

Fire in the Night

Look for every meaning in an omen. Don't merely seize the one you most wish to see.

Dyal remembered his father's words as he lay in the stuffy darkness. He shifted on his cotton-stuffed pallet, envying those around him who were already sleeping soundly. Some were snoring. But he was too uneasy, waking time and again after brief snatches of slumber.

Had he been too hasty, when he'd decided that lustre snake, with its scales shimmering like shot silk, was a portent of great things to come? But he had seen the creature crossing his path on the very morning when he had been summoned to serve Daish Kheda personally on this voyage of vital diplomacy.

He had been summoned ahead of swordsmen who had guarded the warlord and his wives for longer than Dyal had lived. He'd thought it would be a handful of years at least before he could hope to join those warriors on the inner island where the warlord and his family dwelled secure in their high walled compound. Dyal had barely spent a year in an outer barracks' isle, no more than a short sail from the village where he had been born. So he was left breathless when he was told he would be among the retainers on board Janne Daish's galley, when Daish Kheda's foremost wife travelled to the Ulla domain.

He rolled onto his side. How could that snake not be an omen? Lustre tiles were among the Ulla islands' most valuable trade goods; glistening with different colours depending on the angle of the sunlight striking them. How to craft such beauty was that warlord's first wife's most highly prized secret. So there could be no doubting that snake's significance.

But here he was, bare-chested in loose cotton trews, lying on a pallet alongside musicians and maidservants. He'd spent the day as a humble porter, carrying heavy chests through this labyrinth of a fortress to the guest apartment granted to Janne Daish and Itrac Chazen. The noble ladies themselves slept behind the inner door, guarded by their ferocious personal slaves.

So much for Dyal's hopes for a hauberk of finely wrought chainmail. So much for dreams of a gleaming helm and a sword to call his own, instead of the least notched blade he could find in the common armoury when he and his fellow recruits were summoned to practise their drills.

Even so, he didn't entirely envy the armed and armoured men who surrounded the warlord and his wives. He was still sweating even though the sun had long since set. With the seasonal rains due any time, the heat was brutal even after nightfall.

Beside him, Gal threw off an embroidered coverlet, snorting as he rolled over. They had sparred many times, serving in the same outer barracks. Dyal considered the other two burly men who'd fetched and carried all day. Like him, they were no common servants, but had been summoned from the westernmost isle where more warriors were ready to defend Daish interests from vessels without permission to sail their seaways. Training to fight with sword and staff and knife had given them their broad shoulders and muscled chests, not spending their days carrying noble ladies' chests of dresses, jewels and cosmetics.

All four had been warned by their former captains to keep their eyes and ears open. They should be constantly alert for trouble, though their captains couldn't say what that might be. Surely that proved this was no trading voyage.

So why was Janne Daish insisting on the pretence that this was simply business as usual? That she was merely here as the senior wife who governed the domain's commerce to negotiate with those noble women wed to Ulla Safar. So Daish could exchange pearls and other valuables for the vital resources which only the larger Ulla domain offered in this reach of the Archipelago.

How could business as usual continue after the devastating attack on Chazen? As far as anyone knew, the lady Itrac was the sole survivor of that domain's ruling family. Worse, if

rumour was truth, the mysterious foes from the empty southern ocean were led by men using magic.

Flopping onto his back again, Dyal shivered despite the heat. Magic. The ultimate evil. Uttermost corruption of the natural order. An obscenity distorting omens and portents all around the earthly compass. Stripping away the guidance which everyone relied on; from the lowliest islanders scratching a living from gardens hacked from the jungle to the exalted warlords who dwelled in silken luxury. Magic's contamination could even warp a ruler's vision of the heavenly compass's stars and the night sky's travelling jewels which offered the most vital auguries of all.

How could Daish warriors fight such vileness? Even if their ranks were swelled by the thousands of fighting men at Ulla Safar's command? Even with the help of Caid and Redigal, whose lords had joined this hasty council?

And was there danger closer at hand? Telouet, Daish Kheda's personal slave, the warlord's sword and shield, had been struck down with vomiting and purging before they'd spent a day in this claustrophobic fortress. No one had murmured 'poison' but the Daish servants shared their suspicion in every glance. Ulla Safar's treachery was legendary.

Unless Telouet had simply succumbed to fever. Such illnesses usually followed the rains, but some years pestilence was a harbinger. Dyal swallowed uneasily. A headache tightening behind his eyes was making him faintly nauseous.

His nose twitched. He'd been enduring the river's stink all day. Even the fragrant herbs flourishing in the private garden outside these apartments' ornately carved doors couldn't mask the reek. It was all very well building this mighty fortification on an island, leaving no foothold outside the outermost wall, but this deep into the dry season, the river's flow was too low and too sluggish to wash away the effluent oozing from Derasulla's drains. The moat between the first and second ring of towers was a stagnant sump.

But that wasn't what he smelled now. The scent of burning scratched his throat. Fire! Panic set Dyal's heart racing. An instant later, the door from the corridor crashed open. Someone staggered in, doubled over and coughing. Acrid smoke surged after him.

Dyal saw the shadowy figure stumble towards the inner door. An assassin to murder Janne Daish? Struggling not to choke, he grabbed his everyday dagger, ready to hand by his pillow. But the smoke was stifling. His head pounded and his stomach churned.

'Wake up!'

Daish Kheda? Dyal was relieved and startled in equal measure to hear his master's voice.

'Janne! You have to wake up!' The warlord was in the inner room, rousing his sleeping wife and the others.

Dyal opened his mouth to speak, only to clench his jaw on sudden queasiness. Daish Kheda hurried back out into the corridor, a lamp bright in his hands. Within moments the warlord returned with something metal to bang on the marble walls. The brutal noise startled servants and musicians awake.

'There's a fire!'

Dyal struggled to his feet, knotting his dagger sash around his hips. Now he could hear the crackle of flames. He fought to contain his terror.

'The fire's that way.' The warlord flung a hand towards the heart of the fortress. 'The other doors are blocked. We have to get out into the garden.'

Everyone heard the urgency beneath his measured words. Those closest to the outer doors started pushing on them. Dyal hurried to help. The solid wood didn't yield so he used his shoulder. The sharp carvings bit deep into his naked skin. He ignored that. Better bruised than burned.

'It won't open!' A flute player's voice broke, panicked. 'It's jammed on the other side!'

‘Someone get out through the windows.’ Kheda commanded.

Everyone looked up at the high slatted shutters. They were now covered with the awnings that had offered shade at the height of the day. Dyal frowned. Moonlight had striped the tiled floor when they’d all gone to bed.

‘Where are the poles?’ A bemused maid sat heavily on a chest, one hand pressed to her heaving chest.

Dyal realised the smoke was making them all light headed. Too light headed to think how to save themselves. His stomach hollowed still further with dread.

‘Someone help me get up there.’ Itrac’s personal slave appeared, masked with a scrap of torn silk.

‘Here, on my back.’ Dyal blinked away the stupefying smoke. He’d been sent here to keep the warlord and his ladies safe, hadn’t he? Now was his chance to serve. Concentrate on that to keep fear at bay. Turning to face the wall, he stretched out his arms to brace himself, legs bent.

Itrac’s slave clambered up on to his shoulders. Dyal gritted his teeth. It felt as though the nails in the man’s sandals were stripping the skin from his shoulders. He heard the shutter wrestled open.

‘Up you go, lad.’ One of westerly isle porters seized the warrior’s foot, propelling him further upwards.

Relieved of the warrior’s punishing weight, Dyal took a step back and saw Itrac Chazen’s slave balanced on his stomach on the windowsill. Agile despite his armour, the man swung a foot up and pulled himself astride the opening. ‘What do I do now?’

‘Open the garden door!’ The warlord yelled, hoarse from the smoke.

The slave disappeared over the sill. Birut, Janne Daish’s attendant, emerged from the sleeping chamber supporting the two women.

‘Forget everything but the jewels,’ Janne snapped. ‘You, and you, fetch your lord’s personal coffers and his physic chest.’

Itrac’s slave was banging on the other side of the door. ‘Now! Push as hard as you can!’

Gal summoned the other supposed porters with a jerk of his head. ‘All together, on my nod!’

Dyal threw his weight against the door alongside them. The iron-hard wood finally yielded, hinges splintering.

‘Wedged, my lord.’ Jevin held up a split and dented block of wood.

Cooler air flowed in. Everyone stood motionless for a moment, relieved to take a clean breath as well as seeing their escape. Solace was short-lived. The crackle of the fire beyond the corridor deepened to a snarl as the fresh air fed the ravenous blaze.

‘I’ll fetch Telouet,’ Kheda shouted to Janne Daish’s slave. ‘Get everyone outside.’

Birut didn’t need telling twice. He half carried Itrac and Janne to the door. Serving women and musicians pressed close behind them.

Dyal was about to follow when he saw one of the younger maids collapse over a travelling chest. She’d been filling it with silken gowns despite Janne Daish’s orders. For a treacherous instant, Dyal hesitated. Every instinct urged him to flee the flames. Furiously denying such cowardice, he hurried over to the foolish maid, fighting the urge to cough.

Kheda took the lamp into the corridor, leaving him in thickening darkness. Dyal found the girl more by feel than sight. Trying to lift her was a mistake. As he instinctively drew a breath, the smoke provoked a coughing fit that left him reeling. Drenched with fresh sweat and fighting to stay on his feet, he hooked his hands under the girl’s armpits and slid her over the tiled floor towards the garden door.

About to haul her outside, he heard unexpected sounds in the corridor. Not the surging roar of the fire. Footsteps. Grunting. The thud of a blow upon flesh. A crack of broken glass.

Dyal saw burning oil flare beyond the doorway.

Looking around for help, he saw Gal dragging a flute player into the garden. But Dyal could barely whisper, his throat flayed by coughing. He tried again. ‘Gal!’

As the warrior turned at the sound of Dyal’s croak, they both heard a cry of anguish in the corridor.

Dyal heaved the foolish girl out over the threshold and headed back into the darkness. Gal was a few steps behind him. But as they reached the doorway, Daish Kheda appeared. His arms were wrapped around his bodyguard’s chest, with Telouet’s arms draped limp over his shoulders.

‘My lord!’ Gal hurried to the slave’s other side, sliding an arm around Telouet’s waist to take his weight.

‘Are you hurt?’ As they moved into the moonlight, Dyal was horrified to see dark smears on Daish Kheda’s bare chest and shoulder. Blood?

‘What?’ The warlord looked down before shaking his head. ‘No, I’m fine.’

What had happened in that hallway? Now Dyal saw the blood was coming from deep, oozing gouges down Telouet’s arm. Who attacked them? How had Daish Kheda escaped?

What mattered was their lord had escaped. Besides, securing proof of Ulla perfidy was impossible, Dyal realised. Flames consuming the corridor’s doors were now colouring the marble walls ochre. Heading into that inferno would be suicide.

They staggered into the garden together. Daish Kheda succumbed to a coughing fit that left him swaying on his feet, eyes unfocused.

Janne Daish didn’t give him a moment to recover. ‘What do we do now?’ She clutched at his arm, her long hair tousled.

Dyal remembered his mother just as distraught and dishevelled when he was a child. A seasonal storm wrecked half their village’s houses and flooded the rest. Itrac Chazen sat on a chest, face in her hands, her shoulders heaving. Her slave knelt beside her, his gestures as helpless as Dyal felt.

‘Raise an alarm.’ Hoarse, Daish Kheda flung an wrathful hand at the shutters of the inner citadel looming above them. ‘Find something to throw at those. Shout as loud as you can.’

The maidservants seized his permission to vent their shock with accusing yells. Gal shoved a massive urn off its plinth. As the thick clay shattered, spilling earth and a lovingly tended feverfeather plant, Dyal snatched up a thick curved shard of the rim. He hurled it at an upper window. As it shattered against the wooden frame, he heard a startled screech and a hastily kindled light glowed behind the cracked slats.

Daish Kheda spoke, low and careful, to avoid coughing. Dyal’s throat and chest ached in sympathy.

‘Listen to me, everyone. We’re going back to the galley. If Ulla Safar’s servants can’t show a modicum of care with night-time candles, we will be safer there.’

A fallen candle? Dyal couldn’t believe that any such trivial accident had caused this murderous blaze. But it wasn’t his place to question Daish’s lord and master.

‘We certainly can’t use these rooms until they’re restored to some order.’ Janne Daish sounded more her usual self, even barefoot and wearing someone else’s hastily snatched tunic. ‘If we return to the *Rainbow Moth*, we won’t discommode Mirrel Ulla by requiring alternative accommodations.’

Shouts of alarm were echoing through the fortress now. Closer to hand, Dyal heard someone yelling for buckets of earth and flails to extinguish the flames in the corridor.

In the garden, no one moved. Musicians, maidservants and porters alike were waiting to follow Daish Kheda and Janne’s lead.

The warlord turned to his first wife. ‘Let’s get to our ship as soon as possible. Itrac is

plainly most distressed. This unfortunate accident has doubtless redoubled her memories of those fires that have ravaged the Chazen domain.'

The maidservants and musicians immediately began picking up whatever they'd dragged out into the garden.

Dyal looked at Gal, uncertain what to do. The other swordsman was standing guard over Telouet, the slave lying senseless on the ground.

The warlord took a seat on an ornately carved bench. 'Birut, did you get Telouet's swords?'

'Of course, my lord.' Birut sounded mildly offended that his master needed to ask. 'And my own.'

Dyal grinned despite himself. The slave was naked except for a breech clout but Birut's glower would give the most heavily armed Ulla warrior pause for thought before attacking him.

'Bring them to me.' Kheda held out a hand for the weapons.

Dyal felt a pang of jealousy as the warlord handed one blade to Gal. Kheda jerked his head towards the other three so-called porters. 'Birut, give one of them your second sword and get Jevin's off him. Draw lots for whoever has to end up with a stick.'

Dyal clenched his fists, desperately hoping he wouldn't be the one left unarmed. In the next instant he angrily rebuked himself for such petty selfishness in the midst of this crisis.

All Daish Kheda's attention was on his wounded bodyguard. 'Janne! Do you have my physic chest? You, Jevin, get me some bits of wood.'

A girl hurried over with the small coffer. Daish Kheda searched out salve and bandages. Dyal watched his lord carefully splint Telouet's arm. How had those bones been broken? The body slave hadn't suffered any such injury earlier.

'You!' Birut thrust a sword towards him. 'Keep watch and don't allow anyone not our own into this garden. And you,' he barked at Gal.

The two of them walked towards the door. Dyal glanced over his shoulder to see the other servants all still gathering up whatever they'd salvaged from the fire.

He caught Gal's eye. 'Who's going to tell the *Rainbow Moth's* crew to expect us?'

Gal pursed his lips and surprised Dyal by turning back to ask Daish Kheda. 'My lord, are we waiting to send word to the ship by one of Ulla Safar's servants? Or shall we take a message to the landing stage, to make sure they summon the galley at once?'

The warlord looked up to focus on the two of them. 'It's Gal, isn't it? And Durai?'

'Dyal, my lord,' he said meekly.

Daish Kheda didn't seem to hear as he looked at the door that would only lead them back into the burning building and then to the tall windowed walls on both sides. Then he turned to contemplate the garden's outer wall. The seamless masonry rose up to a walkway guarded by toothed crenellations on the outer side and a wooden rail on the garden's side.

Dyal recalled seeing the way this parapet ran right around the fortress, set with low towers at regular intervals. He frowned. Why hadn't Ulla sentries appeared up there, drawn all this commotion?

Daish Kheda made his decision. 'I don't feel inclined to wait for Ulla Safar's minions to sort out their mess before coming to our assistance. We'll get up to that walkway. Then we can follow the rampart round to the other side of the fortress and signal the *Rainbow Moth* ourselves.'

'What have we got for a rope?' There'd be no getting up there without one. Dyal grabbed a coverlet that had been tossed aside to snap a perfume tree's frail branches. Thrusting the scabbarded sword through his sash, he unsheathed his dagger instead.

To his horror Gal ran down the steps and vanished into the smoke filled room which they had just fled. Before Dyal could decide to follow, the burly man reappeared, his arms

full of silken bedding. He released his inheld breath with an explosive gasp. ‘Who’s got a knife?’

Dyal hadn’t been the only one to grab his dagger. Daish Kheda began shredding a quilt. He glanced dubiously upwards. ‘How do you suggest we get the first man up to the parapet?’

Had the warlord never seen how deftly the outer islanders worked together to harvest ripe nuts from the very tallest palms? Dyal exchanged a glance with Gal and the two western islanders as he plaited strips of fabric. They all grinned back at him.

‘Leave that to us, my lord,’ he assured Kheda.

They quickly fashioned the rope. The stockiest of the westerners braced himself against the wall, just as Dyal had done to get Jevin up to the windows. Gal climbed onto his shoulders and did the same. His broad shoulders supported the third man.

As soon as they were all securely balanced, Dyal climbed up, finding footholds on their thighs and shoulders and with the makeshift rope slung over his shoulder. Reaching the parapet, he decided against trusting the wooden rail on the inner side and secured a loop around the sturdy crenellations instead.

‘You two stay here. Back up Birut and Jevin.’ Daish Kheda said to the western isles men. Then he startled them all by climbing up immediately after Gal. If the warlord wasn’t used to climbing trees, he was as quick up a rope as a *matia* after ripe fruit in the highest branches.

An instant later, Dyal realised what Kheda had heard. Ulla servants had quenched the fire and were hurrying through the scorched apartment, calling out.

‘Ignore them.’ Kheda shoved Dyal’s shoulder so he hurried on ahead, trusting Gal to bring up the rear. Down below, Janne Daish was caustically berating whoever was unlucky enough to reach the garden first.

A watchtower soon blocked their path. They would have to go through it to reach the parapet beyond but the door was locked and the window shuttered. What sort of laggard watch did this Ulla garrison keep?

Or was this more treachery? Had Ulla Safar truly ordered all their deaths? Was that what the lustre snake had warned of? Murderous Ulla intent?

Uncertainty goaded Dyal, together with insidious fear of falling short of whatever this night might ask of him. He vented his turmoil on the door. ‘Open to Daish Kheda!’ he yelled as he pounded the wood with a fist. ‘Are you deaf as well as blind?’

As he heard someone shift within, Kheda’s hand on his shoulder stilled him. Dyal looked back to see the other men had heard the same movement.

The warlord’s grip tightened, pulling Dyal backwards. As they changed places on the narrow walkway, his voice was steely with menace. ‘I am Daish Kheda. Open to me now or I’ll demand your heads for your insolence.’

Bolts slid back and the door edged ajar. Two boys whom any Daish captain would send home for at least two more years’ growth stood mute and wide-eyed with fear.

‘Tracherous scum.’ Dyal had already half-drawn his borrowed blade, moving to stand between them and his lord.

‘They’re not worth the waste of our time.’ As Kheda’s hand urged him once again, Dyal realised the tower’s other door stood wide open. A third youth was running away along the wall walk.

Who was he going to warn that Daish’s warlord had escaped Ulla’s trap? No matter, as long as they stopped him before he spread the news. The Daish men all drew their swords in the same breath. The Ulla boys shrank back, making no attempt to stop them.

The fleeing youth left both doors to the next watchtower open. They barely paused to make sure no one lurked in those shadows before pursuing him. Dyal ground his teeth, frustrated, as he saw the Ulla guard reach the next tower and slam the door behind him.

As they reached it, Dyal heard muffled voices and a metallic rattle. Maybe they hadn't slid the bolts fully home. He spun the sword around in his hand to hammer at the wood with the pommel.

The door opened, catching him unawares. A mailed warrior rushed out. No boy but a veteran with hair as silver as the moonlight.

Dyal swept his blade round but the warrior brushed the blow aside with a steel-clad arm. The Ulla man darted forward, intent on gutting Daish Kheda with the dagger in his off-hand.

Dyal was still close enough to get inside the toothed blade's reach. He wrapped his arms around the Ulla man, trying to crush his hands to his sides. The enemy wrestled to free himself. Dyal thrust a leg between his feet to trip him.

Instead of falling towards the parapet's outer wall, they staggered backwards, entangled. Dyal felt the wooden rail press hard against his thigh. He took a step, then a second. Wood splintered—

—and his foot found empty air. He was falling backwards into the darkness. Falling to his death. He would die this very night, broken and bloody on Derasulla's ruddy stones.

That snake hadn't been a portent of some great future but of his imminent fate. In the same instant as that gut-wrenching realisation, Dyal made a cold calculation. If he must die, the Ulla warrior would too.

The Daish youth clung to his enemy. The man screamed with fear and fury. They tumbled through the shadows until a sickening crunch brought silence.

The impact knocked the wind out of Dyal. He struggled to refill his lungs only for the smoke's lingering effects to seize him. But he had no breath to cough. Streaks of light flashed across his vision like shooting stars. Dizziness overwhelmed him and all sensation fled.

Sometime later, something broke the lethal deadlock. Dyal found he was panting like an exhausted hound. After a further long moment, he realised he'd landed on top of the Ulla swordsman.

Head still swimming, Dyal tried to raise himself up. His out-stretched hand found something warm and slick. A dark pool of the Ulla man's life's blood was spreading out from his shattered skull. His foe was limp in death.

A door opened. 'Here he is!'

Where was his sword? Dyal clenched an empty hand. He'd lost the borrowed blade in his fall. Could he still fight with fists and teeth? No, his limbs were as weak as a fever victim's. All he could hope for was swift execution instead of torture to compel him to betray his lord.

'Hush, don't move,' the voice soothed. 'Until we know your bones are whole.'

What was this madness? Had he hit his head? The unseen speaker had a Daish accent.

'We have to get him out of sight!' A second voice spoke, low and urgent. A female voice, where the first was a man.

'Where are you hurt? How badly?' A tentative hand touched his shoulder.

Dyal found his voice. 'I'm not, I think. Just winded.' He cleared his throat. To his intense relief, he didn't start coughing.

'Let's see if you can stand up.' The female voice sounded dubious.

Hands on both sides slid between his bare chest and the mailed corpse beneath him. Dyal felt some strength returning and he tried to help. He couldn't help a shudder of revulsion when bracing his hand against the dead man's chest forced a last despairing groan from the Ulla warrior.

Shakily finding his feet, he was able to look at his unexpected allies. The young woman wore the same nondescript gown of pale cotton as all Ulla's maidservants, luminous in the

moonlight against her dark skin. The man was beardless and soft-fleshed. Dyal recognised the eunuch who'd been in charge of those Ulla servants fussing around Janne Daish and Itrac Chazen in their guest apartments. 'But you're—?'

'Hush.' The *zamorin* retainer with the Daish accent pressed a finger to Dyal's lips.

'We have to get him hidden,' the maidservant said urgently. 'They'll know where he fell. They're pursuing Kheda at the moment but as soon as he's beyond their reach, someone will come to find out what happened here.'

'We have to get him out of the fortress,' the *zamorin* said grimly. 'Safar's guards will flog half the household bloody if they think he's alive and hidden.'

Dyal couldn't make sense of this. The *zamorin* – now sounding like a man born and raised in the Ulla domain – spoke as though his own warlord's swordsmen were the enemy.

The maidservant shook her head, emphatic. 'We must ask Orhan.'

Dyal's heart sank deeper than the stinking riverbed. Ulla Orhan, this domain's heir, was scorned by all Daish's warriors. The youth was a thoughtless idler, as devoted to indulging his own appetites as his vile father.

The *zamorin* made a swift decision. 'Keep him out of their grasp and meet me in the empty ice cellars. I'll talk to Orhan.'

The maidservant reached for Dyal's hand, only to recoil from the blood still sticky on his fingers. 'Don't touch me! Don't touch anything. Leave a blood trail and you'll be the death of us all.'

He squatted down to wipe his hand clean as best he could on the dead man's cotton trousers. Were there any smears on his own clothing? He couldn't tell in this uncertain light.

'Come on!' Grabbing his elbow, the girl urged him after the *zamorin* who was already leaving this dark courtyard. As they reached the door, the empty scabbard thrust through Dyal's sash clattered against the frame.

'Leave that behind – and your dagger.' The maidservant's eyes shone like obsidian.

'What will I fight with?' he protested

'You intend leaving a trail of bodies to guide those hunting you?' she retorted, acid.

Dyal looked down, abruptly uncertain. His father had given him this dagger when the new year's stars marked him reaching the age of discretion, the threshold of manhood. It was the finest blade anyone in their village had seen in many years

The maidservant's swift move caught him unawares. She snatched away both scabbard and dagger, throwing them into the shadows to skitter away across the flagstones.

'Those mark you as Daish!' she hissed. 'If all you have is a nameless slave's tunic, no one can say who you are.'

Heartsick, he knew she was right. Right, but careless. That clatter echoing round this small courtyard alerted someone high on the rampart. An urgent voice shouted.

The maidservant darted through the door. Dyal followed to find a corridor stretching away to either side, dimly lit by widely spaced lanterns. He got his first good look at the girl. She was much his own age, but scrawny and with the hollow eyes of someone who never got enough food. The determined set of her jaw suggested she'd likely fight to keep what little she could claim.

The *zamorin* was already well ahead; not running but certainly hurrying and not looking back. Dyal would have followed but the maidservant dragged him in the other direction.

She evidently knew where she was going, taking one particular passageway and then ignoring others, heading this way and that, along plainly tiled corridors. These were the servants' levels and they were heading ever deeper into the bowels of the fortress. Without any chance to glimpse the night sky's stars, Dyal was soon hopelessly lost.

They passed a stairwell and he heard running feet and peremptory voices somewhere up above. Curt shouts answered querulous protests, and more than once, the crack of a slap

sparked a cry of pain. As vast as Derasulla was, it seemed the whole fortress was being roused. Hunting him? Pursuing Daish Kheda? For some reason he couldn't guess at?

'What's your name,' the girl asked in low tones as they rounded yet another corner.

'Dyal.' He was surprised to think that she wanted to be friends.

'I'm Yshri.' She shot him a sardonic glance. 'We won't convince anyone you belong here if you don't know that much.'

Dyal halted, overwhelmed by misery and the pains of his fall. He may not have broken any bones but he was achingly bruised.

The maidservant walked on for a handful of steps before realising he wasn't at her side. She turned back, brow creased. 'What—?'

'I just—' Dyal choked on emotion.

A door opened somewhere behind them. They heard the unmistakable chinking of men running in chainmail coming in their direction.

Yshri took to her heels. Dyal raced after her, skidding and nearly falling when she took a sudden turn that he didn't expect. But this stub of corridor ended in a doorway. What was she thinking? He didn't dare ask for fear of his voice drawing lethal pursuit.

Yshri bent to the lock. 'In here.'

He followed her into a store room, as far as the light from the corridor's dim lanterns reached anyway. Shelves on either side were piled high with folded cottons. She grabbed a rag from a basket on the floor and thrust it at him. 'Wipe your hand!'

He scrubbed at the blood, wishing desperately for water. She searched through a heap of well-worn clothing.

'Here.' She snatched back the bloodied rag, throwing a much mended tunic at him.

As Dyal dragged it over his head, he saw Yshri hitch up her skirt. As he tugged the loose cotton straight, her gown fell back around her knees.

She pushed a heap of bedding from a shelf into his arms and took another pile for herself. 'Walk quickly but don't run.'

But before they could leave the storeroom, five armed and armoured men appeared in the main passageway. Dyal cowered and lowered his gaze. Beside him, Yshri was already looking meekly at the floor.

'In there!' The leader jabbed his bare blade at the storeroom's shadows. A warrior with a lantern pushed past them, sword ready in his other hand.

'No one here,' he reported tersely.

Looking through his lashes, Dyal saw the man's knuckles were white on his sword hilt. The blade quivered as tension racked the warrior. What punishment did he fear, if they failed to deliver the quarry they were hunting?

'Search properly!' spat the leader.

Lantern held high, the warrior sheathed his sword and began dragging cloth off the shelves. Impatient, the leader joined him, scattering garments and bedding all over the floor.

Yshri pressed purposefully against Dyal's side. He obediently edged towards the door.

The leader spotted the basket of rags. He overturned it with a kick and searched through the contents with the point of his blade.

Dyal summoned all his self-control not to betray them both with an appreciative glance at Yshri. A bloody rag hidden in a basket would see them both brutally interrogated, to find out if they had seen or heard the Daish fugitive, even if these men believed they were Ulla servants. But even if they were stripped naked, blood-stained cotton tucked into a young woman's breechclout could hardly be considered suspicious, even in this seething ant heap of mistrust.

They sidled through the doorway and into the short corridor. Dyal kept his hand hidden behind the drooping edges of the bedding he carried. Any blood caked around his fingernails

might look like dirt in this dim light but he didn't want to risk these men wondering.

The leader rounded on them. 'Who are you? Who do you serve?'

'I am Yshri and I serve Shay Ulla. This is Dyal and he is mute,' she said before he even thought of opening his mouth. 'My mistress had his tongue cut out for speaking out of turn.'

Dyal hunched his shoulders, trying to look suitably shamed. Feigning fear as well as humiliation wasn't hard. The Ulla warriors were laughing. Their cruel amusement at the thought of a slave's mutilation made his blood run cold. Amusement but not surprise. What would never be countenanced in Daish was evidently commonplace here.

'Who shall I tell my mistress caused me this delay in doing her bidding?' Yshri didn't need to hint at a threat. Even Dyal knew that Shay Ulla was the warlord Safar's second wife and second only to Mirrel Ulla in devious malice.

'On your way.' The warriors' leader dismissed them with a brusque gesture. 'As for you fools, with me!' He scowled at his men as though they were somehow responsible for whatever had led him down this dead end.

Yshri didn't move so Dyal stood still beside her as the warriors departed to search somewhere else. She stayed motionless as the slap of their leather-clad feet on the tiles faded away.

Dyal stole a sideways glance at the girl. Her eyes were closed, her face a frozen mask. The fringe of a coverlet in the bundle she carried was trembling. For all her boldness defying those swordsmen, she was terrified. How bad must life truly be in this hideous place to drive her to take such fearful risks to aid her lord's enemies?

Yshri drew a deep breath. 'Come on.'

They took sloping passages downwards. The lamps grew fewer and further between. Yshri took one from its niche. After they passed two more, there were no more lanterns to light their way. Now the tiles weren't even plain white but unglazed earthenware. The air grew damp and foetid. Still, at least it was cooler down here.

Yshri stopped dead, hugging her burden to her. Dyal glimpsed a subdued glow around a curve in the passage ahead.

Dyal sorted through the bedding he was carrying, dropping all but the longest length of the most stoutly woven cloth. He hurriedly spun it into a lash. 'Give me the lamp and get behind me.' He reached for the pottery vessel with its burning wick. That would make another weapon.

The glow ahead vanished. Yshri sucked her teeth inelegantly. 'Well, that's either Inais got here ahead of us, or he's been caught or else betrayed, and we may as well rush onto the swords that'll be waiting. Better a quick death than torture.'

Her voice was surprisingly calm. Before Dyal could find any kind of reply, she walked onwards, lamp held high. He had no choice but to follow.

A heavy wooden door stood barely ajar. Yshri squared her shoulders and pushed the door wider.

'Quick, get in here!'

Dyal recognised the *zamorin* Inais's voice. Relief sending a shiver through him, he followed the girl.

Except Inais wasn't alone. A heavy-set youth stood beside him. Dyal swallowed, his mouth abruptly dry. This warrior could only be Ulla Orhan, the warlord Safar's sole surviving son. His resemblance to his dread sire was striking.

He wore a tunic of heavy leather armoured with embossed metal plates, and carried twin swords. Somehow, whatever the rumours, he looked like a man well used to wielding those weapons.

'Shut that.' The Ulla domain heir jerked his head to command the *zamorin*.

Dyal turned to see Inais close the door. The inner surface was thickly padded with

securely nailed sacking. More hemp rags were strewn across the floor along with smears of sawdust. The materials used to pack the quantities of ice brought down from Ulla's mountain heights in the cooler days of the year and stored here to cool the warlord's drinks and desserts while the fiercest heat left everyone else prostrate.

'My lord.' Dyal prudently dropped to one knee, head bowed.

'On your feet.' Orhan evidently didn't have time to waste. 'We must get you back to the *Rainbow Moth* before she sails. You must deliver this to Dau Daish. Put it in her hands personally.'

Dyal stood up as the Ulla heir held out a red and black lacquered scroll case. He held Dyal's gaze with his own. 'You must give her this message from me, from your own lips to her ears and no one else's. Swear that you will do this.'

'My oath on it, my lord,' Dyal said hastily. How could anyone who'd ever faced Ulla Orhan's piercing eyes call this young warrior spineless?

'I was so very sorry to learn of the death of Haytar the Blind. I will always mark the day when the light of his genius was snuffed. I'm sending Dau Daish this copy of his *Book of Animals* so she may cherish his poems as fondly as me. After all, no man is truly dead as long as his words are remembered. Tell her that my favourite tale is "The Birds, the Beasts and the Bat".' Orhan pushed the scroll case into Dyal's hands. 'Repeat that back to me.'

Dyal promptly did so. Fortunately an apprentice swordsman's first task in Daish was running messages from the barracks' captain to any number of other people and places.

Ulla Orhan looked at him intently for a long moment. Finally he nodded. 'Very well. Do not fail me.'

'As you command, my lord.' Dyal nodded.

Orhan's gaze cut to Yshri. 'Get him to the garbage dock as fast as you can. There'll be a rowboat to get him away.'

Without another word, the Ulla heir strode to the door, opened it, took a lamp from the niche beside it and disappeared.

Inais the *zamorin* held out a hand to restrain Yshri. 'I'll take him. You get back to your mistress. We need to know exactly what she makes of this night's work.'

Dyal couldn't help himself. 'Was this Mirrel Ulla's murderous plan?'

'Who are you to ask such a thing?' Yshri instantly countered. 'A lackey of no account.'

Inais silenced her with a curt gesture before nodding towards the scroll case in Dyal's hands. 'Do you truly seek such perilous knowledge? When you're already burdened with that weighty task?'

Before Dyal could answer, the *zamorin* headed for the door, collecting the remaining lamp. Dyal had no choice but to follow if he didn't want to be left down here in the darkness. Yshri was already waiting in the corridor. She bolted the ice cellar door before away in the opposite direction to the *zamorin*.

Dyal hurried to catch up with Inais. 'Where—'

'Not a word,' the *zamorin* warned him. 'Not until you're back with your own.' He glanced at the scroll case. 'And not a word about who gave you that to anyone but Dau Daish herself. Unless you want to be the death of us all, when you owe us your very life.'

Dyal chewed his lip, frustrated. What was this all about? But Yshri was right, however blunt she had been. He was the lowest of the Daish warlord's warriors. It was not his place to ask questions. It was his duty to obey.

They hurried through dull passageways, earthenware tiles damp beneath his feet. Reaching the white tiled corridors, the floor began sloping upwards. The sickly scent of decay tainted the air when Inais took a final turn. Dyal saw twin doors ahead, one narrowly ajar. Passing through, he realised they were wrought of solid iron, evidence of the Ulla domain's wealth of such rare and precious metal.

A second set of similarly sturdy doors opened onto a narrow landing stage piercing the fortress's outer wall. This aperture was barely tall enough for Dyal to stand upright and crowded with frayed baskets piled high with rotting refuse. A man was emptying them but not straight into the river. Thuds and splats onto wood indicated a boat tied up below.

Inais glanced over his shoulder. 'Quickly. The guards will be back soon.'

Dyal nodded. No such vulnerability in Derasulla's defences would be left undefended. Whatever connivance had won him this opportunity could only be a temporary measure.

Reaching the edge of the landing stage, he saw steps built into the wall and reaching downwards. Once the rains came to swell the river, the topmost stones would be awash but for now the sluggish waters were far below. A long, shallow rowboat was tied to an iron ring, already piled high with spoiled or half-eaten food, broken pottery, stained scraps of paper and the stars alone knew what else.

'Get down there and bury yourself.' The man emptying the baskets didn't pause, even when a scaly-tailed rat ran over his foot as it scurried away. 'Inais, a word.'

What was this news? Dyal would have waited to hear but the *zamorin* urged him on with an impatient shove that gave him the choice of going down the steps or tumbling headlong into the river.

Reaching the stinking boat, he looked up at the night sky to take one last look at the stars. Then he tucked the lacquered and sealed scroll case under his tunic before burrowing into the noisome heap. As he curled around his mysterious burden, for whatever protection that might offer it, he struggled not to vomit at the stench.

All the same, he still heard Inais's voice incautiously raised in anger, with that curious echo of home ringing through his words. 'No! I won't believe it until I see his body. Daish Reik always taught us never to believe a man's dead unless you see his corpse for yourself!'

Dyal would have heaved himself free of the garbage to ask what was going on but another basketful of kitchen waste landed right on top of him. A moment later the boat swayed as the rower jumped aboard and Dyal heard the rattle of the mooring ring as the rope was unhitched.

Despite his revolting hiding place, he couldn't help his spirits rising. Not so long before, he had expected to die. Now he had escaped Derasulla!

That relief lasted as long as their journey downstream to find the *Rainbow Moth* unexpectedly anchored in the middle of the river channel. Dyal saw the great galley looming above them when the refuse man kicked his foot and he cautiously raised his head to shake off a small cascade of fruit peelings.

'That's one of yours.' The rower jerked his head at a skiff labouring upstream.

'What's going on?' Dyal sat up to see a swarm of small boats swirling around the galley.

'Word is your lord fell in the river,' the rower said briefly.

Before Dyal could demand to know more, the Ulla man raised his fingers to his lips to send a shrill whistle through the humid night. 'Daish man! Come see the fish I caught!'

'No—' Before Dyal could silence him, a handful of the small boats headed straight for them. Seeing the hope on so many faces crushed when they realised he wasn't Kheda was like a knife to Dyal's heart.

'Who the curses are you?' snarled a mariner from the prow of the first vessel to arrive.

'I know him.' An armoured man said curtly from further back. 'He's one of ours.'

'Then take him back,' snapped the refuse man. 'I have better things to do than hook your fools out of the river.'

The mariner extended a reluctant hand. Dyal ignored it, holding tight to the scroll case as he climbed from one boat onto the other. The mariner recoiled. 'You reek!'

'I know.' Dyal sat down, hunched in the prow.

Whether they were repelled by the stink of his stained clothes or choked by their bitter disappointment, no one said a word to him as the boat returned him to the galley. The swordsmen guarding the stern ladder looked at him wordlessly, as Gal was summoned to vouch for him.

‘Yes, it’s Dyal.’ His fellow warrior-turned-porter stared at him, astounded. ‘How by all the heavenly jewels—?’

‘Gal! To me! Now!’

Dyal couldn’t see who had yelled that summons but he breathed silent thanks all the same. As Gal hurried away, he moved to the galley’s rail, setting the scroll case down in the shadows before stripping off his noisome clothes and hurling them into the river. Using one of the buckets securely tied to a rope, stowed all around the deck, he hauled up and emptied successive pailsful of water over his head. If the river wasn’t overly clean, he was filthier still. Once he’d scrubbed himself as best he could, he headed below decks, heading for the corner of the hold where his pallet still lay, along with the bundle of necessities he’d brought on the voyage here.

As he found a clean tunic and treads, he hid the scroll case beneath the cotton-stuffed mattress and wondered desperately how to explain himself to Janne Daish without breaking his oath to Ulla Orhan.

He need not have worried. No one came to demand his account that night. Everyone was wholly preoccupied with the search for Daish Kheda. By the next morning, Dyal had concocted a story of fleeing for his life through Derasulla’s underground passages before stumbling on the refuse dock entirely by chance. He claimed the garbage man had said the guards had been called away in all the night’s commotion, leaving him to load his boat or bar the doors, if some foe appeared before they returned.

‘I told him I’d cut his throat and leave him for the vermin to eat if he didn’t get me away from the fortress,’ he concluded as he told Gal the tale.

Would that satisfy Janne Daish? Dyal never had to find out. As it turned out, the warlord’s wife wasn’t even aboard that first night. She returned to the great galley shortly after first light. Her command to set sail for home spurred the crew to immediate action. No one knew where she had been, or if they did, they weren’t saying.

Her orders forbidding all discussion over Daish Kheda’s possible fate followed swiftly afterwards. There could be no possibility of certainty until they returned to the Daish warlord’s stronghold, to learn whatever news courier doves had brought while the *Rainbow Moth* was still at sea.

After the first three oarsmen had been flogged for speculating on their shared bench, there was barely any conversation below decks that wasn’t solely concerned with everyday practicalities. Though Dyal could see the confusion shadowing every face, coloured from time to time by anger, obstinate denial or simple, heartsick grief.

In the curious way of travel, the voyage home seemed to pass much more quickly than their journey to Ulla. Though there was sufficient time for his bruises to heal.

Once they reached Daish waters, Dyal racked his brains for some reason to request an audience with Dau Daish. What business could such a lowly swordsman have with the eldest daughter of the domain though?

He still hadn’t come up with some pretext when the galley reached the inner isle where the warlord and his family dwelled. But before the galley was even unloaded, he was abruptly summoned to Daish Sirket’s presence by Telouet himself. The slave came to find Dyal on the lower deck, with his broken arm still splinted and the fresh bandages already ominously stained. He looked gaunt with fever.

‘Our new lord wants to know exactly what happened after his honoured father climbed

up onto the ramparts.’ Telouet scowled accusingly, as though he held Dyal personally responsible for his erstwhile master’s fate.

Dyal hastily bundled up his belongings and followed Telouet ashore. Going through the great gates of the warlord’s residence, they followed the white path skirting the ornate gardens and shimmering fountains. Grey stone pavilions with patterned roofs of vivid tile were set here and there, each one a noble wife’s residence. His mother would be avid to hear every detail but he was so nervous he found it impossible to commit anything in particular to memory.

His mouth was dry, his palms damp. Dyal wondered apprehensively what he was supposed to say to Daish Sirket? The young warlord would surely command him to tell the truth, on his oath as a man of the Daish domain. That must surely outweigh the vow he’d sworn to Ulla Orhan? It could even be argued that oath had been made under duress, couldn’t it?

He looked this way and that for anything which he could read as an omen or a portent, to show him what to do. Nothing helpful caught his eye. Until he followed Telouet up shallow marble steps.

Daish Sirket was waiting in an audience chamber whose white painted walls made the colours of the patterned tiled floor all the more vivid. But he wasn’t alone. His eldest sister was with him, gowned in emerald silk, and surely as poised and beautiful as their mother Janne must have been in her youth.

Relief rushed through Dyal. He had sworn to deliver Orhan’s message to Dau Daish’s ears and no one else’s. But the Ulla heir hadn’t specified that Dau must be alone when he did so. Orhan could hardly have expected that she would be, could he? Every noble lady was always attended by her body slave. The muscular young man who served Dau glowered at Dyal in a manner he must surely have learned from Telouet.

Daish Sirket stood gazing out through one of the wide windows, with the oiled black hardwood shutters half open, ready to be closed against sudden squalls now that the rains had begun. He turned to Dyal. ‘Speak.’

‘My – my lord,’ Dyal stammered, momentarily distracted by the young man’s striking resemblance to his lost father.

Sirket raised a quizzical eyebrow and the hint of a smile tugged at his lips. Dyal felt a little less overawed.

‘My lady, I have a gift and a message for you.’ He dug the scroll case out of his bundle and offered it to the young woman.

She sprang to her feet. ‘From my father?’

‘Forgive me – Ulla Orhan—’ Dyal’s voice broke as he realised his stupidity. Would he be punished for inadvertently giving her such hope, only to snatch it away?

Telouet seemed to think he’d deserve it. A pace behind him, the slave growled with wordless menace.

Sirket silenced him with an upraised hand, reminding Dyal powerfully of the young man’s formidable mother. ‘Telouet, call for refreshments and find our friend a stool. I can see this tale will take some telling.’

As Dyal sat, he felt the tension knotting his shoulders begin to ease. Fresh squeezed berry juice soon eased his parched throat. Once he had finished relating a full and wholly truthful account of that accursed night’s events, Daish Kheda’s heirs looked at him for a long silent moment.

Dyal longed to ask if there had been any news of their father’s fate but the sweet berry juice was sticking his tongue to the roof of his mouth now, keeping him mute as an Ulla slave.

‘Lemir.’ Eventually Dau’s nod commanded her body slave to fetch the scroll case that

Dyal still clutched.

Sirket heaved a sigh. ‘What do you suppose we should do with that?’

Dau looked up from studying the wax seals to narrow her eyes at Dyal. ‘What should we do with you, now that you share in such secrets?’

Dyal stared back at her, trembling with trepidation. Then he noticed the lustrous green and gold enamelled scales of the snake decorating the comb which held back her long black hair.