

Rocks and Shoals

So far, so good.

High above him on the headland, mighty fortifications loomed. Down below, sandy hollows offered safe anchorage, provided that ships avoided the hidden teeth of outlying reefs to reach those calmer waters.

Dyal checked his bearings yet again. As long as he kept the northernmost tower of the fortress in line with the beacon's iron basket on this side of the bridge, he'd keep his skiff's hull whole.

In the instant he looked up, a bird flew across the harbour from west to east. A black-backed eagle; the fork of its tail and crested head was unmistakable. It veered abruptly northwards, to be joined by a second bird. Another male: both birds were too small for either to be one of the mighty females who could pluck the largest prey from the treetops. Dyal watched, open mouthed, as the pair hovered for a moment above the fortress's observatory tower before darting westwards once again, to be lost against the island's forested slopes.

That's a complex omen. How should I read it?

The skiff lurched beneath his feet and Dyal gathered his wits along with the rope that governed the little vessel's single, square sail. He adjusted the steering oar and the boat's prow turned for a rock-carved jetty where a weather-beaten islander waited.

'Good trip?' Fenai fended the skiff off from the unforgiving stone with a deft pole.

Dyal hurried to throw the saller-straw fenders over the side rail. 'Good enough.'

He tossed Fenai a rope and the islander made the prow secure as Dyal looped a second length of hemp around a stone post close by the stern. He gestured at the cargo stowed fore and aft of the central mast.

'You can take those chests ashore but you may as well leave the baskets.' This might be the Daish warlords' rainy season residence but the Greater and Lesser Moons would circle the heavens in their twin dance at least five more times before those torrential storms swept in from the western ocean.

Dyal climbed ashore as Fenai jumped down into the open boat. The islander knew better than to ask any questions. Not that he'd breathe a word to anyone else of Daish, still less to any visiting mariner, to suggest that Dyal was anything other than a small-scale trader sailing these islands and those of neighbouring domains.

Crossing the rock jetty, smoothed by countless feet, Dyal still felt as though he was at sea. He made sure to be particularly careful as he crossed the bridge that offered a short cut across the stream foaming below the fortress. More lives than his own would be at risk if he stumbled and fell into those boulder-strewn waters.

Safely reaching the far side, he ignored the longer path curving inland to climb the demanding slope up to the headland's heights and the fortress's main gate. He headed for the workshops and storehouses clustered below the black cliff facing the sea.

How many eyes are watching me? Has someone already taken word to my lord and lady that I've arrived?

The whole harbour and its approaches were overlooked by countless narrow windows piercing the covered walkways that circled the base of the fortress walls. These outer fortifications could swiftly be filled with Daish archers ready to skewer invaders foolish enough to seek a foothold here.

That much was obvious. The secret of the stair curling upwards through the solid rock of the headland to reach them was only known to a few.

Dyal walked between long tables where boys sat hollowing out the heavy seed spikes of the island's shihaya-nut trees. Their fathers and uncles polished and carved the dense, dark wood to make divination cylinders, marking the outside face with every arc of the earthly

compass.

What would one of those tell me, if I dropped a stone inside and rolled it around to see which of those countless seed-mouths that token became stuck in?

None of the craftsmen or apprentices looked up. Dyal entered the storehouse behind them. A heavysset man was sharpening drawknives on a grindstone beneath an open window, his feet driving the treadle that spun it. He spared Dyal a glance and a grunt, before rising to lift the substantial stone and its solid frame to one side.

Dyal opened the trapdoor only apparent to those who knew where to look. The cavern beneath was dark and dank. He went carefully down the slippery stone steps. There was no question of taking a lantern. Nothing in this storehouse must hint at secrets which daylight couldn't reach.

At least I didn't have to work the pump handle myself.

No water sloshed in the depths. Someone had seen his skiff approaching in good time to close the sluices that channelled the stream outside through this hidden cavern. Then Penu had hitched his treadle to the wheels and gears that drove the water-screw to empty it.

As Dyal reached the bottom of the stair, Penu closed the trap door over his head. Dyal heard the scrape of the grindstone being replaced. He fought to swallow his apprehension as he felt his way along the wall in the impenetrable darkness.

No one will open the sluices until Penu sends word. He'll give me more than enough time to get out of here before the pit floods again.

All the same, he breathed a great deal easier once his questing fingertips found the edge of the entrance to the narrow, spiral stair. Though he forced himself to take the steps at a steady, measured pace. The first time, he'd been in such a hurry to escape the threat of drowning that he'd barely made half the climb before his thighs and calf muscles burned so viciously that he'd been forced to stop for a rest.

At least the going was a little easier when he reached the cunningly concealed door that gave him access to the fortress's covered walkways. That wasn't the end of the stair – but whatever other hidden passages threaded through this headland, they weren't Dyal's to know.

Telouet was waiting for him at the archway which opened into the gravelled killing ground between the fortress's outer wall and its first ring of battlemented buildings. He handed over clean clothing; indigo-dyed cotton trews and a matching tunic lavishly embroidered with black silk. Dyal shed his ragged and travel-stained garments with relief

'They're waiting for you.' Telouet held out a brass-studded sword belt and twin scabbarded blades.

Here at least I'm a warrior.

Dyal took a moment to buckle the double-looped belt tight around his hips and settle his swords securely.

Telouet led the way through the gates and around to the gap in the inner ring of buildings that was overlooked by tall watchtowers. Dyal breathed the perfume of the gardens beyond appreciatively after his days at sea.

Formidable towers stood amid the trees and shrubs, each strategically placed to defend the others, and none of them linked to give attackers easy access to the rest if one were taken.

Dyal followed Telouet up the steps and through the doorway of the one crowned with a glass-walled observatory. They climbed the stairs to reach the room dominated by a great table set on a broad pedestal of crammed bookcases. The pale wood of the tabletop was carved and stained with every arc of the earthly and heavenly compasses and marked with the paths of the constellations and wandering jewels through the skies.

A young man in plain green silk was trying to find some particular volume on the equally packed shelves below the windows. As they entered, he abandoned the search.

'My lord Daish Sirket.' Dyal bowed low.

‘I am pleased to see you safely returned,’ Sirket said with unfeigned relief.

‘Do you have a message for me?’ The young woman who sat on a stool to one side of the table held out an expectant hand laden with rings. Her silver necklaces, earrings and bracelets were adorned with every shade of coral from deepest red to the merest blush of pink, all striking against the charcoal grey of her satin gown and echoed in her flawless cosmetics.

‘My lady Dau.’ Though Dyal hesitated. He recognised the noblewoman’s personal slave, Lemir, who was now setting writing materials out for his mistress, but the other young warrior in the room was unknown to him.

‘Zari.’ Telouet jerked his head towards the youth by way of introduction. ‘I’m training him.’

‘You may speak freely before him.’ Sirket confirmed.

Dyal swallowed a surge of jealousy. He had been so proud to be admitted into the warlord’s confidence, to be trained by Sirket’s personal slave. Telouet was the domain’s foremost swordsman, after all. But now this newcomer would be benefiting from such expert instruction and hearing secrets which Dyal would never know, while he toiled back and forth to the Ulla domain, carrying the lady Dau’s messages.

Will there still be a place for me in my lord’s personal guard, when I’m done being his sister’s eyes and ears in the sea lanes?

Only time would tell, that’s what his father would say. Reaching beneath his tunic, Dyal pulled out a small pouch strung on a sweat-blackened leather thong. Opening it, he took out the traveller’s twin dial that would show a traveller the passage of the day or the night by referring to the sun or stars respectively.

‘My lady.’ He handed it to Dau.

‘Who did you see?’ She deftly twisted the nocturne dial’s brass discs and pointing arm to open its secret compartment and removed a tightly folded square of onionskin paper. ‘To take my message and to bring Orhan’s answer?’

‘Yshri.’ Dyal bit his lip.

Sirket noticed instantly. ‘You’re concerned about her? You care for her?’

I would care for her, given half a chance. Though I barely know her. We’ve shared no more than ten conversations.

Dyal grimaced. ‘She was bruised, and badly. Her face and her arms.’

The slave girl had been walking stiffly too. From a beating or some vile assault by Ulla Safar’s brutal guards? They readily followed their master’s lead in slaking their lust for any woman who caught their eye, whether she was willing or not.

‘She’s Chay Ulla’s maidservant, isn’t she?’ Dau looked up from the scroll she was using to decode the ciphered message on the translucent paper. ‘Chay always turns her fury on her retinue when Mirrel is getting the better of her. I wonder what their latest quarrel might be.’

‘I cannot understand—’ Sirket shook his head, disbelieving.

No one in the room needed him to complete that thought. Daish warlords always married women who would work together to promote the domain’s trade and interests.

Though you have yet to follow your father’s example, my lord Sirket, and take even one wife, let alone more. Has Telouet been brave enough to tell you how fervently your people wish to see you give the domain an heir besides your brother Mesil?

Movement outside the window caught Dyal’s eye. Another black backed eagle. He seized on that sign to change the subject.

‘My lord, can you read a portent for me?’ He described what he had seen above this very tower just before he made landfall.

‘That is a puzzle.’ Sirket looked thoughtful. ‘The Eagle is an emblem of strength in its

positive aspect and any bird's flight from west to east tells us that's how we should read it. On the other hand, black birds presage danger or death and a switch of direction in flight warns us to be wary of sudden attack while any hovering hunter speaks of treachery. Yet two male birds flying together is a very good omen.'

'I believe I may have some answers,' Dau said grimly as she laid down her needle-nibbed pen. 'This message isn't from Orhan. It's from Inais.'

'The *zamorin*?' Sirket frowned. 'Orhan's shared your cipher with him?'

'Obviously.' Dau looked exasperated at her brother. 'Do you want to hear what he has to say?'

Sirket folded his arms. 'Go on.'

'Orhan's fled Derasulla.' Dau stared at the flimsy paper as though she didn't quite believe it. 'He believes that his father will kill him, given any opportunity to do so which can plausibly be claimed as an accident.'

'Where is he?' Sirket demanded. 'What can we do?'

Dau shook her head. 'He says this is a matter for Ulla alone, so Inais reports.' She looked up. 'Besides, he needs us to warn Redigal Coron that treachery threatens him and his family.'

'Redigal?' Sirket glanced involuntarily westwards. 'Isn't he Ulla Safar's ally? Or at least, he'll never stand against him.'

Dau shrugged. 'Inais says that Coron's councillors are plotting to kill him, with Ulla Safar's connivance.'

'But hasn't Coron always done whatever his councillors say?' Sirket waved his own question away. 'I suppose he has shown a few signs of thinking for himself of late. I imagine they'd find that inconvenient. Though how are we to warn him, without Safar realising that means somebody is spilling Ulla secrets to us?'

'Inais tells us to contact a *zamorin* called Aksin who serves Hinai Redigal as steward.' Dau's lacquered nails clacked on the table top as she drummed her fingers thoughtfully.

'Does he now?' Sirket's eyes narrowed.

'What of it?' Dau cocked her head, instantly curious.

'Aksin served our father as his eyes and ears in that domain.' Sirket's glance around the room was sufficient to remind everyone that such knowledge must not spread.

Dau's face hardened. Dyal had noticed she always reacted this way, whenever Kheda, once of Daish and now of Chazen, was mentioned. She also invariably changed the subject, just as she did now.

'What can they intend, Coron's *zamorin*? The Redigal domain has an heir, and one of an age of discretion, in Moni Redigal's son, Litai. Rule would simply pass to him.'

Sirket had his doubts. 'Litai's only in his fourteenth year and none too bold, from what I've seen of him. He would be easily browbeaten into obeying his councillors while he grieved for his father and especially if they drove his mothers away.'

'Coron was not very much older, when he succeeded Redigal Adun,' Telouet observed. 'That's how the rot set in, when he learned the habit of deferring to those *zamorin*.'

Sirket glanced sharply at Lemir, Dau's bodyslave. 'Was there ever any shadow of suspicion over Coron's father's death?'

'Not that I ever heard, my lord.' The swordsman spread helpless hands. 'But I was in Moni Redigal's service for barely half a year, before she traded me to Rekha Daish.'

Sirket looked at his sister. 'Perhaps our mother Janne knows more?'

She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow, sardonic. 'Perhaps, perhaps not, but we know for certain what will happen if we take this news to her. She will tell us not to concern ourselves and then she will take whatever action she deems best for the Daish domain. What if she decides that it's somehow in our interests to let Redigal Coron die? Or to betray our

allies in Ulla?’

‘I don’t see...’ But Sirket didn’t complete the thought.

‘She believed it was in our best interests to exile our father,’ Dau’s scarlet glossed lips pressed tight together for a moment. ‘Though at least we know that he still lives. Does Redigal Litai deserve the grief of his father’s death? Do his sisters warrant the blight on their marriage prospects of such a dire omen as that bereavement? When we know that Ulla Safar will already be poised to wring whatever advantage he can from their catastrophe?’

‘He’d do that even if he didn’t have a hand in their tragedy.’ Sirket scowled at the thought before turning his attention to Lemir. ‘But we cannot send you to warn Coron. You’ll be recognised as coming from Daish.’

‘And I cannot spare him,’ Dau interjected tartly before gesturing at Dyal. ‘Besides, we have a proven confidential courier. Lemir, do you know enough of Redigal’s sea lanes to chart him a safe course to the warlord’s residence?’

Dyal cleared his throat. ‘My preferred route north to Ulla waters has always been through Redigal’s easterly islands, my lady. There’s too much open water between Daish and the Ritsem sea lanes to risk such a little boat as mine in anything but the calmest weather.’

‘Then your face is already known on Redigal’s trading beaches and you have earned the right of access to their sea lanes, with the pennants to fly to prove it. You are also the one who saw the portent of those eagles warning of treachery and unexpected attack.’ Sirket looked at Dyal, contemplative. ‘Then I’d say that omen’s for Redigal rather than Daish, coming in the very same day that we get this news from Inais. It would seem that you’re meant to carry this warning westward.’

Dyal bowed his head. ‘I am yours to command, my lord.’

Though it would be good to see some omen promising me that frustrating Ulla Safar’s plans won’t make life even more perilous for Yshri and Inais.

‘How to get you off a trading beach and into Hinai Redigal’s audience chamber?’ Dau mused aloud, gazing at Dyal before turning to her brother, bright eyed. ‘Are we ready to defy our mother Rekha as well as our mother Janne?’

‘If you’re going to rob another man’s fishing ground, you may as well fill a big net as hook your catch one by one.’ He shrugged. ‘In any case, she’ll be as cross with us as Janne will, when she learns we didn’t take this news to her.’

Dau leaned forward, her elbows on the table. ‘Rekha and Moni have re-opened negotiations over an agreement to trade Daish pearls for Redigal brassware. They’re going round and around in circles, like forest cats looking for a rival’s weakness.’

Sirket looked grim. ‘Moni’s heard some whisper about the dire harvest from our reefs last year?’

Dau nodded. ‘While Rekha’s still determined to hide the truth by passing Chazen pearls off as our own, whatever you say against it.’

Sirket’s face tightened at that memory. ‘What do you have in mind?’

‘I have a store of nacre which I am entitled to trade on my own account. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t send an envoy to Redigal Coron’s second wife, to propose that she deals directly with me.’ Dau laced her fingers tight together. ‘Other than our mothers will be furious when they discover I’ve done so without their sanction.’

‘Then we will say that you acted with my full knowledge and approval.’ The glint in Sirket’s eye reminded Dyal of the young warlord’s father, whom he so strongly resembled. ‘Though don’t tell Hinai just how poor the rewards from our reefs were last year. We can still show our mothers that much obedience.’

‘And point out that they cannot stop us, if we choose to let that truth be known.’ Dau’s knuckles whitened.

‘That’s an argument I don’t relish having.’ Sirket sighed. ‘But it’s a debate for another

day. For the present, let's do what we can to ensure Redigal's continued peace.'

What's going to be asked of me here? Delivering this message and no more? What if I arouse someone's suspicions and get a knife in my back? Who here knows about this conspiracy to overthrow their lord?

Dyal searched the sky and the sea, around the whole circle of the earthly compass, looking for some portent. No flight of birds caught his eye and there wasn't as much as a cloud in the azure sky. No rush of fish glittered beneath the skiff's hull and no ruffle of foam betrayed some sea beast surging through the waves.

Well, at least I'm closer to home than I am among the Ulla islands, if I have to make a dash for safer waters.

No omen showed itself to him ashore. All he could see ahead was the trading beach thick with tents that ranged from opulent pavilions, bright as butterflies, through to worn sailcloth awnings stretched over poles and ropes. The merchants' vessels were anchored off to one side of this broad bay, by order of Redigal Coron's councillors. Dyal's acquaintances in the domain's outer sea lanes had explained all this to him when he sought guidance in those marketplaces.

The central sweep of the sandy arc was kept clear for those visiting ships which would come and go within a day, two at most. There were more of them than Dyal could count, from sturdy lateen-rigged two-masters, through little craft like his own, all the way down to shallow rowboats which could only have come a short distance along the coast.

This was hardly remarkable. The Redigal warlord ruled four substantial islands clustered within a day's sail of this central isle as well as Ocal, still larger, several days to the south. All of which produced valuable goods to trade and whose inhabitants were keen to enjoy luxuries and well-crafted items brought in by merchants from neighbouring domains.

Such prosperity meant that the warlord commanded more than enough resources to sustain a fearsome fleet of triremes, from the heavy ships that ferried his warriors to battle, to the lighter fighting vessels whose bronze-sheathed rams could hole even the mightiest galleys and sink them too fast for saving.

Dyal glanced up at his little skiff's masthead, to reassure himself that his lilac pennant marked with the Redigal sigil still streamed overhead. Since leaving the outer sea lanes, he'd twice been overtaken by a light galley deftly stealing the wind from his sail with its greater length and height. That left the skiff floundering while a Redigal vassal demanded Dyal account for himself. It was a daunting task under the watchful eyes of a double handful of archers ready for their captain's order which would leave him bristling with more arrows than a porcupine has quills.

Was that normal practise in these inner waters or does Redigal Coron have some reason for more than usual paranoia? Should I ask the other traders on this beach if the mood has changed hereabouts or would that draw unwanted attention?

Dyal still hadn't made up his mind by the time he had threaded a careful course through the crowded shallows and finally poled the skiff inshore to ground on the sloping sand. Once he had set anchors securely fore and aft, he collected the pale coffer which Dau Daish had given him. There was nothing to be gained by delay.

Holding his precious burden high, he waded through the shallows to be met by a Redigal swordsman, armoured with oiled leather and mail. Though the man wasn't wearing a helmet so Dyal guessed he didn't anticipate trouble today.

'Good day to you,' the man said, genial. 'Where have you come from?'

'Daish.' Dyal turned to show the warrior the distinctive design of the dagger he wore

sheathed on his belt. It was strange to feel the weight on his hip. He had become so used to shedding any sign of his true allegiance well before he reached Ulla waters.

‘Trading on your own account?’ The man nodded at the honey-coloured coffer.

Dyal lifted the lid just far enough to show the guard the iridescent gleam within. The coffer was full to the brim with slips of the shining nacre which lined a pearl oyster’s shell. It was at least as valuable, if not more so, than the pearls themselves. Even a barren oyster yielded nacre.

‘I bring greetings from my mistress Dau Daish for your mistress Hinai Redigal.’

‘Do you indeed?’ The swordsman pursed his lips.

So you know enough to know this is out of the normal run of trade between our two domains. Are you wise enough to know it’s not your place to admit or deny me? Or lazy enough to palm this decision off onto somebody else? Either will suffice.

The warrior’s face remained unreadable as he turned with a casual gesture. ‘Follow me.’

Just as long as you’re not Moni Redigal’s man, delivering me to her personal steward.

Dyal did as he was asked, all the same. If he did find himself explaining his presence to the domain’s first wife, he would just stick to his story. That’s what he and Sirket had agreed. It wasn’t as though Moni could have any good reason to deny a Daish envoy access to Hinai, however curious she might be. However determined she might be to turn whatever she later learned from her sister-wife to her own advantage.

Sirket and Dau knew Moni’s shrewdness of old. So Dyal had no intention of warning Hinai Redigal herself about the Ulla plot. For Inais and Yshri’s sake, the eunuch Aksin was only one person here whom he would trust with that perilous news.

The swordsman led him through the tents and cook fires scattered among the trees that fringed the beach. Merchants from other domains, and visitors from other Redigal isles, thronged the substantial village beyond. The resident islanders were amiably trading food as well as access to perfumed baths and other pleasures now that the morning’s trading was done and the fiercest heat of the day was passing.

The ground inland sloped steadily upwards. They followed a well-worn path across a broad swath of dusty turf. Reaching a shallow crest, Dyal appreciated the way that Redigal archers and spearmen would enjoy a murderous advantage over any attackers striking up from the beach. Beyond, he saw the path dip before rising again, crossing a further stretch of open ground before they would reach the forbidding walls of the Redigal stronghold. On either side of the central track, afital seedlings clustered, shin high.

His companion glanced over his shoulder. ‘Keep to the path.’

‘Of course.’ Dyal followed, wondering what was hidden by those tufts of variegated leaves. Anything from caltrops to mantraps to cripple invaders would be his guess.

Though any force determined to storm this stronghold would have to be so vast that it could surely sustain however many casualties the afital meadow claimed. The Redigal warlord’s outer fortifications stretched so far away to either side that Dyal couldn’t begin to guess how much land this rampart encircled.

It’s no wonder that even a man with as many troops as Ulla Safar prefers to undermine this domain by treachery rather than launch a frontal assault.

The track led them to a twin-towered gatehouse thrust forward from the line of the walls. Dyal’s escort stood in front of the foremost portcullis with his empty hands outspread and his chin lifted so his face was clearly visible to the unseen guards.

‘Jelat and one other for admittance!’

Dyal gazed upwards, doing his best to appear as humble as he possibly could.

There was no answer from the gatehouse’s heights but a few moments later, the iron lattice rose smoothly upwards. Dyal followed the warrior Jelat into the gloom. A second gate

of iron-studded wood barred their way, unmoving as the first crashed back down behind them.

The young Daish swordsman had to force himself not to look up at the stone vault arched above them. A mere messenger wouldn't search for the holes that would spew burning pitch or worse, if Redigal's guards decided he was some threat.

The gate ahead swung open on noiseless hinges. Jelat walked on and Dyal followed meekly, to find an expanse of meticulously maintained parkland. Paths of golden shingle curved between artfully placed stands of trees. Some were all alike; others offered clusters of complementary foliage. Here and there some noteworthy species was granted the honour of a single tree standing alone. Some were saplings, recently planted. Others raised lofty crowns and broad branches to the heavens, testament to the years they had seen.

Jelat took a fork in the path, the stones crunching beneath his feet. Dyal glimpsed a battlemented wall a good distance ahead, several towers within it. This was a substantial fortification in its own right, and as they walked on, he saw other such residences off in the distance to either hand. All were sufficiently scattered that capturing any one of them would give an enemy no advantage for assaulting the next.

So any invader faced a poisonous choice. Concentrating his strength on a single tower would leave his men exposed to counter attack from all directions. Splitting his forces to launch simultaneous assaults would most likely mean being outnumbered in any one fight. Either way, Redigal's warriors would take full advantage of the concealment offered by those lovingly tended trees.

'Jelat with a messenger from Daish!'

Dyal could only assume this was Hinai Redigal's gatehouse, as the young warrior halted before yet another forbidding bastion and proclaimed his errand. At least this time a few sentries were visible on the walkway above.

The outer iron lattice was quickly lifted and an armoured swordsman walked out. After a nod of acknowledgement for Jelat, he turned to Dyal with his hands outstretched to take the coffer. 'You may give me your gift for my mistress.'

'Forgive me.' Dyal bowed low, his voice contrite. 'My instructions are to deliver this coffer to your mistress herself.'

So go and find the noblewoman's steward, so I can convince him of my good faith, before he admits me to her presence. Then go and busy yourself somewhere else, so I can tell this zamorin Aksin that I've brought him a private message without arousing everyone else's suspicions.

He stood, still bowing, waiting for the swordsman's response. After what felt like half a day, the warrior grunted. 'Very well.'

As Dyal straightened up, he saw the man rest his hand on his sword hilt. The Redigal man met Dyal's eyes and held his gaze with a humourless smile.

Just to let me know that you could cut my head from my shoulders before I could get my dagger clear of its sheath.

He did his best to look suitably intimidated. That wasn't hard, alone as he was, and with no hope of getting back out beyond these walls unescorted.

Jelat was already walking away. Hinai Redigal's man turned for the entrance without looking to see if Dyal was following. At least this time, the fortification's inner doors were already opening before the iron gate slammed down behind him.

The octagonal residence within wasn't as dour as he was expecting. While four watch towers crowned it, offering a clear view over the outer walls in case of any threat, the floors below all enjoyed broad windows with their shutters wide open to the perfumes of the flower gardens surrounding it. A child's gleeful laughter floated out overhead to prompt an answering smile from a slave who was pruning a sardberry bush.

Steps ran up to the tower's double doors. As they approached, one side opened to reveal a tall man in a plain tunic of unbleached silk over loosely cut treads. An unbearded man. Dyal tried not to look too eager as Hinai Redigal's man greeted the eunuch.

'Good day to you, Aksin. It seems we have a messenger from Daish for our lady.'

'Do we indeed?' The *zamorin*'s gaze was somewhere between surprised and suspicious as he looked Dyal up and down. 'What's that you're carrying?'

'Nacre.' Dyal ducked his head, submissive, as he lifted the coffer's lid. 'And there's a letter from my lady within.'

'Is that so?' The *zamorin* pursed full lips, thoughtful.

Dyal was struck by his resemblance to Inais. That was unexpected.

'Very well,' Aksin said briskly. 'You had better come in and await our lady's pleasure, Daish man.'

Better and better. Though Dyal had to contain his impatience until the warrior was out of earshot. He went up the steps as slowly as he dared, as the swordsman walked away. Pausing on the threshold, he kept his voice low in case of unseen servants within.

'As well as this gift and a letter for your mistress, I have vital news for your ears alone.'

'Indeed?' Aksin's eyes narrowed. 'Then let us take a turn around the gardens until my lady has concluded her business with her engravers.'

Dyal shifted the coffer's weight on to his hip as they walked down the steps. It wasn't a large burden but the longer he had to carry it, the heavier it was feeling.

'This way.' As they headed sunwise around the tower, Aksin's shrewd green eyes assessed their distance from slaves tending the flowers and shrubs. 'What do you have to tell me?'

Dyal was happy to oblige. 'I have a warning for you from Inais.' He quickly outlined the Ulla domain's collusion with Redigal's treacherous *zamorin* advisors.

'That explains a great deal.' Aksin looked grim.

'What--?' Dyal broke off. 'No, don't tell me.' What he didn't know, he couldn't betray.

'Don't tell you how I propose to confound them?' Aksin looked bleaker still. 'There's nothing that I can do.'

'What?' Dyal was aghast.

The steward shook his head. 'I will never be allowed a private audience with Coron. I've argued against the ways this domain has been doing Ulla's bidding far too often for his counsellors to permit that these days.'

'Your mistress?' Dyal wasn't about to give up. 'She must spend time alone with her husband.'

Aksin shook his head again. 'They lead separate lives. In any case, I doubt that she would believe me. Why would Ulla Safar turn so viciously on a loyal friend?'

Dyal halted, incredulous. 'You're going to let your lord be murdered?'

'I never said that.' Aksin urged him onwards with a discreet hand. 'But the first person Hinai would ask for advice would be Moni, and without any proof to bolster my word she would assume this was simply some lie being spread by one faction within Coron's *zamorin*, in order to discredit their rivals. Once word spread, as it surely would, and I was found dead with my throat cut, that would be enough to confirm it.'

He smiled thinly at Dyal's astonishment. 'Such things happen all the time here. Be thankful that your lord Sirket's attendants are more concerned with the Daish domain's advancement than merely enriching themselves. Unless you have some proof?' Aksin stopped walking, looking at Dyal, intent. 'Something written in your lady Dau's own hand? To help convince Hinai?'

'No.' Dyal was appalled to realise how badly they had miscalculated. 'We thought that was too great a risk. But I can ask for such confirmation, if you can share Hinai Redigal's

most secure cipher for my lady Dau to use.'

As long as I can make the trip home and get back here in time, before Redigal Coron is killed.

'There may be another way. The quicker we can act, the better.' Aksin continued walking. 'What are your tastes in lovers?'

'What?' Now Dyal was confused.

'Women? Men? Either?' the slave persisted.

'Women.' Unbidden, Dyal thought of Yshri.

Aksin grimaced. 'Can you feign an interest in men?'

'I suppose so.' Some of Dyal's fellow recruits to Daish's ranks shared their quilts in the barracks, though he'd never felt the urge. 'Why would I?'

'I told you that my lord Coron and Redigal's noblewomen lead separate lives.' Aksin gauged their distance from the tower doorway. They had nearly completed the full circuit of the gardens. 'His own preference is for male lovers and now that he's done his duty begetting a bevy of children for his wives and the domain, he satisfies his desires as he wishes.'

'You want me--?' Dyal swallowed hard. Truth be told, he had little enough experience with girls in bed. What a man two decades or more older might want of him was a complete mystery.

'It's the only way you'll be able to talk to Coron in complete privacy. And no one will look twice at you while they're wondering why I've decided to compete with those other *zamorin* who send him amiable young companions.' The glint in Aksin's eye challenged Dyal. 'Could you convince Coron that Safar's malice is real, face to face?'

If that's what it took to confound Ulla's plans. 'Yes,' he said firmly.

'Good.' Aksin quickened the pace. 'I'll deliver that gift of nacre to my lady while you get cleaned up.'

He led Dyal up the steps and into the tower. A door immediately inside the entrance opened onto a stair leading down to a half-basement where Aksin evidently enjoyed a luxurious apartment, both by virtue of his rank within Hinai's household and also to afford him the privacy customarily granted to *zamorin*. Some methods of castration left little outward sign but others resulted in scarred ruin that no one needed to see.

'Bathe.' Aksin threw open a door to reveal a bathroom well supplied with soaps, towels and cool ewers to dilute the hot water which the steward was calling for as he continued down the corridor.

Dyal relished the opportunity to wash his hair, beard and body clean of the salt and staleness of a five day voyage. A sluice with a bucket of sea water couldn't compare. Still, the sooner he delivered Daish Sirket's warning, the better. By the time the *zamorin* returned with an armful of clean clothing, he was rubbing himself dry.

'Hinai Redigal is most grateful for Dau Daish's generous gift and for her letter. She will have her reply ready for you tomorrow morning.' Aksin paused on the threshold and took a moment to assess Dyal's naked physique.

He nodded, satisfied. 'You're very much to my lord's taste. No one will think twice about me offering you a generous gift to entertain him while you overnight here. It will definitely raise my standing in his eyes.'

'Good to know.' As long as no one suspected he was carrying something more than the gift of nacre from Daish, Dyal would be satisfied.

He laid his dagger on top of his faded cottons and dressed quickly in the silks Aksin had brought.

'Ready?' The *zamorin* barely waited for his nod before leading Dyal back out of the tower. The swordsman Jelat was waiting by the gate.

'Follow me.' He led the way without saying anything further.

Dyal followed, and continued following as they passed by one tower after another. By the time they had left three such fortifications behind, he had entirely lost sight of Hinai Redigal's dwelling.

There must be more of this island within the Redigal warlord's fortifications than there is outside them.

Granted, that was probably an exaggeration but the extent of this enclosed parkland continued to confound him.

Now though, they turned down a path towards what Dyal assumed was their destination. Thankfully, with the evening cool approaching, he hadn't broken into a sweat to stain the finely woven garments he now wore.

What do you make of all this?

He studied the back of Jelat's head. The swordsman's expression was as impassive as it had been when Dyal had first met him, and he had no idea what Aksin might have told him.

Best not to ask, then I don't have to explain myself.

Jelat didn't need to ask for admittance at this gate. Before they came within hailing distance, a *zamorin* backed by a brute-faced warrior came out to meet them.

Dyal didn't catch what Jelat said to the suspicious steward but he noted the *zamorin's* eyes glancing in the direction of Hinai's tower.

What do we do if they don't let me in?

He'd asked Aksin that very question. He wished he shared the Daish ally's confidence that the conspirators surrounding Coron would want to see what Aksin's unexpected move might lead to, rather than provoke him by blocking this gambit in whatever intricate game they were playing.

It seemed that Aksin was right. Jelat stood aside and this unknown *zamorin* looked Dyal up and down, his lip curling with a faint sneer. The young Daish warrior steeled himself not to react to some disparaging comment.

The *zamorin* merely gestured to the thickset swordsman. 'Escort this to my lord's antechamber.'

Now the warrior looked him up and down. Dyal spread his hands a little so the man could see quite clearly that he carried no weapons. Not that there was much chance of concealing any blade beneath the flimsy green silk of this sleeveless tunic.

Jelat turned and walked away without a word. The unnamed swordsman jerked his head. Dyal obediently followed him through the gatehouse into Redigal Coron's personal residence. Feeling a qualm run down his spine, he squared his shoulders and raised his chin, glancing around.

It would look more suspicious if I wasn't curious, wouldn't it?

This tower was considerably larger than any of the warlord's wives' dwellings. Further accommodation was ranged all around the inner face of the encircling wall. Dyal guessed a handful of visiting nobles could lodge here, each with his personal retinue in a separate suite of rooms.

He followed the thick-set swordsman into the central tower. The hallway took him past the audience halls on either side. Their ornately carved doors of milk-white wood stood open to reveal pale marble floors softened with vivid carpets. The walls were hung with painted silks that offered vistas of misty forested mountains in contrast to the views of the surrounding fortifications glimpsed through the unshuttered windows.

Sunlight fell through a lofty glazed turret to illuminate the stairwell ahead. Dyal followed the swordsman up the spiral steps. As they passed one floor, he felt the prickle of apprehensive sweat in his armpits. By the next, his mouth was dry as dust, no matter how hard he swallowed. He clenched his fists as the warrior turned off the stairs into the next hallway.

‘Wait here.’ The thick-set swordsman opened the first door. He didn’t enter, waiting for Dyal to go ahead of him.

‘Thank you.’ Dyal managed not to betray his nervousness.

How am I to convince the warlord of such a powerful domain to believe my unsupported word? I must have been mad to think I could do so.

But if he failed, Ulla Safar would seize control of these islands, if not by force of arms then through the *zamorin* who would rule Coron’s young son. The more powerful Safar became, the less chance there was of Orhan’s rebellion succeeding. The greater the threats to Yshri and Inais would be.

Dyal took a deep breath. He looked at his damp palms. Wiping them dry on his thighs would leave marks so he glanced around the room on hopes of some other solution. As well as the silken carpet, bright with vines and flowers, cushions were piled in the window embrasures. He was moving towards the closest when the door opened behind him.

Redigal Coron was both taller than most men in these reaches and broad-shouldered. He wore amethyst silks that flattered his dark skin. While his hair and beard were touched with grey, that merely lent distinction to his strong features rather than hinting at any decline in his strength of mind or body.

A warlord in his prime, in marked contrast to Daish Sirket still striving to establish himself.

Dyal bowed low and dropped to one knee, as he had been instructed.

‘You may stand.’ The Redigal warlord regarded him with frank interest. ‘You’re a trader newly come with a commission from Dau Daish, I gather, to deliver a gift for my wife Hinai.’

‘I am, my lord.’ Dyal stood with his hands clasped behind his back. ‘Her steward sent me to ask if I might be of service to you, while I wait for the lady Hinai to compose her reply to my mistress.’

‘Indeed.’ A faint smile teased one side of Coron’s mouth as he walked forward. He stood close enough for Dyal to tell that the warlord favoured orris root to scent his clothing. Running a finger down the curve of Dyal’s shoulder and upper arm, Coron’s eyes were bright with anticipation. ‘And what service—?’

He broke off and looked at Dyal, somewhat perplexed. ‘If coming here was not your own choice—’

‘No,’ Dyal said hastily. ‘That’s to say, my lord—’

Are treacherous zamorin ears listening at that door?

He took a pace to stand chest to chest with the warlord, clasping his shoulders and leaning forward until his cheekbone brushed Coron’s beard.

‘I came here of my own free will,’ Dyal whispered, ‘but to talk to you in complete privacy. Your life is threatened, my lord.’

He felt Coron’s muscles tense beneath his hands. ‘Not by me, I swear it, by all the stars in the heavens. Daish Sirket has sent me to warn you.’

Coron moved his head to look unblinking into Dyal’s eyes. ‘Why should I believe you?’ His breath was perfumed with tarit seed.

‘Why should I risk my life to tell such a lie?’ Dyal couldn’t think what else to say.

Coron’s hand moved so swiftly, he took Dyal unawares. The warlord clasped the back of Dyal’s neck and pressed his lips to his own. An onlooker could mistake this for some lovers’ embrace but there was no seduction in Coron’s kiss. His long fingers were iron hard, pressing painfully on the side of Dyal’s neck. The blood thundered in the young man’s ears and he felt ominously light-headed.

Is he going to leave me senseless on the floor and call for his body slave to snap my neck? But if I fight back...

Dyal felt his knees buckle. In the next instant, the terrifying pressure eased. Now Coron slid his other hand around the Daish warrior's waist to support him as Dyal blinked, breathing deep to clear his head.

Softer now, Coron's lips brushed the angle of Dyal's jaw as he whispered curtly. 'You will tell me all that you know.'

Whatever test that was, it seems I passed it. But I am still utterly at his mercy.

Dyal's relief mingled with fresh apprehension as the Redigal warlord took his hand and led him towards the room's inner door. Opening it revealed Coron's bedchamber.

No experience is ever wasted. Take whatever knowledge you can from it and move on.

Dyal recalled his father's words as he looked at the silver ring in his hand, engraved with afital leaves. It gleamed in the strengthening sunlight, just as the wavelets all around the bobbing skiff sparkled in the dawning day.

This ring was twin to the one which Redigal Coron had given him, before he'd left the warlord's residence that morning following their night together. He'd traded away the first one on his last but one voyage through these Ritsem waters but Dyal remembered the design clearly enough.

That night had assuredly been an education, and pleasurable in its own way, even if the most significant thing Dyal had learned was that he definitely preferred bedding women to men.

Coron had learned everything that Dyal could tell him of Safar's most recent treachery. In the soft intimacy of the warlord's quilts, realising the Redigal warlord was still loath to believe him, Dyal had also told him the truth of the Ulla tyrant's attempt to murder Daish Kheda, in defiance of all customs of hospitality. How a fire had been set to kill the warlord along with Janne Daish, Itrac Chazen and all their servants. When that hadn't worked, Safar had sent Ulla warriors to cut Kheda down. Dyal had been witness to it all.

As he'd been one of Kheda's attendants when Daish, Redigal and Ritsem had all travelled to Derasulla for that fateful meeting, Dyal could supply detailed answers when Coron's questions challenged him to prove that he'd truly been there.

Careful not to betray any hint of Inais or Yshri's existence, Dyal had also shared what he'd seen of the viciousness which pervaded the lower levels of that mighty fortress. Like the reek from the river, such things went unnoticed in the upper apartments and gardens where noble visitors were lodged. All of which explained Ulla Orhan's determination to take a stand against his father's cruelties and Daish Sirket's wish to support him.

The following morning, Coron had been silent and thoughtful while they breakfasted together. Dyal had been escorted out, to be handsomely rewarded by the warlord's steward. The *zamorin* had been narrow-eyed with curiosity, though he hadn't said a word beyond essential courtesies. Hinai Redigal had been similarly generous, when Aksin led him into her presence, to receive her letter and a gift of uncut topaz for delivery to Dau Daish.

Since then, Dyal had resumed his duties as a messenger between Daish and Ulla. He'd kept his ears and eyes open on every trading beach but there hadn't been a whisper of untoward events in Redigal. Sirket reported nothing beyond the usual correspondence between the two domains. Until the message he now held reached Dyal.

I know that you believed me, my lord Coron. So what can this signify?

To call the note he'd received on a Ritsem trading beach a puzzle was an understatement. As he had already done countless times, Dyal contemplated the piece of paper which had been rolled up inside the silver ring, before that itself had been concealed beneath the thick band of wax sealing the whole thing tight.

The wax had been unmarked by any seal or sigil to give any clue to who sent it. The message was unciphered, plainly written for anyone to read, to make whatever sense of it they might.

Fish in the deep channel north of Ocal on the day the Opal leaves Death to the Pearl. Look for a catch at first light to settle a debt.

It had been intended for him, no question. The man who had caught his elbow on that Ritsem shore had looked him straight in the eye, pressing the paper into his hand without any hesitation. He'd known exactly who he was looking for.

Dyal contemplated the ring again, scraping wax out of the engraved leaves with a fingernail. Had he read the night skies correctly, back on that distant beach?

The Lesser, the Pearl, first and foremost for Daish as far as he was concerned, had risen alongside the Amethyst for initiative, beneath the stars of the Winged Snake, emblem of courage and setting things to rights. The Greater, the Opal, for truth, joined the heavenly Diamond, the warlord's gem and token for loyalty, amid the Horned Fish constellation that was for happiness, in the arc of the sky where one sought portents of love affairs, among other things.

All four gems in two neighbouring arcs of the heavens. Such a conjunction couldn't be ignored. Portents urging him to act. So he had upped anchor to catch the very next tide. Because there was no way to know what this message might mean without doing what it instructed.

The Horned Fish also promised good fortune for sailors. That had certainly held true. Favourable winds and calm seas had been vital for Dyal to make this crossing to Redigal waters without mishap in his little boat. The only possible way to do it fast enough had been by risking the open swells north of Daish.

Very well, I'm here. What now?

He scanned the waters in every direction. There were no other vessels to be seen. The island of Ocal lay to the south, darkly green and thickly forested, with the barest haze of wood smoke here and there indicating a village's dawn cook fires. The open seas lay behind him to the east while heading west would take him into the heart of the Redigal domain, at least until a stern trireme turned him around, most likely stripping the skiff's mast of his trading pennant for such a transgression.

A trio of small islands lay northwards, marking the edge of the deepest channel. Dyal had sought their shelter from the prevailing winds last night, not willing to trust to the skiff's sea anchor to keep him safely away from the rocks and reefs on their far side.

He looked at the message again. Last night, the Pearl had set in the arc where omens for the most intimate relationships were seen. This evening it would rise in the heavenly arc where portents for death and consequences just as severe could be found. It would join the Walking Hawk's stars, emblem for a warrior, for watchfulness and discovery. Meantime, the Opal would have moved on, into the arc for travel where it joined the stars of the Sailfish that were token for freedom and good fortune. Any omen seen beneath the Sailfish was all the more positive when seen alongside one full moon, never mind both.

So what might all this signify? Will I have any better idea by the end of today?

A pale flicker of movement caught the corner of his eye. Fishing boats were setting out from those three little islands, hauling up sails to catch the rising breeze. Dyal poked the rolled paper back through the silver ring and tucked the whole message into the pocket sewn inside his trousers' waist band.

Deft with long practise, he hauled on the ropes that angled his skiff's sail. The little boat scudded across the waves to join this flotilla. Arriving among the fishing boats, he glanced from side to side, to make sure that he didn't encroach on anyone else's course, to steal the wind from their sail, or to risk a collision.

That's odd.

Dyal frowned. None of these Redigal mariners were busy with nets. No one was scanning the waters around for whatever might indicate schools of fish beneath their hull. Instead, each vessel's look-out stood in the prow, alert to the north. Dyal followed their gaze.

Two great galleys hove into view. Longer, wider, and deeper-hulled than even the heaviest trireme, these vessels sailed the Archipelago at a warlord's wife's bidding. Their capacious holds could carry unparalleled quantities of goods to trade, driven through the waters by the triangular sails on their three tall masts or by the oarsmen, nigh on two hundred of them, hauling on the lower deck's oars. On the deck above the rowers' benches, the accommodations would be as luxurious as anything noble Aldabreshi women were accustomed to ashore.

These galleys flew the Redigal warlord's pennants. Their course would take them south and east to skirt the bulk of Ocal. After that, Dyal knew, they would be heading south. All these southernmost warlords had been invited to Chazen; to read the omens in the new year's stars and to celebrate the birth of twin baby girls to the lady Itrac. Now that beleaguered domain had two heirs and both were thriving by all accounts.

Dyal wondered what Sirket thought of his new half-sisters. The young warlord had kept his own counsel, so Telouet had said. Unlike Dau, according to the avid conversations Dyal had heard around the harbourside. Though no one could quite agree what particular emotions had prompted the storm of weeping that her maidservants reported.

The brazen clamour of a signal horn drove all such thoughts out of his head. The sound came again, startling birds out of the trees. A third time and before the reverberations faded, he saw these fishing boats that hadn't brought any nets all surging towards the great ships.

Dyal went with them, for lack of anything else to do. His confusion grew as he snatched glances at the galleys in between trimming his skiff's sail and correcting his course.

The first of the two mighty vessels sailed serenely on its way. The second was in some sort of trouble. Even at this distance, Dyal could see oars lolling uselessly in their ports. Some were already slipping free, to float away on the waves. But surely that shouldn't be possible, if their lashings were properly secured?

What was happening with the masts? With wind coming up from the south to drive this fishing fleet ever closer, both galleys should be carrying their vast canvases safely furled. The first ship showed tidily lashed sailcloth bundles along each mast's great spar.

For some unfathomable reason, the second galley had loosed its sails. Worse than that, the canvas flapped free. No one controlled the intricate network of ropes and pulleys that governed the spars and cloth. Wind and waves were making a plaything of the ship. The great galley floundered, ungainly.

Sunlight flashed on steel. Not a sword but an axe. Now Dyal was close enough to see men on the galley's deck. One hacked like a woodsman at the stays running from the rails to the masts. Those vital ropes, thick as a man's forearm, kept the masts securely upright. Without them, the wood would be free to bend and to break.

The man sprang back as the triple-stranded hemp parted and the end whipped away with lethal speed. He collided with someone else. The open deck was full of people. Full of men, Dyal corrected himself. Sailors and servants, all dressed in black cotton clothes for no readily apparent reason.

Why was no one trying to save this ship? The crew sprang onto the rail before diving into the choppy waters. Dyal winced as one rower's outstretched arms missed a floating oar by barely a hand's breadth. If the man's head had struck it, he'd have sunk senseless, to drown.

Or would he? These fishing vessels had come prepared for this very different catch. Men threw ropes to those in the water. They hooked struggling swimmers from the waves

with hooked poles. Dyal saw a bare-chested island man alerted by shouts and pointing hands. One hapless fugitive from the galley floated motionless amid the chaos. The islander dived into the sea and hauled the limp man to safety.

Though not everyone was being rescued. Dyal choked on a wordless exclamation of horror. A swimmer struggling to grab hold of a rope was smashed over the head with a brutal pole. A corpse floated past, eyes blank in death as the waves washed gushing blood from a murderous gash to his throat.

The clamour all around was deafening. Ahead, Dyal saw the galley wallow ever lower in the water. Water was sloshing inboard through the open oar ports. The sea would soon have a fatal hold on the stricken vessel.

How has this disaster struck so quickly and so completely?

Dyal looked upwards in a vain search for answers. He saw men fighting on the galley's tilting deck. Men and *zamorin*. Their pale garb marked the eunuchs out. Breath caught in his throat as he realised those two dead in the water wore unbleached cottons too.

'Aksin!' He frantically searched the waters. 'Aksin!'

'Over there!'

Dyal's head snapped around before he realised that shout wasn't for him. A Redigal islander had seen a white-clad figure swimming away from the carnage.

A zamorin who knew not to expect rescue? Aksin?

Dyal had no hope of recognising the swimmer at this distance. All he could do was go with his instincts.

The run of the breeze and waves helped him. Swinging the skiff around, he cut ahead of the closest fishing boat alerted to the fugitive in the water. Better yet, those islanders assumed that he shared their murderous intent. Their prow reared up and away as that steersman headed straight for another floundering *zamorin*.

I don't have enough hands!

Managing his own steering oar and sail took all Dyal's strength and concentration. The wind was strengthening and the little boat rocked on the mounting waves. Every rising swell snatched away his view of the white-clad swimmer until the jolt of a trough restored it.

Dyal saw his rising arm fall into the water instead of cleaving it cleanly. Fear couldn't outweigh exhaustion. The *zamorin* rolled onto his back to see his death approaching.

As Dyal recognised Aksin, elation was quenched by dread.

How can I possibly get him aboard?

Inspiration struck swift as lightning.

Use that net!

Dyal had traded finely crafted Ulla tiles for one before he left Ritsem waters. After all, he'd better pass for a fisherman until he unravelled that message's mystery.

The mesh was bundled under the stern thwart. Dyal dragged it out with one foot, all the while fighting to steer the skiff and manage the sail. Seizing his chance in a lull of the wind, he snatched a glance back at the foundering galley.

All the Redigal fishermen were occupied rescuing the last few crew. Several boats were already rowing away, heading back to the trio of islands.

Dyal knotted his sail's rope around the steering oar as best he could. He hooked one edge of the net on the skiff's rowlocks and threw the bulk of it over the side rail.

When he looked back at the waves, the *zamorin* was nowhere to be seen. A pale shape floated beneath the skiff. The upturned belly of a shark, drawn by the blood to feast? No. Dyal saw a blurred face. He dived after it.

The water closed over him, silencing the fishermen's shouts. Sunshine turned to green twilight. His questing hand found a cotton sleeve. Dyal twisted his fingers into the cloth and kicked as hard as he could for the surface. Broaching a wave, the daylight dazzled him, lungs

burning as he gulped cool air.

Rolling onto his back, he hooked his hands under Askin's armpits to raise the *zamorin's* head clear of the sea. Dyal shook his head to get water out of his eyes, craning his neck to search for the skiff. There no words for his relief when he saw it bobbing close by.

A few hard kicks and the planks loomed above them. Now the net trailing in the water offered Dyal hand and footholds as he scrambled aboard. All the while he kept one fist knotted in Aksin's tunic. The *zamorin* floated, still senseless, in the water alongside the boat.

Dyal half-lay, half-knelt, in the belly of the boat, leaning over the side rail. He threaded Aksin's hands through the net's coarse mesh, first one, then the other, before tangling the rest around the *zamorin* as thoroughly as he could.

Sitting with his back against the far rail and bracing his feet, he heaved. The skiff rocked alarmingly. Dyal pulled again. The rocking grew more perilous. Dyal refused to let go.

Askin's head and arms flopped into the boat, limp as dead fish. As the rail bit into his midriff, the *zamorin* writhed. A moment later, he vomited up the water filling his stomach. A wheezing gasp dragged air into his lungs and he fought feebly against the net.

'Stay still!'

Dyal was terrified his struggles would capsize them.

'Aksin! You're safe!'

His voice penetrated the *zamorin's* confusion. Aksin managed to drag himself into the boat to slump beside the mast, chest heaving. Dyal swiftly set a course to take them as far from the sinking galley as fast as possible.

“Do not trust the first hand that's outstretched. Take only the one that you know.” That's what the note I got said.' Aksin handed the paper back to Dyal. 'The same hand wrote this one.'

Dyal shivered despite their fire. 'He was wagering your life that I'd be there in time to find you.'

The *zamorin* shrugged and grimaced as he coughed. Dyal poured hot water from the pot over the flames into a cup full of herbs. Aksin took it and inhaled the pungent steam cautiously.

'Daish Sirket will shelter you,' Dyal promised. 'The domain—'

Aksin raised a hand, shaking his head.

Dyal waited. He threw more driftwood onto the fire. Birds chattered above them in the fringe trees clustered along this deserted shore. Dyal turned the redrock fish threaded on sticks to cook, ends wedged between the stones ringing their impromptu hearth.

'I cannot come to Daish,' Aksin said eventually. 'Everyone must believe all Redigal's *zamorin* are lost.' He swallowed another cough. 'If not, why was I the only one to survive? Was I warned? If so, by whom?' He paused again. 'There must be nothing to contradict whatever tale Coron chooses to tell of this day.'

Dyal nodded soberly as he dropped the note into the fire. The flames reduced it to a pale drift of ash. 'I see what you mean.'

Aksin managed a humourless smile. 'I wouldn't want Ulla Safar's men asking me what prompted Redigal Coron to abandon my brethren of the knife to whatever fate the seas decreed.'

'What can I do to help? Where can I take you? What do you need?' Dyal rummaged in his hidden pocket and held up the silver ring. 'You can have this for a start.'

Aksin held out a hand and caught the ring as Dyal tossed it over. 'My thanks.'

Dyal looked at him and shook his head, half smiling, half incredulous. 'You look very cheerful for someone who nearly drowned and who's lost his home and all his possessions.'

Aksin surprised him with a grin. 'But think what I have gained.'

Dyal handed him a cooked fish, his face questioning.

'Now I have my freedom as well as my life. I can go anywhere and tell whatever tale I choose to explain my past.' Aksin looked around, managing a deep breath of satisfaction without prompting a cough. 'As long as everyone believes that Hinai Redigal's steward is truly dead.'

He bit a careful mouthful of white flesh and crisp red skin from the hot fish. His eyes fixed on Dyal as he chewed and swallowed. 'You alone hold my fate in your hands.'

Dyal used the point of his knife to slice along the fish's backbone. He levered away a thick flake between blade and thumb. 'I will never speak of this day. Not even to my lord Sirket or the lady Dau.'

So Ulla Safar won't ever be able to trace the ruin of his scheme back to Yshri or Inais.