as they say the wielding of magic anywhere within the Archipelago twists and distorts the omens that would otherwise show us our wisest courses of action. I cannot believe that. Not now. Too much has happened to convince me that any man’s destiny is shaped by his own hands, not by the uncaring stars of the heavenly compass or the random chances of earthly occurrences.

I married Itrac because the death of her lord Chazen Saril and all his other wives left her and the Chazen domain so vulnerable. Before that, I married Janne and Rekha and Sain for reasons of trade and diplomacy. Of all the women I have ever taken to my bed, Risala is the one whom I have most truly adored. And Risala still trusts in omen and portent. I dare not tell her frankly I no longer believe. I dissemble and demur, for fear of losing her with outright denial of prophecy.

Will I ever be free of the deceits that have mired me since I first contemplated involving myself in magic? Because I convinced myself that the omens sanctioned such actions.

Kheda halted as he got a clear sight of open water lying before them to the south. ‘East or west?’ He glanced back over his shoulder.

‘Let’s head round to the west.’ Velindre drew her words out slowly.

‘You have some sense of the dragon?’ Risala asked apprehensively.

‘I can sense the elements without stirring them and letting it know I’m here.’ The magewoman’s thin lips narrowed almost to invisibility. ‘There’s a current curving around that headland that’s sweeping in from the deep ocean. It’s mingling with waters that have circulated in and around this domain since the last rainy season. The dragon will find that fascinating.’ She sounded certain of that.

‘Then we go west.’ As they picked their way through the scattered nut palms, Kheda slid covert glances at Velindre. He noted Risala keeping the same watch on the wizard woman.

Just to be sure she doesn’t succumb to the thrall of the dragon’s magical aura if we come upon the beast unawares. That could be the death of us all, if she’s intoxicated by the power, if she loses control of her own magic. But she has seen such dangers at first hand, just like us. She will be on her guard.

Velindre certainly looked utterly determined.

What must it be like to be mageborn? What manner of sense could reveal the elemental shifts of the air, the unseen currents within the waters of river or ocean, or the consummation of flame? What is it like to know the very rocks of the earth beneath your feet are as malleable as clay if you summon your magic to work them?

A new sound filtered through the thirst-stricken trees and Kheda abandoned such speculation. Something was splashing slowly and rhythmically. Risala drew up beside him, Velindre arriving on his other hand. They moved forward together, step by agonizing step. The noise stopped and they all halted.

Kheda heard Velindre’s breath coming faster, rasping in her throat. ‘Can you feel its

magic?’

She nodded tightly. ‘But it’s a water beast. I feel it but it doesn’t overwhelm me.’ She managed a smile like a death’s head. ‘You might have cause to worry if it were an air-born dragon.’

Risala pressed herself to a nut palm’s ridged trunk. ‘It’s there,’ she whispered.

Kheda crouched down behind a bank of earth crowned with tangles of silvery midar stems, brittle and leafless until the rains should come.

The dragon had found a deep inlet thrusting into the rocky side of the island. The creature floated amid the silken blue ripples lapping out and then returning from the shore. It was resting on one side in the ocean’s embrace, with its muscular limbs drawn up like a sleeping hound’s. Only no hound in the Archipelago or any land beyond boasted murderous talons as green as jade and longer than any sword a warrior might carry.

‘What now?’ Kheda’s gaze stayed fixed on the creature lolling all unawares in the water.

Its sinuous neck was extended, long muzzle stretched out. The crest of turquoise spines crowning its narrow head lay flat and the white pinpoints of fire at the centre of its emerald eyes were hidden by half-closed lids. Its green belly lay towards them, the fine scales in the creases of its lithe limbs as pale as new leaves. Heavier scales darkened to a hue vivid as wet seaweed on its muscular flanks. It might have seemed asleep, but for the vicious spike at the tip of its long tail beginning once again to rhythmically flick idle foam from the water.

‘There’s no malice in it.’ Velindre’s whisper was harsh with defiance. ‘It’s an animal, no more, no less.’

‘Its magic makes it considerably more.’ Risala shot the magewoman a sharp rebuke.

‘We’ve already seen it devastate a trading beach.’ Kheda reluctantly looked away from the creature to capture Velindre’s gaze with his own. ‘Can you be certain it didn’t kill anyone? Malice or accident leaves people just as dead, children just as orphaned.’

‘There will be villages close by.’ Risala gestured minutely out towards the sea where the smudges of nearby islands were plain to see. ‘Fishermen will sailing out as soon as the heat of the day is done, or dragging crab pots up from the rocks.’

‘I don’t believe it will attack boats,’ Velindre protested, with the stubbornness of someone returning to an old argument. ‘We’ve seen no sign of this beast hunting for human flesh.’

‘We’ve all been aboard ships smashed to kindling by the creatures. It’ll be tempted by such easy meat sooner or later.’ Kheda swallowed revulsion at the memories of the dragon born of scarlet fire that had blithely eaten its fill of living and dead in Chazen. ‘We have to drive it off before it gets a taste for Archipelagan flesh.’

‘Otherwise we’ll never be rid of it.’ Risala pressed closer still to the nut palm’s trunk. ‘Unless whichever warlord rules these isles can spare enough men to entangle it in nets and ropes. T hack it to bloody pieces no matter how many of his warriors it kills in the process,’ Kheda said ruthlessly. *I led countless men of Chazen to their deaths as we fought a dragon that was already dying in such a fashion. Could such a fit and powerful beat be killed that way?*

The magewoman drew a deep breath. ‘Then let’s see if it’s hungry for something more substantial than a few fishermen.’

‘Be careful,’ Kheda warned before he could stop himself.

The magewoman’s sniff spoke volumes of derision. She rubbed her long hands together, nail-bitten fingers spread wide and the faintest glimmer of blue-green light kindled between her fingertips.

The dragon instantly rolled over to crouch impossibly on the surface of the inlet, foam seething around its forefeet. Turquoise spines running the length of its back snapped erect to scatter diamond drops of water that vanished in the air. The dragon’s head whipped around, a

white blaze kindling in its emerald eyes. It bared jade teeth, long aquamarine tongue tasting the air. Rearing up, it half-spread its wings in the stiff breeze, rattling leathery membranes that were the blue-green of a storm-tossed ocean.

Velindre swore on her life and her element that she could hide this magic from the beast when she wove the deception she had planned. Are all our lives forfeit because I believed her?

His heart pounding, Kheda swallowed to find his throat as dry as dust.

At the mouth of the inlet, a sea serpent broached the surface of the sea in a flurry of slime-laced foam. Where the dragon was scaled, this creature's coarse hide was akin to sharkskin and mottled like a stone-strewn shore. It had no limbs, no neck, just a single pale golden fin running the length of its thick body. Thrashing frantically, it opened its cruel mouth in a soundless gasp to reveal rows of dirty yellow teeth and its gill slits fluttered. Black eyes set deep in its blunt head glinted like jet.

'We know you eat serpents,' Velindre breathed.

The serpent knew the same. It coiled around itself, diving instantly for the depths.

The dragon plunged after it with a splash that echoed all around the rocky inlet.

Kheda swallowed again the breath easier in his chest. 'Where's it going?'

'I'm sending the serpent far out to sea, keeping it just out of the dragon's reach' Velindre said tightly. 'I'll tie it to the fast current that sweeps out to the west from here. Then the lure of the deep water currents and the serpents that follow them will take the dragon back to the open ocean.'

'No, it won't.' Risala pointed with a trembling finger.

Out to sea, the dragon sprang up from the water to glide on half-spread wings trailing chains of silver droplets. Landing on the surface with astonishing delicacy for such a massive beast, it folded its wings neatly against its glossy green flanks to make a shallow dive. They watched it swim back into the inlet, undulating through the limpid water, graceful as a fisher-bird.

Why did I allow myself to hope that this could be so easy?

Kheda did his best to hide his disappointment. 'It can't be hungry.'

'We're to wait till it gets an appetite?' Risala wondered dubiously.

'I doubt that would be wise.' Velindre said grimly. 'It's already suspecting there's a strange magic close by.'

The dragon emerged in the middle of the inlet, crouching on the surface of the water once again. As it looked this way and that, the white fire in its eyes burned brighter and it hissed menacingly. Windblown ripples travelling across the water towards it reversed and fled in fear.

'If it doesn't want to eat, let's hope it wants to fight,' Velindre said resolutely.

'You'd challenge it?' Risala took a step backwards away from her tree. 'After you nearly died the last time? And you didn't even win!'

Kheda reached up for Risala's unbandaged hand and pulled her down to kneel beside him. 'Remember what she said about luring the beast away with distant magic.'

It's hard to remember that these are beasts in so many ways. Loals and jungle cats and hook-toothed hogs think of little besides eating and fighting rivals for mates and territory. Dragons see anything wielding magic as a rival, be it mage or another of their own kind. And Velindre's proved that she can work her magic at a remove before. Otherwise we'd already be dead.

He looked apprehensively at the magewoman. A dangerous smile curled her thin lips as she narrowed her hazel eyes, deepening the creases of age and weariness in her face. Thin scars marked her cheeks, barely healed.

She didn't look so worn before we sailed west. What changes will people see in my face if

and when I get home?

The dragon whirled around, barbed tail sending spray flying in a tumbling white arc. It roared with a penetrating fury that finally prompted the island's bird life to show itself. Finches and crookbeaks and glory birds erupted from the trees to flee in all directions, squawking with frantic terror. The dragon ignored them, all its attention now focused out to sea.

White clouds were spinning themselves out of the clear blue sky. The pale threads thickened and tightened into a coil, growing darker and darker. A talon of whirling cloud reached down towards the sea and a water spout rose up to meet it. The twin spirals danced on the dimpled sea and became one writhing column of braided cloud and water, tantalizingly threaded with aquamarine lightning. The dragon stalked towards it, massive feet treading lightly on the haphazard waves helplessly criss-crossing the sea.

Draw it away. Take it far out to sea till those winds and currents you're so certain of lure it somewhere else.

As Kheda silently willed her on, the magewoman thrust her hands out before her. The waterspout began dancing out towards the emptiness of the western ocean.

Stormy green wings flaring outwards, the dragon creature shot across the sea. It flew beyond the waterspout rather than attacking, the fury of its passing carving a furrow in the water. Circling around, the dragon spat a vivid mist of cold green fury that crackled up and down the interwoven cloud and water. Undone, the plaited clouds unravelled to evaporate in the hot dry air. A vortex momentarily opened a hollow deep into the sea as the waterspout collapsed. The dragon roared with satisfaction before gliding back towards the inlet with leisurely grace.

'What happened?' Kheda saw a blush darken beneath the tan on Velindre's cheekbones.

'I lured this beast away with a water spout once before.' Velindre rubbed at the joints of her fingers as if they pained her. 'It remembered.'

'Does it know where you are?' Risala asked with sharp alarm.

'No.' Velindre flexed her long fingers and her knuckles cracked loudly. 'It's looking for a rival trying to use the water against it. It doesn't realise my affinity is with the air.'

'What happens when it does?' Kheda demanded.

'Let's deal with one thing at a time.' Velindre was still intent on the dragon. 'We still have to fool this beast into leaving here.'

The dragon landed deftly on its belly, forelegs and hind feet drawn up as it sank just below the surface of the water to lie, relaxed, its chin pillowed on a curl of foam. The spines along its back broached the slow swell and the spiked tip of its tail flicked up and down once again.

It may look as if its idling but I'd wager half the Chazen domain that it's ready to spring.

'If we can't lure it away with food or some supposed rival to fight, how do we persuade it to go?' Kheda asked slowly.

'Poets have spent lifetimes weaving stories around animals.' Beside him Risala tensed. 'Beyond eating and claiming a territory, they must find a mate to raise more of their kind.'

'But dragons don't mate.' Kheda found himself uncertain and turned to Velindre. 'Do they?'

'Not that we've seen,' she said dryly. 'Not as long as they can gather the jewels that they crave to create an egg and kindle a spark of life within it from their own magic.'

'Dragons born of water crave emeralds, isn't that what you said?' Risala reached inside her grubby tunic to pull out a sweat-darkened leather thong. It bore a heavy silver ring set with a polished, uncut emerald.

'I have one too.' Kheda tugged at the thong around his own neck and produced a ring that was twin to Risala's. 'Can you use these stones to lure the beast away?'

‘That red dragon had to gather all the rubies in the Chazen domain before it could weld them into an egg.’ Velindre hesitated then reached for the rings.

As her fingers brushed the emeralds, the dragon erupted from the water with a shattering bellow. It ran straight across the inlet towards the fragile line of nut palms sheltering them. Fronds thrashed above their head, lashed by its fury.

‘Velindre!’ Kheda gripped the handle of his hacking blade with futile defiance and reached for Risala.

The world vanished in a blinding white light. Only this time he could still hear the dragon’s furious roaring getting louder. He strained to see something, anything in the featureless whiteness. An emerald glow spread ahead of him, like lamplight seen through fog. It grew brighter and he saw twin sparks of white fire at its centre. The dragon’s roar sank to a throbbing growl of ominous concentration.

The emerald radiance blinked out, the white light vanished and Kheda fell to his hands and knees. He coughed. His lungs felt as seared as if he’d been caught in a sandstorm. ‘What—’

‘I’m sorry.’ Velindre rasped. She lay collapsed on the ground like a heap of discarded clothes. ‘I had to wring every hint of water out of the translocation magic.’

‘Where are we?’ Kneeling upright, Risala pressed her bandaged wrist close to her chest, wincing as she used her other hand to rub at her throat.

‘I’m not sure.’ Velindre caught her breath and pushed herself into a sitting position. ‘The dragon ripped into my spell.’

‘Where is it?’ Kheda looked frantically around. They had tumbled into a thicket of spine fruit trees. A few banded finches hidden in the dusty leaves called cheerfully to each other. The russet-striped tail of a foraging matia was disappearing beneath a berry bush.

‘I don’t know.’ Velindre’s ire was directed at herself. ‘It’s gone.’

‘Gone from this domain?’ Kheda wondered with hollow hope.

‘When did we last have such good fortune?’ Risala said darkly.

Velindre heaved an incautious sigh which prompted a painful bout of coughing. ‘I’ll scry for it,’ she offered when she was able to speak.

‘Why not summon some aid from your fellow wizards?’ Kheda said sternly.

‘I’m the only mage alive who’s had significant dealings with dragons—’ Velindre began obstinately.

‘— apart from Naldeth.’ Risala interjected.

‘Apart from Naldeth,’ Velindre agreed tersely. ‘Whom we left a thousand leagues or more behind us on that western isle. And apart from Azazir, who is utterly insane and horribly dangerous.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’ Kheda rubbed a hand over his beard.

Naldeth chose to stay behind on that desolate isle. Because he believes all wizards have a duty to see none of their kind misuse their powers. He’s there, all alone, watchful lest any children of those wild men mature to find these magic senses born in their blood. He won’t allow any of them to re-establish the tyranny that blighted that place for so long.

And he wants to be certain that no mage of his own kind is drawn there, seduced by the elemental power underpinning the island. What did they call it? A confluence, which first drew the dragons there? Naldeth doesn’t trust of his fellow wizards. Not all of them, anyway.

Am I really asking Velindre to bring more of these mages to the Archipelago? What among all the omens recorded since my birth could ever have predicted I would propose such a thing? No matter. I have been taught all my life that a warlord must do whatever is necessary to resolve the situations laid before him, regardless of personal cost. If I am to be condemned for bringing magic into the Archipelago to fight against magic, I’ll spend my life by bringing as many wizards as necessary for them to be equal to this task.

‘Well?’ he prompted more forcefully. ‘What else do you suggest we do?’

Velindre was gazing unseeing into the depths of the forest. Small black flies hovered around her head but she didn’t seem to notice. More fluting birdsong joined the happy chirps of the finches and the matia rustled through the undergrowth to poke its long inquisitive face out at them, round ears cocked forward, its flexible nose twitching and black eyes bright.

‘Let me scry, find out where the dragon has gone.’ Velindre turned to Kheda, one hand raised to forestall his objections. ‘I will take the time to work the subtlest of magics against it. But I’m not translocating us on the basis of a scrying again,’ she said with some chagrin. ‘It’s a horribly dangerous practise and I dare not risk it if there’s any chance that dragon can twist my magic again.’

Now it was Kheda’s turn to hesitate before answering. ‘Very well,’ he said at length.

Because I have no means to compel Velindre to do as I wish. Which is merely one of the frustrations of having wizards as allies.

‘I don’t know about anyone else but I’m hungry and thirsty.’ Risala stood up and brushed dust from her knees. ‘And we need to find out just where we are. Let’s see what we can do about that at very least.’