

Western Shore

Book Three of the Aldabreshin Compass

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Chapter One

What a beautiful day. The rains are long past, all malaises driven out by the heat of the sun, yet the dry season is still far from punishing us.

Seated on a wide, low backed bench, Kheda looked around the immaculately tended garden in the hollow square at the heart of the luxurious dwelling. In the centre grey and scarlet shadow finches sang merrily in their spacious aviary. The turquoise painted wood echoed the roof tiles of the white walled buildings. Above, the sky was the soft blue-grey of a courier dove's wing and the garden still husbanded the early-morning cool. When the heat of the day came, spinefruit trees would cast their generous shade. Vizail, jessamine and basket-flower shrubs flourished in the moist, fragrant air, nourished by rich earth, black in contrast to the paths of pale sand. Though none of the bushes were flowering as yet.

They're saving their strength for the trials of the hotter weather. Their glorious blooms will be harbingers of the rains to come when the first clouds blur the horizon. Then they'll blossom and this garden will be full of sun birds and butterflies. Then seeds and fruit will fall to the moist earth to wait out deluge and mildew before sprouting to drink in the sunlight.

'Are you sure it's not too early?' Beside him, Itrac shifted and tossed a silken cushion petulantly onto the raked sand. 'It should be a year less a hundred days-' She broke off, catching her breath.

Kheda laid a gentle hand on the light cotton gown swathing his wife's swollen abdomen and waited for the contraction to pass. Eyes closed, her face twisted with pain as she groaned and rocked back and forwards. Kheda allowed himself a grimace as she gripped his hand.

At least I remembered to take my rings off. And Itrac's hands are barely swollen.

He looked at her slender fingers crushing his fingers atop her gravid belly, hard as rock as the contraction wracked her. With blood from northern and western domains in her lineage, her skin was more golden than bronze. Her knuckles showed white. Itrac drew a shuddering breath and opened her eyes, sweat beading her forehead.

'Twins always come early,' Kheda said gently.

'You really think it is twins?' Itrac brushed a stray wisp of hair from her forehead with a shaking hand. The thick plait of her waist-length black tresses was tousled and uneven after the long night of her steadily progressing labour. Stripped of the intricate cosmetics expected of a warlord's wife, she looked very young.

As young as my eldest daughter, very nearly. Born half my life ago. When life had none of the complications that have so beset us both and forced us together like this.

'Your womb grew by more than two fingers for every turn of the stars.' Kheda resisted the temptation to press harder as her belly softened with the passing of the contraction, to try to feel which way the babes were laying. 'I'm sure I could feel more than one head.'

Was I right? Is one of them safely head down? What do we do if they are both head up? I can't feel any movement. But there's rarely any kicking this far into a birthing.

He resolutely thrust away half-formed fears and used a scrap of muslin to mop Itrac's forehead. 'You're already as big as any woman bringing a babe through ten full turns of the stars.'

As big as any of my former wives when the birthing came upon them.

'But it's taking so long.' Itrac wailed. A weary tear escaped her hazel eyes to glisten on her cheek. 'If I die, you must bury me here.' Her voice trembled. 'In this garden, so your next

wife will be able to bless the domain with children-'

'The first birth always takes the longest. Many women labour much longer-' Kheda swiftly changed tack at Itrac's mordant look. 'There is no reason to fear any danger to you or the babies,' He wiped away the tear and cradled her face in his sword-calloused hand. 'Look at me.'

Itrac obeyed, her face shadowed with fear.

'Every turn of the stars has seen you in good health,' Kheda continued, reassuring. 'You've eaten well and rested as you needed to. I've done this before, many times-'

'No you haven't!' Itrac's face contorted at the onset of another contraction. 'You may have watched. I watched-' She bit her lip, unable to continue.

True enough; I have only watched, like any man. But I was there to receive my children wet with their birth blood as they slid from Janne, from Rekha. Such is the most intimate expression of a warlord's duty to care for every man, woman and child of his domain. But my former wives and children are lost to me, along with my former domain. Now all I can do is see Itrac safely delivered of these innocent babies that I have begotten on her with undoubted affection but no real love.

The dull ache of loss gnawed beneath Kheda's breastbone as the contraction passed and Itrac's ragged moans gave way to weeping. 'I'm so tired,' she sobbed. 'I wish Olkai was here, and Sekni.'

'It won't be much longer.' Kheda soothed as he put an arm around her shoulders. 'Jevin!' He snapped his fingers and the youth who'd been waiting motionless beneath a flame tree hurried forward, bearded face anxious. Like Kheda, he wore an unadorned tunic and trousers of unbleached cotton. This wasn't a day for the finery expected of a noble lady's body slave. Unlike Kheda he had the straight black hair and compact physique of these southernmost domains.

'Yes, my lord.'

'A drink for your mistress.' Seeing the uncertainty in Jevin's eyes, Kheda frowned at the young man.

Do you remember I told you you're to show no fear? No one must voice doubt as to a wholly favourable outcome.

The youthful slave immediately forced a cheerful smile as he proffered the brass ewer and goblet he had been clutching. 'My lady?'

'It's izam juice.' Kheda helped her take the goblet. 'Your favourite. Do you want another of the rosehip sweetmeats?'

'I don't think I'll ever want to eat rosehips again.' Itrac managed a watery smile before sipping obediently.

'Not too much.' Kheda's hand hovered, ready to ensure she didn't drink too deep.

Rosehips crushed with quail berries and yellow-fan seeds to ensure you don't labour in vain, just to feel the pains fade and the babies die with them, within you. Those herbs have done their work and better an empty stomach for what is to come. Izam juice with its sweetness to give you strength, with just enough poppy syrup to take the edge off the agonies for you without putting the children at risk. I learned to mix those doses precisely after Rekha and Janne's early labours.

'Twins born to the domain will be a powerful omen,' Jevin was clutching the ewer so tightly he was in danger of leaving dents in the metal.

'A portent of fertility and fair weather for all our islands and their people,' Kheda agreed robustly.

As long as I can deliver them both safely and see Itrac through all the perils of childbed. These people could see few worse omens than the death of any one of them.

'What do the stars say?' Her voice faint, Itrac looked up at the cloudless square of sky

framed by the roofs of the pavilion.

I never even thought to look at the skies when her pains first began. No matter. I could draw the jewels and constellations in every arc of the heavenly compass blindfold. I might as well be blind, for all the truth they can show me.

Kheda looked up as he drew her close, feeling her trembling within the circle of his arm. ‘The Pearl is in the arc of Death-’ he spoke resolutely over Itrac’s inarticulate murmur of distress. ‘- which in its positive aspect is also the arc of inheritance. With the Pearl waxing so close to its full, its talismanic properties make positive aspects dominant. Of all the heavenly gems, the Pearl’s the most potent charm against death and for the present it’s set among the stars of the Sailfish. That’s always a symbol of fertility, all the more so when it swims with either moon.’

‘The Lesser Moon as heavenly Pearl must be a talisman for you, my lady.’ Jevin looked at Kheda with uneasy hope. ‘With our domain’s pearl harvest so fruitful last year.’

‘In claiming that arc of the compass, the Lesser Moon also forms the point of a triune reading of the whole sky.’ Kheda smiled confidently at Itrac. ‘Today, of all days in the year, the Opal, the Amethyst and the Diamond are all in the heavenly arc of parenthood.’

‘Truly?’ Itrac’s wonder momentarily relieved her near-exhaustion.

‘Opal is a talisman for truth, while Amethyst counsels calm and humility. Believe me — we’ll need both as parents.’ Kheda handed the goblet back to Jevin. ‘Diamond, talisman for all warlords, and symbol of long life. The stars with them are the Horned Fish, a powerful emblem of life and renewal.’

‘They live and give birth in the open seas,’ Jevin said encouragingly. ‘Even though they breathe the same air as us.’

‘If that’s two points of the triangle, what’s the third?’ Itrac shifted, her bulk unwieldy, so unlike her usual elegant slenderness.

‘The Ruby is in the arc of Life.’ Kheda brushed a kiss across her clammy forehead. ‘Talisman of vigour. In the arc of Life where the stars of the Vizail blossom are particularly bright at this season, and that’s one of the most potent tokens of the hope all women carry within them.’

‘And the Ruby is a powerful talisman against blood loss,’ Jevin interrupted.

‘Indeed.’ Kheda shot a repressive look at the anxious youth.

Weren’t you listening when I told you all she needs from you is constant reassurance? Perhaps it wasn’t such a good idea to warn you about all the things that can go wrong in childbirth.

Another contraction seized Itrac. She moaned, low in her throat. Kheda took her hands and braced himself as her nails dug deep into his palms. Her groan rose to a howl that startled a cooing pair of glory birds out of the nearest shade tree.

That’s a new note in her agony. It won’t be long now, for good or ill. Jevin can put his trust in rubies and heavenly conjunctions if he likes. I’ll rely on all I was taught and all I’ve seen and all the preparations I’ve made.

Kheda watched Itrac intently as the contraction passed, leaving her panting. A shiver ran through her and clear liquid darkened the cotton skirt of her loose dress. ‘Oh, Kheda,’ she gasped, suddenly scared.

‘My lord?’ Jevin was equally alarmed.

‘That’s the birth waters.’ Kheda rose, lifting Itrac to her nerveless feet. ‘It’s time to go inside. Jevin, take her arm.’

With the young slave supporting her other side, the warlord guided his wife towards the rear of the garden. Double doors stood open with a handful of apprehensive maid servants hovering inside.

‘Touai.’ Kheda nodded to the foremost among them. He noted two of the girls shared the

older woman's lean build, their angular features softened by youth but still marking them as Touai's daughters.

She brought her own living proof of successful childbearing, if Itrac's in any fit state to take comfort from their presence.

Itrac's personal withdrawing room had been stripped of its customary lush carpets, the banks of silken cushions and low tables of polished and inlaid wood. Only the pale pink walls painted with a riot of colourful birds flitting among nut palms and lilla trees remained the same. A sturdy bed with a firm cotton mattress had been set against one wall of the airy room and the cool lustre floor tiles were covered with swathes of calico. The morning sunlight filtered through thin muslin drapes tightly secured to bar entry to any flies drawn to the scents of blood and birth to come. As Kheda escorted Itrac inside, the maid servants circled around to close the door behind them and refasten the curtain hiding the garden outside.

'Let's get you to the bed.' As he spoke, another brutal contraction gripped Itrac, forcing them all to a halt. 'Where's Lihei?'

'Here, my lord.' A sturdily built woman with tight braided greying hair stepped forward and smiled reassurance at Itrac. 'Most honoured to be here, my lady.'

I hope you got some sleep last night.

Kheda set his jaw against his own fatigue. 'Let's get her to the bed.'

Itrac collapsed onto the mattress as the next contraction seized her. She crouched on her hands and knees, keening wordlessly. Lihei hugged her shoulders, crooning soft reassurance. 'It'll pass, my lady, just let it pass.'

Forcing himself to leave Itrac to the grey-haired woman's tender care, Kheda crossed the room to a wide table covered in more calico.

She should have sister wives to support her, offering that understanding no man can hope to match. All we have is our steward's new wife, a widowed weaving woman until she caught his eye. But Olkai and Sekni are dead and gone and I'm done with marriage for alliance or advantage in trade or territory. I wouldn't have married Itrac if there had been any other way to see her safe from those who would have abused her.

'Touai, you're certain there will be plenty of warm water when we need it?'

'Yes, my lord.' The older maid servant filled a basin from a tall ewer, her hands steady.

Kheda felt a tremor in his own hands as he scooped soft soap from a shallow dish and rubbed it to a lather. As he scrubbed his hands and nails scrupulously, he surveyed cotton cloths neatly folded, ready to swaddle the newborns. A silver tray held smaller squares of muslin as well as a handful of brilliant red ribbons held down by a small set of gleaming steel shears. A copper box hid its contents from view.

Needles cleansed with flame. Boiled thread for sewing, inevitably.

'It hurts so much.' Itrac moaned, turning her head into Lihei's accommodating bosom.

'I know, flower.' Lihei hugged the young woman close. 'You rest a moment and let me see how we're doing.'

With Jevin's anxious help, the grey haired woman persuaded Itrac to sit up against the head of the bed, propped on firm cushions, her feet planted wide, Itrac's head lolled forwards, her chin on her chest, her eyes closed. Kheda rinsed his hands as Lihei sat on the end of the bed and lifted Itrac's skirts up over her knees to see how matters were progressing.

Jevin came to meet him as he approached the bed. 'She's exhausted, my lord,' he said, low and fearful. 'How can she go on?'

'She's past the point where she has any choice,' Kheda said with compassion.

Itrac gasped before Jevin could say anything. 'I have to push.'

'That's as it should be,' Lihei agreed calmly. 'I'll be easing you with warm cloths and oil, my lady, to see if we can't do this without leaving you too sore.' The older woman glanced over her shoulder at Kheda. 'It won't be long now, my lord.'

The warlord nodded. 'Jevin, open that the blue bottle and sluice my hands.' He held them over the bowl. As the young slave obeyed, the sharp alcohol stung small scratches on Kheda's hands that he hadn't even realised were there. 'Empty the basin,' he ordered. 'No, not in there!'

About to empty the basin into a shallow ceramic bowl underneath the table, Jevin froze.

'That's for the afterbirth.' Kheda reminded the slave, curbing his own irritation with some difficulty.

Jevin's face was already muddy with weariness after the long sleepless night. He went positively ashen before scurrying away to empty the basin into a slop bucket standing by a far door.

Kheda looked at an ebony coffer tucked away beneath the table's calico drape.

Blue casque in case the pains stop altogether; we shan't need that now. Saller rust, perhaps, if there's too much bleeding but not before the afterbirth is delivered. Hind's herb and black bark, to bring on her milk and ease the pains after the babes are born; that can wait awhile. The root of the yellow earth star will be the most important, to strengthen her blood against childbed fevers. But we have to see these children born first.

Kheda refused to contemplate the other contents of the physic chest: the thin-bladed, razor-sharp knives brought out when all hope for the mother was gone and only the child could be saved: the bright, slicing wires used when the babe must be given up for dead and the only thing worse than that loss would be the woman dying with the child unborn within her.

My former wives were safely delivered of ten children between them. I don't intend taking up such butcher's tools now.

He looked at the bed where Jevin was sitting behind Itrac. Her fingers dug into the slave's muscular as she leant against him, secure within his embrace. Her eyes were closed; her feet set wide, her toes digging into the mattress.

Kheda glanced at Touai, her daughters behind her. 'Stay out of the way but be ready to bring me swaddling cloths and the ribbons to tie the birth cords.' He joined Lihei at the end of the bed and saw that Itrac's labour was indeed proceeding apace. He glanced up at Jevin and managed a bracing smile. 'Just hold her and keep telling her how well she's doing. Encourage her to push until I tell her to stop.'

The slave looked back as Itrac's head rested on his shoulder, her unseeing eyes rimmed with white. 'She seems so distant, my lord.'

'That's as it should be.' Another contraction seized Itrac and her feral cry drowned out Kheda's words. He rubbed her cramping feet, adding his own meaningless endearments to Jevin's encouragement as she struggled with the merciless demands on her body. The spasm passed and Itrac went limp, sucking down deep breaths.

'You'll be surprised how little she remembers. Janne-' Kheda bit down on the name of his former first wife.

'Women would never do it a second time if they did,' Lihei chuckled before another contraction put an end to such levity.

And men and women alike lose all sense of time. I was astonished, when Janne finally delivered Sirket was as my first-born, to find that it was already evening.

Itrac yelled, pushing with all her strength. Successive contractions came harder and faster, each one arching her back more brutally than before. As Kheda and Jevin encouraged her, the labouring woman showed little sign of hearing them. With every new spasm, her energy and understanding turned inwards, the dictates of instinct driving her body and brooking no denial.

Lihei continued diligently applying warm, oiled compresses. Kheda watched intently past the woman's calm brown hands for the first sign of the first child.

This could all still go horribly wrong if the first thing I see is buttocks.

Some indeterminate time later, relief flooded him at the sight of black wispy hair.

‘Itrac, try not to push, just for the moment.’ He spoke loudly and firmly. ‘I can see the head.’ As he heard Jevin pleading with Itrac to hold back her straining, Kheda cradled the tiny crown, ready to ease the wrinkled little face gently into the air.

Not too fast, to save Itrac damage. Not too slow, to be sure the baby thrives. Not pulling, not twisting, just guiding as I will do for the rest of this child’s life.

There was a moment of total stillness in the room as the baby’s head emerged. No one spoke. Kheda found he wasn’t even breathing, stunned by the marvel before him.

As astonishing as the first time I saw a child of mine born. You always forget how small they are.

The tiny form slipped sideways as Itrac’s womb inexorably expelled it, first one pale golden shoulder emerging, then the second. In a rush of blood and fluid, the baby was in Kheda’s hands, the cord still linking it to Itrac thick and blue and pulsing.

‘Bring ribbons,’ Kheda called hoarsely. ‘And swaddling.’

‘Is it all right.’ Itrac rasped.

‘She is.’ Kheda held the baby in his cupped hands, keeping her low beneath Itrac’s hips. ‘You have a daughter, my lady.’

Now we wait, just a moment, until the thread of blood linking you to your mother stills. How strong are you, little one?

The tiny girl drew her first breath with a faint mewling noise and then began crying, a high reedy sound that was encouragingly robust. Her little arms and legs waved, congested face screwed up against the light and this strange new place.

‘Let me, my lord.’ Lihei was ready with a soft cotton wrap.

Reluctantly surrendering the child, Kheda turned his attention to the birth cord, watching it shrink and grow pale.

‘My lord.’ Touai was at his elbow with the silver tray.

Kheda tied a ribbon loosely around his newest daughter’s fragile wrist, making sure the knot was secure. ‘We need to be sure she doesn’t lose this, so we know she was first,’ he warned all the women as he tied off the birth cord a finger’s length from the baby’s round belly. Taking up the shears, he cut through the cord.

Tough as sinew, just like always.

Itrac moaned as a new contraction ran through her, her feet flexing.

‘Clean our new daughter while we wait for her brother or sister,’ Kheda said softly.

As Lihei withdrew with the newborn, Touai at her side, Kheda looked up to see Itrac smiling through her utter exhaustion. Behind her, Jevin’s face was wet with tears, eyes wide with wonder.

Kheda realised his own close trimmed beard was damp, his eyes full. Another contraction gripped Itrac and he wiped his face awkwardly on one shoulder, before turning his attention to waiting for the second baby. It wasn’t long in coming. As Kheda received the tiny buttocks, he smiled. ‘It’s another girl.’

She slid easily from Itrac now her sister had opened the way. Touai was ready with the ribbons for tying the cord when the moment was right and Kheda cut it deftly. Both babies’ cries filled the room, rising above the shaky congratulations the maid servants were offering their lord and their lady.

‘Let her suck, my lady.’ Lihei returned with the firstborn baby clean and lightly swathed in soft cotton.

Dazed, Itrac obediently opened the front of her gown and brought the baby to her breast. After a moment’s nuzzling, the questing mouth found her nipple and one of the quavering cries was stilled. Itrac gazed down at her daughter, oblivious to anything else.

‘Do you want to take her, my lord, while I wait for the afterbirth?’ Touai offered Kheda cotton cloth to wrap the new baby.

‘Yes, thank you.’ He carried this second new arrival to the swathed table, close to his body with one hand supporting her tiny head.

You have more hair than your sister, little one. What am I to do now? I was so determined to leave you both to your mother’s rearing, to save myself from the pains of loving you lest I lose you. How can I do anything but love you and your sister both?

He laid her gently down in a nest of soft cotton and took up a clean cloth as one of the maids poured fresh water into an unused basin. Dampening one corner, he began carefully wiping the blood and fluid from the baby’s flawless golden skin. His own hands were dark and creased in contrast.

Will you share your mother’s colouring or will your complexion darken to resemble mine? Will you have her beautiful eyes or will they be green? Will your hair stay black and fine like your mother’s or grown brown and curly?

Once he was satisfied the baby was quite clean, he accepted a spotless white cloth from the attentive maid. ‘Come and let your mother see you,’ he said softly as he wrapped his new daughter securely.

Over on the bed, Itrac was still rapt in adoration of her first born. She looked up, disconcerted, first at Kheda and then at the steward’s wife. ‘Can I give them both suck, at the same time?’

‘Of course.’ Lihei snapped her fingers at Jevin who was gazing wide-eyed at the baby. ‘You can move now, my lad.’

As Lihei saw Itrac settled back against her pillows with a baby at each breast and supported with cushions, Kheda saw Touai was waiting patiently at the foot of the bed with the shallow ceramic bowl.

‘Each came with her own afterbirth my lord.’ The gaunt maid servant showed him the basin’s gory contents.

So there’ll be none of that nonsense about them being two halves of one whole and wondering whether the good and the bad in their character has been evenly distributed.

‘Good.’ Kheda steeled himself to be certain nothing had been left behind to poison Itrac and rob these children of their mother before she was anything more to them than milk and comfort. Finally satisfied, he nodded, and drew a cloth over the basin with relief. He glanced over at the table where the copper box holding needles and sutures waited. ‘Does she need-?’

‘No, my lord, thankfully.’ Fellow-feeling with the new mother was evident in the older maidservant’s eyes. ‘That’s often the first blessing of twins, with them being so small.’

‘Not too small?’ Kheda saw Itrac’s face lit with wonder at the strange new sensations of suckling her babies.

It’s early days. Janne’s second son didn’t live beyond his first half year, despite all we could do for him-

‘No, my lord, not too small.’ Touai smiled. ‘And they’re strong.’

‘As is Itrac.’ Holding his bloody hands away from his sides, Kheda tried to ease a stiffness in his neck and shoulders that he hadn’t felt until now. Tiredness threatened to overwhelm him. Relief that everything had gone so well seemed to have broken down his defences. ‘But don’t keep her here too long. She needs to be in a clean bed-’

‘Leave me and Lihei to our duties, my lord.’ Touai flapped her hands at him. ‘As you do yours,’ she prompted. ‘The omens?’

Kheda did his best to hide his reluctance. ‘That can wait until I’ve given Itrac a draught of childbed herbs.’

He returned to the table where Touai’s diligent daughters brought him yet more hot water and he scrubbed his hands until they tingled. Bending to retrieve the ebony physic coffer, he

felt all the weariness of the long night in his back and legs as he lifted the heavy box and set it on the table 'Bring me a small goblet of izam juice, please,' he asked one of the two beaming girls.

'Hind's herb, to begin with,' he observed to Touai as the maid scoured her own hands clean, 'and tincture of Earth Star.' He took up a silver spoon and measured out crushed dried petals and then the pungent liquid. 'Is she bleeding too much?'

Touai shook her head, angular face relieved. 'Not with the two of them sucking so readily.'

'Keep a close watch and let me know as soon as you suspect she needs something to staunch the flow.' Kheda stirred the medicines into the izam juice. Itrac stirred herself to smile at him as he walked back to the bed though she looked wholly exhausted and more than half asleep. 'Twins,' she murmured drowsily.

'You were as strong and as brave as I knew you would be.' Kheda kissed her on the forehead, strands of hair still plastered across it.

'I had no idea it could hurt so much.' Itrac bent to nuzzle her second daughter's fluffy black head. 'But it was all worth it.'

Jevin was perched on the edge of the bed beside Itrac, still lost for words. Kheda handed him the goblet as both Itrac's arms were fully occupied. 'Make sure she drinks it all, and some water.'

'I am thirsty.' She sounded surprised. A yawn interrupted her, drawn from the very depths of her being. The movement dislodged the elder babe from her suckling. Tiny eyes tight shut, she sought the comfort of her mother's breast for a moment then settled to sleep instead.

'You give that to Touai and strip off your tunic, my lad.' Lihei addressed Jevin.

'You heard.' Touai took the goblet from the startled youth and edged him aside as she helped Itrac drink from it.

Jevin obediently tugged his tunic over his head, puzzled.

'For the next ten days or so, if my lady's nursing just one of them, you must keep the other warm.' Lihei wound a length of soft cotton deftly around Jevin's ribs. 'Sit down.' As Jevin obeyed, Lihei handed him the sleeping elder baby. Wide-eyed, he held her with infinite care as Lihei bound her gently and securely against his tautly muscled abdomen.

'We'll need you to take your turn, my lord,' Touai glanced at Kheda. 'When my lady takes her first bath.'

Kheda nodded. 'Naturally.'

'Can I go to sleep now?' With a faint wince, Itrac shifted to lie more to the side where the second baby was still intently feeding.

'Yes.' Kheda leaned forward and kissed her forehead again. 'I'll be back in a little while.'

I wouldn't mind a chance to sleep myself but I had better do what is expected of me.

He headed for the doors opening into the garden where a little maid had armed herself with a feathery grass whisk to make sure no flies got past her guard. As he stepped outside, trying to stifle a yawn, Kheda was pulled up short. A silent, anxious crowd was clustered in the garden. Almost all the household servants and slaves were there, creased and dishevelled silk tunics identifying those who had kept vigil throughout the long night. Cotton clad gardeners were clutching hoes and rakes and porters held baskets or brass ewers to their chests.

Beyau, the steward of the extensive residence stepped forward. His blunt features were uncharacteristically vulnerable, though his stance was still that of the warrior he had been before all the upheavals that had swept over this domain. 'My lord?'

Kheda composed a confident, triumphant smile. 'My lady Itrac has given the Chazen islands two beautiful daughters.'

The garden rustled with exultation dutifully stifled to spare the exhausted mother within. Beyau beamed at him. 'The beacons are ready, my lord.'

'Then light them.' The crowd parted to clear a path for Kheda across the garden and some eager hand opened the door to the hall on the far side of the pavilion. 'While I see what the omens say.'

Kheda kept smiling and nodding to acknowledge the murmured congratulations as he passed through the garden. Eager hands patted his arms and shoulders in tangible approbation. As he passed into the long, high-ceilinged audience hall, he noted five times the usual number of maids busy brushing the thick soft carpet and polishing the tall elegant vases that lined the walls. They all turned hopefully towards him.

Kheda tried to make his smile a little less stiff. 'My lady Itrac is safely delivered of twin girls.'

The women curtsied, their individual congratulations merging with the gathering swell of relief and celebration that followed Kheda out into the bright sunshine in front of the pavilion. He blinked and shaded his eyes with one hand as he saw the sparkling sea before him crowded with boats. Some might be dutifully ferrying necessities to the warlord's household from the outlying islands with their comfortable huts of tight-fitted wood and closely woven thatch. Most had no such excuse.

I don't think I've ever seen this harbour so full.

This most southerly residence of the Chazen warlords was built on a chain of small islands at the heart of a broad expanse of reef. Those who had ruled here before Kheda had put their trust first in the open waters and then in the tortuous channels among the corals that barred the way to any ship whose master wasn't privy to the anchorage's secrets.

He watched the news sweep through the assembled boats, like the breeze that bellied the triangular sails of the fishing skiffs and the mighty square rigged masts of the fat merchant galleys. Delight surged through the ships like the waves toying with the rowing boats that dutifully ferried. Signal flags were raised and Kheda heard the distant note of brazen horns sounded to send word to the ever vigilant triremes patrolling the deeper blue seas beyond the turquoise waters of the lagoon.

Word will soon be carried from one end of the domain to the other. And to every neighbouring domain beyond.

The crowds outside the pavilion were more voluble in their exultation, their words an unintelligible jumble of congratulation. Those further away contented themselves with raising a cheer that soon spread out across the harbour. Feet and oars drummed on decks and thwarts, swelling the tide of jubilation.

Itrac is truly bound to this domain now, not just as wife to their former lord. The threads of her daughters' birth blood are a better and stronger bond than her role as only survivor of the disaster that overthrew her dead husband's authority. Now she has given Chazen an heir and a second daughter sharing the same birth stars, should any calamity befall the elder.

Acknowledging continued congratulations, Kheda walked down the neatly raked path leading away from the pavilion and crossed a small bridge of ropes and wood swaying on piles driven deep into the reef. Any attacker would find themselves wrong-footed and exposed to arrows from all sides as they fought across these narrow walkways that the defenders could cut at will.

I'd forgotten how tightly one of those tiny hands can get a grip upon your heart. A grip that cannot be broken. And I am bound by my duty to make sure no battle or other woe blights those new lives. I have no one to blame for that but myself. I chose to take on this role as defender of Chazen and Itrac's protector. The domain I was born to was lost to me. Can these births help me finally put Daish behind me and look to the future? That might be easier if I had any confidence in what the future might bring.

A nub of coral supported a square platform where more bridges ran away across the crystal clear waters. They linked islands where more low pavilions of white stone were roofed with tiles like a reflection of the brilliant sea. Flashes of red and orange sunset fishes in the water beneath his feet caught Kheda's eye as he crossed to the next island.

Everyone is so pleased at present. Will there be any dissenting voices, once the village soothsayers have taken time to consider the implications of a girl as heir to the domain? Will there be whispers of regret behind discreetly raised hands that I could not give the domain a son, to be a true born lord of Chazen when he grew to manhood?

A few slaves and servants clustered on the wide steps of the building here, shaded by the broad eaves. Kheda glanced at the more humble dwellings where the servants were quartered and the shuttered more opulent and spacious buildings beyond.

Beyau will soon have every maid and manservant cleaning and polishing, fitting out those halls with every luxury to welcome the dignified lords and gracious ladies of the domains that border Chazen. They will soon be discussing the news that these islands are now fated to pass into the hands of a ruling lady. So if my first duty is to hold this domain secure for her to inherit, my second must be to teach her all the intricacies, contradictions and deceptions necessary to rule once she has reached an age of discretion.

As Kheda crossed the next bridge, he accepted further profuse congratulations with smiles and nods. He felt his smile becoming irretrievably fixed and crossed the final swaying walkway across the reef with carefully concealed relief. The slaves and servants of his personal household were gathered on the steps of the warlord's pavilion. There was one warrior in chain mail among the silk and cotton tunics and dresses.

'Ridu.' Kheda nodded as the armoured youth came down the steps.

'Congratulations, my lord.' Ridu bowed low.

'Thank you.' Kheda couldn't restrain a jaw-cracking yawn.

'You're tired,' Ridu observed unnecessarily.

'I'm also crumpled and stale,' Kheda said frankly. 'Have them fill me a bath while I visit the observatory.' He nodded towards the very last building on the chain of little islands. 'Then I'll sleep.'

Ridu bowed again. 'Do you want anything to eat, my lord?' Kheda was already walking towards the observatory. 'Nothing special, just some steamed saller grain and meat, perhaps some fruit.'

'Very good, my lord.' Ridu turned and clapped his hands at the attentive servants as Kheda continued on his way to the observatory.

For my guard captain, Ridu makes a competent personal attendant. Not that I'll convince Beyau it's acceptable to use him as such. Nor that the last thing I want is a body slave shackled to me and my fortunes ever again. He'll start pressing me on that again soon, especially now we can expect visits from all our neighbouring lords.

The long shadow of the observatory reached across the dusty ground. The tower rose three times the height of the single-storeyed round building whose half-circle halls held the accumulated wisdom garnered by generations of Chazen's warlords. The topmost level of the tower was open to the sky.

How long do I have to stand up there to convince everyone I've studied the patterns of the clouds and the flight of birds, the ripples and shades of the sea, to determine what lies ahead for my new daughters? The whole household would wait patiently for days if I said I needed to read all the books within, searching out interpretations of every conjunction of the stars and the bright jewels that circle through the heavens, checking through the records left by each warlord interpreting the validity of each construction placed on the concatenations of signs and stars. Can I bring myself to dissemble like this for much longer?

He opened the solid wooden door. Ignoring the spiral stairs curling upwards through the

core of the tower, he passed through the archway leading to the eastern facing hall. Star circles in bronze and silver hung on the walls, glinting as shafts of sunlight piercing the oiled wooden shutters fingered them. The paths of every constellation were incised on each plate, heavenly jewels inlaid on the net of pierced metal overlaying the circles, a measuring bar precisely aligned across each one.

Kheda halted, taken quite by surprise. ‘Risala?’ A young woman was sitting on a stool at one of the long tables set in the middle of the room. She had a small ivory circle before her, one of those marked out for reading the heavens as well as registering the path of the sun and taking directions for setting sail.

‘I picked this up on a trading beach in the Tule domain.’ She rotated the disc this way and that. ‘I thought it would make a nice addition to the Chazen collection.’

Kheda surveyed the extensive array of stargazing apparatus. ‘Chazen Saril’s collection.’

Risala waved a thin hand at the euphoria still ringing round the anchorage outside. ‘You’re the only person in this entire domain who still has qualms about your claiming dominion here. I’ve made it my business to be certain.’ She stood up, brushing back a lock of unbound black hair that fell to her shoulders and looked at Kheda with fond irritation. ‘Do I have to remind you what Itrac’s fate would have been if you hadn’t offered her marriage? She would have fallen prey to some monster like Ulla Safar, ready to rape her and call that a wedding. What would have happened last year, even if Chazen Saril had still been alive? No one I’ve spoken to is under any illusion that he could have saved them from one dragon, let alone two.’ She narrowed her sapphire blue eyes at Kheda. ‘So was it twins? Boys or girls or one of each?’

‘Two girls.’ Kheda scrubbed his face with his hands, trying to stave off his weariness. ‘Each will be her own woman; they’re not mirrored twins. They’re small but strong and healthy. Itrac’s exhausted but she suffered no damage in the birthing. There’s every reason to believe she’ll recover fully and fast.’

‘So now you’ve come to read the signs in the skies and the earthly compass to be sure of that, and to see what lies ahead for the children.’ There was an unmistakable note of command in Risala’s voice as she came over to Kheda.

‘You’re here to make sure I do my duty?’ The bitter mockery in his reply wasn’t directed at her.

‘We can see that as an omen, that I just happened to arrive on the day Itrac gives birth.’ She slid her arms around his waist. ‘You know what you have to do.’ ‘While you alone of this whole domain know that I think it’s a wholly futile exercise.’ Kheda clasped her narrow shoulders with his broad hands and looked at her.

You’re much the same age as Itrac, and as my lost eldest daughter. And I love you with more passion than I ever thought possible.

‘Do you plan on telling anyone else?’ She stiffened in his embrace and stared up at him, her blue eyes clouding. ‘No, I didn’t think so.’

‘Why do you still wear this?’ Kheda stroked a finger along the chain of small, silver mounted shark’s teeth around Risala’s neck. ‘Can you honestly tell me you still believe the portents we imagined were woven around it?’

She looked stubborn. ‘I know it’s a token of your faith in me. It tells me I can trust you with my life-’

‘As I trust you with mine.’ Kheda bent to kiss her.

Risala’s lips were soft and eager, the flicker of her tongue prompting a spark of desire in him. A spark that faded and died as another yawn would not be denied. Kheda drew her close nonetheless. ‘Everyone’s eyes will be turned to Itrac for a good long while. We’ll be able to find some time for ourselves.’

‘As long as we’re discreet,’ Risala warned. ‘The lords and ladies of Redigal and Ritsem

will be visiting soon enough. I'll be no more use as your confidential agent if their spies hear gossip that I'm your concubine.'

'I won't have anyone visiting too soon' Kheda stifled another yawn. 'Itrac needs time to regain her strength and the babies must build up theirs. I suppose I must consult the star circles for an auspicious conjunction of the heavenly compass for visits.' He scowled with distaste.

'Especially from the Daish domain,' Risala said neutrally.

Daish, where I was warlord until a malign succession of disasters convinced my formerly faithful wives that I was no longer fated to rule over them. There was no brooking their determination to see me driven out, short of taking up arms against my own son. Some thanks that was for making a journey where I risked my life to bring them some means of salvation from those invaders who had already laid waste to Chazen and slaughtered Itrac's sister-wives and their children.

When Kheda didn't answer her, Risala twisted in his arms to look back at the ivory star circle on the table. 'It's forty days until the new year stars align. That would ensure Itrac a generous recuperation.'

Kheda nodded reluctantly. 'I imagine I can read some lies into the sky to argue for such a delay.'

'Go and read the omens for your new daughters, for their sakes.' Risala rose on her toes to kiss him. 'It's not their fault your faith in such signs is wavering.' Kheda looked unblinkingly at her. 'The only signs I look for are hints on the wind or in the sea's currents that we're to be invaded by those wild men and their magic once again, or worse still, see another dragon land on Chazen soil.'

Risala shuddered involuntarily. 'Then look for those signs as well, as long as you read the sky for your daughters' births. Or do you want to scandalise the gossips around the island cookfires, and have them looking askance at the babies from their birth?' A new thought struck her. 'What are you going to call them?' Kheda shrugged. 'Itrac said, if it proved to be twins and they were girls, she wanted to call them Olkai and Sekni.'

Olkai and Sekni who were so much loved and respected. This didn't save them from death at the hands of the invaders who ravaged this domain for their own foul purposes. None of us saw any portent that presaged such disaster. With all she's seen since then, how can Risala wonder why I no longer have faith in the signs of the heavenly compass?

'That'll be popular among the islanders.' Risala was biting her lower lip absently. 'And it's news I can trade-'

Kheda frowned as he belatedly saw something else in Risala's expression. 'What is it? You didn't just come here to make sure I didn't scandalize the domain and blight my daughter's lives by declaring my abandonment of portent.'

'I picked up something else in Tule waters besides that ivory compass.' She wouldn't meet his eye, looking down. 'I got a message from Velindre.'

Kheda's blood ran suddenly cold. 'What did she say?'

Has that strange barbarian woman seen some sign that fire and magic and death are about to overturn all our lives once again?

'Nothing to send us running for the boats and fleeing the domain.' Risala laid her cheek against Kheda's chest, her hands linked in the small of his back. 'She wants to meet me on the most northerly of the Endit domain's trading beaches, on either of the days bracketing the Ruby's passing into the arc of Wealth.'

'She's been brushing up on her star-gazing,' Kheda commented cynically. 'What do you suppose she wants?'

'There's only one way to find out,' Risala said ruefully. 'I'll take the Reteul and visit the other main trading beaches on my way to see what news is being bought and sold along with

word of Itrac's new daughters. I can get there and back before the new year if the winds stay in my favour. Which would be an omen,' she added lightly.

'For those fool enough to put their trust in such things.' Kheda allowed himself a moment's comfort as her body pressed against his. 'Still, the trip will certainly be a chance to read moods in the domains you pass through.'

'Such as Ulla waters. You can't avoid inviting Ulla Safar to celebrate Chazen's good fortune,' Risala warned.

Kheda sighed. 'Not when the venomous slug can snap his fingers to summon more armed men than any two other domains could muster from all their islands.'

'Not when his ill-will would close so many sea lanes to stifle Chazen's trade,' Risala pointed out more prosaically.

'Let's hope he'll content himself with finding spiteful portents in his reading of the heavens over Chazen's new daughters' births.' Kheda reluctantly released Risala. 'I supposed I had better go and see what's to be seen, if only to confound his malice.'

To match Ulla Safar's undoubted lies with lies of my own. What does that make me?

Risala reached up to take his face in her hands 'I need no signs to tell me those girls couldn't wish for a better father.' She drew him down to kiss him soundly. 'That remains to be seen,' he said tersely. 'All right, I'll go and see what I can make out. Wait for me here.'

Heaving a weary sigh, he left the room with its myriad star circles and climbed the spiral stair to the open observatory with leaden feet.

Do my other children still think I have been a good father to them? How do they judge me, forced to abandon them, thanks to my own choices and those of their mothers? I won't be able to avoid inviting Sirket, any more than I can shun Ulla Safar. Daish Sirket, my son, my firstborn, forced to assume rule of the Daish domain when he's barely older than Itrac. But if I hadn't allowed everyone to believe me dead, so I could forswear all I held true and bring a wizard to fight the invaders' magic, Sirket and everyone else in Daish would have suffered the same slaughter as Chazen. Does he know that? Has Janne told him? What exactly has she told him?

Kheda squinted as he emerged onto the open observatory level. The sun was growing hotter and the black and ochre tiles dividing the floor with the cardinal lines of the compass were warm beneath his bare feet. He turned and looked to the north, where the Daish domain lay hidden far beyond the horizon.

Will Janne or Rekha come with Sirket? Will they deign to tell me if Dau is married yet, without my knowledge or consent? How much will Mesil or Efi and Vida have grown? Would I even recognise Mie or Noi, barely more than babies the last time I saw them. I've never even seen Yasi, Sain's firstborn, and he'll be walking by now.

He walked slowly around the waist-high wall, one finger tracing the carvings on the wooden rail that delineated aspects of the particular omens to be read in each third of the quadrant. He paused as the curling script marked out the arc of marriage.

What would Sain Daish say of me as a husband? Does she still trust in omens? Fearful as she was, she came to marry me trusting in the portents that I and her brother saw promising her a long and successful marriage. Look how that turned out. But everyone will be expecting me to tell them how the portents promise a long and happy life for each of my newest daughters. Risala is right about that.

He sighed and returned to the centre of the open floor, fixing his attention on the south and east where the successive arcs denoting the fates of children, parents and siblings ran round the compass towards the west. A steady breeze blew in from the open ocean.

Below the horizon at this season, the stars of the Winged Snake writhe in the arc for children. Its restless nature is said to bring hidden things into the light, as well as being token of courage. Shall I tell everyone I saw a rainbow there, to be certain that all possible positive

interpretations can draw the sting from whatever signs village soothsayers claim for this day?

Kheda gazed out over the ocean. Where the green and gold of the waters around the reefs faded to mysterious blue, a puff of spray caught his eye. He saw another, then another, at odds with the ruffles of white rising and falling.

Whales. A sign of vitality and of determination, also of mystery and an unknown fate. Though the whale is always read as a positive sign by the sages of Chazen. This is the only domain where men are brave enough, or sufficiently foolhardy, to take to their boats to pursue the great beasts. Will they try to catch up with those I see and drive some laggard into the shallows where meat for a birthing festival can be harvested along with fat and bone? The whale's a sign of plenty in this domain, isn't it? I can tell Itrac that our firstborn daughter is born to the expectation of her resolute rule bringing fruitful times for Chazen. She'll be happy to hear that and I won't be telling her an outright lie.

That didn't particularly relieve the heaviness weighing down his spirits.

There's no earthly omen in the arc of parenthood. That's no great concern. The heavenly conjunction of Amethyst, Diamond and Opal will keep the soothsayers hunched over their books of lore until the rains come. And the Horned Fish's stars swim there. Those beasts have been known to succour drowning mariners if the books in the libraries here are to be believed. I can tell Itrac that augurs well for our care of these babies.

He looked past the point of due south marked on the observatory's tiled floor to the next arc.

The Net's myriad stars shine in the arc of siblings. If I stress the aspects of unity and cooperation, Itrac can hope our daughters' life together will be harmonious. Though nets can entangle and subdue. How hard will it be for this second daughter when she realises she isn't the heir, when the two of them are so nearly of an age? Will she fret over whatever twist of fate held her back to be born second? Girls born when both moons are waxing are said to be precocious.

An unexpected flash of white caught the warlord's eye. This time it wasn't on the sea but rising into the far blue sky. A zaise spread long white wings with a span as wide as a tall man as it soared above the boundless ocean, spurning the land.

All white birds are a sign of beauty and fertility. I can claim that as well as the zaise's stamina and constancy for the younger girl. And mariners say the bird is an omen of returning safe to harbour, even if it's rarely seen to rest on the waters and never known to land on solid ground. Some even say it builds a nest that floats on the waters beyond the outermost islands.

I suppose there will be those who would say that was a valid omen for a girl who must fly away to some other domain to fulfil her destiny. Still, with a bird portent for the younger one, and the whale omen for her sister, I can argue that each girl should be treated as an individual from the outset, not as two halves of some whole. And both omens carry an element of mystery so perhaps I can protect them from the burden of false expectations wrenched from the heavens.

Abruptly weighed down with weariness, Kheda turned away from the vast sweep of the southern horizon to go back down the stairs.

That's sufficient nonsense for the soothsayers and everyone to debate over their cook fires. I just want some sleep.