

## Southern Fire

### Book One of the Aldabreshin Compass

Juliet E McKenna

#### Chapter One

*No omens of earth or sky, just tranquility. I couldn't ask for a better welcome home.*

The sun was all but set among serene bands of golden cloud untroubled above an unruffled sea. Down in the lagoon far below, Kheda could see the little boats of his fishermen heading out for their night's work, the weather set fair. The great galley that had brought him back to this island at the heart of his domain rode calmly at anchor. Closer to shore, the first lamps were being lit above the floating frames hung with nets that gathered fingerfish for smoking above fragrant herbs. Standing high above, on the roofless platform at the top of the circular stone tower, Kheda was too far away to hear the banter of his people idling about their work on the shore.

*It'll be the usual jokes and debates about whether to settle to mending nets or making gourds into new buoys. Chances are they'll opt to spend the evening with their families and friends instead. We're not so different, highest to lowest, Daish Reik always told me that.*

At that recollection of his father's wisdom, Kheda yielded to the desire to greet his wives and children. He'd turned first to his duty as augur; now he was entitled to claim some time for himself. Smiling, he was about to go down the narrow winding steps of the observatory when a new thought struck him.

*Those little lights to tempt curious fish look like early stars on the dusky water. What of the heaven's compass? I wouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't look for any new portents, even if all the constellations are settled at their midpoints.*

Kheda turned to look inland at the sky darkening to blue just deep enough to show the first true stars. Long practise found the Winged Snake, just rising above the dark bulk of the island's hilly interior. The sky around the constellation was clear of cloud, nothing else intruding that might warn or advise. Kheda had no need to glance down at the arcs of the compass of the earth that were carved on the balustrade of the observatory. The Winged Snake was in the arc where omens for marriage and all such intense relationships would be found.

*Symbol of male and female intertwined, of courage and the rewards of toil, of new things being revealed. Of course. And unseen, below the horizon, the Net will underlay the arc of the compass for birth, token of support and help, co-operation and unity. Though the Canthira Tree, symbol of the cycle of life and death, is in the arc of fear and retreat. Of course, Sain will be fretting, what with it being her first baby. She'll have all the support she needs from Janne and Rekha, that much is quite clear, with the Vizail Blossom, symbol of womanhood, so firmly planted in the arc of sisterhood.*

Kheda's eyes scanned the sky. What of the heavenly jewels that drew their own courses among the stars? No, none of them were approaching the invisible lines that divided one arc of the heavens from the next. However he read the compass of the skies, in triune, sextile or quartile, the distant lights drew no pattern. Only the moons were moving between the heavenly regions in their rapid dance around the world. The Lesser Moon, heavenly counterpart to the pearls that were the wealth of the Daish domain, was the merest paring of nacre, sharing the sky with the Winged Snake. The Greater Moon by contrast was at its full, disc patterned like the Opal that was its earthly talisman for faithfulness and self-knowledge. It shone, rising slowly in the sky where omens for life and self should show themselves. Kheda could see nothing beyond the pattern of stars that made up the Mirror Bird, a sign for

protection and a link between past and future. The Amethyst, for calm and inspiration, was happily centred in the arc of hearth and home, and the Diamond, talisman for clarity of purpose and most particularly of warlords, was set squarely in the arc of wealth. Beyond, the Ruby, talisman of strength and longevity, rode in the arc of friendship and community.

His spirits rising, Kheda turned to quit the lofty observatory. 'Remind me to tell Sain Daish that the heavens look entirely propitious for all coming births.'

'She can only be scant days from childbed.' His sole companion sitting on the top of the stair sounded pleased. Then his stomach gurgled loudly in the evening hush.

'Well, Telouet, that's a sign that takes no skill to read,' Kheda laughed. 'It's been a long day, I know. But I had to be sure there were no portents.'

'My lady Janne has to be happy that you've discharged all your responsibilities, if we're all to sleep content on our first night back home.' Telouet grinned as he rose to his feet, adjusting the twin swords held in his wide sash as he made way for his master.

Kheda walked rapidly down the dim, familiar stairs, winding down around the tower's central core of successive rooms packed with records and interpretations and all the materials necessary to work the different divinations that he used to serve his people. Lamplight showed beneath the closed door of the lowest chamber.

'Sirket?' Kheda entered and smiled affectionate reproof at his elder son. 'Telouet's gut's growling louder than a jungle cat, so it must be time for us to eat. Join us.'

Seated at a reading slope, the youth looked up from the weighty book he'd been studying, eyes still distant in thought. There was no doubting he was the warlord's son; both had eyes as green as the newest leaves of the rainy season, unusual in these southernmost isles of the sprawling Aldabreshin Archipelago. They had other features in common: high foreheads, faces more oval than round with more sharply defined cheekbones and noses than Telouet. Telouet's nose would have been broad and flat even before the fight that had left it squashed crooked on his cheerful face. But Sirket's mother had brought him fuller lips and darker skin than his father, as well as tightly curled black hair that he kept cropped short. Kheda's hair and beard were a coarse and wiry brown, tamed only by close clipping.

'My mother Janne said we might be visiting the Ulla domain before the rains arrive.' Sirket scratched at whiskers shadowing his jaw. Not yet full grown, he was already easily the height of his father. 'I don't want to be shown up like Ritsem Zorat was last time.'

'That won't happen. I won't permit it.' Kheda crossed the room and closed the heavy tome. 'Now, go and tell your mother I will dine with the two of you, once I've seen Sain and Rekha.'

'As you command, my father.' Sirket ducked an obedient head but his smile was relieved and his step light as he ran off ahead, bare feet noiseless on the well-trodden earth. He had some years to grow before he carried his father's muscle.

'What does Ulla Safar think he will achieve by humili-ating the sons of his closest neighbours?' Locking the tower door, Kheda followed more slowly. 'Ritsem Caid will surely turn down any suggestion that his son take the auguries next time they meet. Then all Ulla Safar will have is a pointless quarrel on his hands.'

'When did he ever shrink from a quarrel, however trivial?' One pace behind and to Kheda's side Telouet brushed at an intrusive frond. Night was falling with its customary rapidity and the green leathery leaves were barely distinguishable from their shadows. The bushes were musical with the songs of lyre crickets and something rustled in the darkness, a foraging animal or a -startled night bird. 'Besides, Ulla Safar always wants someone to read the omens for him. He rarely bothers himself with such things and Ulla Orhan shows little - aptitude for divination.'

Kheda snorted. 'That's Ulla Safar's problem and one of his own making. It's his responsibility to teach the boy. He's not doing his duty by his son or his domain.' He took a deep breath and the familiar scents of home soothed his irritation. The air was moist and

heavy now they were down among close-planted plots of shrubs set in their lattice of little paths.

'Do you think we will be travelling to the Ulla domain before the rains?' Telouet asked as they walked through the scatter of houses below the fertile forested slopes, built from a miscellany of mud brick, clay-covered woven branches and close-fitted wooden planks. Thatched with palm fronds and with wide overhanging eaves to give shelter from the sun or to carry away rain depending on the season, the one-roomed dwellings thronged with activity.

'Only if Janne has some really pressing reason,' said Kheda frankly. 'We'd almost certainly get caught in the rains on the voyage back and I'd really rather not risk that. Besides, I should be here when Sain is brought to childbed.' Slatted shutters of oiled wood were not yet closed and Kheda found himself smiling at the scenes within the comfortable homes. Children were being coaxed or ordered towards their beds, or more rarely, were settling obediently among their quilts.

*Will Rekha have sent the little ones to their beds or given them permission to stay up to see me tonight?*

Outside, on the broad steps beneath the eaves of the houses, men relaxed after a hard day's labour, sharing news and observations with their neighbours. All wore loose cotton trousers; some dyed bright colours, and others left unbleached white. Some men wore tunics, some relaxed bare-chested. A few wore simple bracelets of plaited palm fronds with carved wooden beads or necklaces of leather thong carrying some natural talisman such as a seedpod, shell or sea-shaped stone.

Kheda and Telouet walked through their midst, their appearance a dramatic contrast. The warlord wore trousers and tunic of indigo blue, the fine silk gathered at wrist and ankle with golden clasps. As well as chased gold chains close around his neck, Kheda wore a longer necklace of carnelian and diamonds interspersed with carved golden beads and a central trio of uncut, highly polished stones heavy on his breast, the massive diamond framed by carnelians. Bracelets of twisted gold jingled softly on his wrists and an arm ring inlaid with mother of pearl and turquoise rested just above the elbow of his sword arm. Plaques of gold filigree decorated his blue leather belt and more gold wire coiled around the dark sheath of the dagger that was his only weapon. It had the same smoothly curved blade and twisted grip as the daggers all the men of the village wore at their hip but Kheda's had a golden hilt and a single flawless pearl at the pommel. Telouet was the only man wearing swords as well as his dagger, twin blades in dark leather sheaths, their hilts plain and unadorned. He wore clothes of more sober cut in soft grey silk as befitted a faithful slave but the cloth was of as fine a quality as his master's. Like Kheda, his hair and beard were tamed with close cutting and scented oils.

The islanders taking their ease smiled warm greetings to Kheda, bowing low. Wives, deftly cooking fish or meat on cook fires placed a prudent distance from vulnerable thatch, paused to add their own heartfelt welcome. A substantial pot of pale yellow grain steamed in the embers of each hearth and greens from the burgeoning gardens behind each house seethed with fragrant spices. Kheda was pleased to see that even this late in the dry season none of his people were going hungry.

'The word is there are islands in the Ulla domain where the people are eating dry stalks and old husks, their granaries are so empty,' Telouet remarked.

'So I hear,' Kheda nodded.

A bright-eyed maiden with an inviting smile was shoved into their path by her doting mother. She held out a wooden platter lined with broad leaves each carrying a morsel of meat glistening with rich sauce. 'My lord,' she managed to say before giggles got the better of her.

Kheda nodded with approval as he ate a piece. 'Excellent. Telouet, try some.' He winked suddenly at the maiden before turning to smile at the mother. 'You must share that blend of

spices with Janne Daish's cook.'

'Indeed.' Telouet's agreement was muffled by his mouthful of succulent meat.

Waving a farewell that encompassed all the islanders, Kheda walked on. Telouet was still chewing as the two of them approached the mighty walls of the compound beyond the little houses.

'Do you want to share something with the daughter? She was all but throwing herself at you.' Swallowing, he adopted a tone of spurious innocence. 'It's an even-numbered year and the wrong season besides, so my lady Rekha won't be inviting you to her bed tonight.'

'I find three wives quite sufficient without adding concubines.' Kheda laughed. 'How often do you need telling? Still, I don't want Sirket going to his wedding night all theory and no practice and the lass is certainly a fragrant blossom. You could ask her parents if she's promised herself anywhere yet. If not, she might like to join Janne's household for a season or so.'

'My lady Janne is keen to see Sirket married.' Telouet scratched his beard. 'Birut was telling me she let the wives of every domain know she was casting her net, on their way back from the Redigal islands.'

Kheda nodded. 'Which will doubtless be the topic of conversation over dinner.' He looked sideways at Telouet, the light from the lamps above the gate catching his smile. 'I still think it's rather more important to find him the right body slave just at present.'

'I've been keeping my eyes and ears open but I've yet to come across a likely prospect.' Telouet looked serious. 'Boys of that age are difficult to read and if you can't find out exactly who's owned them, that makes it harder to judge their character.' He paused to hammer on the solid black wood of the compound's doors. 'Open to your lord Daish Kheda! A slightly older slave might be a safer choice,' he continued.

'No.' Kheda shook his head firmly as the wide gates swung open. Four guards armoured in finely wrought hauberks stood on either side of the path, naked blades gleaming in the lamplight, faces hidden by the nasal bars and chainmail veils of their ornamented helms. All bowed low to their lord. Kheda inclined his head in passing and the guards fell back to bar the gate securely once more.

'He need not be too much older,' Telouet began.

'No.' Kheda's rebuke was firm though not harsh. He turned his head to look at Telouet. 'We must find him a slave whom he can trust as I have trusted you, who hears his unspoken thoughts as you hear mine, but that slave cannot be older. If Sirket defers to him once, he'll do it again and that becomes a dangerous habit. Look at Redigal Coron.' Kheda laughed mirthlessly. 'Sirket must be the master.'

'My lord.' Telouet bent his head in apparent acquiescence.

'After all, we know it's possible.' Kheda studied the thinning hair on the crown of his faithful slave's head. 'My father found you for me.'

Telouet grinned at him. 'Daish Reik's wisdom in so many things still blesses the domain.'

*I wouldn't mind hearing it from his own mouth again, just occasionally.*

Kheda paused to look around the compound - checking that all was well was second nature to him. Quarters for all lesser members of the vast household clung to the inside of the massive stone wall, the broad parapet above their roofs patrolled by watchful sentries. Within this protective embrace, separate pavilions stood, marble steps pale as they were brushed by the light of the Greater Moon, solid walls of grey stone dark beneath the shadows of the wide eaves. Shutters and doors of black hardwood were fitted with bronze, the roofs above of gleaming tile, patterns dazzling by day muted just at present by the half-light. Fountains playing in broad pools set in the extensive gardens around each pavilion pattered softly in the dusk.

'Shed your swords and go share a drink with Rembit.' Kheda clapped Telouet on the

shoulder. 'Wait for me at Rekha's door. No, go on,' he insisted when the slave would have protested. 'You only make Sain nervous. She can do without that.'

*Besides, my faithful steward will doubtless tell you a few things that he left out of his report to me on the beach.*

Kheda turned his back and headed for his youngest wife's residence without waiting to see that Telouet obeyed. He soon reached the assiduously tended garden around her pavilion, the carefully selected pebbles of the path smooth and cool beneath his unshod feet, the scent of night-blooming vizail intoxicating.

*Not that there is any reason for Sain to be wary of Telouet. Not that there's any reason for her to act like a nervous kitten around everyone in the compound. She's almost more at ease out among the islanders, collecting her stones and seedlings. We must make sure she gets leisure to make such trips and tend her garden after the baby is born. Perhaps she'll be less timorous after the child is born. She's very young, after all. Barely older than Sirket. Younger than you were when you found yourself ruler of the Daish islands. You found that prospect daunting enough and you had been raised to the expectation. Remember, Sain never expected to be anything more than a minor prize in marriage until her brother's ambition secured the Toc domain by right of conquest. 'My lord Daish Kheda.'* A massive man rose from his seat on the broad steps in front of the door and house lizards skittered away into the darkness.

'Hanyad.' Kheda acknowledged the man with a smile, careful to hide his private amusement. *Whoever chose you as slave for timid little Sain knew what they were about, finding such a mountain of a man to stand between her and danger, real or imagined.*

'How is she?'

'Weary, my lord.' Hanyad's dour warning was still coloured with whatever northern tongue he had learned at his mother's knee. As he opened the door, yellow lamplight shone on his grizzled hair and once-pale skin turned leathery from endless seasons' sun. 'My lady, your husband seeks admittance.'

Kheda waited patiently for Sain's reply. Every wife was within her rights to refuse her husband entry and one of a body slave's multifarious duties was enforcing such decisions.

'He is most welcome.' Unseen within, Sain certainly sounded tired. The big man hesitated but stepped aside to yield the threshold to Kheda.

'I shan't stay long.'

*I was right to shake off Telouet. That wouldn't have gone down well, not this late in the day and with Telouet hungry, and the last thing I need is my body slave falling out with Sain's.*

Kheda entered and Hanyad closed the door behind him and sat cross-legged to bar it. 'Sain, my dear, how are you?'

'Well enough.' Wearing a loose unbelted tunic of plain golden silk, his youngest wife reclined on a bank of russet silk cushions embroidered with a riot of colourful birds. She wore no jewellery; her long straight hair was simply pulled back into a thick black plait. Slightly built and no taller than Kheda's shoulder, these last days of her pregnancy plainly weighed heavy upon her. A small girl was rubbing scented lotion into her feet and Kheda noted Sain's visibly swollen ankles.

'You look exhausted,' Kheda said frankly. Even in the muted light of the single lamp, the darkness around Sain's eyes was more than just shadow. He heard a grunt of agreement from Hanyad. 'It's just the heat.' Sain fanned herself with a delicate, copper-skinned hand.

'Which won't abate until the end of the season.' Kheda noted the increase in her gravid belly while he'd been away in contrast to face and wrists grown thinner than ever. He strove for a balance between authority and affection in his words. 'You must do nothing but take your ease until the rains or the baby, whichever comes first.' He smiled, partly at Hanyad's rumble of approval and partly to -reassure Sain whose big brown eyes were wide with

concern.

'My duties-'

'Tembit has already made his report on the state of the compound and the island. He tells me the fields are tilled and ready for the rains, saller grain seedlings flourish in the nurseries.' Kheda spoke with warm congratulation. 'Even all the house fowl and goats are healthy, which is rare enough this late in the dry season.'

'Naturally I strive to serve the domain.' Sain's evident pleasure brought a little animation to her face. She tried to push herself more upright but her pillows slipped beneath her, vivid colours catching the lamplight. The little slave girl barely managed to save her bowl of lotion, greasy hands fluttering in indecision.

'You've discharged your every duty to the domain. Now all we ask is you cherish yourself and this baby until you are both safely through childbed.' Kheda waved the child away.

*Perhaps Sain would show a bit more spirit if her attendants weren't all such dolts.*

He considered putting an arm around her shoulders once she was settled comfortably again but decided against it. Neither Rekha nor Janne had particularly welcomed close embraces so near to giving birth. He held his hand above the swell of her stomach instead. 'May I?'

'She's kicking.' Sain laid her hand on his so he could feel the baby move within her.

'Girl or boy, we'll know soon enough.' At his words, Sain tensed beneath his touch and the spark in her eyes faded.

Kheda leant over to plant an emphatic kiss on her forehead. 'Girl or boy, this child is yours to keep. And here's a gift for the babe, to prove my words.' He fished in a pocket for a small silken packet, tied securely with braided cotton.

Sain took it, long varnished nails picking apart the knot, child-like excitement brightening her tired face. 'Oh, Kheda, husband, it's beautiful.' She held up a shimmering bird made of silver chains linking opal feathers.

'Hang it for a talisman over the baby's crib,' Kheda smiled. 'For the virtue in the stones to protect our firstborn.'

'I was thinking-' Sain set the shimmering bird in her lap, her voice tremulous. 'About the baby's future. Perhaps I should visit a tower of silence. I haven't done so since I came here and the rains won't arrive for some days yet. I might dream something important there, something about the child, it is my duty as your wife-'

'You are in no condition to spend a night outside sleeping on bare earth, whatever the weather.' Kheda heard Hanyad grunt his emphatic agreement. 'Once the baby is born, once you're recovered, when we've moved north to the rainy season residence, you can think about undertaking such a ritual, with Rekha and Janne to help you with all due preparations. That will be quite soon enough to learn whatever threads from past or future this baby might hold in its hand.' 'As you command, my lord.' Sain managed a wan smile but Kheda could tell she was upset. *The last thing I want to do is play the heavy-handed warlord with you, when that's all you've ever known, but you do make it so cursed difficult.*

'Go to bed, dear heart. Stay there as long as you want tomorrow morning and every day after.' Kheda rose from the floor. Hanyad was already on his feet, opening the double doors to Sain's bedchamber beyond. The little slave girl scurried past him, scrubbing oil from her hands with a scrap of cotton cloth.

Kheda helped Sain stand. She was too grateful for his support to tense as he slipped an arm around her waist. He gave her a gentle hug. 'Sleep well, my flower. Attend your mistress, Hanyad, I'll see myself out.'

Releasing her into the slave's watchful care, he went out into the humid, heady night, stifling a sigh of exasperation. Outside, in the compound, those servants and slaves whose duties were done rested and ate beside braziers set outside their quarters, faces bright in the

pools of orange light. The air was fragrant with herbs burning to deter the insidious whine of the night's biting insects and laughter rippled through the low murmur of conversation.

Telouet was waiting at the bottom of the steps. 'How is she?'

'Much as always.' Kheda shrugged.

'Not long now till the baby's here,' Telouet offered.

'And do you think it's my babe or Hanyad's?' Kheda led the way towards a much larger pavilion with a second storey in the centre and many windowed wings to either side.

'She came to your bed a virgin, my lord,' said Telouet thoughtfully. 'And I don't think she had time enough to get used to you bedding her to get curious about any alternatives.'

'True enough.'

*And that had been yet another new experience for a nervous girl arriving in an unknown domain. Then you'd barely coaxed her out of her tenseness when she fell pregnant and her nausea put an end to any embraces. I really don't imagine Sain thinks she's getting anywhere near a fair share of the benefits of this marriage.*

Then Kheda's mood lifted at the sound of lively voices suddenly hushed behind the pillars of his wife Rekha's pavilion. Little shadows scampered along the outer steps and Kheda ducked down, waving Telouet to do the same. They moved closer at a crouch. Kheda sprang and caught his second daughter by the waist, swinging her off her feet, growling in her ear. 'Efi Daish, what are you doing outside past dusk? Hunting house lizards again?'

'My father!' She squealed with delight, twisting in his embrace to fling her arms around his neck. 'Vida?' Kheda raised his eyebrows at his next youngest child who had managed to leap on to Telouet's back, thanks to the slave's carefully mistimed lunge for her.

'We haven't heard anyone call for us,' she asserted with spurious innocence.

'How could that be?' Kheda swept aside a lock of Efi's lustrous black hair and felt inside her ear. The child squirmed and giggled, her cotton nightshift slippery, but he held her securely, her bare feet brushing his thigh. 'No, no beeswax. Telouet, check that one for something stopping her ears. Otherwise I must mix a dose of aiho root to cure them of deafness.'

Telouet shuddered with exaggerated horror. 'But that tastes dreadful!'

Vida dropped to the floor and ran to haul open the main door just enough to slip through. 'Mother Rekha, my father is here!'

Efi was content to wait in her father's arms as Telouet knocked perfunctorily and opened the door to spill light on to the marble steps. Within, the room was bright with lamps hanging on chains reaching down from the lofty ceiling, their light striking back from walls panelled in pale wood and set with mirrors. White curtains of fine mesh covered the long windows, the cloth redolent with the sharp scent that the slaves applied to deter heat by day and biting insects by night.

'Enter and be welcome.' Andit's formal greeting sounded a little abstracted. Kheda entered and saw his second wife's burly body slave was absorbed in a game of stones with the warlord's younger son.

'Beating him again, Mesil?' Kheda enquired genially.

'Not yet.' The boy looked up and grinned broadly. 'Shall we have a wager on it, my father?' 'I've been away, what, ten days? Is that time enough for Andit to get smarter?' Kheda pretended to consider this. 'No, I don't think so.'

Mesil swiftly moved several coloured-glass roundels, his beringed fingers deft on the circular game board. Entirely his mother's son in build and feature, his wiry brown hair nevertheless convinced Kheda he had certainly fathered this child.

'I give up.' Andit sighed. 'Third defeat this evening.'

'I believe it is the fourth.' There was amusement in Rekha's voice. Long-limbed and elegant in a many-layered dress of rainbow silk, she lay on a low couch, eyes closed. A

cushion supported her neck as a kneeling slave ran a gold comb inlaid with lapis through her mistress's long black hair. 'Are you sure you're not letting Mesil win?' Rekha queried with faint reproof, her silver bracelets chinking as she settled her hands.

'Hardly. Even I can beat Andit.' Graceful in a close-fitting tunic and treads, Kheda's eldest daughter sat beside her second mother, cross-legged on a thick-piled carpet with an intricate design of canthira leaves interlaced with the flames that were both death to the tree and life to its seeds. She was holding out her hands to a young man who sat patiently applying golden varnish to her immaculately shaped fingernails. She watched him with a smugly proprietorial air.

'Then don't play him, Dau, play Mesil,' Kheda said with a smile to soften his words. 'How else will you improve?'

'I do play Mesil.' In contrast to Rekha whose aquiline face now bore only a faint sheen of cleansing oil, cosmetics still made a bright mask of Dau's eyelids and lips. The dusting of silver on her cheekbones caught the light as she smiled at her father. Her black-rimmed eyes were the same warm brown as her mother's but other than that, she bore a striking resemblance to her full brother Sirket. 'I nearly beat him yesterday.'

'You did not!' Mesil protested, his voice cracking between its boyish tone and manhood.

'I'll bet you a day of Lemir's attendance on you that I can beat you,' challenged Dau.

'Children.' Rekha did not raise her voice but she did open her eyes and wave away her attendant slave. 'Firstly, Dau, you do not make a wager unless you are hazarding something of real value to yourself. If you wish to test your fortune against Mesil's, wager your own attendance on him or one of your talismans. Then the outcome will have some meaning.

'Secondly, I have had a long and tiring day, as has your father. Behave, and you will be treated as adults. Bicker and you'll be sent to bed along with the little ones.' She raised herself on one elbow and narrowed her eyes at Vida. 'Who are to be sent to bed a second time, I see.'

At her mistress's nod, the slave woman laid down her comb and clapped her hands at the little girls. 'Quietly now. If you wake the babies, it'll be cold saller porridge and no fruit for you at breakfast.'

Kheda set Efi down to the floor and she followed her sister obediently through an inner door opening on to a hall with a stairway beyond.

'You can play one more game, Mesil and then you go to bed.' Rekha stood up and fixed Andit with a stern eye. 'You're to tell me if he deliberately spins it out. Dau, if your hands are done, Lemir should clean your face. There's no one to see us now and your skin needs to breathe a little before bed.' She smiled gracefully at Kheda. 'Shall we take some refreshment more privately, my lord?'

'As you wish, my wife.' Kheda bowed to her.

Dress whispering on the cool marble floor, Rekha led him down a corridor to a wide empty room. The ruddy wooden wall panels were inlaid with exquisite mother of pearl and soapstone flowers and fronds. A low table of the same wood and patterning was set to one side on a -luxur-iant carpet bright with blood-red swirls of fern fronds.

'When did you get back?' Rekha asked as they entered.

'Just before sunset,' Kheda replied. 'So I went up to the tower to read the sky by the last of the light.'

Telouet slid past him to light the room's lamps unobtrusively and then discreetly withdrew.

'I take it you saw all is well?' Rekha looked at him, dark eyes alert.

'The heavens are settled in auspicious aspects and there were no other portents to say different. I have a sheaf of recommendations from village spokesmen for likely swordsmen and lads with an ambition to go to sea, as well as a boatload of prentice pieces that various craftsmen have sent for your assessment.' Kheda gestured back towards the other room. 'I see



your trip was successful.' 'Moni Redigal has always had a good eye for a slave,' nodded Rekha with undisguised satisfaction. 'His name is Lemir.'

'I heard. He's a little young,' Kheda said thoughtfully. 'Decorative too.'

Rekha raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. 'You think I should have found some much-handled goods like Hanyad for our daughter?'

'Telouet tells me Hanyad was traded from one end of the Archipelago to the other before Toc Faile secured him for Sain.' Kheda shrugged. 'He can tell her a great many things that she'll find useful.'

'For a woman so inadequately raised, he's a good choice.' Rekha's voice held just the faintest hint of acid. 'Janne and I have made sure Dau does not need any such tutor. She can look for wisdom or cunning in a slave when she's of an age to decide for herself that she needs it. For now I want her adored and indulged by a lad handsome enough to be the envy of all her equals among the other domains through these last seasons of her girlhood.'

Telouet's arrival saved Kheda from having to find a reply to that. He and Rekha stood silently as the slave set a tray on the low table and poured pale fruit juice from a long-necked, fat-bellied ewer of beaten bronze into gleaming goblets.

'We'll serve ourselves.' Kheda took a long drink as Telouet served Rekha and retreated towards the door. It was lilla juice, inevitably at this season. 'Adored and indulged is all very well but does this Lemir know how to fight, and when to fight, come to that?' He turned to refill his goblet and caught Telouet's eye as the slave closed the door. Telouet nodded infinitesimally.

'He comes well recommended by Moni Redigal and her body slave both,' Rekha replied confidently.

'Very well.' *Besides, Telouet will put the lad through his paces as soon as he joins the household's other body slaves on their private practice ground.* 'So, now she has a slave of her own, will you be taking Dau to the pearl harvest after the rains?' Kheda sat, cross-legged and straight-backed, on the carpet softening the marble floor, entirely comfortable.

'I think so.' Rekha chuckled as she sank elegantly on the other side of the low table, folding her feet beneath her. She held out her goblet for more juice and wrinkled her fine nose comically. 'If nothing else, learning to keep a straight face through all that stink will be good training. If she behaves herself, I'll take her with me on my next journey north and maybe even let her do a little bargaining with some seed pearls, just for everyday wares.'

'She'll like that.' Kheda smiled. 'And what other successes did you win for the domain in your recent voyage?'

Rekha smiled with satisfaction. 'Moni Redigal will supply a shipload of brassware between now and the end of the rains in return for a full eighth share in the pearl harvest as it leaves the sea.' 'She's always a woman for a gamble.' Kheda shook his head. 'What if half her oysters come up empty?'

'That's the risk she chooses,' said Rekha without concern. 'Though I don't see her losing by it, even if she doesn't see quite the gains she dreams of. My divers speak well of the condition of the reefs. Taisia Ritsem prefers to wait, hardly a surprise. She'll see what the oysters yield and then trade finished silks for graded pearls and cleaned nacre.'

'Excellent,' Kheda approved. 'How did you fare with getting Mirrel Ulla to settle her accounts with you?'

'She claims a dearth of sandalwood makes it unexpectedly impossible for her to meet her obligations.' Rekha's disbelief was patent. 'I said I hoped she would soon regain the necessary authority over her loggers. No matter. Mirrel needs tin for her tile makers' glazes and the nearest domain that can supply that is Redigal. I can make life very difficult for Mirrel, if I call in a few debts from Taisia Redigal.'

Kheda recalled Sirket's apprehension. 'Are you or Janne thinking of making a trip to the

Ulla domain before the rains?'

'We considered it.' Rekha drank before shaking her head. 'Then we decided we should both be here for Sain's first baby. Anyway, it'll be a quicker trip from the rainy-season residence, once we've moved north. It'll do no harm to let Mirrel Ulla fret over just what I might be doing in the meantime.'

'I have every confidence in your abilities to serve our domain,' chuckled Kheda.

*I certainly did well by my children in finding such an intelligent wife to secure their future through her impressive aptitude for trade. And the lack of passion between us means I always know what to expect from Rekha.*

'How was your trip?' Rekha observed her husband over the rim of her goblet. 'How fares our own domain as the seasons turn?'

'Satisfactory.' Kheda pursed his lips. 'Every isle had the usual pointless disputes and endless debates-'

'Inevitable just before the rains,' Rekha interjected. 'Were there any killings for you to sit in judgement over?'

'No.' Kheda didn't hide his relief. 'And it's a rare year when the heat doesn't tip someone into lethal folly, so I think we can take that as a favourable omen. Other than that, the beacons are well maintained and fuelled. Every watch post has its message birds preening happily. No village had any disease to report and the omens were set fair wherever I read them.'

'There'll be an outbreak of some pestilence or other come the rains,' Rekha commented a trifle dourly. 'It's hardly the best time for Sain to be bringing a child into the domain.'

'I've seen no evil portents,' said Kheda mildly.

*It's your privilege to arrange our children's births as you see fit but I've no quarrel with Sain showing a little less rigorous design than your scheme of births in alternate years, falling in the fruitful, cooler days when the rains have just ceased.*

'The children all look well,' he observed with a fond smile.

'They are thriving.' Rekha's face softened. 'Mie will be walking any day now. I'm glad you're home to see it. Noi has been running us all off our feet as usual; she lost that wooden goat Birut made for her yesterday and I swear we must have searched the whole compound three times over.'

Kheda laughed. 'Did you find it?'

'In Mie's quilts but Noi finally forgave her.' Rekha shook her head with fond exasperation. 'I'll see them first thing in the morning,' Kheda -promised.

*I can take half a day to relax with my little girls before addressing whatever's cropped up here in my absence. I am the warlord after all.*

'Make sure you bring something with you,' warned Rekha with tart amusement. 'Efi's been telling them how any of us returning from a voyage always means presents.'

'They're both old enough to understand that?' Kheda groaned in mock distress. 'I'll be beggared by this time next year.'

'Not with me trading the fruits of the pearl harvest, you won't.' Rekha plainly relished that prospect. She rose in one fluid movement, shaking out the folds of her gown over her slim feet. 'If there's nothing else you want to discuss, my husband, I'll bid you goodnight. I'll be drawing up my ledgers tomorrow if you want to look over them.'

*Which will show a handsome balance in Daish favour, I have no doubt.*

'Good night.' Kheda didn't get up, pouring himself the last of the fruit juice instead. He drank it slowly, listening to the protests from the far room. Neither Dau nor Mesil were sufficiently grown not to try pleading and wheedling for some extra leisure before bed.

Telouet entered on silent feet, visibly amused. 'You'd think they'd have learned by now that Rekha never changes her mind, no matter what fuss they make.'

'Youth is all about hope.' Kheda grinned and emptied his goblet.

'You sound like a sage in his seventieth summer,' Telouet mocked.

'After sailing the length and breadth of the domain, I feel it.' Kheda groaned and held out a hand.

'A good night's sleep will put you to rights.' The slave hauled him to his feet. 'Where are you sleeping?'

'Let's go and see how Janne feels about that.' Kheda nodded to the far door of the reception hall and Telouet opened it. 'What do you make of Dau's new plaything?'

'He made a good job of her nails.' Telouet pursed his lips. 'I'll want to see him tested on the practice ground. Still, Andit will have put him through his paces as soon as he saw my lady Rekha was considering a trade for him.'

'Let me know how he fares.' Kheda knew Telouet had a high regard for Andit's swordsmanship; the stocky warrior had been traded down through several domains from the central islands where recurrent battles always honed such skills to a fine edge.

Outside, the compound was appreciably quieter now as the warlord's household had largely retired to bed, well aware that their duties would return with the dawn and sleep would be hard to come by now the oppressive heat was building to the ceaseless trial that only the rains would relieve. Sentries patrolled the parapet on silent feet and one aged slave was slowly treading the white paths that wove through the pavilions' gardens, alert for snakes or scorpions that had no business there.

Janne Daish's pavilion didn't have an upper storey but wings had been added on either side. Kheda headed for one side door where lamplight showed and Telouet hastened to knock for him.

'Enter and be welcome.' Janne's words overrode Telouet's formal request so he simply pushed open the door. A trio of musicians rose smoothly to their feet and bowed, taking themselves and their lyres and flutes away.

Janne's personal retreat was furnished with plenty of cushions, myriad side tables laden with curios and -ornaments, the walls covered with intricately woven hangings bright with patterns of frolicking animals that framed silver lamps set in crystal-lined niches to scatter a soothing light. Kheda felt the tensions of the day leave him as he relaxed in the comfortable familiarity of the room. Then his own stomach rumbled with appreciation at the spread of dishes on the low table. Mingled spicy scents rose from silver platters of vegetables sliced and sauced and carefully blended for an aesthetically pleasing mix of green leaves, blanched stems and fine sliced orange roots. Morsels of dark bird meat rested on a bed of yellow shoots dotted with shreds of brilliant red seedpods.

'Is that a chequered fowl?' Kheda took a seat on a firm cushion across from his most senior wife. Telouet went to help Birut, Janne's personal slave, who was entering with a tray laden with still more dishes.

'One of the hill men brought a brace down this morning.' Janne was already scooping finely spiced saller out of a substantial brass pot and into a gold-rimmed white ceramic bowl. She handed it to Kheda. 'Pour your father some wine, my dear, and some for yourself.'

Sirket halted as he fetched a fluted silver ewer from a side table. 'For me?' He looked at Kheda for permission.

*So, Janne, your thoughts and mine chime in harmony, as so often.*

'You're of an age of discretion,' Kheda said casually. 'It's time you widened your experience.'

'Better you learn the pleasures and pitfalls of liquor within our own walls than by disgracing yourself like Ulla Orhan.' Janne smiled to soften her words.

Inadequately hiding his pleased smile, Sirket poured three goblets of clear golden wine before sitting and accepting his own bowl of steamed grain.

'A little light wine, when you have met all your responsibilities, when there will be no call on your judgement, that's entirely acceptable. Distilled liquors-' Kheda pointed an emphatic finger at his son. 'Potent spirits are a whole different nest of snakes.'

'No warlord with a taste for those holds power very long,' agreed Janne. 'Or one who tolerates any drunkenness among his swordsmen.'

'There will always be eyes on you watching for weakness.' Picking up his goblet, Kheda drank. 'Learn your own limitations and you'll notice anyone trying to exploit them.'

The slaves set the last dishes down and removed themselves to sit silently in the corners of the room.

'I take it all is well around the domain?' Even for this informal meal, Janne was still dressed with all the elegance expected of a first wife. Gold and red paints on her eyes were bright against her dark skin, matching the ruby-studded chains of precious metal around her wrists and neck. Her mature figure was flattered by an inviting dress of gold-brocaded crimson silk.

'Well enough.' Kheda settled himself comfortably on a cushion and reached for the dish of fowl meat. 'I'm still not sure about that new spokesman on Shiel though. He hasn't got the village men together to clear the river margins of dry season growth.' Though it was hard to be concerned with such things in this room's welcome embrace. Kheda took a moment to smile at Janne. She smiled back, her full lips luscious with a scarlet gloss of paint.

'If the rains don't find a clear channel, they'll all be up to their knees in floodwater, won't they?' Sirket looked from one parent to the other.

'Which will give those who wouldn't respect their spokeman's authority pause for thought,' Janne said unperturbed. 'We'll see how he handles himself through the wet season.'

'Perhaps.' Kheda shrugged, non-committal, as he savoured a faint citrus tartness offsetting the sweetness of spiced honey soaked into the fowl meat. 'So, Sirket, have there been any portents around the compound while I was away?'

Chewing, the boy considered his reply. 'Two black-banded snakes were caught the night before last. They're not unusual at this season and they weren't a pair. I mean, one was by the gate and the other was in Sain's garden. They were both caught just before dawn, so that's a favourable omen, if it's anything at all. Neither had eaten anything and there were no marks or deformities in their entrails.'

Kheda leaned over the table, reversing his silver spoon and using the twin tines on its end to spear a smoked fingerfish dusted with finely ground spice. 'So their presence means what?'

'To be vigilant in our care of the domain,' said Sirket confidently.

'As always.' Kheda smiled. 'A reminder never comes amiss.'

*I wouldn't wager a broken potsherd on Ulla Safar's chances of humiliating you, my son.*

All three turned their attention to making a hearty meal in companionable silence.

'How is Sain this evening?' Janne asked as they paused to allow the slaves to clear away the meats and bring the fruit course to the table.

'She looks exhausted.' Kheda didn't hide his displeasure, crunching creamy nuts from a dish of poached purple berries. 'And still too thin.'

'She always ate like a bird and with the heat and the baby so heavy on her stomach, Hanyad can barely get her to take more than a mouthful.' Janne shook her head, hair braided close and dressed with heady scented dye to redden the grey among the black.

'She's what, ten days from childbed, maybe fifteen?' Kheda took a handful of crisp slivers of fried red fruit. 'That's going by the moons though. It's a big babe and she's none too sturdy to carry such a weight so it could arrive any time.'

'First babies are often late,' Janne countered.

'I shan't let it linger too long. I made fresh pella vine salve before I went away.' Kheda spoke indistinctly through another mouthful of nuts. 'And I gathered plenty of bluecasque on

the trip.' He glanced at Sirket. 'Have you been busy about your grinding and decocting?'

The boy grinned. 'We're well supplied against every wet-season disease I've found listed in the pharmacopoeias.'

'And what of cleansing and healing salves?' Kheda nodded at a graze on Sirket's knuckles. 'Miss a sword pass on the practice ground, did you?'

'Birut caught me by surprise.' Sirket looked a little shamefaced.

Kheda grinned back at the boy. 'Better a slave doing that in practice than some assassin in the night.'

'Sain seems to have her heart set on visiting a tower of silence.' Janne sighed. 'Has she spoken to you about that?'

'Yes and I've told her it's entirely unnecessary until the child is safely born,' said Kheda decisively.

Janne's face softened. 'It's just that she's so fearful she'll bear a son and that will be the last she'll see of him.'

'I wish I knew why.' Kheda shook his head in frank exasperation. 'I've told her time and again that we will raise the baby, boy or girl, to serve the good of the domain and all our alliances.'

'She came from a domain still running with the blood of its children,' Janne pointed out. 'Old Toc Vais may have raised all his sons and grandsons in his own compound but they still had to fight for power among themselves when he died.'

'Which was a bloody enough affair,' allowed Kheda. 'And I don't suppose we heard the half of it outside the domain's borders.'

'I hope she does bear a boy.' Janne tilted her head on one side. 'Then she'll learn once and for all that you're a man of your word. Otherwise she'll go through all these same agonies with her next pregnancy.'

'If she decides to risk another child.' Kheda allowed himself a sour expression.

'I'm confident you'll have convinced her to invite you back into her bed,' Janne chuckled.

Sirket coughed and spoke rather louder than was necessary. 'Is it true that Ulla Safar has any sons born to his wives killed?'

'And even to his concubines.' Kheda answered with a briskness that didn't quite disguise his distaste. 'Doses them himself with frog venom, according to what he tells me.'

'Why?' Sirket frowned. 'If Orhan dies-'

'He's none so hale after that attack of breakbone fever last year,' commented Janne.

'And there's always accident or malice to fear.' Kheda's look challenged Sirket. 'What happens then?'

'Tewi Ulla inherits as next eldest child.' Sirket shook his head. 'She's afraid of her own shadow. She won't find a husband willing to stand as consort and let her rule in her own right.'

'Without younger brothers to command the domain's swordsmen, she'll be lucky to escape marriage by abduction,' commented Janne.

'So why does Ulla Safar want a quiver with only one shot?' Kheda leaned back from the table and studied his son.

*What do you think, now you're discovering things that your parents know yet never discuss openly? How far are you going to take this?*

Sirket hesitated. 'Because he fears younger brothers would be a threat to Orhan's hold on the Ulla domain.'

'Tule Nar was overthrown by his brothers,' Janne agreed in apparent support.

'Do you think it was as simple as that?' Kheda raised his brows at Sirket.

'Tule Nar had lost both the love and respect of his entire domain,' Sirket said slowly. 'There were endless hostile portents before his brothers took up arms against him.'

'Do you think Tule Reth holds the domain securely now?' Kheda prompted.

'Tule Dom and Tule Lek would both die for him,' Sirket nodded. 'And both have their own compound as well as permission to own slaves in their own right.'

'Duar Tule grants all their wives shares in the domain's trading rights as well,' added Janne.

'A loyal brother can be worth his weight in pearls.' For all Kheda was smiling, he pointed his spoon sharply at Sirket. 'Never give Mesil or any son that Sain may bear us any reason to think you don't value them.'

'You don't fear two might conspire against me when they're grown?' asked Sirket, emboldened.

'With you the eldest and them so widely spaced in age? Your mothers and I made sure of that much.' Kheda held his son's gaze. 'It's for you to make sure your rule is wise enough for them not to feel a need to remove you.'

'We'd be remiss in our duty if we left the domain with no alternative to a tyrant.' Janne smiled too but there was a steely glint in her dark eyes.

Sirket chewed his lower lip. 'Rekha bore a second son between Vida and Mie. What happened to him?'

*If this question has finally come, perhaps it is time to think of marrying you, my son.*

'I have no idea,' replied Kheda honestly. 'Rekha took him north and made her own arrangements for his care. He's now of some other domain.'

'The child will never know different to what he's raised with,' Janne commented.

Sirket's expression turned both determined and fearful. 'Am I your only son?'

'Yes. I bore another the year after Dau but he didn't live beyond the rains.' Janne smiled wistfully. 'I would have sent him to one of my sisters to raise in her own household.'

'Daughters are a boon to every domain. Sons can be blessing or curse. Every warlord has to make his own decision about how many to raise and what to do with those who cannot inherit his power.' Kheda looked at his son with open challenge. 'Why do you think Ulla Safar kills babies still wet with their birth blood?'

Sirket couldn't hide his revulsion but did his best to consider the question with detachment. 'A life cut so short has little chance to become embedded in the affairs of the domain, so I suppose the death cannot harm the domain too much. But does he look for portents? There's always the chance the child's life would benefit the domain far more than its death, isn't there?' He looked from father to mother and back again.

'Of course,' Kheda agreed.

*And while every warlord must makes such decisions alone and none may gainsay him, I'm so very glad to see your disgust at the notion of murdering infants, my son.*

'Ulla Safar considers removing any rival to Ulla Orhan sufficient,' shrugged Janne. 'And no, from what I've heard, he never bothers with any augury beforehand.'

'Then the sire's as much a fool as the son,' Sirket muttered unguardedly. He reached for a lilla fruit and began stripping the outer husk from the pod with angry fingers.

*Is this the time for the next question? 'Did you have any brothers, my father?' What will you make of Daish Reik's solution to the eternal problem of his sons?*

Kheda took a drink of the light, fragrant wine. Sirket stayed silent, intent on scooping the creamy seeds from the dark green flesh of the lilla fruit.

Kheda glanced over at Janne. 'Where do you think Sirket might look for his first wife?'

Sirket looked up, startled. 'You think it's time?'

'You're much the age your father was when I married him,' Janne smiled.

'Newly widowed of Endit Cai and divorced of Rine Itan before that.' Unexpected recollection startled Kheda into a chuckle. 'I can recommend a much-married girl as your first wife.'

Janne quelled her husband with a stern look. 'So she can share her experience of the wider Archipelago.'

Kheda was tempted to a ribald reply but forbore for Sirket's sake.

'How are you faring in your hunt for a suitable body slave?' Janne looked at Kheda. 'You wanted that arranged first, so you were saying.'

'I've still to find the right man.' Kheda grimaced at Sirket. 'Sorry.'

'Perhaps you should be looking for an adequate slave rather than the ideal.' Janne drained her goblet. 'He needs to travel and he can't do that without an attendant. Find one who will do and once Sirket's out and about, he can look for a better prospect himself.' She stroked her son's hand affectionately.

'That's something to consider, certainly.' Kheda twirled his own goblet by its faceted stem and studied the cloud-like patterns that the craftsman's skilful hammer had left on the metal.

*A notion to consider and reject; my son isn't facing the manifold dangers threatening any warlord's heir without the best swords I can find protecting him, not as long as I have the final word in the matter.*

'We're finished here, aren't we?' As Sirket and Kheda nodded, Janne waved a hand at Birut and Telouet. 'You may eat. Good night, Sirket.'

'Good night.' After a fond embrace for each parent, Sirket took himself off. The two slaves hungrily applied themselves to the remnants of the meal as Kheda followed Janne into her boudoir.

Rather than light the lamps, she crossed to a far window, throwing open the shutters to gaze upon the moonlit garden beyond. A pool edged with white stones shone among the dark bushes. Kheda came to stand behind her, folding his arms around her and resting his chin on her shoulder. He wasn't holding the firm slimness of the girl who'd both intoxicated him and intimidated him, nine years and more his senior but no matter. The feel of her still made his heart race, however the passage of years and the trials of childbirth had changed her body. He closed his eyes and breathed in her familiar, beloved perfume.

'It's hard to think of Sirket marrying,' Janne murmured softly. 'It's easier with Dau, I don't know why.'

'As it happens, I feel quite the opposite.' Kheda kissed Janne's ear. 'About her and all the girls.'

She smiled. 'I thought you'd be tired after such a long trip.'

'Not too tired.' Kheda kissed her again. The wide neck of Janne's dress was held together at the shoulder by filigree brooches. He undid one and kissed the smooth skin beneath.

Janne untied the jewel-encrusted sash that wrapped the dress around her soft midriff and let it fall to the floor. 'You haven't bathed, my lord.'

'Am I very ripe?' Kheda wrinkled his nose as he undid another brooch, letting the silk fall away to reveal the enticing swell of her bosom.

'Yes, but we can easily remedy that.' Janne turned in his embrace and kissed him long and deep as she began stripping away his jewellery. Kheda spared just enough concentration to undo the remaining brooches and ease the dress down over Janne's accommodating arms, letting it fall to the polished wooden floor.

Janne stepped out of the puddle of whispering silk and held out her hand to lead Kheda to the bathing room beyond the broad bed waiting for them with its pile of soft quilts ...