

## Northern Storm

### Book Two of the Aldabreshin Compass

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#### Chapter One

*What does this sunrise bring, beyond another day of trying to read all the faces turned to me? What omens might there be as to whether or not I'll meet whatever challenges are set before me before sunset. Or will I fail? Who will I fail — myself or these people who never foresaw that I would become their ruler?*

Idly rubbing a hand over his close trimmed beard, he glanced from side to side to see if any portent offered itself in any arc of the compass, firstly in the pale skies of the early morning, the clouds iridescent as mother-of-pearl. Dropping his gaze, he studied the indigo waters broken by reefs of foam and mysterious swirls of lighter blue. The waters rose and fell as gently as a sleeping child's chest.

*No sign of any sea serpent lurking in the channels between coral and sand. No whale rising unexpected from the distant deeps further out. No detritus floating in our path as portent of good or ill. There are no omens that I can see. The future is as bare of signs to guide me as the empty ocean.*

A dutiful voice interrupted his fruitless survey.

'We're nearly there, my lord Chazen Kheda,' the helmsman announced, sitting alert on his stool on the raised platform at the stern of the little galley. He had one brown hand on the steering oar, his dark eyes fixed on the man standing in the prow. The ship's master kept an alert watch for reefs and skerries beneath the waves, his dun cotton tunic and trousers flattened against his muscular body by the breeze. In the belly of the ship, the rowers bent and hauled and sent the *Yellow Serpent* speeding through the water, three men to a bench, each with his own long oar lashed to its thole pin. With the crew of the warlord's vessel drawn from the most practised oarsmen, they barely needed the regular drone of the piper's flute amidships to keep their strokes even, making light of pulling the long, lithe vessel against the wind.

'We're in good time, as always.' Kheda eased his shoulders beneath the weight of his chain mail hauberk and adjusted the silk scarf around his neck before raising his voice so that the rowers on the open deck below could hear him. 'The *Yellow Serpent* has served me well throughout this voyage.'

*As I have served this domain, I hope. But this voyage is all but over and I will have a whole new set of challenges to meet when I return to what I suppose I must call my home now.*

'Seen any omens for our day?' A man whose bald head barely topped Kheda's shoulder held out a round brass and steel helmet with a chain mail veil hanging down to protect neck and shoulders. Diamonds around the gold brow band spat defiant fire back at the strengthening sun.

'I won't want that till we land.' Kheda relished the breeze brushing his close cropped, tightly curled hair as he kept his eyes on the rapidly approaching drifts of foam that ringed the few scraps of sandy land in the midst of the reefs and sandbanks. Sparkling beaches ringed dense clumps of midar shrub pierced here and there with stands of nut palms. The trees waved exuberant fronds of lush new growth, still drawing on the water hoarded by the earth since the drenching of last year's rains.

'The final outposts of your domain, my lord Chazen Kheda, before the countless islands of the Aldabreshin Archipelago yield to the boundless southern ocean.' The shorter man's

tone was faintly mocking.

‘Not so boundless, Dev.’ Kheda shot a glare at him. ‘We know all too well there must be land beyond the horizon to succour our enemies.’

Dev affected not to see Kheda’s irritation as he adjusted the broad, brass studded belt around his sturdy waist, armour jingling softly as he shifted his bare feet on the smooth planking. His hauberk was plain, wholly made from polished steel rings in contrast to Kheda’s which boasted a diamond pattern of brazen links and engraved metal plates inset to protect his vitals from piercing arrows or murderous sword thrusts. The fine leather of the warlord’s belt was invisible beneath golden plaques embossed with intricate sprays of canthira leaves.

‘Have there been omens of battle ahead, my lord?’ the helmsman asked with alarm. ‘Do you think some new wave of invaders will come to support those still trapped in the western isles?’

‘No.’ Kheda smiled easily to calm the mariner’s fears. ‘There’s been no such sign.’

*Fool. Watch what you say. These men of Chazen haven’t known and trusted you since your birth or theirs. You cannot rely on them to read your words aright, or keep them to themselves as those of Daish would have done.* ‘We will throw those last sorry remnants of those savages into the sea soon enough. Let the currents carry their bloated corpses back to wash up and warn their kin not to try quitting their own shores again.’ As he continued in the same confident tone, Kheda waved his hand airily and the uncut emerald on the heavy silver ring he wore glowed vividly in the brilliant light.

‘We’ll be getting back to clearing out the last of the invaders, will we, as soon as we’ve completed this interminable tour of every last rock and reef?’ Dev demanded abruptly.

Kheda glanced at him, face stern. ‘Dev, as a barbarian, I’ll allow you more leeway than I would any true born Archipelagan, but use that tone to me again and I will have you flogged. Better yet, I will do it myself.’

*Do you remember what I told you? That one of my father Daish Reik’s precepts of leadership was never make a threat you’re not prepared to carry out. You can be sure that’s no idle warning, barbarian.*

He looked into Dev’s dark eyes but couldn’t read anything there. No matter. The barbarian looked away first.

‘My lord, if you please, where’s the Mist Dove?’ The helmsman was gazing resolutely over the heads of the rowers on their serried benches towards the Yellow Serpent’s burly shipmaster on the prow platform. A flurry of foam blew up over the prow as the knife edge of the brass sheathed ram sliced through the waves.

‘Staying well clear.’ Kheda looked back astern to see the heavy trireme that had accompanied them slowing in the more open waters, oars idling. The weapons and armour of the fighting men aboard glinted in the sun.

*And if by some mischance I have failed to note any portent of some new assault by the savages, we have steel and hatred to use against them. But let’s not tempt the future with such thoughts. There’s been no sign of any new invasion. You had better turn your attention to what awaits you here, and whatever portents for your rule of this domain that’ll be set out for all to see.*

Shallow enough to negotiate the encircling corals, the light galley headed towards the largest of the scatter of low islands. The ragged fronds of the tallest trees were stirring in the rising breeze and the channels between the islands were thronged with little boats.

‘So where exactly are the pearl beds?’ Dev studied the shipmasters raising their sails, the divers busy on deck checking the weighted ropes that would take them down to the sea bed and the lifelines that would ensure they would enjoy the fruits of their labours. Lookouts on each boat sharpened broad-bladed shark spears and viciously barbed gaff hooks.

‘They shift from year to year.’ Kheda watched the youths and young girls trading their sweat and muscle for the right to learn the skills of diver and sailor. Some were wading out to the skiffs carrying food and water on their heads, others stowing the stacks of baskets waiting to bring the year’s greatest bounty up from the deep.

*And sometimes the pearl oysters vanish altogether. What manner of omen would that be?*

The tremor that ran through Kheda had nothing to do with the surge as the Yellow Serpent’s rowers bent over their oars. Pearl skiffs scattered as the galley headed towards a wide beach where a veritable village had been thrown up. Huts built from woven panels of palm fronds were roughly thatched with bundles of coarse grass tied with tangling vines. The greenery was barely faded but Kheda knew it wouldn’t be long before the punishing sun parched roofs and walls to a yellowy brown.

*Then the pearl harvest will be over and the huts will be left to the sand lizards and the sooty shrews hunting sickle snakes and scorpions. The pearl gulls and the coral fishers will plunder the roofs for their own nests and prey on unwary shrews to feed their own young. The dry season will bleach these huts to frail straw and the rainy season’s storms will rip them apart. There’ll be barely a sign that there was anything here, when the last full moons of the year ahead of us will summon the divers to search the reefs for the shifting pearl beds.*

*I wonder if I will be here to see next year’s harvest.*

The wind shifted bringing a startling stench. ‘Saedrin save me!’ Dev barely reached the stern before he lost his breakfast noisily over the rail.

Kheda exchanged a rueful grin with the helmsman, trying to breathe as shallowly as possible. ‘You always tell yourself it can’t be as bad as you remember.’

*And perhaps that’s a sign; to concentrate on the here and now rather than indulge in idle speculations about future paths.*

‘Then you realise it’s worse.’ The helmsman’s weather-beaten brown face grimaced as he hauled on the steering oar in response to a signal from the shipmaster.

The rowers hauled on their oars with a will, even those gagging on their own nausea. The *Yellow Serpent* accelerated past the bare sandy reef that was the source of the stink. Masked with swathes of cotton cloth, one of the few men ashore waved. Another was more concerned with throwing an old dry shell at a gull darting down from the cloud of birds wheeling above, squawking their outrage as mats of woven palm fronds frustrated their efforts to plunder the vast tubs the men were guarding. Emerald finches and dusky gnatcatchers swooped unopposed, gorging on the red-eyed flies that hung around the tubs in smoky swarms.

As the *Yellow Serpent* passed the reeking islet and the breeze brought clean, salt-scented air, Kheda dipped a cup of water from a lidded barrel lashed to the light galley’s rearmost signal mast. He passed it to Dev who was still leaning over the stern, pale beneath his coppery tan.

‘You people can’t just open your oysters with a sharp knife and dig out the pearls?’ Dev swilled water round his mouth and spat sourly over the rail.

‘Not when we want every pearl, right down to the seed and the dust pearls.’ Kheda watched the water turning from mysterious green to crystal clarity over the brilliant sands as the shipmaster skilfully guided the vessel into the shallows. ‘The only way to get those is to let maggots strip the oysters clean.’

‘We’re sailing west again after this?’ the barbarian growled beneath his breath.

‘Back to the residence. No, I told you.’ Kheda shot the scowling Dev a warning look, his voice low and rapid. ‘After all they’ve suffered in the last year, these people need the reassurance of correct observance of every ritual. As warlord, I have to be there when the new-year stars come into alignment. It’s my duty to read the skies for the domain and give judgement on any other portent.’

‘What portents do you think they will bring you? Lizards caught in bizarre places?’ Dev

mocked. 'Or patterns imagined in a pot of beans?'

'Just keep your mouth shut on your ignorance.' Kheda didn't hide his contempt.

'Some new year it'll be, without so much as a sniff of liquor.' Dev muttered, sipping at his water with distaste. 'What then?'

'We'll see.' Kheda smiled thinly. 'In the omens of the heavenly and the earthly compasses.'

He left Dev and went to stand beside the helmsman's chair. The rowers had slowed, listening for the shipmaster's shouts of command and the piper's signals. Some glanced up at the stern platform with discreet curiosity. Kheda kept his face impassive as he made covert survey of the crew's bearded faces.

*They're as curious as everyone else to see what kind of pearl harvest will mark the turn of my first year as unexpected lord of this Chazen domain. And I can see a measure of private anticipation, naturally, in hopes that serving the warlord in person will win them some share in the bounty.*

*What can they see in you? Very little, hopefully. 'Show no more emotion than a statue of the finest marble,' that's what your father used to say. Because people looking at a statue see in it what they want to see more often than not.*

*But I'm not seeing that trust I was so used to as ruler of the Daish domain that I took it for granted.*

*What did your father Daish Reik have to say about respect? That a wise warlord would earn it before he demanded it.*

*Let's see if I can do that in this domain.*

'Excuse me, my lord.' The helmsman interrupted his reverie as a couple of men tossed anchors over the prow at the shipmaster's nod and two more came up to secure the galley's stern with a rattle of ropes and a clatter of iron.

'Time to go ashore, Dev.' Kheda halted by the steps down to the main deck, lowering his voice. 'Try to look as if you have some idea what to do with those swords.'

'I could kill any man on this beach in a knife fight,' Dev thrust Kheda's helm into his hands with scant ceremony.

'Which would prove you're no true body slave.' Kheda looked hard at the shorter man, unsmiling eyes shaded by the face plate of the helm held up over his forehead by the sliding nasal bar. 'And set everyone wondering just what you might be, barbarian born and so far from home.'

Fleeting uncertainty momentarily replaced the veiled antagonism in Dev's dark eyes. 'Then you'd best make sure there's no need for me to fight for your honour, hadn't you.' He thrust his own helm on his head and pulled the strap tight beneath his belligerent, clean shaven chin.

Seeing that their pause was prompting unwelcome curiosity, Kheda went down the steps and strode along the central gangway between the rows of benches. He took the double step to the shallow bow platform in a single lithe stride and nodded his approval to the shipmaster. 'A swift voyage and a smooth one, Hesi. Thank you.'

'It is my honour to serve you, my lord.' The burly shipmaster bowed low.

Kheda looked over the *Yellow Serpent's* prow to see a waiting row-boat and climbed carefully down the rope ladder slung ready.

*Falling in would hardly suit a warlord's dignity. Besides, every man, woman and child here would see some truly awful omen in such a mishap.*

The islander at the oars of the little boat smiled ingratiatingly at Kheda then his eyes widened as Dev cautiously descended the flexing rope rungs. Even tanned by his years beneath the strong Aldabreshin sun, the northerner's skin was paler than either Kheda's or the boatman, an oddity made all the more obvious given his lack of a beard.

‘Any time you’re ready.’ Dev settled himself on the stern thwart of the boat.

The boatman’s confusion visibly deepened. Dev’s accent wasn’t from any of the southerly Aldabreshin domains but his speech was fluently Archipelagan as if he’d learned the tongue at his mother’s knee.

Kheda demanded the islander’s attention with a wry smile. ‘We smelled the first hauls of oysters putrefying nicely.’

‘The first fruits are already gathered, my lord.’ The boatman recalled his purpose and bent to his oars. ‘The reefs are as thick with oysters as we’ve ever seen them.’

As relief flooded through Kheda, the pearl skiffs clustered close, divers calling out to support the rower’s verdict with eager claims of their own.

‘Excellent news,’ Kheda called out with warm approval.

‘Indeed, my lord,’ echoed Dev with unashamed calculation.

*I suppose that will pass unremarked. He’s obviously a barbarian and we all know rampant greed rules the unbroken lands of the north. Besides, a loyal body slave would know the quantity and the quality of this year’s harvest is crucial to all our hopes. And surely every islander will want to see my rule sanctioned by the best possible omens?*

‘I’ve brought swords and archers to keep your harvest safe,’ Kheda called out to the pearl skiffs. ‘Carry water to my ships to refill their barrels, if you please.’

Leaving behind a robust chorus of earnest assurances, the rowboat soon reached the shallows. The boatman shipped his oars and jumped lithely over the side, grabbing for the bow rope to begin hauling the boat up onto the drier sand.

‘This will do.’ Kheda raised a hand, inclining his head courteously to the boatman as he got out. ‘Make yourself known to my slave before we leave.’ The cool ruffles of surf around his shins were refreshing after the sun-baked wood of the galley’s deck beneath his bare feet. ‘Remember that boatman and give him a few pearls,’ he said quietly to Dev as they walked up the beach.

‘Naturally, my lord,’ murmured Dev with a touch of sarcasm. ‘A memory for faces is essential in my proper trade.’

Kheda’s spine stiffened despite himself. Before he could find a reprimand for the barbarian, a handful of men advanced down the beach towards them, leaving more waiting in a respectful half circle where the white coral sands gave way to dusty soil and sparse coils of parched grey midar stems. Dev had been walking a pace behind Kheda on his open side, one hand resting lightly on the twin hilts thrust through his double looped sword belt. As the islander approached, the barbarian moved swiftly to stand between the warlord and this newcomer, stony faced, until Kheda gave him the nod to stand aside, his smile one of nicely calculated superiority.

*You can feign this much of a true body slave’s duties at least.*

The leader of the delegation bowed low. The bold yellow cloth of his simply cut cotton tunic and trousers was rich with embroidery mimicking turtle shell. He had a darker complexion than his companions and the more tightly curled hair of a hill dweller, showing blood from some larger domain had mingled with his more local ancestry. ‘My lord Chazen Kheda.’

‘Borha.’ Kheda smiled widely to conceal how much that new title still grated on his ears. *Get used to it, fool. You’re not Daish Kheda nor ever will be again.*

‘I see you’ve brought plenty of strong arms to reap the pearl harvest,’ Kheda continued smoothly.

‘We left plenty of men to continue our rebuilding.’ The man beamed with pleasure at being recognised but fingered a white crab shell talisman on a cord around his neck, betraying an unconscious anxiety.

‘I know — we’ve just come from Salgaru. Your village is certainly prospering and all the

others besides.' Kheda widened his smile and looked beyond Borha to include all the waiting men in his approval.

One of the others spoke up. 'Will you take some refreshment while we wait for our fishermen to return, my lord?'

'Thank you.' Kheda walked on up the beach and the islanders moved to either side, giving Dev a respectful distance. A few had darker skin and curly hair like Borha. More had the rich brown complexion and straighter hair prevalent in these southerly reaches. All wore crisp new cottons in reds, blues and yellows decorated with skilful embroidery. Some bore vivid butterflies across their shoulders or patterns echoing any one of the myriad bright birds that graced the bigger islands. Other patterns recalled the intricate trceries of thorn coral or the spirals of seashells. A couple wore bracelets of twisted silver wire and one boasted a chain of gold lozenge links around his neck. Most wore more simple talismans; a plaited wristband of the silky fibres from a tandra seed pod or a string of polished ironwood beads. All the men wore daggers at their hips but Kheda and Dev were the only ones with swords.

*They're all so careful to match my pace exactly, with the same diffidence I've seen throughout this voyage around the domain. They bow and simper and answer all my questions, barely asking any of their own. This is obviously how they treated Chazen Saril. But Saril's dead and gone. These people must learn how different a ruler I am.*

Kheda headed for a temporary pavilion set up among the palm huts. Polished berale wood supported azure cotton embroidered with fan shaped midar leaves shading a bank of plump indigo cushions. Hopeful maidens in simple silk dresses of yellow and white that flattered the warm bronze of their bare arms and faces stood holding beaten brass plates laden with dainties. Idling unconvincingly among the crude huts, men and women clad in sober unbleached cotton eyed the spectacle.

'Please, join me.' Kheda swept a hand round to include all the spokesmen in his invitation.

Dev was already moving to take a tray of goblets from a girl who had found time to weave crimson striol vine flowers into her glossy black curls. He surprised her into a giggle with a mischievous wink before he offered the salver deftly to Kheda, eyes dutifully downcast.

'Admire if you want but lay a finger on any of them-' Kheda raised the goblet to hide his lips. '-and I'll cut it off.'

'Naturally, my lord.' Dev's answering murmur dripped with sarcasm.

Kheda sipped velvety sard-berry juice, its richness quenching his thirst and the heady scent cleansing the lurking memory of the rotting oysters. 'My lord Chazen Kheda.' Another of the islanders' spokesmen spoke up, stumbling over his words.

Kheda searched his memory for the stained yellow talisman the man wore on a leather thong; a tooth from some piebald whale either taken by a valiant ancestor or washed up on these shores as a sign to bemuse anyone other than a seer or a warlord. 'Isei, isn't it?'

*Tell me, why is your fist so tight around the stem of that goblet that your knuckles are white?*

'You come dressed for war, my lord.' Isei cleared his throat. 'I was wondering how the western isles fare. Are the invaders finally defeated?'

Some of the other spokesmen edged away to disassociate themselves from such boldness and a few closed their eyes, helplessly struggling to hide their expressions of pain.

*Do you think I would disapprove of such a question? That I don't have my own unwelcome memories of the destruction that swept across your islands not even a year ago?*

'I was always taught to travel armoured.' Kheda shrugged.

*Taught by my father, Daish Reik, warlord of the stronger, richer Daish domain to your north, a man to be treated with all due respect lest he make your lives intolerable by closing*

*the seaways to you. Who would ever have foreseen that his son would become your warlord? Not Daish Reik. Not me, that's for sure, when I was Daish Kheda. Not Chazen Saril. But then none of us foresaw the invasion of Chazen by brutal savages from some unknown land beyond the southern horizon.*

He looked slowly around the circle of intent faces. 'As for the invaders, we wrought your vengeance with the death of nearly all of them in that first sustained assault, with Daish lending their swordsmen and ships and warriors from Ritsem and Redigal domains coming to our aid as well. The last sorry remnant disappeared into the thickets of the most remote islets of our south and west. We continue to hunt them down, making sure we have cleared each island entirely before we move on to the next. But we are being cautious, yes. I don't intend to spend a single Chazen life for the sake of a hundred savages, not if I can help it.'

Kheda paused and drank from his goblet, noting one of the spokesmen pressing the back of a burn scarred hand to his tight-shut eyes.

He hardened his voice. 'Their savage wizards are all dead so they cannot visit the foul evils of their magic on us ever again. They have no ships, so they cannot escape. Our triremes keep vigil along the seaways and crush any of their log boats trying to put to sea. Few of the islands they hold have water year round. They'll be as thirsty as these reefs before much longer into the dry season.'

He gestured at the temporarily flourishing greenery beyond the pavilion before startling the assembled spokesmen with sudden entreaty. 'Leave me and the warriors of Chazen to serve the domain in fighting these vermin. Let us take your vengeance on a people so debased they brought magic to fight their battles for them. Your strong arms and backs are better used in rebuilding your homes and your boats, in restoring your vegetable gardens and grain plots, in recapturing your house fowls. Then, when we have put the last invader to his richly deserved death, you will be ready to help restore those islands in their turn.'

'You don't fear the presence of such vile savages will have corrupted those islands beyond cleansing?' Isei's free hand strayed to the hilt of the dagger at his plaited leather belt.

*Crescent moon Chazen dagger like the one I wear now, not the smoother curve of a Daish blade like the one my father gave me.*

Kheda looked him straight in the eye. 'Not after every trace of their foul presence has been burned to ash and scattered to the seas and the winds.'

*For retribution as well as purification, for the sake of all those innocents they slaughtered and all the villages they burned in their accursed rampage.*

'My lord, something to eat?' Borha broke the tense silence with a snap of his fingers at the waiting maidens. One immediately proffered candied lilla fruit slices set on cakes of steamed saller grain glistening with honey.

'Thank you, no.' Kheda smiled to mitigate the rebuff. 'Passing by the oyster vats has left me without an appetite. Tell me, are the divers right? Are we going to see a good harvest of pearls for the Chazen domain?'

'It's early days yet my lord, but yes, I think it will be a truly splendid year.' Borha's smile was wide and ingratiating.

'Let's go and see for ourselves.' Kheda abandoned the pavilion and strode towards the crude awnings sheltering those sifting of the pearls already won from the close-mouthed oysters. The assembled spokesmen hurried after him, other islanders trailing after.

*Let's keep you all looking to the future and let's hope it's a favourable one. Let's not remember the invaders who brought chaos and death last year. Let's not recall the calamity of your erstwhile lord Chazen Saril dead in exile from his birthright. Let's not wonder how rumours of my own death turned out to be falsehood or contemplate those events that set me over you as your new ruler. Let's not ponder just why it proved impossible for me to return to my home and my family and the Daish domain I was born to rule.*

Borha drew level with Kheda's elbow. 'We filled the vats within a few days of starting to dive. They were already rotted down enough to be emptied yesterday. We've had a fine haul of pearls and there are plenty of shells warranting a closer look.' He gestured to the baskets of dark mottled ovals in the midst of a gang of old men sitting cross legged on a stretch of faded, sandy carpet.

'My lord.' One acknowledged Kheda with easy self-assurance. His hair and beard were white in stark contrast to skin as wrinkled and dark as a sun-dried berry. Unhurried, he studied the empty oyster shell, fine bladed knife hovering around a sizeable blister marring the iridescent nacre that so closely mimicked the pearls it bore.

Kheda found he was holding his breath as the old man scored a fine line around the bulbous swelling.

*A trivial omen but an omen nevertheless. Will he find a pearl? Or will this be one of those pockets of stinking black slime?*

The old man eased the sharp steel into the nacre and the swelling burst to leave a perfect milky sphere rolling in the hollow shell. 'Should clean up well enough.' Putting the pearl carefully in a cotton lined box, he took another shell from the basket and contemplated a cyst of three half moon pearls clinging stubbornly to one edge.

'You're polishing them here?' Kheda moved on towards an awning sheltering men and women gently scouring impurities from the gleaming pearls they held in scraps of soft deer hide, their forearms shimmering with pearl dust.

'And drilling them, my lord.' Borha bowed obsequiously, simultaneously indicating a tent some way beyond where the most skilled craftsmen were studying pearls through handheld lenses or marking them precisely with callipers tipped with lampblack.

As Kheda approached he observed that one man had already drilled a large silvery pearl from one side and was plucking it from the moist scrap of leather holding it in a notch in the wooden block gripped between his knees. Deftly reversing it, he set the needle-fine tip of his drill on the sooty pinpoint he had made earlier and cupped the upper end of his drill rod in a discarded oyster shell. As he worked the bow back and forth, slowly at first and then more swiftly, the string whirled the steel tipped drill around.

'Ever seen this done, Dev?' Kheda asked.

'No.' The barbarian grinned with open appreciation. 'It's quite some trick.'

Using his little finger on every other stroke, the craftsman was flicking water from a larger hollow in the block deftly onto the pearl. His apprentice watched attentively, pausing in his own duty of sharpening drill points on a broad whetstone. As the driller pulled rod and bow away, the lad instantly picked the pearl out of the hollow and washed it carefully in a little pot of fresh seawater.

'Are you having many pearls break?' Kheda asked casually.

'Very few, my lord,' the craftsman assured him with a half smile.

'They're still getting their eye in on the biggest pearls.' Unbidden Isei spoke up. 'There'll be more losses with the smaller ones.'

'True enough,' said Kheda mildly.

*But the fewer losses the better, both as portent for my rule and for the sake of the domain's trade, when we need every resource to make good all the losses of this last year.*

'Please take these to our lady Itrac Chazen, my lord.' Borha had stepped away for a moment, returning with a box of berale-tree wood still pale and fresh from the joiner's hands. Dev stepped up smartly to claim it.

'We'll be hard pressed to have all the pearls polished and drilled by the time our lady Itrac wishes to sail north.' Isei's beard jutted defiantly. 'So many of our craftsmen were murdered by the invaders. And there are those who would say those of us that remain would be better spending our energies elsewhere.'



I'd wager that whale tooth talisman wasn't won by some ancestor who found the beast dead on the shore. He was probably master of the ship risking life and limb to drive it into the shallows and the waiting spears..

'I take it you're one of them?' Kheda looked straight at Isei once again. 'Then make your case. What concerns do you have? Speak freely,' he commanded. I'm not some lord like Ulla Safar who can kill a messenger for bringing undesirable news. Nor, to his credit, was Chazen Saril. .

Isei hesitated before drawing a deep breath and plunging on. 'We'll run short of food before the end of the dry season, my lord. The rains were more than half gone before we could get our saller seedlings in the ground. We have fewer men to work the land, with so many dead or fled and fewer still to tend what we could salvage from the fruit and vegetable plantations. Even with all the women and children lending their strength to bring in the harvest, we nowhere near filled the granaries.'

Kheda raised a hand to quell the voices of the other spokesmen suddenly emboldened by Isei's words. 'I'm hardly ignorant of such vital matters but you're right to make certain I appreciate your situation.'

'What do you propose to do about it?' Isei looked straight back at him unabashed.

'I propose to discuss all the domain's necessities with my lady Itrac Chazen,' replied Kheda with a hint of reproof, 'so she may trade these pearls with the ladies of Redigal and Daish and the domains beyond, to Chazen's best advantage.'

'We have concerns there as well, my lord,' asserted Isei boldly.

'Explain yourself,' Kheda prompted tersely, noting Borha wincing out of the corner of his eyes

'My lady Itrac will doubtless feel Chazen is under obligation to Daish, Redigal and other domains for their help in driving out the invaders.' Isei folded his arms across his chest. 'Which is certainly true. But I believe Daish owes Chazen some debt that should be weighed in the scales before any price in pearls is agreed for saller grain or dried meats. Many Chazen who had no choice but to flee before the invaders were given sanctuary among the Daish islands. The Chazen repaid this generosity with their labour in the Daish saller fields and vegetable plots.' Isei hastily qualified his words. 'And such labour was gladly given, don't mistake me. Daish harvests have been plentiful and we're glad of it, and to see Daish Sirket's rule is begun under such good auspices. But it's a fact that Daish Sirket's decree that all those of Chazen quit his domain before the stars of the new year has left his islands with fewer mouths to feed while we have more come home with every tide and little enough to share as it is.'

'You think Chazen might rightfully claim some share from the Daish granaries and storehouses?' Kheda hazarded.

Is this some test, honest Isei? Do you think I should prove my fitness to wear a Chazen dagger by challenging my own son, who was forced to declare himself Daish warlord because I was believed dead? Don't think I haven't heard the murmuring, honest Isei, the whispers of those who say I should have raised my sword against Sirket, instead of turning to claim this leaderless domain. Do you think I should have brought internal warfare on the people of Daish, with untamed savages massing on their southern border? Who would have driven the invaders out of your islands then, after Chazen Saril had fled in abject terror?.

Isei made no reply, staring at the ground in front of him. The uncomfortable silence lengthened.

'I will discuss all the domain's concerns with my lady Itrac Chazen.' Kheda turned from Isei to address Borha with a friendly smile. 'I know it's early days but are there many pearls of unusual colour or shape?'

'This way, my lord.' Borha eagerly ushered Kheda towards an open-sided tent surrounded

by shallow baskets redolent of decayed shellfish. Women sat at trestle tables, sorting through layers of salt stained cotton to retrieve smooth orbs, tear drops, angular hound's teeth pearls, flattened petals and half moons.

Kheda paused by a plump matron comfortable in a shapeless gown of orange patterned with yellow vizail blossoms, a turtle shell comb in her grizzled curly hair. Her deft brown fingers were quick as a silver crane plucking shrimp from the shallows as she dropped each style of pearl in separate silk lined boxes.

'How are the pickings?' Kheda enquired genially.

She didn't look up, intent on her task. 'Far better than last year.'

'Here, my lord.' The woman on his other side surprised Kheda by taking his hand and dropping two coloured pearls into his palm. One was a deep vibrant gold, the other a mysterious cloudy blue. Both were as big as the nail on Kheda's smallest finger.

'Isei.' He held them up. 'Your village chose you to speak for them so you must read the day-to-day omens. What do these signify to you?'

'Yellow for wealth, my lord.' Isei's eyes brightened with faint hope. 'Blue for good fortune.'

'A fine portent to greet your visit, my lord' said Borha obsequiously.

A fine portent and better yet, one that I had no hand in seeking out. An interpretation that we've all known since childhood, plain enough for even the disaffected to read. A sign I can trust? That the fortunes of this hapless domain are finally turning to good after the ills that have plagued it? Reassurance that my actions haven't irrevocably blighted my future or theirs?

'I'm interrupting you, forgive me.' Kheda smiled at the women whose fingers hadn't stopped working. He walked on, beyond the shade of the tents where bolts of closely woven black material were stretched along the dry sand. Buckets were being emptied out onto the cloth and the scent of decay was inescapable. 'What's going on here?' Dev wrinkled his nose.

'After fifteen days the vats are filled with sea water, to float out the maggots and slime and leave the pearls and the shells.' Kheda nodded towards the detritus on the cloth; tiny scraps of shell, a few dead and broken maggots, nameless sparkling fragments and sand of every colour the reefs offered. 'The slurry from the bottom is sieved for seed pearls. Then it's dried and picked over for dust pearls.'

'I didn't think Daish went to so much bother,' commented a man searching the debris in front of them. He only had one hand and was propping himself on the stump of his other wrist. His leg on that same side ended abruptly at mid thigh.

'Daish doesn't. This is Chazen.' Kheda looked out towards the reefs where the pearl skiffs were now anchored for their day's work, distant bobbing specks. 'Tell me, has there been much sight of sharks? Any word of sea serpents?'

'Not so far,' The man looked up with frank thankfulness.

'You've got funny eyes.' A little boy squatting beside the crippled diver to search the dark cloth for miniscule treasures stood up. His curly black head barely reached Kheda's sword belt, as he peered up with open curiosity. 'They're green.'

'Su, that's your lord Chazen Kheda.' A slim girl said in strangled embarrassment, scrambling to her feet and dusting her hands against well worn cotton trousers.

'He's still got green eyes,' said the lad forcefully.

'You're plainly your father's son.' Kheda hunkered down to meet the child on his own level. 'My forefathers and foremothers made alliances that brought barbarian blood into my line. See, my hair's more brown than black, isn't it?' He took off his helmet and relished the breeze on his sweating forehead.

'He's a barbarian.' Su's glance flickered dubiously to Dev. 'But he's got *brown* eyes.'

'So he's not that different to you.' Kheda ruffled the lad's tousled black hair. 'And now

he lives among civilized folk, so that makes him an Archipelagan.’

Su looked wide eyed at Kheda. ‘Is it true the northern lands run unbroken all the way across the horizon?’

‘I’ve never seen that myself,’ Kheda answered apologetically. ‘Dev?’

‘It’s true enough,’ the barbarian confirmed with a grin.

‘I’m going to take ship to the north and see for myself when I’m grown,’ the little boy said robustly. ‘I’ll take an oar on a galley and work my way up to helmsman and then shipmaster.’

‘When will the merchant galleys be coming, my lord, from the other domains?’ The girl bit her lip at her own daring. ‘It’s just that we’ll need silk, for stringing the pearls.’ Someone behind Kheda caught her eye and she fell silent, dropping her gaze to the ground.

‘I shall remind my lady Itrac Chazen,’ Kheda assured her, ‘just as soon as may be.’ He stood and thrust his helmet back on his head to hide a furtive sting of tears in his eyes.

*Sirket was like that as a child, always ready to speak his mind and full of questions. Mesil was more of a thinker, doubtless still is, certainly not one to play a wager against unless you’ve all your wits about you. Which will my third son grow to be — eager seeker or careful observer? How will I ever know, separated from him and all my other children, my beautiful, beloved daughters?*

He cleared his throat and nodded to the crippled diver. ‘You are certainly blessed in your children, my friend.’

The importunate Isei was at Kheda’s shoulder as he turned to walk away. ‘Children are indeed a man’s greatest good fortune. And the domain’s.’

*That’s another of your concerns, is it? You and everyone else speculating around the evening cook fires. What would you have me say to my lady Itrac Chazen on that score?*

Kheda found his patience with abruptly exhausted. ‘Thank you Borha, this has all been most interesting. I shall take some refreshment now, until you have need of me to read the omens.’

With his sudden about-face leaving them wrong footed, he strode past the startled spokesmen. The islanders who’d trailed around after their progress hurriedly got out of his way. With Dev at his shoulder, Kheda headed for the little blue pavilion and dropped onto the down-filled cushions, ignoring the girls.

‘Some privacy for my lord. No, leave that.’ Dev nodded at a girl carrying a ewer of juice. She put it on a small table wedged firmly into the sandy ground where Dev set the berale wood box of pearls before shooing the patiently waiting maidens away, taking a tray of little cakes from one and a goblet of sard berry juice from another.

Kheda reached up to take the drink the barbarian offered him. ‘That should be ‘our lord’.’

‘Who expects an ignorant barbarian to get it right every time?’ Dev said, sardonic.

‘Too many lapses and they’ll expect me to beat it into you if necessary,’ warned Kheda, ‘And they may start wondering why I don’t. We can’t either of us afford that.’

‘You’ve got them wondering about more than your unusual body slave.’ Dev glanced idly around at the village spokesmen who were engaging in desultory conversations with various islanders. ‘I think they’re trying to guess if you’ll turn out to be some vicious tyrant like Ulla Safar or the enlightened ruler they were so used to hearing Daish traders boast of.’

‘They should be used to uncertainty. Chazen Saril’s moods were apt to change as quick as a weather vane in the rainy season.’ Kheda took one of the little sweetmeats Dev was offering and bit into it. Taken unawares by the glutinous sweetness of the filling, he grimaced before forcing himself to swallow it. ‘And as my dutiful body slave, can you please spread the word as tactfully as you can that I have nothing like Saril’s sweet tooth.’

‘Anything else?’ asked Dev, amused.

‘Yes.’ Kheda looked up, tone forthright. ‘You can find out just what history there might

be between Borha and Isei. If there are any tensions between the two of them or their villages, I want to know every detail. Everyone's all cooperation now, with the first excitement of a rich pearl harvest in view. That might last or it might not, once all the late nights and early mornings take their toll. And this cheerfulness will float away on the tide if sharks or sea serpents start taking divers on the reefs, or if too many of them find their eyesight fails this season.'

*Healer I may be, but there's nothing I can do for eyes grown clouded, silvered as the pearls they've sought for so many years. Nor for those who find blurring in their vision means they can only see what they're not actually looking at. I may be their augur but I've no explanation for that paradox.*

*But the divers are always remarkably sanguine; they know some will play that price for the ocean's bounty. Everything has its price.*

'Leave it to me,' Dev said confidently. 'I can always be your eyes and ears, just like a proper body slave.'

'I don't have a lot of choice, do I?' retorted Kheda, waving away the sweetmeats and taking another drink to try and rid his mouth of the cloying taste.

*But you're right. You are an accomplished spy and one who spent enough years sailing the length and breadth of the Archipelago's domains to know all the ins and outs of masquerading as a body slave. Everything except the sword skills.*

*But are you still spying for those mysterious barbarian powers that first sent you into Aldabreshin waters? And how will you seek to profit on your own account with whatever you learn, with your northern greed and utter lack of scruple? What will these people of Chazen think of me, if you're caught out in some despicable connivance?*

*What wouldn't I give to have Telouet back as my body slave, strong sword arm and faithful friend besides? The only consolation for his loss is that he serves Sirket now. There's no one I would rather have trusted my son to.*

Dev grinned as Kheda handed him the empty goblet. 'I can tell you one thing none of you Archipelagans seem to know. You can do better than silk for stringing pearls. Horsehair, that's what you want, white horsehair. That's what all the gem traders on the mainland use. It's the first thing they do, when they get their hands on Aldabreshin pearls — restring them.'

Taken aback despite himself, Kheda rallied. 'Just how am I supposed to get such stuff when we're as far from the unbroken lands as it's possible to get? And every northern domain that's been tempted to trade for horses from you barbarians has seen their investment sicken and die before the year's out. No, I'll settle for safer trades and more immediately useful ones, food most of all. Isei may be over-bold but he's not wrong to worry about a hungry end to the dry season.'

'Well you'd better not go hungry here or you'll be insulting all these fine people.' Dev searched through the sweetmeats with careful fingers. 'I think that's a plainer one. If you're worried about them running short of food hereabouts, can't they just eat the pearl oysters, instead of fattening up maggots for the fish and the seabirds and raising a stink to curdle the clouds?'

'Have you ever tried eating a pearl oyster, you ignorant barbarian?' Kheda was surprised into laughing and nearly choked on the little cake. 'I'd eat the coral gulls first and they taste disgusting.' He paused to catch his breath before continuing, face serious. 'No, I don't want anyone in the domain reduced to such straits; they'd give up on my rule for good if they were. Besides, it's an ill-omen to cook any kind of shellfish and find you've ruined a pearl with the heat of a fire. Haven't you seen how thoroughly the divers cut up purple conch flesh, to make sure there's nothing hidden in the folds?'

'If you're not hungry, can I eat something?' Dev asked as he handed Kheda the refilled goblet. 'I lost my breakfast, if you recall.' He barely waited for Kheda's nod of permission

before cramming a couple of sticky morsels into his mouth, speaking through the food. 'It doesn't look as if you've much to worry about. If this year's harvest is as good as everyone's saying it will be, you'll have enough pearls to buy each islander their own sack of saller grain.'

Kheda shook his head as he sipped sard berry juice. 'It's a good start but it's only pearls. You might only get a handful out of every thousand oysters. The shells in these reaches are too small and too thin to provide much nacre. That's the foundation of Daish prosperity, the inner face of the oyster shells. That's why they don't have to trouble themselves salvaging every last dust pearl from the slurry in the vats.'

'You should let me take a boat back to the northern lands and do some trading for you there.' Dev looked out towards the ocean, face unreadable. 'That little box they gave you just now would pay a king's ransom on its own.'

'All the trading and bargaining done in Chazen's name is my lady Itrac's responsibility,' Kheda said repressively. 'I won't encroach on her prerogatives nor yet insult her with such a proposal.'

*And I wouldn't wager an empty oyster shell on my chances of ever seeing you again. You may be as much a liability as you are an asset as a body slave but I want you where I can see you.*

'Your loss.' Dev shrugged and sighed as he looked over towards the reefs. 'Remind me, what are we doing now?'

'We're waiting until one of the fishermen Borha sent out comes back with something by which I can read the omens for the rest of the pearl harvest.'

'How long's that going to be?' Dev looked askance at the warlord.

'Who knows?' Kheda shrugged. 'Which is all part of the omen in itself.'

*And who else will there be here to read the omens and cast their own interpretations around once the Yellow Serpent has carried me away?*

As he drank his juice, the warlord glanced idly around the crude huts, eyes alert for any man with the long untrimmed hair and beard of a soothsayer. There was none to be seen, wherever he looked.

*Does that mean there are no seers here? Or are they just staying out of sight till I'm gone?*

Kheda tried to put such thoughts out of his mind and enjoy the shade beneath the pavilion. They had waited there long enough for Dev to discreetly eat most of the sweet cakes before a cry of anticipation went up along the waterline. A sturdy skiff was approaching the beach, the two men crewing it shouting and waving urgent hands. Chazen islanders abandoned their toils over baskets and tubs to splash into the shallows and help drag the craft onto drier, firmer ground. Pearl drillers and pickers alike stood up, their tasks forgotten as they strained to see what was being brought ashore. The spokesmen forgot their dignity as they hurried down to the shore with everyone else, Borha and Isei shoving their way to the fore.

'There's a favourable portent in itself, that they've found something so soon.' Kheda got to his feet, feeling a welcome lightening of his mood.

'Here you go again,' Dev said under his breath. 'Getting up to your elbows in something's innards. Have you any idea how the laundry maids complain when I take them a tunic with blood up to the armpits?'

Kheda laid a hand in the middle of the sarcastic barbarian's mailed chest. 'I've told you before; curb your tongue. For a man so keen to boast of his cleverness you can be remarkably stupid.' Not waiting for the barbarian to find a reply, he strode out from the shade of the little pavilion, the sunlight striking down hard on his unprotected head.

*Which is pretty stupid of you, oh wise and powerful warlord and you can hardly ruin the*

*moment for all these onlookers by going back for your helmet, you fool. You need to curb your temper or you'll both end up dead, your blood spilled along with Dev's. There are some things no domain's people will forgive.*

'It's a flail-tailed shark, my lord!' The press of people around the pearl skiff parted to reveal Borha.

'Have you seen many of them this harvest?' Kheda looked round for some diver or boat master among the anxious, anticipatory faces clustering close.

'This is the first sign of any shark, my lord.' A thick-set man spoke up, bare-chested in coarse cotton trousers faded to colourlessness. 'And we've manned a ring of watch boats at first light every day, well before the divers take to the water.'

'Then it's a good omen when the very first shark to come sniffing around ends up on a spear.' Kheda nodded his approval. 'What else can we read into this? A flail-tail is a dangerous shark but nowhere near as deadly as a ragged-tooth. A ragged-tooth will eat a flail-tail, so the very fact a flail-tail is in these waters should mean the bigger sharks are elsewhere.'

'Very true, my lord,' agreed the confident diver and the crowd's smiles broadened perceptibly at this happy thought.

*Though it's no meagre specimen, at least as long as I am tall and doubtless as heavy as any three men here.*

'Let's see what else we can learn from this fish.' Kheda stepped back to let the crowd press forward, eager hands grabbing at the harsh-skinned bluish-grey fins and tail. There didn't seem to be any life left in the creature but he kept a prudent distance from the vicious maw all the same. The skiff's master and his helmsman lifted the shark's head between them, using the broad bladed spears that had slain it and were still embedded deep in its gills and through its snout. The islanders wrestled the inert mass over the side of the boat and dumped it on the ground. Dark blood oozed from its mouth, staining the sand.

'Show me its belly.' Kheda held out a hand and Dev provided him with a heavy barbed spear got from someone. The skiff's crew rolled the unwieldy creature over to lie half on its back, half on its side, glaucous underside pallid in the sun, the long pennant of its tail trailing lifeless across the sand. Kheda lifted the spear high above his head with both hands and with a grunt of effort, thrust it clean through the shark just below the vicious curve of its jaw, pinning the creature to the ground. There was a murmur of uncertainty from a few directions.

*Not what Chazen Saril was used to doing then? Perhaps his father never told him of warlords who'd been surprised by a moribund shark and been bitten even after they'd cut the beast's head off. That's not the kind of omen we want today.*

'A knife.' Kheda reached behind him.

'Here.' Dev slapped a long, brutally serrated blade into his palm.

'My lord?' Isei was looking expectantly at him.

Kheda took a deep breath and pinioned the fish's tail firmly with one foot. He dug the point of the blade into the fish's cloaca and ripped a jagged slit up its length, fighting against the tough, clinging skin, harsh as a carpenter's rasp against his knuckles.

*Not too deep. Don't pierce the intestines or to mar the liver, blighting the interpretation before it's even begun. Stars above, this is easier with a deer or a hog.*

Wiping sweat from his forehead, he persisted until he had laid the shark's entrails bare for all to see. A powerful smell rose from the dead fish, not yet edged with the sickly stench of decay, though that wouldn't take long in this strong sun.

'The beast is certainly healthy, nothing ill-omened among its entrails, no marks, no deformities.' Kheda waited to be quite sure the shark was motionless then stuck the knife into the sand by his foot. He reached both hands into the cavity to lift out the dark liver, searching for stains or blemishes.

*What's the first thing I will see mirrored in its sheen? That's always the crucial portent.*

As he sought to get a grip on the solid, slippery mass, something squirmed among the coiled lengths of the shark's guts. Kheda abandoned all thoughts of securing the liver and snatched up the knife instead.

'Has it eaten something alive?' Dev peered into the beast with lively curiosity.

'Or someone?' quavered Borha.

'It's a flail-tail, not a ragged-tooth,' Kheda took a firm grip on the salt-roughened handle of the knife.

*Which is fortunate because we've all heard the tales of ragged-toothed sharks cut open to reveal whole skeletons inside them or at very least fateful collections of skulls and bones. Flail-tails can only take an arm or a leg at worst and one of those could hardly still be fighting or kicking. Besides, the divers said there'd been no mishaps on the reefs.*

Dismissing his incoherent thoughts, Kheda used the point of the blade to push aside the pallid loops of the shark's gut, less concerned with piercing them now than with revealing this mystery. He exposed a swollen sac, feebly contorted by whatever lay within in. 'Whatever this is, it isn't in the creature's belly,' he said, bemused. Setting his jaw, he seized one end of the sac where it was anchored within the fish and sliced it open with a deft stroke of the knife.

A miniature shark twisted out of the wound, as long as a man's arm and about as thick, perfect in every detail. Black eyes bright, its snapping white teeth missed Kheda's hand by a hair's breadth. A frisson ran through the mesmerized islanders.

*Teeth more than big enough to do damage. How would that be for an omen?*

He skewered the wriggling infant through its flapping gills and hoisted it out of the dead shark's belly on the knife blade. It was surprisingly heavy.

'Has anyone ever seen such a thing?' he enquired, letting a hint of amusement colour his query.

Heads shook all around, some faces awestruck, others apprehensive.

'Then we certainly have a mighty portent to read.' Kheda smiled and threw the baby shark down on the sand, sending the nearest islanders stumbling backwards into those pressing close behind them. 'But let's not get ahead of ourselves. What has the liver has to tell us?' As he bent to tug at the uncooperative mass, using the knife to cut it free, he thought furiously.

*What might be read into such a thing? A shark with a live baby in its belly? What is that an omen for? Who is such a portent meant for?*

The dark unwieldy mass of the adult shark's liver came free with a suddenness that surprised him and Kheda felt Dev's steadying hand in the small of his back. The ground was treacherous now, slick with the shark's blood and the stench was growing heady, red-eyed flies gathering to defy the islanders' swatting hands.

'My lord?' It was the bare-chested diver, the confident one.

Kheda saw the man's face reflected in the last gloss on the rapidly drying surface of the shark's liver and let the weighty organ fall back into the gutted hollow of the great fish with a soggy thud. He smiled at Borha hovering anxiously on the other side of the shark. 'We've seen all we need to so I'll wash now, if I may.'

'Here, girl!' The spokesmen's spokesman beckoned to the maidens who had been serving by the pavilion. One hurried forward cradling a broad silver bowl of scented water and tense beside her, a younger girl clutched a sizeable sponge.

'In the water with it,' Dev prompted briskly, taking the bowl. 'The sponge, girl, the sponge!'

'I see most favourable omens in this shark's death.' Kheda announced as he squeezed water over his arms to wash the worst of the blood and slime off onto the sand. To his relief

besa oil's astringency cut through the fishy stench hanging all around. 'To add to all the other positive portents favouring this pearl harvest and this domain at present.' He submerged one forearm in the bowl and scrubbed with the sponge.

'This shark came to feed at dawn, as is their habit. But it came alone, we need not fear a season of losses among the divers, not to the sea's predators. That's how I read the matter anyway. Mind you, I believe it came to lay claim to the reefs and whatever prey it might find there. To give birth in a place is to tie your future to it.' He looked around to see rapt agreement on every face. 'It didn't succeed, did it? Your watch boats spotted the creature and your fishermen speared it before it had a chance to flee or to hide. It had no chance to make its bid for a stake in these waters.' He gestured to the dead infant shark before beginning to wash his other arm.

'The mother was a healthy beast which indicates the omens overall are to be read in a positive light and everything that I saw in the mirror of its liver was a favourable indicator for the success of our pearl harvest. The spawn did its best to bite me. It failed and more significantly, it died at the hands of your warlord, which suggests Chazen interests will be safe for some while, wouldn't you say? Dev, we'll take that with us.' He nodded at the infant shark. 'Borha, have the jaw cut out of the head and share out the teeth among the divers for talismans. Take the carcass well out to sea before you dump it, where the currents will take it away from the reefs. We don't want its kin coming to see where it got to.'

The burly diver was the first to raise a cheer. Loud approbation spread among the islanders, even those faces that had been uneasy before soon clearing. Kheda waited, smiling, as he dried his arms on a white cotton cloth offered by yet another maiden, this one all coquettish smiles which faded a little as he waved her away. At the first hint of an ebb in the surge of fervour, he turned to walk unhurried back up the slope towards the pavilion and the crowd drifted apart.

Dev walked at his shoulder, studying the infant shark as he carried it skewered on a spear he had pulled from the larger fish. 'So all the omens are good.' His face was studiously neutral. 'Does that mean we can get back to hunting down those invaders? There's no telling what might have happened out to the west while we've been trailing round the rest of the domain,' he concluded with ill-concealed frustration.

'For the pearl harvest, the portents are certainly most favourable. As for that shark spawn, I'm not sure what such a thing might mean,' Kheda admitted in a low voice as they returned to the shade of the pavilion and its illusion of privacy.

'Does it really matter?' Dev was unexpectedly curious.

'It almost got its teeth into me,' Kheda said soberly. 'That has to mean it's a personal portent. I'll have to consult Chazen Saril's library when we rejoin Itrac at the residence. I'm really not clear on the lore of sharks.'

*And I had better be before I have to counter whatever verdict any other soothsayer sets running around as rumour, out of honest belief or treacherous intent.*

He tossed Dev the cloth he'd been wiping his arms with. 'Wrap it in that. I don't want to be mobbed by gulls all the way back.'

'What now?' Dev took the cloth and swaddled the infant shark securely.

'Favourable portents are all well and good but once word spreads, that'll encourage any hovering sea hawks to prey on such a plentiful pearl harvest.' Kheda shaded his eyes with a hand as he stared out to the strait where the *Yellow Serpent* waited; light skiffs were busy ferrying food and water to the rowers. 'There are still too many opportunists sneaking about Chazen waters for my peace of mind. Itrac won't do much trade for saller grain or horsehair or anything else if some enterprising pirate plunders the galleys she sends to collect the pearl chests.'

'Which would be an unfortunate omen,' Dev commented sarcastically.



‘Quite,’ said Kheda shortly. ‘So when you’ve dropped a pearl or two into every hand that’s done us a service here, we need to get back to the *Yellow Serpent* and tell Hesi to set a course to check up on that motley flotilla of boats we left to guard the seaways. Share out the rest of that box out between Hesi and the trireme’s shipmaster.

‘Which means yet more delay before we sail back to the western isles,’ muttered Dev with stifled anger.

‘We will still be back at the residence for the night of the new year.’ Kheda looked at the barbarian, green eyes cold as jade. ‘Though if I deem it necessary after that, we’ll repeat this entire voyage around the domain, just to be sure all is well.’

‘Why?’ demanded Dev. ‘When I can tell you precisely where every boat might be — every islander if you give me time — be they friendly and unfriendly, without you having to move a muscle.’

‘And how do we explain how we came by such knowledge? What will you do when we’re discovered?’ Kheda looked at him with ill-concealed anger. ‘You using magic and me condoning it? You think I’d escape having my throat cut so that my blood might dilute the stain of wizardry in yours, as it soaks into the ground while you’re skinned alive and your hide turned inside out to expiate your every touch on Aldabreshin soil?’ His voice thickened. ‘Do you think Itrac would lift a finger to save either of us? Do you think she could? These people of Chazen don’t just detest wizardry like the other domains of the Archipelago, for all its foul assault on the natural order of things. They truly fear and loathe it after all the misery and death those invaders and their brutal enchanters brought with them. The day your secret is out is the day you die.’

‘Fools, the lot of them.’ Dev gritted his teeth. ‘When it was my magic saved them from those savage mages. Just as long as we head west as soon as we can after you’ve played your new-year games.’ The barbarian wizard bent to retrieve Kheda’s helmet. As Kheda reached out to take it, Dev’s fingers closed over the warlord’s, pressing painfully against the hard metal and unyielding facets of the diamonds on the brow band.

‘You promised me I’d be there to see the last nests of those savages rooted out. I killed their wizards for you but the survivors may be hoarding something that could give me a hint of how they worked their magic. You really don’t want to break your word to me, Kheda. You shouldn’t need any portents to warn you just what a bad idea that would be.’