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# PearlofPatmos

*Blade Book 07*

*by Jeffrey Lord*

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## CHAPTER 1



It was one of those perfect days which so rarely come to England . The first day of June. The sun was golden, the Channel deepest sapphire, the air drowsy with bee hum and bird song. The Dorset littoral was a rolling quilt of mustard and dun over which cuckoos wheeled and emitted their plaintive cries, searching for foster nests.

Richard Blade, sunning himself in the skimpiest of breech cloths, lay on his hard flat belly and squinted over the corundum waves that came lazily in, wearing flecks of lace at their throats. Far out, under a canopy of brown smoke, a coaster was making for the Thames and London . Blade, who had read poetry at Oxford and promptly forgotten most of it, found some of Masefield's popping unbidden into his mind ... dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack... with a cargo of ivory, and apes and peacocks, sandalwood and cedarwood and sweet white wine...

No matter that the poet had not written it so—Blade's version better fitted the day. He turned over and closed his eyes, peering into the red lagoon at the dark shadow play. He drowsed, relaxing, watching the sciomachy behind his eyelids, the amorphous and fluid Rorschach blots that melded and intersticed and—and blotted out the sun? His face was in full shadow now although there were no clouds in the sky. A trickle of sand, hourglass slow, bounced off his muscled belly like a miniature avalanche.

He had not heard her approach.

Blade's first impression, when he opened his eyes and stared up into hers, was of green glacial ice. Not so much a coldness as a reserve, narrowed at him in a mix of curiosity and indifference. From a small brown fist she continued to pour sand on his stomach. Blade said nothing.

"They told me in the village that this cove is usually deserted at this time. I came here because I wanted to be alone. Now I find a huge creature like you taking up practically all of it."

Her supply of sand ran out and she dusted her hands. Blade, whose training made such observation automatic, noted that her hands were ordinarily well kept but now had crescents of dirt beneath the nails. She was wearing a simple looking mini-dress which he guessed was expensive. Her feet were bare, as were the long slim legs vanishing into brief black pants. He gave her a faint smile.

"Well-intentioned of the locals," he said. "And ordinarily they would be right. I don't usually come here at this bane. Today—well, today is a little special."

J had called that morning. Lord Leighton had the master computer ready. The next day, Blade was due to go through the machine for the seventh time. To explore another Dimension X.

For a moment she pouted, and the pursed small mouth spoiled her face. Then she smiled and was beautiful again. The ice-green eyes watched him with a glint of private amusement.

"You're looking up my dress," she said.

Blade nodded. "So I am. Considering our relative positions it would be hard not to. Of course you don't have to stand like that. I have an idea that you are what is commonly known as a lady. Ladies are supposed to be fairly modest, are they not?"

She tilted her head to one side and stared down at him. She had a Grecian beauty, narrow-faced, full-mouthed, straight high-bridged nose. Her arms were slim and well formed, rather muscular, and Blade doubted that she was wearing a bra. Their glances locked and held for a long moment. She was the first to laugh, displaying small even teeth that were white but did not dazzle.

"I'm not, very," she said.

"Not what? Modest?"

"Uh huh. I have never been. Mother was always at me about it, but it never took. Anyway it doesn't really matter, does it? I do have pants on."

Blade nodded. He had the impression, gone immediately, that he had seen this girl before. Or someone very like her. He yawned and clasped his big hands beneath his head. The girl put her toe in his armpit and tickled the black hair.

"You don't shave under your arms."

Blade closed his eyes. He shook his head. "No."

She continued to tickle his armpit with her toe. "Do you think it is unmanly or something?"

"No."

Blade was silent. He kept his eyes closed. He could smell her body, a compound of clean woman flesh and light sweat. She took her toe away and for a moment there was silence.

She said, "You aren't going to go away and let me have this little beach, are you?"

"No."

"You aren't exactly a gentleman, are you?"

He did not open his eyes, but had to grin. "Sometimes I am. In some matters. Depends on the place and time and the people, and my mood. In this case you are the interloper, not me."

"Interloper? I like that! Anyway this is not a private beach. Anyone can use it. They told one so in the

village."

Blade smiled. "You have stumbled on the one village in England in which all the inhabitants are idiots. This is a private beach, but they will never admit it. Makes sense, I suppose, from their viewpoint. They are all descended from smugglers. Some of them are still at it, without doubt. I've had the cottage for five years now and they still think I'm with Her Majesty's revenue. A spy. But I do own the beach rights."

"I came down here because I fancied a swim." She sounded pouty again. She went on, "Do open your eyes. I can't abide people who don't look at me when they talk."

Blade opened his eyes. He propped himself up on an elbow. The affair had to be straightened out. Obviously she was not going to go away. He was not quite sure, looking at her again, that he wanted her to. Tomorrow he'd go through the computer. Today was, well, today. And his life of late had been monastic.

She stood very near him, hands on her hips, wide-legged, black pants still plainly in view. He stared pointedly until she twisted about and fell to her knees beside him, trying to pull the mini-skirt down with no success at all. Her inner thighs were tender brown velvet, rubbed and polished.

The green eyes considered him and seemed not so glacial now. "You do look at a person, don't you. But somehow I get the impression that you are a gentleman. Even if you are so huge."

Blade chuckled. "I've never heard that size kept a man from being a gentleman."

"No-o. I suppose not. But there is such a lot of you! And muscles. Are you an acrobat or an athlete or something?"

Blade, who had taken blues (similar to American letters) in every major sport at Oxford, nodded. "I was an athlete. In my long lost youth. Never an acrobat. And never a something, whatever that is."

"All right." She nodded vigorously, her brown hair rippling about her slim shoulders. "I will take it that you are a gentleman. And I wish to swim. I have no suit. So you will let me have the beach, please? I promise I won't be long. No more than half an hour."

Something in her eyes—some hint of tease, or promise?—caused Blade to answer as he did. It was, he divined, the answer she wanted to hear.

"Swim all you like," he said. "With my permission. But I intend to remain here. This is my beach, remember." He grinned. "I have no intention of being evicted by an interloper."

She feigned indignation well. "But I have no suit! I told you that. I, well, I can hardly—"

There was no mistaking the tease in her green eyes. She leaned toward him, chin in hand. "You really don't know who I am, do you?"

Blade was about to admit his thought of a few minutes earlier, that she was vaguely familiar, but checked the impulse. It just might, somehow spoil the game that was slowly, but gaining points every moment, developing between them. Blade was, suddenly very much interested in the game. He was not a man to be unappreciative of what the gods send.

He shook his head. "Haven't the faintest idea who you are. Should I know? Are you someone important?"

Again the hint of pout. "No-o. Well, maybe some people think so, but not really. If you see what I mean?"

"I don't. Does it matter?"

The girl stood up. "No. Not the slightest. I like it. We'll have a game, shall we?"

Blade smiled. "By all means. What kind of a game?"

"We won't tell names. Now or ever. And we must each promise never to try to see the other again. Will you do that? We're strangers now and we'll stay strangers. We will never, never see each other again. Whatever we say, or whatever happens between us, will be forgotten when this day is over. It will be like it never happened. Do you promise?"

"Whatever happens? What do you expect to happen?"

A shrug of slim shoulders, a liquidity of unrestrained breasts beneath the dress. "I don't know. Neither do you. This is part of the game. We just let things develop naturally. Maybe nothing *will* happen."

Blade laughed. "That I do not like to think about. But all right, I promise. When does the game start?"

She knelt beside him again. "Right now. But first we have to have names—no, don't tell me your real one. I mean made up names. Hmmm—let me see."

Her eyes roved over his body. She traced a finger through his chest hair. "I think," said Blade, "that I am going to like this game."

She put a hand over his mouth. Her fingers were cool and crusted with sand. "Be quiet. Ummm, yes. Hercules. No help for it. It's obvious, and a little trite, but you will just have to be Hercules. You agree?"

Blade reached for his cigarettes and lighter on a nearby blanket. "I suppose I must. As long as I don't have to clean out my stables. Who are you going to be? Something mythical and classical as well?"

"Of course. I am Diana."

Blade nodded. "Good choice. It suits you, I think. Goddess of the moon. And of hunting."

The green eyes narrowed at him. "I am—very good at hunting."

Blade leaned back and exhaled smoke. "And I the willing prey, Diana. Now—are you going to swim or not? I have just remembered a bird and bottle at the cottage. A couple of birds, in fact, and all the bottles we need. Interested?"

"Very much. After my swim."

She glanced up and down the little cove. The beach was small, a scallop of sand and shingle eroded by the sea at the base of overhanging cliffs. Some hundreds of yards down the cliff facade a wooden stair switchbacked precariously up to the rim.

"Can anyone see us?"

Blade flipped his cigarette away and smiled at her. He was still not quite convinced that she would do it, but was prepared to be pleasantly surprised.

"The villagers may be idiots and smugglers, but I doubt there are many Peeping Toms around. They leave me pretty well alone. Of course there is old Professor Wright. He strolls along the cliffs sometimes. But he's nearsighted and more than a little around the bend. He wears an Inverness cape and a deerstalker cap and thinks he is Sherlock Holmes in retirement. He even keeps bees."

"Professor Wright sounds like an old darling," said the girl. "I shouldn't mind him seeing me. As long

as there are no cameras—"

There was a clue in that last imperfect sentence, but Blade let it slide past. At the moment he did not care who she was. What she was—that was the important thing. And what she was kept him speechless for a moment.

She pulled the mini-dress over her head in a single motion and let it drop on the sand. She faced him, wide-legged, hands on hips, half-smiling and half-serious, with no preening of her body. She simply offered it for inspection.

The black pants were skintight and plain, with elastic in the waist and leg bands. Several long curly tendrils of brown hair strayed beneath the elastic near her mons pubis. Her legs, Blade thought, could only be called elegant. An old-fashioned word, but it fitted. Her legs were so good, so slim and sweetly curving, with thighs and knees barely kissing, that they did not need the arch decoy of high heels to show them off.

Her breasts were beyond description. Blade forgot words and simply gazed, his loins excited and moving. He was something of a connoisseur of breasts and he immediately recognized that hers were hybrid, half Nordic, half Mediterranean. Not tanned pears, but with a hint of conoid; not warm melons, but swelling to round fullness. Her nipples were half-awakened rosebuds.

"You chose your name well," Blade admitted. "You are Diana. In the flesh. As she must have been imagined by the ancients."

She tossed her thick brown hair behind her shoulders. The movement set her breasts to rippling. She regarded him steadily, lower lip caught in upper teeth. "When you have looked your fill," she told him, "we can get on with the game. There are rules, especially one. I think you had better know about it."

"There are always rules," said Blade with a mock scowl. "They usually spoil things. What particular rule did you have in mind?"

"You can look at me, but you may not touch."

"Oh?" He made no effort to disguise his dismay.

"Until I say you can—if I ever do. Do you agree? If you don't we must stop the game here and now."

"Oh, I agree," Blade said hastily. Under his breath he muttered, "*La belle dame sans merci*."

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Maybe not. Not entirely. We shall have to see. Are you going to swim with me?"

He reached hastily for another cigarette. "Er, not just this minute. You go on. I'll have a smoke and watch. I wouldn't go out too far—there are some undercurrents that can be nasty at times."

There was pure and joyous malice in the green eyes. She stared at his breech cloth. "You daren't stand up," she laughed. "You're afraid I'll see how excited you are."

Blade busied himself with the lighter. It was running low on fuel. "Don't talk nonsense. You forget who I am. Hercules would never be bothered by such a thing."

Her laughter came in a full-bodied shout. She bent over, her breasts pendants of symmetry. "You're embarrassed. You really are embarrassed. Hercules is embarrassed by Diana!"

"Like hell he is." Blade joined her in laughter. He stood up, hoping that he was right about the seclusion of the cove. He had never been disturbed here, but that meant little. There *could* be peepers,

and binoculars, and if so there would be, to paraphrase the old Yank song, a hot time in the old village tonight. Tongues would be clacking in the pubs. Blade thought of J's probable reaction, should he ever hear, and had to grin. J was something of an old woman. Astute, cunning at his job, but on the prim side. Lord Leighton, that scandalous old man, was another matter. He would revel in such a contretemps. Would demand details and relish them with goatish laughter.

"Oh!" She was staring at the massive bulge in his breechcloth.

"Is something wrong?" he inquired innocently.

"Oh, my God!"

She turned and ran into the seas. Blade followed her, glancing up at the cliff rim. No sign of anyone. No revealing glint of sun on glasses. They were, Blade thought as he plunged into the cold water, probably going to get away with it. For the sake of all concerned he hoped so. The local constable, Bob Anderson, was a stolid man and capable enough but lacking in imagination. Blade went deep into the blue water, down to where it shaded into a cold green, the color of her eyes, and nearly choked at the thought of Diana and Hercules in magistrate's court.

When he surfaced there was no sign of the girl. He swam out a hundred yards, cutting effortlessly through the wavelets, noting that the coaster's flag of smoke had nearly vanished. He did not worry. Such a girl, Diana, could surely handle herself in the water.

There was a frothing explosion near him. She shot out of the water like a porpoise, in a rainbow of spray, laughing at him. Water sequins sparkled as the sun caught her breasts. She splashed water at him, treading easily, tossing her sodden hair behind her shoulders.

"This is marvelous. I haven't been in the water since I got back from the south of France. I think I must be part mermaid. I love the water so."

Blade, also treading water, kept his distance. He frowned. "I much prefer that you remain Diana. From the pictures I have seen of mermaids there seems to be an essential part missing. And no merman ever shouted, '*vive la difference*.' In fact I have always felt sorry for mermen—they must get some very nasty shocks."

She moved a little closer to him. Her eyes widened and she caught her lower lip in her teeth. "You know, Hercules, there is something about you. At first I thought you were just a big beautiful muscle-bound oaf, but I was wrong about that."

"Hercules," Blade said smugly, "was always underrated."

"Be serious for a minute. I almost wish we weren't playing the game. So we could tell our real names and—and maybe see each other again sometime."

"The times are out of joint," he said. Tomorrow he'd go through the computer into Dimension X. The future, his private future, consisted of the hours between this moment and the time he sat down in the chair in Lord L's laboratory. Beyond that there were no certainties. That he had always come back meant nothing. The time would come when he, or, if his luck held, another man in his place would not come back.

Diana moved a bit closer. "What does that mean? The times are out of joint? Don't you, wouldn't you, want to see me again? If we could, I mean?"

Blade smiled at her. Stop the glooming. Hell! He had come back six times. He would come back this time.

"Hercules' mother raised no fools," he told her. "And it is only a game, you know. Shall we stop playing it and get to know each other?"

For a moment he was certain she would agree. The look in her eyes, colored a darker green and warmed by the sapphire water, told him that. Then she shook her head. "No. We can't. I was just thinking crazy for a moment. We're still playing the game."

Blade was put out. He ached for her. "Then let's get on with it." He was gruff. "That bird and bottle is still waiting at my cottage."

Again she shook her head. "I think not. I've changed my mind about that."

Blade scowled, not altogether in jest. "I never read that Diana was a tease."

She laughed, eyes green slits, and splashed at him. "Oh, but she was! She was a terrible woman, in many ways. Cruel, when she wanted to be. When she was angry. Didn't she change some poor man into a stag and have her dogs tear him to pieces? Just because he watched her bathing?"

"I don't know." He sounded sulky, and was. The whole bit was becoming *jejeune*. She was putting him on, this strange little bitch from nowhere, and he had been cooperating all too readily in making a fool of himself.

She moved closer. "Hercules is losing his temper," she gibed. "We don't want that. I suppose I had better relax the rules a bit."

Her body was against his. She put her arms about his neck and her mouth close to his ear. Her breasts, buoyant in the sea water, flattened against his chest.

She whispered in his ear. "Hercules may kiss Diana if he wishes."

"He wishes."

They clung together, half-floating, half-treading water, their mouths together. "Let's swim out a little farther. There *might* be someone watching from the cliffs."

Blade saw no point in this, but did not demur. At the moment he could not have cared less about peepers. His massive body was crammed with lust for her. He towed her along, feeling her sleek wet thighs against his, caressing her sleek tan hide, watching her rosebud nipples turn into pink needles. He swam out another hundred yards, then a hundred more. Neither was in the least winded or tired. She might, he thought, be nearly as good in the water as he was. Blade could swim twenty miles without breathing hard.

"This is far enough," she breathed. They kissed. She put her hand down into his breech cloth. "Hercules," she murmured. "Hercules indeed."

Still holding him in a firm grip, squeezing and stroking, she arched her back and bowed a little away from him. Mischief danced in the narrowed green eyes and in the little smile.

"People have told me that this is impossible. You know—that you can't really do anything underwater."

He was finished with nonsense. He tugged at the black pants. He said, "People tell you anything. Now, Diana, will you please shut up!"

"You shut me up. Fill me up."

He closed her lips with his own and she stopped his mouth with her tongue. She kept her eyes tightly

closed as she twisted and helped him strip off her pants.

"Don't lose them. I—"

"Be quiet. Too late, anyway. They're gone."

"I don't care. To hell with them. Where are you, darling?"

Blade thrust strongly between her welcoming thighs. Her hand found and guided him. "Oh, yes. Yes. I thought I had misplaced you. Oh, yes. There. Just there."

Without taking her mouth from his she gave a little leap and pinioned his waist in her long thighs. Blade slid easily, deeply, into that moist undersea cavern. She locked her ankles behind him, squeezing and tugging with amazing strength. After a moment she bit his ear and whispered, "I want every bit of you. Every bit!"

A minute passed in which they did not speak. Their bodies spoke, and her sighs and Blade's breathing, but no words came.

Then she said: "I hope you can tread water for both of us, my love. I shan't be much help. Oh, dear God!"

Blade, frantically exploring the long and narrow grotto that clasped him, that was at once victor and captive, longing to surrender, to be subjected, felt himself near to climax.

As was she. She murmured in his ear. "I shan't be long. Not long."

He somehow managed the words, "Breathe deep," barely coherent above the tortured rasp of his breathing. She nodded and clung to him in a fast-rushing last frenzy. They sank beneath the pale blue water.

Downward. Slowly. Turning and twisting and drifting. Through liquid luminescence into growing darkness. Her eyes were closed, her hair a trail of brown kelp, her nose and mouth pinched shut and pressed close to Blade's face. Down and down, both shuddering, convulsing, two intertwined coral statues, two drowned and yet living things. And then not two creatures, but one. Fused. Welded. Sharing the volcanic experience.

They floated upward in gentleness, limbs locked. They surfaced and saw the sun with surprise. Nothing had changed. Eternity had lasted less than a minute.

For a minute or two they floated lazily side by side, silent, each content and harboring secret thoughts that would remain secret. Blade held her hand, small and cold, and at last said, "There is always the killjoy, the practical character, who must drag the balloon down to earth; I guess I'm elected. We are in something of a pickle, Diana. We have lost your pants."

Somehow he had expected her to laugh. When she did not, when she said nothing, he swirled in the water to see her face better. She was regarding him with languor, her misty eyes still remembering ecstasy. Blade put his cheek against one of her breasts. She stroked his sleek damp head, but after a moment pulled away from him.

"No matter," she said. "I still have my frock. And my car is parked in a lane near the cliffs. I'll be all right."

Blade saw a solution. "I'll go in first and bring your frock out to you. I don't suppose water will ruin it?"



She did smile then, and traced her fingers over his face. "No. I have hundreds of frocks. You're making too much of it. There is something else—I must go. Now. This instant."

He was not surprised. Had been half expecting it. He glanced at the beach. They were at least a quarter of a mile out.

She read his look "I'll be fine. The distance is nothing. You—you won't try to follow me? To find out who I am—or anything?"

Blade shook his head. "Not anything. The forsaken merman promises. Goodbye, Diana." He would have had it otherwise, but under the circumstances perhaps it was just as well.

"Goodbye, Hercules. I'll never forget you. Or this day."

Their glances met and lingered. Her eyes were as green as when he first gazed into them, but the glacial ice had melted.

"Neither of us," Blade said, "is likely to forget this day."

She kissed him lightly on the mouth, said goodbye again, and was gone.

He floated, treading now and then, watching her slim body cut the water with an expert eight-beat crawl. He scanned the cliff tops and made out a tiny figure wandering along the path. Old Professor Wright. Even at that distance Blade's hawkish vision could make out the cape and the deerstalker hat. Today the old man had a butterfly net with him. After specimens. Blade shook his head and grinned. The Professor was a specimen, no doubt of that, but harmless. He could hardly see beyond the end of his nose. No trouble there.

He saw her leave the water and race to where her dress lay on the sand. She did not look out to sea. Blade began to swim with slow powerful strokes. She was making for the cliff stair now, running easily and with a coltish grace. Blade allowed himself regret. Damn, anyway! It would have been nice, fun, to come to know this lovely stranger. He had been rather at odds with life since he had lost Zoe Cornwall. Apart from his duties, the computer forays into Dimension X, life had been on the bleak side. There were personality changes induced by the restructuring of his brain cells, not all of them for the better, and for a time booze had been a problem. After that it had been women, as he sought, or so J advised him, a surrogate for Zoe. Show girls, barmaids, ladies, and tramps, West End debs and Cockney tarts, Blade had tried them all. None brought him more than temporary surcease. J had voiced concern and alarm and even Lord Leighton, the old rogue, had begun *totch-tch*—a bit.

It had ended at last. Since his last trip through the computer Blade had been living in virtual seclusion in the Dorset cottage. Now this girl from nowhere. Gone back into nowhere.

He saw her on the rim of the cliff. She was in silhouette against an apple green sky. She raised a hand and waved once. Blade did not wave back. She lingered for a moment, motionless, and he sensed those green eyes on him. She turned and walked back out of sight.

When he came out of the sea a few minutes later there were only her footprints to prove that it had been no dream, no fantasy. A fantastic experience, but no fantasy. As he went about gathering his things, smoking a cigarette, he again wondered where he had seen her face before this day. He was sure now that he had never met her in person. But he had seen that face. Where?

The path along the cliffs was deserted as he made his way to the cottage. The phone was ringing as he entered and he did not hurry. It would only be J checking on him. Wanting to be assured that all was well. Tomorrow the computer. A journey to hell or paradise.

Blade reached for the strident phone. Between rings he heard, could have sworn he heard, the muffled roar of a high-powered sports car pulling away in low gear.

Blade grinned. He hoped that Diana would go straight home, wherever that was. If not, he hoped she would be very careful how she sat, or bent over. He was still laughing when he picked up the phone.

## CHAPTER 2

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J had asked Blade to stop in at Copra House. It was from this antique structure, on Bart Lane near Threadneedle Street, that J ran the affairs of MI6A. Here he had a suite of dingy cubicles that were offices only in a symbolic sense. J, as Blade entered, appeared to be his placid, pipe-smoking, tweedy self. Upper-class, understated, civil servant.

Blade knew better. J had aged considerably since the computer experiments began. J was nervous at times now, where BTC—Before The Computer—J had had ice water for blood. Blade could understand. His own nerves were not what they had been.

J greeted Blade with a casual wave of his pipe toward a chair. "Good morning, Richard. You are looking extremely fit."

Blade shrugged his big shoulders. "I am. I should be. I awoke this morning to blackbirds singing and honeysuckle on the vine. Pippa passing and all that rot."

J sucked on his pipe and gave Blade a meditative look. "Methinks the lad doth protest too much. To be direct, Richard, I don't think you're too happy about going into Dimension X again."

Blade grinned at the older man. "I'll level with you, sir, as the Yanks put it. I could pass this cup. Not that I will, naturally. It's my job. I'll do it."

J nodded as he knocked pipe ash into his palm, spilling it on his vest. "Of course, my boy. Of course you will. But it needn't be forever, you know. That is, er, rather why I asked you to stop past before you go to the Tower."

Blade left his chair and wandered to one of the grimy windows. He looked down into Lothbury Street. A newsboy was standing in a doorway, out of the rushing city throng, holding his placard on high. Blade read the large black letters without much comprehension: *LADY DIANA DUCKS DAVID*

Blade smiled at the labored alliteration and turned back into the room. He was far from a snob, but the truth was that he had never read the News of The World in his life. A lively paper, and not too fastidious about the truth. Yet as he faced J again he could not help wondering who the unfortunate David was, and why Lady Diana had ducked him.

"I think you have a right to know," said J, "that Lord L and I are trying to find a replacement for you. It is not easy, I assure you. His Lordship has been running cards through his computers like mad. So far he hasn't come up with anything much. We do have, er, some likely candidates. About twenty odd who measure up in a superficial sense, at least. Out of the lot there may be one who will measure up. If we have the luck."

Blade slouched back into his chair and crossed an ankle over a knee. He smiled at J. "Cooing to sack me, eh? Work not up to snuff? You think I'm past it?"

For a moment J thought he was serious. He began, "My dear fellow. You know better than—" He stopped, gave Blade a reproachful look, then continued, "I am perfectly serious, Richard. Absolutely.

The pitcher can go to the well too often and that mustn't happen. In any case it is only good sense, good science and good technology. The Americans, for instance, are very careful about overdoing it with their space people. One trip to the moon is usually the limit, two at the most. Strain, nervous tension, even fear—and we all have that—these things can be cumulative and they take a toll."

Blade regarded his chief with wry amusement. "You don't have to sell me, sir. I've been out there six times and I am ready to quit. As of now. Would you like me to write out my resignation?"

J looked miserable. "I only wish it were as easy as that, Richard. It isn't, of course. Lord L is waiting for you now."

Blade stood up, his sinewy bulk making the room appear even smaller than it was. His dark hair nearly touched the ceiling. He winked at J.

"Then why are we wasting time here? Let's get on with it, sir. Who knows—this might be an easy one."

It would not be, of course. As always there would be death and terror lurking out there in Dimension X.

They left Copra House by a side entrance and came into Lothbury Street. The newsboy was still placarding his black headline. Blade nodded toward the man and said, "Who in the hell do you suppose David is?" It was in the nature of a rhetorical question. J was the last man to *beau courant* with London's various subcultures.

J surprised him. He glanced at the placard and then smiled at Blade. "You're rather out of things down in Dorset, I see."

"True. I like it that way. And if I did have a paper brought to the cottage it wouldn't be *News of The World*."

J raised a finger to a taxi. It ignored them. J joined Blade again on the curb. "You mustn't be smug, Richard. Admittedly the paper is an abomination, a penny dreadful, but it does have a certain zest and life to it. Vulgar, yes, but alive." J made a prim mouth. "There are moments when I think the *Times* could do with a little vulgarity."

Blade did not hear him, not really. He was staring across the busy street at the newsboy. *LADY DIANA DUCKS DAVID* The newsboy was holding up a paper, quarter folded, and Blade could see that there was a picture, a three column 'cut,' beneath the screaming headline. The photo was of a woman, but even Blade's eyes could not make out details at that distance.

J signaled another taxi and was again ignored. Blade crossed the street and bought a paper, giving the man a shilling and not staying for his change. He recrossed to where J stared in surprise, glancing at the picture as he nimbly dodged a lorry.

It was she. His Diana. Diana of the beach. It was incredible, impossible—yet there she was smiling out of the page. It was a posed studio shot, a still. The caption beneath it said: *Lady Diana as she appeared in her most recent film, "No More Camelots."*

Of course. That was where he had seen her. In the flicks. In scores of magazines and papers.

As he rejoined J on the curb the old man said, "You must be very curious indeed, Richard. Risking traffic like this for a thruppenny paper."

Blade grinned at his chief. "I get these spells, sir. Worse than any cat." He affected a Cockney accent. "Cor, mate, it comes over me all sudden, it does. If I don't know who David is I'll blow me flipping lid."

J missed hailing an empty taxi and muttered a genteel curse. "I could have told you that, my boy. Sir David Throckmorton-Pell. The lady's husband."

Blade kept an impassive face. He glanced again at the picture of Diana. Lady Diana! The minx. She had used her right name.

"I've heard of Sir David, of course. The judge. The one who sits in the Old Bailey? A pretty savage old boy, from all I've read."

J had his own sense of humor. He said, "That's the one. They call him 'The Rope,' I hear, and I hardly suppose it is because he likes to tie knots—unless they are hangman's knots."

Blade hardly heard him. He was staring at the picture and remembering. The blue sea. Green eyes. Sinking down and down until—

"Richard—Richard! Good grief, man. Are you in a trance?"

Blade glanced up. J had snared a taxi and was already ensconced, the door open and waiting, the driver looking impatient. Blade folded the paper and thrust it into his jacket pocket. "Sorry, sir. Wool-gathering again."

J directed the taximan to the Tower and then gave Blade a sharp glance. Blade avoided his eyes and stared out at the traffic. It was clotted like stale jam. They would be a time getting to the Tower.

J said, "Why the interest in Lady Diana's peccadilloes? Do you know the lady?"

Blade avoided a direct lie, but only just. "Not really know her," he said. "I've seen her in films."

He did *not* really know her. He thought of the old joke about sexual congress not constituting an introduction, and had difficulty in repressing a smile.

J leaned forward and spoke sharply to the driver. "Can't you go a little faster, man?" Lord Leighton would have the computer ready and His Lordship did not like to be kept waiting.

They were trapped in a endless maze of traffic. The driver scowled in his mirror and said, "If I 'ad wings, Gov, I could maybe fly over this blinkin' mess. But this 'ere cab didn't come equipped with no wings, so we waits. Yer can always walk, Gov."

J settled back in frustration. Blade took the paper from his pocket and began to skim through the story about Lady Diana. J craned to see the picture. "Quite a lovely girl, isn't she?"

Blade nodded. "Beautiful." And passionate. Fey. Certainly amoral—somehow he could not think of her as immoral—with a hard core of honest lust and a sweetness to temper it. All of this he must keep to himself.

J began to stuff his pipe, resigned now to the long wait and the fact that they would be late and Lord L would be angry. Helmeted bobbies appeared and began to sort out the traffic amid an unholy din of squawking horns.

J, reading over Blade's shoulder, said, "She has run away from the old boy again, eh? Not the first time, either. Not much news in that, really, but of course they have to puff it up. Make what they can of it. A pity, really. For both of them. Of course they should have known better—these May and December

things never work out."

By this time Blade had finished the story. The Lady Diana was a sometime film actress, a member of the Jet Set, of the Now and Beautiful people, and she had an independent fortune. That mini-dress she had so raffishly tossed on the sand—it had probably cost a hundred pounds.

"Very odd, that marriage. Can't imagine why either of them got into it. It isn't as though she were a totsy on the make—quite a good family, you know. Her father is Baron Gervase. Tons of money. Pulp and paper products in the Midlands, something like that."

Blade gave his boss a sideways look. This was a facet of J he had never seen before. But then J was a spymaster and it was his job to know about people. All sorts of people. Still—

It rather amused Blade to see J on the defensive. "I do occasionally read Anthony Asquith's column in the *Mirror*," the older man admitted. "Pays to keep up with things, you know."

"Of course," said Blade gravely.

"It's mostly guess and hearsay," J continued. "But now and then one comes across a kernel of truth."

Blade nodded. "I'm sure."

J sucked at his pipe. It had gone out. "A little light reading is good for one at times."

Blade laughed. "You needn't apologize, sir."

"I'm not apologizing, damn it. It's just that, well, I know it is all a lot of bumf, but it is fascinating to read about these people at times. Utterly worthless, most of them, with far too much money, but one has to admit that they are not humdrum."

"Yes," agreed Blade. "One must admit that." As the taxi lurched forward at last he regarded J covertly. J was head of MI6, England's chief spy apparatus. Certainly nothing humdrum about that job—except, perhaps, to J. Since the advent of the computer J had been head of MI6A, the Security Authority set up to preserve the secret of Dimension X. He was a member of a select small group sharing the greatest secret since the Manhattan Project. Yet he read gossip columns to ease his boredom. Or, and in all honesty this must be a more likely reason, to ease his tensions, to gain some relief from the awesome burden of responsibility he carried.

Blade shook his head. It was a mad world.

They were out of the traffic snarl now and making good time. J, now that he had confessed his weakness, had in effect cried *peccavito* the charge of reading a gossip monger, prattled on happily. Anthony Asquith, in the *Mirror*, was apparently an ardent champion of the Lady Diana. Hardly a column passed that did not mention her.

Blade remembered something she had said on the beach—something about cameras? "As long as there are no cameras"? That made sense, unless the lady lied. Very few of those people *really* minded the flash bulbs.

"When they quarrel," J was saying, "or get too bored with each other, Lady Diana simply takes off without any explanation. The boredom, I should imagine, is mostly on her side. She takes her checkbook and a suitcase or two and just goes. Sooner or later she always turns up—in New York, Hong Kong, Tangier, the south of France. It is said," and J chuckled, "that the lady has a whim of iron."

They were nearing the Tower of London. Blade, listening to J with one ear, sought to reconstruct a picture of Sir David Throckmorton-Pell in his mind. Pictures of the judge, 'The Rope,' did not appear in

the public prints as often as did those of his wife, but Blade had seen them. He scowled as the image formed in his mind. Sir David, peruked and black-gowned, his white bands glistening in contrast to the dark and feral face, the parrot nose and thin lips, the small eyes not quite wide-set enough. A perfect picture of a hanging judge. The Rope. The old bastard, Blade thought with what he acknowledged was irrational anger, must be seventy. Or very near.

As the taxi stopped near the ancient Tower, another picture flashed into Blade's mind. He was in the dock and Sir David on the bench. The Old Bailey was crowded and they all knew. Sir David knew. He was putting the black kerchief on his periwig as he prepared to announce sentence.

"You, Richard Blade, sometimes using the nom de plume of Hercules, have been tried and found guilty of the crime of concupiscence toward the Lady Diana. You have, further, known the lady carnally and in so doing have defiled the coastal waters of Her Majesty. For this heinous crime I sentence you to hang by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead."

Blade laughed. J was watching him with a puzzled expression. "What is it Richard? We're here, you know."

"Nothing," said Blade. "Nothing at all, sir. I just thought of something ridiculous."

J paid the cabby. "I wish/could think of something plausible to tell Lord L. He won't believe traffic. He only leaves his labs once or twice a year, and then he goes in a limousine to see the Prime Minister."

"I'm sure he will forgive us, sir. Here comes our escort."

The burly Special Branch men who met and escorted them around to the site of the old Watergate were new to Blade. J saw to that. These men were outsiders, on the fringe of things, never allowed in the sanctum newly carved from the rock far below the Tower. They served for one tour only and were forever after bound by the Official Secrets Act.

J and Blade followed the men down a long tunnel, through the now-familiar maze of sub-basements to a bronze elevator door. One of the Special Branch men pressed a button and they waited. A hydraulic sighing began in the shaft.

One of the guards, a beaky nosed man with shoulders nearly as wide as Blade's, eyed J and said, "His Lordship has called up several times, sir. Inquiring for you. Seemed to think you had gotten lost in the Tower somehow."

J acknowledged this with a nod and a grunt. A moment later the car arrived. J stepped into it with Blade. He was now permitted to accompany Blade as far as the master computer room, a privilege that had not been easily won. Lord Leighton was a tyrant in his own domain. There were those, in fact, who considered the old boffin a tyrant in any domain.

There were no controls in the car. As some signal was given from below it began to dive, down and down, gaining speed. Blade, and J, had both been through this many times and still could not keep their stomachs in place.

The elevator car seemed to be in free fall. J clung to a handrail, biting fiercely on his pipe, a look of near panic on his face. Blade laughed. He knew that Lord L himself manipulated the elevator. His Lordship was having his little joke—and paying them back for being late.

Brakes gripped and held and the car began to slow. It eased to a stop and the bronze door slid back. Lord Leighton was waiting for them in a well-lighted foyer, barren except for a desk and two chairs. His Lordship stood, supporting himself at the desk, his polio-racked body encased in a white gown that hung on him like a shroud. He was a hunchback and as they moved toward him he grimaced

and shifted his position to ease the constant pain in his hump. He glared at them with his yellow lion's eyes and directed all his venom at J.

"Where in the bloody hell have you been, man? How many times do I have to tell you that when I make a setting on the computer *wemuststay* on schedule. To the 1000th of a minute! Now you've gone and bloody well bollixed up things—now I'm in the middle of a cycle. We'll have to wait until I can reset."

J was a man who did not, as a rule, allow himself to be bullied. He often quarreled viciously with Lord L. Now he turned the other cheek and made propitiatory sounds. Lord L ignored him and crooked a finger at Blade.

"Sit down, Richard, sit down. Sorry there isn't another chair, J, but then we don't really need you, do we?"

"I don't mind standing," J said calmly.

"Suit yourself." Lord Leighton shrugged and slipped crabwise into a chair at his desk. He picked up a pen and began to riffle through a thick sheaf of papers. "Might as well stay here. We're as private as we would be in the computer cage. It will be an hour or a bit more before I can bring the machine into exact phase again. You're looking extremely fit, Richard. Fit and ready. You are ready, I presume? No qualms? No last minute doubts?"

Blade, who had remained standing in deference to J, said that he felt very well.

"No more than the usual qualms and doubts," he added. He thought of what J had said about finding a replacement and was about to mention it when he saw J shake his head. It was not to be spoken of. For a moment he wondered why, then sloughed it off. J must have his reasons, as would Lord L. It would be *most* difficult, Blade thought, to find a replacement for him. He was not given to false modesty. But he had been through the computer six times, his brain structure twisted and altered to enable him to perceive and adapt to Dimension X. He could not—they all knew it—go on indefinitely. Of late Blade had often likened himself to a veteran fighter who wanted to quit before his brains were hopelessly scrambled. But for now he must forget that. The mission was upcoming.

There was another factor. Only now, for the first time, did he admit it to himself, bring it into the open, let it seep from the unconscious to the conscious level. He had met, at long last, a girl who might make him forget Zoe Cornwall. Who might fill the void in him, ease the ache, banish the pain. She had come from limbo into the June day and then limbo had swallowed her again. Now that he knew who she was, his Diana, it looked even more hopeless than before. Yet Blade was ready to admit, only to himself, that he might have fallen in love. The incident, and the girl, were past forgetting. He did not want to forget.

Lord Leighton made chicken tracks on his stack of papers and muttered to himself. J, his pipe going like a blast furnace, paced the foyer. Blade smiled wryly and wondered at their reaction should he tell them the truth: that he had found a girl he wanted above all other women. That he had as much right as any other man to a normal life, to give and take love and to have children and a home, and he was bloody well going to do it. He did not have to go through the computer in—he glanced at the Greenwich chronometer whirring over the desk—in less than half an hour. There was no law in England that could force him to do so.

He could resign. Resign and go back to his town flat and pack and start looking for Diana. J would understand, J would even approve, and there was always his job with MI6. J, beneath his proper exterior, had come to loathe and fear the computer experiments. He would welcome back the Richard Blade who had been, BTC, one of his top intelligence agents.

And Lord L? The old scientist would go first into convulsions, then turn canny and coaxing, eventually threaten, and if all this failed he would in the end acquiesce and never speak to Blade again. Not because Blade had failed his country, but because Blade had failed Lord Leighton, and science.

Lord L glanced up at the chronometer and dropped his pen. "It's time to go, Richard. By the time I do the reset and get you properly hooked up the phase will come around. We mustn't miss it a second time."

A blank steel door led out of the foyer. J went as far as this door, then halted and held out his hand to Blade. "I've had second thoughts, dear boy. His Lordship is right. You don't really need me."

His Lordship snorted and banged on through the door. Blade shook hands with J. "Goodbye, sir. Just in case, you know."

J winced. "Yes, of course. All nonsense, of course. Leighton may not be the sweetest old boffin in the world but I trust him to bring you back. I'll see you, my boy, I'll see you. Good luck out there."

"Thank you, sir. Goodbye."

Blade followed Lord L down a long straight corridor that led into the computer complex. Leighton moved fast for an old man and a polio victim, scuttling along sideways and dragging one leg. His mass of white hair, thin and as light as down on a pink scalp, waved in the air as he moved. It gave him the appearance of wearing a halo which, Blade thought with a concealed smile, the old genius certainly did not deserve.

They paused at the first auto-security check station. Lord L placed his hand, palm down, on a square of green glowing glass and stood aside so Blade could do the same. Somewhere in the complex a sentry computer would read their palm prints and compare them with master prints on record.

Without preliminary Lord L said, "Did J tell you that we are trying to find another lad?"

Blade nodded. Obviously the subject was not taboo if His Lordship chose to speak of it.

"Don't like the idea myself," said Lord L. He glared at Blade with his leonine eyes and rasped, "Lot of nonsense. The trips into DX are getting safer all the time. I've slaved to make the computer foolproof. No reason why you can't come and go indefinitely, Richard. No reason at all. Only J says he is worried and J had got the ear of the Prime Minister. J is afraid you'll have a breakdown. Rot, I call it. Pure sentimental rot. No place for that sort of thing in science. What do you say, Richard?"

A metallic voice spoke from the wall grille. "Check out. You may proceed."

They walked through a high voltage barrier—it would have knocked them unconscious had they tried to penetrate it without the permission of the scanner—and approached an L-turn in the corridor.

Blade, who never submitted to coercion of any type, was nonetheless tactful. The old man was not everybody's cup of tea, but Blade had a genuine liking for him, and enormous respect for his awesome talent and, not least, his courage. More than once Blade had speculated as to how he himself would stand up to polio and a hump and old age. Could he face it so boldly, keep the light of energy and defiance burning in his eyes. He would doubtless never know, being not only young but a superb specimen, but he had doubts.

Lord L was still waiting for an answer. Blade said, "I am inclined to agree with J, sir. It isn't so much that I am tired, or afraid of the cumulative effects of brain restructuring—though there is that—as it is a matter of luck. I think about that, sir. A man's luck does run out, you know."

"Bah," said Lord L. "We make our own luck. You've been listening to J."



"It's not that, sir. He barely mentioned it. The thought, about luck, is my own."

They went through another security check. Their photos were taken and sent to an electronic brain for scanning. The brain compared and concurred. They were sent on.

Lord Leighton slowed his pace. They were now winding their way through a maze of cubicles, each containing a computer and a white-smocked attendant. This was the guts of the Computer II Annex, devoted to both routine and recondite projects. A humming and clicking, the sound as febrile as locusts on the move, filled the area. Here were data banks for practically everything that concerned Her Majesty's Government and its subjects. Blade always experienced a sense of unease when he passed through this section. These whirring, spinning, blinking machines held the most intimate secrets of millions of people. They catalogued sin and virtue impartially. They were dispassionate and untouchable. They could not be seduced and they never lied. Nothing was forgotten, nothing forgiven, no favors asked or taken.

After a last security check—this one by voice print—they left Computer II Annex and got into Computer I. This was the original space, gouged out from the living rock far beneath the Tower, in which Lord Leighton had assembled his first computer. The machine that had sent Blade to the land of Alb.

As they entered the master control room, where the gigantic sixth-generation computer squatted like a brain encased in gray crackled armor, Lord L shot a look at Blade and said, "I still say it is all nonsense. But I am a reasonable man. We'll discuss it, Richard, when you get back this time. Now, if you'll get ready—I have some adjustments to make for the reset." He disappeared behind a large finlike shield. Blade went through the familiar preparations. He found the usual cubby and stripped down to the buff. He put on the loin cloth and smeared himself with tar paste against burns. Then he went through a door into the penetralia of the computer. The chair was waiting on its square of rubberoid fabric inside the glass housing. Again, as it always did, it reminded him of an electric chair. He had never seen an electric chair, though he had been in the States, many times, but he had seen pictures and this chair was very similar. J, and even Lord L, agreed in that. It had, over the months, become something of an occupational joke.

Blade went to the chair and sat down. The seat was of molded rubber and cold on his bare arse. He stared, without much thought, at the hundreds of tiny colored wires that extended from portholes in the machine casing. They ran into thick leaders, these blue, red, yellow and green wires, and about thirty of the leaders, each tipped with a shiny electrode the size of a shilling, would be attached to his body. In the massive guts of the machine the wires diversified and thinned and multiplied, copulated and had progeny, and in the end numbered over a million. A million aluminum, steel and copper nerves—and Lord Leighton knew the exact location and precise function of each one.

His Lordship entered the room and went to the glittering instrument board facing Blade. Watching him pull toggles and set levers, twist dials, head to one side, hump grotesque under the white smock, Blade felt the usual chill of anticipation coming over him. And with it renewed awe and respect for this crippled old man. Lord L had told him once that the average human brain contained some ten billion complex cells.

"The trick," Lord L had laughed, "is to use every one of them to the limit. But we don't, you know. Most people use less than a third of their brain capacity. Laziness."

Blade could not believe that this applied to Lord L.

The old man finished his instrumentation and came to where Blade waited in the chair. As he began taping the electrodes to the big man's flesh he went into the usual line of patter designed to quiet Blade's nerves. Blade did not need this—his was a natural and healthy fear—and there had been times when he

wished the old man would not run on like a hangman trying to make his client's last moments more comfortable. But it would have done no good to complain; the logorrhea was habit by now and, in any case, His Lordship was hardly aware of Blade's presence at moments like this.

Lord L patted an electrode into place below Blade's left ear. "Aha, just so. Did I tell you, Richard, that I am writing a book about this experiment?"

He gave Blade no time to answer. "I am, you know. I am calling it The Theory of Intellectronics. Of course I won't be able to publish for years yet, maybe never, but I intend to finish the book just the same. Ummm—let me see. Yes, I believe that is right. We have never used a genital connection before, have we?"

Blade stared down at the electrodes attached to his scrotum. "No, sir. We never have. Why now? That's a rather sensitive spot, sir, and I don't see how—"

"Of course you don't, Richard. Nothing to bother your head about. But we can't stand still, you know. We must progress, always progress. You will have noted that I am using forty electrodes this time instead of thirty?"

Blade had noted.

Lord L finished a girdle of electrodes around Blade's narrow waist. "I may let you remain in Dimension X a bit longer this time, Richard. I said nothing to J about it, because he is turning into a nervous old maid, but you have a right to know."

"How much longer, sir?"

He could not see His Lordship's face. The old man was behind him, taping electrodes to the small of his back.

"Not too long," he said cheerfully. "But a bit longer than you have been staying. Give you a chance to explore and accomplish more, eh? Of course we can't know, other than *a priori*, just what sort of time scale you will encounter out there. But in terms of Home Dimension time I plan to keep you out at least two months. You have no objections?"

Ensnared as he was, caught in a net of wires and electrodes, Blade could do nothing but laugh at the question. "No objections, sir."

"Good—good. Fine. J will worry and call me names, as usual, but I'll handle him. There, just about ready. Let's run through the briefing one last time, my boy. I know it is all very old hat by now, but to humor me we'll just run through the checklist. Right."

Lord L ticked off the points on a clip board as Blade ran through them. Emergency measures, how to best preserve his brain potential, optimum conditions for a computer recall. Blade knew them all by heart and had never had to use any of them.

The old scientist made a final tick on the list and put down the board. "We are set, then. Just remember that you do not have to make an effort *to consciously* remember. None at all. Your sessions with the chronos computer, and the magnesium pemoline, will take care of that. You *will* remember, just as you always have. Your brain protein synthesis has been doubled. When you get back we'll put you into hypnosis and drain it all out of you."

Lord Leighton hobbled back toward the instrument console. Blade watched his gnarled old hand reach for the red enameled switch. The fear was gripping him now and, though he made no sign, his guts were a mass of ice. There would be pain. There would be madness. He was, once again, on the brink of

the unknowable and unthinkable—until that switch closed and his brain cells dissolved and flowed and ran molten into some new matrix that would restructure them. It would be a new and different brain and it would perceive a new and different world.

Only he, Richard Blade, was blessed and cursed in this fashion. Of all the trillions who had lived and died on this tiny capsule called Earth, this spaceship careening out of nothing into nowhere, only Blade had been granted the miracle—that he for a time escape, that he see beyond the veil.

Lord Leighton smiled and waved a hand. "Good luck, my boy. Take every care."

The switch closed.

Blade felt his eyes popping out as a thousand gallons of blood was pumped into his head. Lord L was a white scrawl on a blackboard and a giant eraser whisked him away. Blade felt his blood harden into raw red stuff, a conduit for the current that invaded him. Suddenly he was very small, a micro-man, and he was scooped up and attached to a whirring dynamo wheel. Around and around and around and around—he was doing 5000 rpm.

The giant bloody-pawed rat came out of a Hansel and Gretel house and laughed at Blade. The rat knelt and raised his scarlet paws in prayer. Blade, still tiny, saw that the rat was wearing a saddle. It wished to be ridden. Blade vaulted into the saddle.

The rat changed into a gigantic black steed, pawing air and snorting fire. Blade was riding, riding, riding. He looked back and saw his followers: millions of them, millions of Blades, all himself and all on black chargers.

Blade raised his sword, so long it touched the sun, and shouted into the black rushing wind. "Charge!"

Eternal winds caught the word and hurled it back to the horde behind him and he heard the million echoes: "Charge—charge—charge—charge—charge—"

He lost his seat on the black steed and fell. And fell. And fell. He was in a sunny meadow, unhurt, already forgetting, hearing the sound of running water and consumed by a great thirst. He saw a brook and ran toward it. As he was about to drink, the brook changed into a girl, a slim and red-lipped girl and Blade kissed her and found her lips made of salt and there was no surcease for his thirst. The girl changed into a cat and clawed his face and leaped away from him, spitting.

Blade began to cry. He found a leaf and formed it into a cup and cried into it. When it was full he drank his own tears.

There came a terrible sound, a hissing and crackling and screaming. A wall of fire rushed toward him. The fire encircled him and began to close in, compressing him into an even smaller space. As the wall of flame drew nearer he saw that it was composed of thousands and thousands of individual fires. People. Men and women and children.

Each aflame, each pointing burning fingers at Blade, each screaming oaths at him with fiery tongues.

There was a stench of hell. Blade began to burn. He watched, feeling no pain, as his feet charred and turned black. On came the flame wall, to consume him, consume him...

### CHAPTER 3

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Flame. Smoke, pungent and stinging in his eyes and nostrils, making him cough and retch. Blade,

stupefied, his head a mass of pain, opened his eyes and saw fire devouring wooden beams high above him. He lay on hot stone, the floor of a vast, arching, groined structure that could only be a temple of some sort. A temple now dedicated to fire and smoke and the cries of men and women being put to the sword.

Blade, naked and unarmed, stunned by the trip through the computer, managed to raise himself on an elbow. Never before had he been so weakened physically, so nearly paralyzed, by the electronic restructuring of his brain cells. He was in Dimension X again, but nearly as weak as a babe and in imminent danger of being either burnt alive or crushed.

He saw a rafter sag and begin to peel away from the dome directly over him. Blade rolled, scrambled on his hands and knees, clawing frantically through debris. He pawed over a dead man, then another, and a man and woman locked in a final embrace. The rafter tore away and came crashing down with a thunderous explosion of smoke and fiery splinters. Blade huddled behind another corpse as the flaming shards rained about him. He felt his strength returning. None too soon. He had to get the hell out of this mess, and fast.

Somewhere near him a woman screamed. Blade got unsteadily to his feet and peered around through the dense curtain of smoke. He saw a sword near the band of the corpse that had sheltered him just now, and he picked it up in a reflex action. Somewhere in the smoke the woman screamed again, a high keen of agony and terror. Blade, the sword out-thrust before him, stumbled in the direction of the sound. He was conscious now of another sound, one that came from outside the temple; a mob roar, an all-pervading tumult composed of many lesser chords, all of them unpleasant and threatening: the clash of metal on metal, men gurgling in death and laughing in triumph, women weeping and children crying, victors' shouts and losers' moans—and always the sinister obligato of consuming fire.

The woman screamed a third time. This time the cry ended in words. "Juna help me—Juna save me—Juna—Juna—Ahhhhhhheeeeeee."

Blade had the sound pinpointed now. He reeled through a veil of smoke and saw them on the great stone altar. It was rape. Rape in progress. Still the woman struggled and fought, trying to elude her tormentor. Blade ran, the sword poised.

The soldier was prolonging his pleasure as long as possible. He had cast off his plumed helmet and dropped his sword belt, kicked away his pantaloons. He was squat and powerful and easily held the woman down on the altar, cuffing her and laughing as she sought to disengage herself from his rapacious flesh. To no avail. He was far in her and driving with brutal lunges toward his conquest.

Blade did not stop to think. He put the sword through the man's back. The soldier screamed and, still deep in the woman, clutched at the bloody steel pushing through his chest. He screamed again, rolled off the woman, looked at Blade with staring wild eyes, and crumpled at the foot of the altar. Blade put his foot on the body and tugged out the sword. He turned back to the woman.

Too late. From somewhere in her torn robes she took a dagger and, before Blade could prevent her, plunged it into her heart. He caught her as she fell forward, blood streaming from her mouth. Her glazing eyes met his and she muttered, "Dishonored—dishonored. Juna has turned her face from me. I die. There is only death in Thyrne."

Blade held her in his arms, kneeling, cursing his luck. She could have been of enormous help, have told him much that he must know to survive. A rafter crashed savagely close by and he flinched instinctively. Time to be going. Always before, in his six previous trips into Dimension X, he had been fortunate enough to be given a period of grace, time to adjust and adapt. This time he had landed squarely in the midst of a raging battle. Survival this time depended on his superb body and brain—and on his luck.

He put the dead woman gently aside and began to strip the body of the rapist soldier. He donned the plumed helmet, with a nose piece and metal strips to protect his cheeks and jaw. The shirt was of leather and a vest of chain mail fitted over it. The pantaloons, of coarse wool, were loose fitting and wide legged. The thick sandals were of rawhide and caught with thongs around the ankle.

Blade examined the plume of the helmet. Red feathers, clipped to a smooth nub. There was nothing else that could be insignia. The color red, then, must be his identification and, by the lack of any indication of rank, he must be a common soldier. It did not matter. He had taken the first essential step. He had clothing and a weapon and, he supposed, an identity of sorts.

A great stone fell from the dome and crashed six feet from Blade. It bounced toward him and he dived wildly to one side, barely missing being pulped. Another beam came down and framed him in spattering fire. Blade did the only thing he could do, follow his nose and his eyes through the smoke, plunging through the thinner spots where the visibility was only semi-opaque and trying not to breathe.

He felt a rush of fresh air from his left and moved toward it. The floor was burning through his sandals now. He dashed through a last wall of flame and smoke and came into a narrow passage which led to a door. The door was half open and beyond it Blade could hear the dreadful sound he had heard before. Louder now as he approached the open air. An ever-rising tumult of clashing arms, clangor of steel on steel and shield on shield, the screams of dying horses and the shouts of sweating and bleeding men.

Thyrne? That had been the word—Thyrne. The raped woman had spoken it before she died.

Thyrne. Blade, alone, a stranger in peril, friendless in Dimension X, knew nothing of Thyrne. Except that it must be a city, or a town, or even a state or country. Whatever it was—it was dying. He was witnessing the death throes.

Behind him the ceiling of the temple fell in with a hellish roar. Flame licked down the corridor toward him. Blade tried to wedge his big shoulders through the half open door, but was balked. Something was holding it. He peered around the door and saw a corpse serving as a doorstep. Smoke, blinding and suffocating, swirled down the passage and choked him. Blade bent low, put all his muscle into it and shoved at the door with everything he had. He squeezed through just as the ceiling of the passage caved in and the tunnel became a holocaust.

He was in a cobbled lane. A narrow band of night sky, all that he could see, was tinted lurid red by a thousand fires. But there was a night wind blowing down the lane, a fresh strong wind that came somewhere off a salt marsh. Blade breathed deeply, reveled in the wind, filled his lungs and did not mind that the air was tainted with death.

The temple from which he had just escaped collapsed inward, a pyre of scorched stone and wood ash. The wind blowing around Blade caught at floating embers, balloons of flame, and bore them on to fire another edifice. Blade, on impulse, reached down and got a hand around an ankle of the corpse that blocked the door. He dragged it down the lane to where there was a small square and the light was better. He examined the corpse.

The man had been killed by a blow from a sword, or an axe, that had sheared through his helmet and cleft the skull as far as his jaw. The two halves of the helmet still clung to the greasy, bloody dark hair. Blade noted that the helmets were much alike—the one he wore and this shattered grisly thing—except that the latter had a crest of blue feathers. Blue. Red. The colors of opposing armies or only regimental or divisional insignia? The rapist he had killed in the temple, and this man, had they been enemies? Blade could not know and this was no time to worry about it. His own helmet plume was red. He had the uneasy feeling that he would know soon enough if there was a difference, and what it meant.

He tugged a shield off the arm of the corpse and adjusted it on his own left arm. It was small and

circular, with a metal boss embellished with the curious design of a snake with its tail in its own mouth. Trying to swallow itself?

Beneath the snake, in script that was half cursive, half glyphic, were two words—*Ais Ister*.

Blade shook his head—it was all Greek to him—and began to make his way cautiously down the lane. It narrowed again and twisted this way and that, lined by rows of dark houses with narrow stone fronts and overhanging roofs of shingle. Some of the roofs were beginning to smolder and catch fire from the rain of fiery debris, but no one appeared to fight the flames. The houses were deserted, their occupants slain or fleeing. Blade realized that, for the moment at least, he was alone in a deserted section of the city. He was suddenly thirsty and even felt a pang of hunger. He was beginning to adjust, to adapt to this Dimension X. The Richard Blade of Home Dimension was fading away, to be replaced by a supremely well-equipped survival mechanism.

He entered another small square. It was ringed by deserted homes and shops, but in its center a fountain played and Blade made for it. His tongue was as dry as old leather. For a moment he regarded the fountain from which fell cool water in a delightful spray. It was in the form of a young woman holding a tilted vase from which the water poured. Blade stared and paid silent homage to the unknown sculptor. The girl was nubile and lovely and so cunningly delineated that he half expected her to step off her pedestal and offer him a drink.

He raised his sword in a salute to her frozen beauty and plunged his face and arms into a basin beneath the flowing vase. The water was icy and refreshing, with a brackish taint that he did not find unpleasant. As he emerged, dripping and snorting, he noted the legend at the foot of the statue: *Juna*.

Juna? That had been the name cried out by the raped woman just before she killed herself. Blade, as he drank again and scrubbed himself free of blood and grime and smoke, regarded the stone woman with a quizzical eye. Juna! Obviously a goddess of some sort. Perhaps the patron goddess of this city, of Thyrne. In which case, he thought with a grim smile, her work left much to be desired. That poor raped woman had said it all—Juna had turned her face away!

Then there was no more time for speculation. Blade heard them first. Under him. Beneath the cobbles. A clang of arms and the sound of men marching. At first he did not believe it, thought his senses were tricking him, then he spotted a blank slab of stone in the cobbled area near the fountain. A sewer opening, or at least a way in or out of some underground labyrinth of tunnels and passages. For a moment Blade had the delusive thought—friend or foe? Then he laughed at himself even as he ran for cover. At this juncture, this early in the game, they were *all* his enemies.

Beyond the fountain he found a dark aisle between two houses. He eased into the gloom and crouched low, watching the slab of stone. Moonlight, stained scarlet by onrushing fires, and increasingly laden with ash and smoke, was sufficient for him to see plainly. The stone slab was flung aside and soldiers began to climb out of the revealed dark opening. Their helmet crests were red. Blade's teeth glinted in a sardonic grin. He was, in a matter of speaking, among friends. He would not depend too much on it.

The first man out of the hole was obviously an officer. His helmet plumes had not been shaven to a nubbed crest but stood tall, a red panache moving in the night wind. He carried a sword and a shield embossed with a figure of the goddess. Juna again. Blade nodded. He was beginning to sort them out now, a bit. These must be soldiers of Thyrne. He gazed past them at their city, three-quarters engulfed in flame. They would seem to have lost a battle, but were still fighting.

Man after man climbed out of the trapdoor in the cobbles. Blade watched and listened, trying to piece it together, to make what he could of it.

The officer strode nervously back and forth, shouting and prodding his men, using the flat of his sword to form them into some kind of line. These were weary men, begrimed and bloody from hard fighting, many of them heavily bandaged. Some were swordsmen, some carried lances, and still others had bows and slings. All wore short leather kilts and high-laced buskins. And all grumbled and complained as they stumbled into a rough formation. Judging from their looks, Blade could not much blame them. They must have fought well, to be so beat up, and now they were to be sacrificed in a last desperate rear guard action.

The officer raised his sword for quiet, then began to speak.

"Soldiers of Thyrne, I salute you. You have fought well against surprise and treachery and overwhelming odds. You have earned rest."

A man spoke up in the front rank. "Aye, Captain Mijax. We have that. Then give us our rest. Grant us more than that—our lives. Let us leave this lost and dead city and make our way through the marshes to the coast. There is a chance that some of us will make it to Patmos. Then we can fight the Samostans again. But let us not fight here. Thyrne is lost."

The soldier had spoken boldly. For a moment there was silence in the square but for the wind sighing past the statue of Juna and dropping red and black ash in the fountain. The spying Blade felt his stomach tighten. He had a premonition that he was about to see something nasty.

The officer pointed his sword at the speaker. "Lancemen—drag that man here to me."

There was some hesitation in the ranks. The captain called Mijax slashed his sword through the air and began to bellow. "Immediately, you stupid dolts. Bring him to me—or you will suffer his fate. Bring him forward this instant!"

Two sturdy lancemen dragged the soldier forward. He fought them, struggling and writhing, and did not lose his courage. He continued to shout defiance at the officer.

"You are a fool, Captain Mijax. A fool and a dupe. Thyrne is lost and well you know it. Juna has forsaken us and you know *that*, too. Even now she is with her priests and preparing to flee to the coast. Why should we remain, why should we have to die? Our deaths can mean nothing now. It is senseless, without reason, to—"

The officer slashed him across the face with his sword. "Be quiet! You are guilty of treason. Worse—you are a spy for Samosta. An agitator, a troublemaker. You are in the pay of Hectoris. It was you, or men like you, all traitors, who opened the sewer gates and let the Samostans creep into the city while we slept. I say this—and I say death for traitors!"

The soldier, blood gushing from a great slash in his cheek, sought to struggle up from his knees. "A lie. All lies. Ask my comrades. I have been with them all the while, I have fought as bravely as any man here. You are not only a fool, Captain, you are an insane fool into the bargain."

Blade winced. He had served his time as a lieutenant-colonel in the British army and he knew something of military "justice." The man had been a fool to speak up so—now Blade did not give him much chance.

He was right. The man was gagged and forced to his knees again. Captain Mijax, his face grim, struck off the man's head with one stroke of his sword. He kicked the head aside and brandished his stained sword at the troops.

"Let this be a warning. I speak in Juna's name. All traitors will meet the same fate." He kicked the headless body. "This coward lied. Thyrne is not dead. Thyrne is wounded, on her knees, but Thyrne will

rise again."

Phony histrionics, thought the watching Blade. The captain did not believe his own words. Not did the men believe them—there was a low mutter from the ranks but none spoke up. Blade moved a bit closer to the troops, having all but made up his mind to tag along with them. His uniform was right—he was wearing the red plume—and he judged that his chances would be greater with the soldiers than prowling alone in this stricken city. For the time being. He had no intention of dying for Thyrne.

A solitary horseman, his steed covered with blood and sweaty froth, debouched from a lane and clattered across the cobbles of the square to the assembled troops. Captain Mijax called his battered men to attention and doffed his helmet and bowed to the rider. Blade watched with new interest. The man must be someone of importance and authority.

Captain Mijax raised his sword. "Hail, Gongor! How goes the battle, Excellency?"

"Against us, Captain. Against us in every sector. Hectoris sits in the palace and doles out our maidens for the raping. Our treasure is taken and even now is being shared by the barbarians. How many men do you have here, Captain?"

The man who spoke was elderly. He was helmetless and his scant white hair was in disarray and smeared with blood. His face, grimed with smoke and ash, was narrow and beak-nosed; his eyes were pouched and weary, yet glittering with a dark anger. He wore a metal corselet and the familiar leather kilt and high buskins. A short sword was belted to his waist.

"Some three hundred odd," said the Captain. He gestured at his troops. "As you can see, sire, they have fought hard and are not at their best."

The white-haired man held up a hand for silence, then pointed to the body of the beheaded man. "What was his crime?"

The Captain explained. When he had finished Gongor—a general or a senior statesman, Blade thought—shook his head in weariness and, Blade surmised, a trace of pity.

"You were probably wrong, Captain. I doubt the man was a spy or agitator. Thyrne has been betrayed, but the betrayal was in high places, not low. Not that it matters now—the man was right. We must abandon the city. We few are all who are left. The main body of our troops has been slain or taken prisoner. This sector of the city is all that remains to us, and that only because it is the poorest and not fit for looting. So hear my orders, Captain. We will fight a rear guard action, if we must, and attempt escape by the north gate. I say attempt, because our chances are not good. The Samostan cavalry, by the orders of Hectoris himself, remains outside to ring the city and prevent just such escape. It is our good fortune that Hectoris has not yet ordered them into the streets to hunt down stragglers. So we had best be quick about it. Form your men into columns and make for the north gate with all speed—such of us as can get into the marshes may escape and come to the shore, and so to Patmos to fight again."

Captain Mijax did not like his orders. His tone was near to insubordination as he demanded, "What of Juna and the priests, Sire? Are we to leave them to the mercy of Hectoris? We must not! Look you, Excellency—I can fortify this square with cobbles, with corpses if need be, and we can stop the Samostans. At least I can hold until Juna and her priests have a chance to escape. I beg you, Sire, let me—"

Blade, little by little, had been creeping out of his hiding place in the shadows. From where he crouched now it was a scant dozen feet to the rear rank. Through the acrid, drifting smoky haze he could see the expression on the older man's face. Gongor's features expressed, all at the same time, impatience and tolerance, pity and anger, admiration and irritation. When he spoke his tone was that used by a father



to a rather stupid son.

"You are a fool, Captain. A brave fool, but a fool just the same. It is Juna and the priests who have betrayed us, in their own way and for their own motives. Take my word for it—they are not now worrying about you or your men! *If any* escape the fire and death it will be Juna and her priests. Now cease to question me and follow your orders. Follow *me*! We march at once to the north gate. This is a command, Captain." The white-haired man drew his sword and pointed it at the headless body. "Obey or suffer the fate of that one."

Captain Mijax scowled, then wheeled about and began to shout orders. The men, sensing some hope of escape, were quick to form into a marching column four abreast. Blade, skulking in the shadows, waited until the last contingent was tramping past, then stepped carelessly into line. He fumbled with his kilt as though he had been off relieving himself. It proved a needless precaution, for no one paid him the slightest attention. Most of the men around him bore wounds of varying degrees, and all marched in slovenly fashion, morose, heads bowed and feet dragging. Blade, fearing to make himself conspicuous in such a company, began to feign a limp.

Far down toward the head of the column a song began. Faint at first, barely heard, an anthem as tattered and uncertain, as ragged, as the men who sang it. Blade, limping along in the rear, made out some of the words.

***Juna, goddess of all men, with breasts and thighs  
divine... Juna, who dies and there is born again...  
Juna our mother, our sister, our love... Juna who  
makes love in Hell, and also in Heaven above.***

The soldiers around Blade did not sing. They dragged themselves along and grumbled.

"Old Gongor has the right of it," said one man. "The Captain is a fool. And he did wrong to kill poor old Copelus. We were mates, Copelus and me. He was no traitor. He fought well. As bravely as any of us, as bravely as the Captain himself. It was wicked to slay him so."

"Aye," said another man. "That was wrongly done. But the captain is a brave man and a fine warrior, even though he be short tempered at times."

"Aye—he is brave enough. Brave enough to get us all killed if he had his way."

A man laughed harshly. "The captain longs for Juna's legs around him—he seeks the reward our goddess bestows on heroes."

More laughter. "Then he is twice a fool. I never saw a dead man who could make love."

Blade limped along, listening and watching and learning. The goddess Juna, he guessed, must be both real and image. A stone figure and a woman of flesh. Such duality was not uncommon in the religions he had studied back in Home Dimension—the Dalai Lama, for instance, was thought by certain Tibetan sects to be a living incarnation of Buddha.

This Juna, if the statue he had seen was any indication, must be a beautiful young girl. She would, in the nature of such things, be chosen and schooled for goddess-hood by the priests. Ah, the priests. Always the priests. They would hold the real power and call the shots—with Juna as a figurehead.

Juna must reward certain heroes by sleeping with them. Blade had to smile at that and admit that it was better than a medal. A medal could be cold comfort at times. In any case none of it was important at the moment—Thyrne had fallen and, presumably, Juna and her priests were on the run just as the

remnant of the army was. As he, Blade, was himself.

A painful blow on his bare legs snapped Blade out of his thoughts. A burly sergeant, sent to tighten up the rear, was laying about with the flat of his sword and shouting: "Keep up, you slow marchers. Step lively now! Tighten up that file. Dress on the man in front and beside you. Look lively now. Lively, I say!"

Blade made a mistake. An inexcusable mistake and one that could well have been fatal. He lost his temper. For only an instant was his guard down, but it was enough. The sergeant did not help matters by striking at Blade a second time. He smacked his sword across the big man's thighs and shouted, "Get on, I said. Step it up." He looked closer at Blade and added, "I see no wound on you. Why do you lag back here?" By then it was too late. Blade brought his right fist over in a straight from the shoulder punch that caught the sergeant squarely between the eyes. The man's eyes crossed in surprise and shock, then he slumped to the rough cobbles. The little company of stragglers halted. Every eye was on Blade. Ahead of them the company began to draw away, unaware of mutiny behind it.

Men drew away from Blade as though he were diseased. One man said, "He's dead, like enough. That blow would have killed an ox."

Blade stared down at the sergeant. He did look dead. But he was never to know. A burly man with a patch on one eye and his arm in a sling, his beard a wild profusion of wiry dark hair, came out of the huddle of men. He gave Blade a broken-toothed grin.

"Did my heart good, that did. He whipped me once, the bastard. Take his head, friend. I'll take his heels, so—"

They were before a house with gaping empty windows. "Swing him," said the bearded man. His one gray eye gleamed at Blade. "We'll just let him sleep it off in there. Might come on to rain and we wouldn't want the sergeant to get wet."

They counted three and swung the heavy body in through the window. It landed with a crash. The man with the eye patch turned on the others. "Let's get on, then. None of you seen nothing, hear! The man as talks answers to Nob."

They straggled on, those that could hastening a bit in an effort to catch up. The man with the eye patch fell in beside Blade, who eyed him warily. He needed an ally, a friend, but this rough character was hardly the type he had had in mind. Blade had been thinking in terms of going directly to the top, as was his custom in DX—he had been casting about for ways and means of meeting Juna and her priests. Or possibly the present conqueror of Thyne, this Hectoris, whoever and wherever he was. But all that would have to wait. Insofar as Blade had made any plans at all—there had certainly been no time for proper thought—they consisted of the elementary task of getting out of the ruined city with a whole skin. He had heard talk of salt marshes, and the coast, and of a place called Patmos. At the moment it was enough, more than enough, and he knew that he would be lucky to make it. Before he could raise his sights he must survive—this burly rascal who called himself Nob might be useful to that end.

The two of them caught up with the party of wounded and then, as by unspoken agreement, dropped behind a few paces so they could not be overheard.

For a few moments they marched in silence. Blade eyed his new companion warily and was aware that the other was doing the same. Blade waited, enduring that covert inspection. Nob grinned at him, not exactly an invitation to confidence. The man's front teeth had been broken off at the gum line and the stumps were a dark brown. Blade would have wagered that the man was a rogue, a thief or worse. This did not bother him. Such men had their uses. There was something about the man that he liked even on such short acquaintance—an independent spirit, a blithe "go to hell" attitude that appealed. And the man was shrewd. Blade found that out now.

The question came in a hoarse half-whisper. The black eye patch, it was over the left eye, glinted at Blade as Nob spoke without turning his head. Nor did his lips seem, to move.

"Who might you be, sir? What do you do in Thyrne in a uniform three sizes too small for your heft? I aided ye back yonder, but now I begin to have second thoughts. And I warn ye—if ye be Samostan I'll set about you and do your business the same as ye did the sergeant. So speak to old Nob. Who be ye?"

By his way of speaking he had served time in jail. This rather pleased Blade. The man might make a staunch subordinate if he could win him over. And remember not to trust him.

"I'll answer all your questions in time," Blade said. "You answer me one now—why do you call me 'sir'?"

"Because ye'll never be a common soldier. I've but one good eye and I saw that at first glance. It lies in your manner that you are no commoner, sir. And in your act when the sergeant struck you—aye, that was the real giveaway. A common soldier would have taken the blow and grumbled about it—might even have gotten his dagger into the sergeant some dark night. But you followed your nature, sir, and that nature was to strike back then and there."

The man was observant, Blade thought. And certainly shrewd. But sometimes shrewdness could be a mask for cunning. He must go carefully with this fellow. And above all he must establish their relationship, if there was to be one, from the outset.

So he smiled at Nob and said, "You are right in some matters. I am a stranger in this land. I am no Thyrnian and certainly no Samostan. I came into the midst of this battle by accident and, since beggars do not have choices, I go along with this raggie-taggle army until my mind is clearer about matters. In that, Nob, you may be able to help me. If so, and all goes well, you will not be the loser by it. That is all I can promise now, for you know the chanciness of events as well as I do."

They tramped along in silence while Nob considered Blade's words. They were winding through a maze of poor streets franked by deserted hovels. The smoke pall here was lighter and there was a stink of feces and garbage in the smudged air. Blade wrinkled his nose, and was again reminded of Nob's sharpness, for that worthy laughed and said, "Another sign that ye are gentleman, sir. Your nose is too good for the smell hereabout. Not that I blames you, mind. Faugh! I could never bide it myself. And I born not a street from here. Look ye when we pass this next turn. Sharply now, sir, for 'tis only an alley and easy to miss. But for the stink. There—you see?"

It was a dark hole, shoulder-wide and leading back between the shabby houses. It was cobble-floored and in the middle was a tunnel of filth of every description; the stench it emitted was distinctive even in the surrounding fetid atmosphere. Blade had time for a glance and they were past it. It occurred to him that he was no longer in much danger from the army of Samosta—they would be in no hurry to occupy these slums.

Nob laughed, not a pleasant sound. "Me birthplace, that. No secret about where/come from, sir."

Blade, ignoring the probe, said, "Your home was back there? Your family?"

This time there was a trace of genuine mirth in Nob's laugh. He roared and slapped his hand against his thigh. Men just ahead of them turned to stare.

"Home, ye say? Home was it? Aye, a home I had. In the shit ditch ye just saw. I was dropped like any foal in the field, only my mother did not stay to lick me dry and give me the tit. She bore me and tossed me in the ditch to perish. Aye, I had a home if ye call it that!"

Blade believed the man. He said, "Yet you lived. How was this?"

The eye patch swiveled toward him. Nob scowled. "I know what I was told when I came of age to understand. Nothing more. The story goes that I was picked up by a drab, some poor poxy whore, and taken into a brothel to live." The scowl vanished. Nob grinned and spat. "'Tis like to be true, for certainly I was raised in a brothel. I have no memory of the poor lass who found me and was my second mother. I was told she died of pox nearly afore I was weaned. You can see, my master, that I have had a chancy life and so death, when it comes, will be no great surprise. Yet I am in no hurry to search it out. Look yonder across Beggar's Square—the north gate! May be that old Gongor will get us out of this yet."

The detail of wounded stragglers, of which Blade was a part, came last into the great square. There was a little drifting smoke, no fire, and the last of the moon limned the cobbles and an inner square of booths and stalls that must be, in normal times, a sort of thieves' market. Gongor and the Captain were aligning their men to one side of these stalls. Beyond, on the distant side of the square, Blade saw a high stone wall into which was set a wooden gate. The gate was closed but not barred. Blade was instantly uneasy. His keen eyes sought the bars that should have been in the slots and could not find them. As he stared he thought he saw the gate move.

Blade did not like it. He had nothing to go on but his instinct, yet his sense of vague disquiet grew with each passing second. That gate should have been barred. Where were the bars?

Another sergeant, a long-nosed, narrow-eyed man, came back to sort out those able to fight and integrate them into the front ranks. Gongor knew there might be Samostan cavalry lurking outside the city—he had said as much—and they might sortie straight into a trap. The salt marshes, and freedom, were not yet won. Blade long accustomed to command, could understand Gongor's problems.

Blade let his glance roam around the huge square. He counted six streets, mostly narrow lanes, leading into it. They dodged abruptly away from the square, these lanes, as though in terror of open space. There was no way of knowing what lay back in those crooked ways. Blade looked at the gate again and once more could have sworn it moved—as though from some steady pressure beyond it. He wiped away sweat before it could trickle into his eyes. Something in his brain was screaming—trap!

The sergeant, having sorted out the rest of the detail, confronted Blade and the man Nob. Arms akimbo, a sneer on his narrow features, he looked first at Blade and then concentrated on Nob. He pointed to the arm which Nob carried in a sling. "How came you by such an honorable wound, Nob? Sword stroke? Lance? Arrow, mayhap? How does it do, your wound? Maybe it festers, eh? We shall have to see to it, man."

Nob, with a sideways glance at Blade, said, "'Tis not so much, sergeant. An arrow scratch only. But it pained for a time and so I bound it up. I—"

The sergeant reached quickly for the sling and ripped it away. Nob had no time to draw back. There was a jangle of coins and jewelry as they spilled from the torn sling onto the cobbles and glinted around Nob's feet.

The sergeant's sneer was nasty. "Looting," he snarled. "I thought so. Armus warned me to keep an eye on you. Come to that, where is Armus? I know he came back to you malingerers, to whip you up, but I have not seen him this half hour. Where is he, Nob? And do not lie to me. Your life is already forfeit for looting. I have only to tell the captain and you are for the high hoist."

Nob winked at Blade with his good eye. He stooped and began to gather up his treasure. He bore no wound that Blade could see.

"If you seek Armus," said Nob, "you will have to go back a way, sergeant." The rogue frowned and looked puzzled and winked at Blade again. "I do not recollect that house number exactly. Do you recall it, friend?"

Blade concealed a smile and shook his head. "No. Now that I think of it I do not think it had a number, or a name."

The sergeant put a hand on his sword. "What flummery is this, Nob? I have no time nor mood for stupid games. Where is Armus?"

Blade did not see from whence came the little dagger. He barely saw it flash before it was in the sergeant's heart. For a big man Nob was lightning fast. He plucked out the dagger, concealed it again and caught the falling man all in the same smooth movement. He frowned and made sympathetic sounds. "Poor fellow—he's come down with something, I vow. All this excitement, I've no doubt. Very bad for the heart, sir."

Blade did not know whether to laugh or be stern. It had been murder, but he was in no position to sit in judgment. This was Dimension X. And had he not, only a few minutes before, slain a man with one blow? He contented himself with saying, "Yes, Nob. There is certainly something the matter with his heart."

As Nob eased the dead man to the cobbles, the trap sprang shut.

From beyond the gates came a high wail of trumpets. Blade had never heard this exact sound before, but he knew what it was.

"Charge!"

The gates crashed inward, torn away from the wall by frantic horses as the Samostan cavalry surged in. Banners fluttered and there was a continual call of trumpets. As the mounted horde jammed through the gate, too compressed and disorganized to be an immediate threat, Captain Mijax and Gongor set about assembling their men into squares of defense. There was a great deal of running and shouting and orders and counter-orders. Blade: after the first glance, knew that it was over for the Thymnians if they stood and fought. Once the cavalry disentangled itself and was organized it would cut the foot soldiers down like weeds before a mower.

Nob was calm. He bent to pick up a last bauble that had eluded him and, eschewing the sling, stuffed his loot into various pockets. He tapped Blade's arm. "This is not the place for us, master. Gongor and the captain will stand and fight because they must, and because they are fools. But no law says that we must be fools also. You come with old Nob and maybe I can save our skins. I know this district and I know something better—every sewer in it. That's our way out, master. The sewers."

Blade was more than ready. Horsemen kept pressing into the square and forming up in a half moon, the horns of which were designed to outflank the pitiful force of Thyrne. By this time Gongor had succeeded in getting his men into a series of small squares which in turn formed one large square. Blade, fascinated and for the moment unmindful of his own peril, knew this to be a mistake. One large solid square would have been better. As it was, the squares were fragmented and afforded lanes by which the cavalry could infiltrate.

There was worse. A sudden hail of arrow fire came from the wall. Men in the squares screamed and fell. Blade saw Captain Mijax drop his sword and, still on his feet, use both hands to pluck an arrow from his eye. Another shower of arrows hissed in and the captain went down. The old white-headed man, Gongor, came to stand over the fallen captain and take his place. His snowy locks waved like a banner in the fading moonlight and he brandished his sword and shouted over the din.

"Rally to me, men of Thyrne. To me, to Gongor. For Juna and our sacred city. To me. To Gongor. I invite you to die with me!"

Blade, who did not miss much, saw lance throwers join the archers on the wall. He noted that the lance throwing technique was one he had studied in old books back in Home Dimension. The lances themselves were little more than javelins, short and with heavy blades, razor sharp. They were fitted loosely into long sockets and when thrown the lancer retained the socket in his hand. Behind each lancer was a soldier with a supply of the deadly javelins—as the socket came back empty he fitted a new javelin into it.

By now Blade and Nob had taken shelter in one of the market stalls. Nob must have guided him there, for Blade had no recollection of the journey across the square. They crouched behind a counter and watched the dreadful havoc wrought by the javelin and arrow fire. The pitiful little squares were shrinking, half the remaining Thymians were down, dead or dying, and still the Samostan cavalry bided its time. The trumpets howled without halt and the cavalymen cheered and brandished their shiny sabers, but they waited. When they did charge, Blade knew, it would be all over. The cavalry would be in among the shattered squares like wolves in the fold. Once the Thymians broke and ran, the horsemen could slaughter them at will.

Nob was on his hands and knees under one of the stalls. "Look you for a sewer top, master. Bound to be one about—I remember the market hags using them when I were only a younker. Look lively, sire, or by Juna's tits we've no chance. They'll ride us down like cur dogs."

At that moment came a deeper braying of horns and Samostan foot soldiers began to march out of the streets and lanes leading onto the square. They had been lurking all this while, plugging every exit like corks in so many bottles. Now that the trap was sprung, and the Thymians forced to stand and fight, the footmen wished to be in on the kill. They spilled into the square, six columns of them, advancing slowly with hoots and cries of derision. There were lancers and crossbowmen, slingers and swordsmen, all wearing the snake device on their armor and tunics. And the legend: *Ais Ister*.

Nob was getting nervous. "Blast my balls," he snarled, "there has got to be a sewer entrance hereabout. There must be! I remember. Many the pocky corpse I've seen tossed down—ahhhhhhh."

Nob jammed his fingers into a crack in the cobbles and began to pry and pull, cursing all the time. A slab of stone began to move. It was a solid square into which half cobbles had been cunningly mortared for disguise.

"This is it right enough," Nob gasped. Rivulets of sweat eroded the grime on his face, leaving white streaks. "As heavy as Juna's conscience, I vow. Give us a hand, master."

Blade was experiencing a weird, an irrational, ambivalence. He could not understand it and was both puzzled and worried. He could not deny it—half of him wanted to flee, to gain safety and get on with the mission. The other half wanted to stay and fight with the doomed Thymians. Madness! He looked a last time at old Gongor, his white head shining like a beacon in the battle haze, walking from group to group of his men, encouraging and soothing, laughing while he promised them nothing but death. Part of Blade wanted to stay and fight. Much of the veneer of civilized life as he knew it in Home Dimension had worn away. He was becoming a new man, the man he always became in X Dimension.

He went to give Nob a hand. The bearded man was cursing and sweating and one of his fingers was bleeding. "If we don't shake our arses we're going to be caught," he rasped. "I'll be a ball-less priest else. I don't recall these cursed things being so heavy. Aha, now! Just so, master. Catch that edge and we'll heave together—ar, now. Now—"

Blade put his great sinews into it and the sewer cover came up and away, out of its framing, so quickly and with such impetus that Nob toppled over backward with a curse. His breeches split, and his pockets as well, and coins and jewels split and rolled around the stall enclosure. Nob began to scabble

about, frantically picking up his loot, swearing all the time by Juna's tits that he did not deserve this fate.

Now it came. A great cry of trumpets from the cavalry was answered by the braying horns of the foot. The blood raced in Blade's huge body, pounded in his temples, and he felt the hairs prickle on his neck. He sweated mightily and yet felt cold. He stood wide legged, shield adjusted, sword in his hand, and for a moment the battle madness took him. He would *not* run. He would stand and fight with the Thymians.

The cavalry came on savagely, a long curving crescent of flashing sabers. On Gongor's right flank—Blade and Nob were on the left—the horses were already in among the broken squares and the butchery had begun. Blade caught a last glimpse of Gongor. That venerable old man was wielding a scarlet sword astride a pile of dead, slashing at four mounted lancemen who surrounded him. One of the chargers, a massive black beast, reared and pawed at the lone man. For an instant Gongor appeared to be wearing a crimson helmet, then he disappeared and the tide of cavalry swept over him.

The crossbowmen sent a lethal hail of feathered bolts across the square, killing many of their own mounted soldiers. Blade laughed. There was a great outcry and immediately officers were in among the footmen, laying about with clubs and swords.

Nob gave Blade a push toward the sewer opening. Even at that moment, in all the excitement and blood and battle craze, Blade had never smelled anything as repellent, as fearsome, as the stench from that black hole.

Nob was swearing by other parts of Juna's anatomy. He gave Blade a great shove. "In, master. In! Down! Hasten. They've seen us now and they'll do our business for certain. Jump, for Juna's sake. Jump!"

They had indeed been seen. A squad of cavalry wheeled about and came charging at the stalls. Blade, still poised on the brink of that mephitic pit, fearful but still defiant, felt the impingement of every detail: the sweat and foam of the horses, the pennon held aloft by the trumpeter, the beat and clang and spark of pounding iron on cobbles, the hard glare of the cavalymen as they leaned toward him, their sabers extended straight ahead of them. Nearer they came. A surf of death crashing toward his fragile barrier. Closer... closer...

He could make out individual faces. See the glint of bared teeth, twist of mouths, gaping of nostrils. On their shields and tunics the snake swallowed itself again and again, that hooplike serpent with the words limned under it—*Ais Ister*.

He heard Nob curse. The man gave him a shove. Blade tottered and fell and in failing glanced back and saw gold coins spilling a slow stream of gold, and Nob going after them as the first of the horses leaped the barrier and came crashing down in a shower of sparks as golden as the coins Nob died for.

Blade had only time, and thought, enough to close his mouth and eyes, and hold his nose, as he struck and disappeared into a slowly moving flow of filth.

## CHAPTER 4

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Blade could not touch bottom. He kept his head above the cesspool and paddled slowly, trying not to breathe any more than necessary. The darkness was total. Slimy things brushed him, clung to him, and now and again a corpse bobbed against him. Blade retched and vomited and was not ashamed. This sewer, this cloaca for a dying city, was as near hell as he wished to come. He pushed the bloated body of an enormous rat away from his face and once more sounded for bottom. His toes touched stone.

He could walk now, keeping his chin above the slime. The current, so sluggish at first, began to quicken and bear him along. He was now only shoulder deep. He brushed ahead of him with his sword as he half walked, half floated, through his quagmire of putridity. He rounded a bend and saw a shaft of light just ahead. Light only in a relative sense; a faint shaft of dawn seeping down an open sewer cover. Some few details of his fetid, tube-like dungeon were revealed. Blade paused well back from the gray bar of light and looked about him.

There was no way out. No ladder, no steps cut into the arching stone, no ropes. Nothing. From where he stood shoulder deep in a horrible porridge of feces and urine and rotted flesh to the tiny circle of light was a good thirty feet. He heard the thunder of cavalry up there, felt the reverberations, listened to the screams of men and women being cut down. Blade did not have to see to understand. It was all over. Thyme had fallen and all organized resistance had ceased. The massacre of civilians had started. Blade moved on.

His sense of time was keen. He judged that an hour had passed before he came to the junction of two great sewers, larger than the one in which he suffered, and through which salt-smelling water rushed at a great pace. The moving water, deep and comparatively clean, caught at Blade and the sludge in which he moved and swept them both along. He had to swim now and just ahead he saw a torch guttering in a wall sconce. He made for it.

Beneath the torch was a platform of cobbles, and a narrow walkway led into a shadowy tunnel. Blade, somewhat cleansed by the moving water, hauled himself out of the stream and, with drawn sword, headed into the tunnel. Anything was better than that sewer. Anything.

The tunnel was narrow, so long that Blade must continually stoop, and convoluted as the bowels of some giant. At each bend or sharp turn there was a single torch, and for this Blade was grateful. He kept moving down passage after passage, the only sound that of his buskins on stone and, once, the accidental ring of his sword as it brushed a wall.

He rounded yet another bend and saw a narrow window, hardly more than a barred slot in the stone, high on the right-hand wall. Faint light seeped slantwise through the bars. Blade judged the distance, poised, tensed and leaped. He seized a bar with one hand and pulled himself up until both elbows rested on the ledge. At first he hardly believed it. A toe? A big toe belonging to a mammoth foot?

So it was. He was within a colossus of some sort, a gigantic statue. His vantage was from the ankle, looking forward along the foot toward the toes. Gold. Solid gold! Blade whistled silently and made a few rapid calculations. Given the length of the foot—he estimated some twenty five feet—the image must be about two hundred feet tall. Solid gold. Here was loot enough to repay the cost of invasion a thousand times over, at least by HD standards. He put that thought away. It was far too early to think mission—he must only think survival.

Blade was sure enough, but to verify it he twisted and craned his neck to stare upward. He could see nothing but one enormous golden breast towering high over him, the nipple worked in silver. Juna again. The goddess of Thyme was, for the moment anyway, sheltering him.

Through the window he studied the cobbled square spread out beyond the foot of the goddess. He could make out only a pie-slice segment of it, but by extrapolation knew that the fighting here must have been deadly. Costly to both sides. It was probably here that the Samostans had struck first and had gained enough momentum to carry them to victory. Corpses of men and horses were stacked waist high in places, and pools of black blood still glittered on the cobbles. Dawn, seeping in fast, disclosed the mute and terrible evidence of charge and counter-charge, of heroic last stands and no quarter, of gutted horses and lanced men and banners fallen to make shrouds for their bearers. Blade made a rapid and inaccurate count and took a vague pleasure in his findings—the Thymians had extracted a high price. The



figures were very nearly two of Samosta to every dead man of Thyre. Blade smiled and wondered again at his involvement, as slight as it was. He had no business taking sides. He was a stranger, and certainly not in any paradise, and his job was to observe, evaluate, remember and stake out any claims that might be of potential value to England.

But first to survive.

Too late he heard them coming. Two or three of them, judging by the scuff of sandals on stone. They were coming from the same direction Blade had come—he had passed numerous side passages—and they would be around the bend of the corridor before he could drop from the window and scurry out of sight. There was nothing to do but cling to his perch ten feet above the floor and hope they would not glance up. Blade pushed his left arm through the narrow window, locked his elbow around a bar and waited with drawn sword. At least he would have surprise on his side.

There were only two of them and he need not have fretted. They were priests, ghoulish figures clad in black robes and wearing masks of beaten gold. They walked slowly, dragging their feet, and the golden masks must have been heavy to pull their heads down so. As they neared him Blade saw that the masks were actually helmets, fitting entirely over the head with thin slits for eye holes and a circular orifice for breathing and speaking. Blade relaxed. Their vision would be very poor in those clumsy things.

The taller of the two black robes was questioning with both voice and gesture as they approached the dangling Blade.

"I understand, Ptol, why the living Juna must be given to the Samostans, to Hectoris himself, as tribute and propitiation. But why must we torture and disfigure the girl? This I do not understand. I am not opposed to cruelty, as you know, but in this case it is senseless. I—"

The priest thus addressed, a short and rotund figure who had obviously dined well all his life, stopped in his tracks. He put a hand on the taller man's arm and began to harangue him in a soft, lisping voice. Blade cursed Ptol's mushy guts and the growing pain in his own arm. They would pick this particular place to stop and natter. If they spotted him he was going to enjoy killing them, especially Ptol.

Ptol was talking—and talking—and talking. That slow lisp, running on and on, reminded Blade of syrup leaking out of a cask. If good syrup could be defiled by calling it obscene and hypocritical.

"...we have gained a day of truce, of mercy, for all priests. Is this not so?"

The tall man nodded. "Of course, Ptol. You went to Hectoris in person and wheedled this boon of him. For priests only. That will not set well with the people when all this is over. Oh, I know your motives were pure—the mysteries must be preserved and we priests are the only guardians of those mysteries. But the common folk will not understand. They will call it treason and, when Hectoris and his men depart, there will be trouble."

Ptol laughed. It was a nasty sound, like noxious gas leaking from a bladder. But when the fat priest rapped the other on the shoulder and spoke again there was no mirth in his voice.

"You are twice a fool, Zox. Thrice, four times a fool. Now try again to comprehend. Listen, really listen, whilst I explain once more. For by Juna's golden pudendum I will not say it again."

Blade's arm, locked around the window bar, began to cramp. He scowled and gritted his teeth. Why not simply drop down and dispatch both of them? Because he was hearing something of value and he wanted to go on listening.

The taller priest appeared to shrink away as Ptol alluded to Juna's intimate parts. "There is no need for blasphemy, Ptol. Surely we are in enough trouble without that."

Ptol shook his golden mask from side to side in a gesture that spoke of despair, contempt and fondness for a not too bright protégé.

"Zox! Zox, listen to me. Just listen. Do not speak again or I will forget that I am a priest and fetch you a blow that you will never forget—if you live.

"First—you are beginning to believe your own lies. Our lies! We, the priests, are the essence of Thyrne's religion. It is we who manage things and reap the benefits. It is we who select the girl who is the living Juna, and we who train her, and we who oversee and supervise her, and we who dispose of her when the time has come. The priests, Zox! You. Me. All the rest of the brethren. We make the rules and we play the game according to them. And we are men, Zox. Mortal men. We can be killed and tortured and flung into filthy dungeons just as can any ordinary man. Hectoris knows all this. He is no fool, no mindless peasant. He intends to use us, Zox, to use us to help him rule Thyrne. And we are going to let him use us. Gladly. Because we have no choice. Far from it—we have left just eight of the hours allotted to us. Eight hours to recover from this disaster and get our affairs in order and begin serving the new ruler of Thyrne. And we must serve him well, efficiently, or Hectoris will serve us—a fate that you will not like, Zox. Think of it—you a priest, used to the good things of life, condemned to slavery or the axe or the gallows. Put to the sword on a whim. Or if not that, poor Zox, and you are simply turned into the streets, what would you do? Beg for your bread? What else could you do? You have been a priest all your life—what could you do to earn a living?"

The tall man nodded, but was still stubborn. Blade damned them both as the pain in his arm approached the unbearable.

"I understand all that," Zox admitted. "You are right, Ptol. But as you know I have always studied the deeper cause of things. I do not, as I said before, object to the torture of this girl. I want to know why she must be tortured and her face burned away?"

Ptol sighed long and deep. He slapped a fat hand against his golden mask. "Listen, then. I will try to adjust the matter for your wits. It is really very simple—if we give Juna, the living Juna, to Hectoris as she now is he will be captivated with her. As any man would be. This is so, Zox. You have enjoyed her favors?"

The golden mask moved in what Blade interpreted as a reluctant negative. "No. I am one of the few who has not, uh, availed himself of priestly privilege."

"The more fool you," said Ptol curtly. "But never mind that—you know her beauty and her skill in giving pleasure. Hectoris is a brutal barbarian but he is a man. He will take Juna to bed. More likely he will rape her, not because it is required but because he is Hectoris and prefers rape. And, mind this closely, Zox, if he rapes and dishonors Juna he also rapes and dishonors us, the priests of Thyrne. Do you begin to see now?"

The tall man nodded. "To a point. You have thought it out well, Ptol. If you give him a disfigured and tortured goddess he will only turn her out or have her slain. Yes. I think I begin to grasp—"

The fat priest held up a hand. "Do not strain, Zox. There is more. See if you can grasp it as well." Ptol began to tick off points on his pudgy fingers.

Blade thought: *I cannot last another minute. I may as well drop now. I will kill Ptol first by putting my sword into his skull as I fall.*

"Juna hates us," said Ptol. "She hates all priests. All living Junas hate all priests because of the life they must undergo through us. Nothing new about that—but if this Juna is fancied by Hectoris, and gains his bed and his ear, she will waste no time in plotting against us. My fat trembles to think about it.

"Another point—when this Juna is disposed of I intend to flatter Hectoris by giving him the honor of selecting the next Juna. He is shrewd and he is cunning, but like any man he can be flattered if it is done by an expert."

Zox wrung his emaciated hands. "Clever, Ptol. Most clever. Most subtle."

"Not so much," said Ptol. "But it might do. Hectoris is not a fool and will not be fooled for a moment, but that is the insidious thing about flattery. A wise man can recognize it and still be pleased by it—so long as it is not grossly overdone. In this case it will not be. We will punish the present Juna for false counsel, a crime of which she is clearly guilty. This gives us a legal basis for destroying her and I do not think Hectoris will quibble when confronted with the fact. Then all he need do is to select a tender virgin, break her in and allow us to bestow goddess-hood upon her. You begin to see now, Zox? If Hectoris selects the next Juna himself, and sacrifices her in person, he can scarcely disown her priests. So long as we mind our manners and do nothing to anger him."

Zox clasped his golden mask in both hands and nodded vehemently and said, "You are a genius, Ptol. A master. I always knew it. But had not we better get on with it? Time grows short."

Ptol's golden mask nodded in approval. "For once you are right, my thick-headed friend. Let us be on our way. They have Juna and we are awaited—the matter cannot begin until I arrive."

The two black robes went scuffling on down the passage. Blade, his arm devoid of all feeling, thought they resembled two carrion crows. He waited until they rounded a turn then dropped to the corridor floor with a sigh of relief. His left arm dangled uselessly at his side as he ran softly after the priests. A plan of sorts began to grow in his mind—he did not intend to stand idly by and let these creatures torture a helpless girl. He would rescue her if he could—and if she had friends, powerful friends and resources, so much the better. He needed entry into high circles if he were to survive, and he did not much fancy his chances with Hectoris and his barbarian hordes. Even if this Juna, this living goddess who was about to be deposed in so cruel a way, even if she had no actual power, was a lone and friendless woman, she was still a woman. And she had a brain for Blade to pick. Who better than a goddess should know the inner workings, the labyrinthine politics, of Dimension X?

He went cautiously now. He could hear the two black priests talking as they rounded a bend and went down a ramp into a central chamber. Dozens of torches flared from walls and ceiling, casting a smoky scarlet light over the scene. Blade hung back, sheltering behind a row of stone ladies now consigned to shadowy oblivion. Former Junas, goddesses no longer regnant.

In the center of the chamber was a throne. Bound to it with golden chains was a girl. The current Juna. As lovely a girl as Blade had ever seen. She sat naked on her throne and was chained hand and foot, with a thicker chain around her slender waist. There was defiance in her, and pride, and a terror that she could not entirely conceal. Around her, in a circle, like vultures waiting for a meal, were a dozen of the black robed priests. Each wore a mask of gold. There was a whispering buzz of anticipation among them as Ptol and Zox made their way into the circle.

The spying Blade reckoned his chances. None of the black priests were visibly bearing arms, though he could not know what was concealed by the robes. He eased his position, flattening on his belly between two of the statues, and bided his time. The girl did not appear in immediate danger. There was going to be a trial of sorts. To put a legal face on matters, no doubt. He prepared to listen and learn—every crumb of knowledge was treasure to a man in his position—and meantime he studied the vast chamber and everything in it.

That it had been used for torture in the past was evident. Here, at least, DX ran in parallel with Home Dimension, though Blade did not recognize all the devices. Some were familiar: the rack, wheel, Iron

Maiden, pulleys and hoist, and a huge flat pan on which glowed a charcoal fire. In the midst of the charcoal was a helmet very like those in the priests wore, but it was larger and of steel. It could not have been on the fire long, for only now it was beginning to turn a dull red. Near it, on the edge of the fire pan, was a pair of long-handled tongs.

Richard Blade was not a man given to excessive pity. His had been a rough life in a dangerous profession, and his ventures into various X Dimensions had served to harden him further. Now, however, he felt pity, and a slow anger, as he studied the fair-haired girl chained to the throne and noted the fearful glances she cast at the glowing helmet on its bed of charcoal. She could not seem to avoid looking at it. Blade could fully understand her feelings. When the farcical trial was over they were going to clamp that white hot helmet over her lovely head and burn it all away—hair and features and flesh down to the bone. If she lived, and far better that she did not, she would be a horror that no man could bear to look on.

Blade, in that instant, did not care for consequences. He was not going to allow this thing to happen.

The priest called Ptol was reading from a scroll. He stood near the throne, hardly glancing at the document—as though he had memorized it and through the slits in his mask his eyes roamed over her lush naked body. The other priests stood in a hushed silence, heads bowed, birds of evil omen, the golden masks glinting in the torchlight.

Ptol's evil lisp came clearly to the lurking Blade: "You, Juna deposed, no longer Juna incarnate, no longer the living goddess, being now mere common and mortal woman, have been brought here to hear charges against you and to suffer such penalties as may be decreed."

Drumhead court, thought Blade. Kangaroo. The girl hasn't got a chance.

Ptol continued, "You are accused of having given false counsel to the priests and military of Thyrne. Said false counsel being determined by the following—that when the barbarian Hectoris made offer of an alliance with Thyrne, when he agreed to spare the city if Thyrne would march with him against Patmos, you did use your influence, your then goddess-hood to ignore and refuse this offer of mercy from the great Hectoris. You did counsel, instead, that Thyrne resist the Samostans. In this, because your influence with the common folk and soldiery, you did prevail. Thyrne resisted. With what terrible consequences we all know. Thyrne is now a dead city. Our armies are destroyed and our people slaughtered. How say you to this, woman?"

Her voice was firm and high pitched, with scarcely a quaver in it. Blade nodded in admiration at the look of contempt she gave Ptol. And at her words.

"I have seen no dead priests."

Ptol slapped the scroll on his palm and Blade was sure he scowled beneath the golden mask. "Mind your tongue, woman! Else we might rip it out before we sear your face away. And speak not of priests—you are no longer a goddess and have not the right to mention your betters."

The chained girl stared levelly at Ptol. "You give yourself away, Ptol. No. I revoke that. You merely confirm what everyone knows. That you are a fat coward and a hypocrite."

One of the black priests tittered, a furtive sound concealed by a golden mask and instantly hushed. Yet Ptol heard it and wheeled to glare about the circle of his minions. None spoke.

When Ptol spoke there was a deadly timbre about his lips. Blade no longer found it amusing. "I would remind you all," said Ptol, "that in the absence of a living goddess, I, Ptol, am in supreme authority. A sound, any sound, is indicative of the mind and the man behind it. I have a long memory and let me also point out that it—" Ptol pointed to the steel helmet on the coals, now white hot "will fit a man as well

as a woman."

The girl laughed. There was more terror in it than mirth, yet it was a brave effort. "Do you fear them, Ptol? Why? You have them well cowed. As for power, you have always had that. Why persist in this farce? You, and others like you, have always had the power. Juna never did. Any Juna, she you call the living goddess, has never been anything but a shield, a buffer, a front for you and your priests. A female body to use as you willed. A gift of flesh to be given at your pleasure. How many 'heroes' have I slept with at your command, Ptol—and how many times have I suffered you in my bed while my flesh crawled at your touch and I fought to keep from vomiting!"

Blade laughed silently. Good girl. Paying him out in the only way she could.

For a moment Ptol lost his temper. He strode to the throne and struck the girl across the face. "Enough of this," he screamed. "I say enough. Do you admit your guilt of false counsel? Will you sign a confession of it?"

Her beautiful face was splotched red from the blow. She had not shrunk away. She raised her head proudly and managed a smile of contempt. "Why must you have a confession, Ptol? Must I tell you—you can take it to Hectoris and put a legal face on what you do and ingratiate yourself with him?"

Ptol was nearly dancing in rage. He waved the scroll at her and began to shout again. "This is sacrilege, woman. Blasphemy and treason to speak to me so. Now once again—do you admit to false counsel? Did you, or did you not, counsel that Thyrne resist to the last man rather than accept the generous terms of Hectoris?"

The captive girl on the throne forgot and tried to rise. The chains restrained her, yet Blade somehow had the impression that she had risen and stood proud and imperious.

"I deny that it was false counsel," she said. "I honestly believed that Thyrne could defeat Samosta. So I still believe—had we not been betrayed in the night. How was I to guess that some traitor would open the sewer gates, would reveal their location, and would guide the hosts of the barbarian to the center of our city while we slept? How could I guess at such treachery?"

For a moment there was silence. The little tableau was frozen in time and space, Ptol with one arm extended, pointing the scroll at the girl like a dagger. Then the steel helmet, white hot and giving off an acrid smell of scorched metal, toppled over its bed of coals. One of the priests picked up the tongs and clamped them about the helmet.

The girl looked straight at Ptol. Her words were just audible to Blade. "Where were you last night, Ptol?"

A sigh went up from the assembled priests. Ptol regained his composure. He made a sign and a priest hurried forward with a quill and an inkpot. Ptol stepped close to the bound girl. "You will sign now? Or shall I sign for you?"

Her lips curled. "You must stoop to forgery? Poor Ptol. How full of terror your fat carcass must be."

He thrust the document at her, and the quill. "Sign! If you sign I will give you a drug—you will feel no pain."

She spat at him. "Liar! I have seen your mercy before. You can hardly wait to see me suffer. I will not sign."

Ptol reached quickly and touched her hand with the quill, then scrawled something at the bottom of the parchment. He looked about at the gold masks. "You are witnesses. She touched the quill and I write

for her. She admits her guilt. She gave false counsel. She was in the pay of Hectoris. She opened the sewer gates in the night to admit his armies."

The naked girl struggled against her chains. Her lovely features were twisted in fury. "Liar—liar—liar! You accuse me of *your* crimes."

Ptol pointed a finger at the priest who held the blazing steel helmet in the tongs. "Let the punishment proceed. Let the white hot metal purify this one who has sinned. Let the flame scourge away her vileness as it burns away her hair and her flesh and her bone. The fire!"

The priest came forward, the long tongs extended before him. The helmet blazed white and red and threw off spark and coils of metal-smelling smoke. Two of the priests ran to the throne and, tossing a leather thong around the girl's slender throat, jerked her head back against the backrest. Her red mouth opened in a noiseless scream and her eyes begged. She arched and struggled in terror and hopelessness as the glowing hot mask of metal came closer and closer.

Richard Blade got quietly to his feet, sword in hand. Time to act. He calculated the odds—they were high but not hopeless. Fourteen of them. He had surprise on his side, and anger, and a mean determination that had been growing ever since he tumbled into the sewer. Blade knew himself as well as any man can know himself, and he was *ready* for a little blood letting.

Ptol raised a pudgy band. "Burn her face away."

Blade leaped from the shadows with a fearful cry, his face contorted and stained with blood and filth, a tall, oaken-thewed figure, a devil unleashed from the pit, brandishing a swift, shining and terrible sword.

He played the avenger role for all it was worth. Laughing madly, screaming invective, his white teeth glinting in the rough black stubble on his face, he slashed into them like a nightmare creature come to life.

"Juna! Juna!" Blade was bellowing at the top of his lungs. "I am come to protect and avenge you, goddess! Juna lives. Juna forever!"

Three of the priests fainted out of hand. Ptol let out a screech, then shoved the lean Zox in front of him to suffer the brunt of Blade's charge, whilst at the same time plucking a dagger from beneath his robe. Blade, being of a mind to spare nobody, sabered Zox, withdrew his steel, and went in pursuit of the fat little priest who was dodging around the throne.

Two of the black priests, flashing knives, leaped at Blade. He took the guts out of one and slit the other's throat with a backhand slash. By this time he saw what Ptol had in mind and knew he could not prevent it. Blade conceded reluctant admiration—Ptol might be fat, and an obscenity, but there was nothing wrong with his brain.

Ptol had his dagger at the girl's throat. She arched against her chains, staring wide-eyed at Blade in wonder and disbelief, as shocked by his terrible figure as were the priests.

Ptol pushed his dagger point into her tender flesh and bleated at the big man who menaced him with the bloody sword.

"Stay," Ptol howled. "Come no closer or Juna dies this moment. If I am to die so will she—I promise you that, no matter who you are. Back. Back away!"

The girl twisted against the dagger point, screaming at Blade. "Kill him—kill this vermin. Never mind me. I am Juna, I order you to do this. Kill him—kill him!"

Blade halted and lowered his sword. For a moment it was a standoff. He wanted the girl alive, as a hostage and a source of information—the femaleness of her did not at the moment enter into it—and he

did not like the way Ptol was leering. Now that his first terror was evaporating the man seemed almost smug. Blade was certain that beneath the golden mask the creature was smiling in anticipation. Why?

Blade played for time, thinking hard. The chamber was empty except for themselves, the two priests he had slain and three who had fainted. The others had all fled.

That was it! The priests would bring help. Not more priests, but troops. Ptol must have had them standing by all the time. They would be Samostans, of course, the soldiers of Hectoris who wore the device of the ringed snake and the motto: *Ais Ister*.

Blade feigned bafflement, defeat. He rested the point of his sword on the stones near the helmet, still red hot and smoking.

Blade grinned at the fat priest. In a placid tone, as though they were discussing the weather over a cup of wine, he said, "Tell me, priest, what means the legend on the shields of the Samostans? *Ais Ister*? The words are most strange to me."

Ptol's mouth dropped open. The bound girl stared at Blade and her thoughts were clear—her savior had gone mad.

The point of Blade's sword moved an inch nearer the helmet.

Blade followed with a tremendous lie. "I know your friends have gone for help," he told the priest. One of the men who had fainted stirred and moaned. Blade moved to kick him in the head, then returned to his place. His sword point was now only six inches from the helmet.

"I am right-hand man and first captain to Hectoris," said Blade. "I know that you wheedled a troop from him, Ptol, and that they are standing by. That changes nothing—I want the girl for my own. She is promised to me by Hectoris. I intend to have her and no misbegotten priests are going to damage her beauty until I have had my fill of it. Do you understand *that*, Ptol?"

Ptol's eyes blinked behind the golden mask. He was baffled. Blade moved his sword point again. It was nearly touching the helmet.

Ptol said, "I think you lie, stranger. Your very question gives you the lie. How is it that the chief captain of Hectoris does not know the meaning of the legend, *Ais Ister*? I Act for God? How is this?"

"I am an unschooled man," said Blade calmly. He had the point of his sword under the helmet now. The scorch of metal was in his nostrils. Blade made a slight movement with his left hand, signaling the girl to duck, get out of the way. Her glance signaled understanding.

Ptol could not resist being the pedant, the scholar who knew all the mysteries. He kept the dagger at the girl's soft throat, but he deepened his voice and spoke, in a voice so reminiscent of the classroom and of lectures that at any other time Blade would have laughed.

"Mmmmmmm," lisped Ptol, "it is possible, I suppose. The words *are* from the ancient and forgotten language. Only the greatest scholars can decipher and understand it. Hectoris himself, as I happen to know, lifted the inscription from the tomb of a king dead for thousands of years. Yes, it is not likely that a common soldier would—"

Blade whirled the smoking helmet on the point of his sword and hurled it at the little priest. To the girl he shouted, "Down!"

Ptol was caught off guard just long enough. In an instinctive attempt to save himself he leaped back from the throne. The girl flung herself down and to one side as far as her chains would allow. The helmet struck the throne just over her head and bounded high in the air. Blade was after it, covering the ten feet

in one great bound, howling for Ptol's blood.

One of the priests chose that exact moment to regain consciousness. He moved and flung out an arm with a groan. The arm struck Blade's leg and tripped him. Blade, cursing, went to his knees. He recovered almost instantly, but Ptol was running past him, squealing like an animal about to be sacrificed. Blade regained his balance and lunged fiercely with the sword, wanting with all his heart to kill Ptol. The priest screamed and thrust out both hands, twisting his porcine body away from the slashing steel.

Blade's sword severed Ptol's right hand. The priest screamed again, clutched at the gushing stump and kept running. Blade turned back to the throne. Too much time had been wasted already. Time to be gone.

The girl shrank away from him as he approached. She tried to cover her bare breasts with her hands. Blade shook his head, unspeaking, and set about freeing her. This was no time to set about fathoming feminine quirks—the fact was that she was as terrified of him, or nearly so, as she had been of Ptol and his black executioners. Figure that!

The chains were padlocked behind the throne. Blade found the long-handled tongs and thrust them into the hasps and twisted. At first the locks were stubborn, then he began to lose his temper—it was very short at the moment—and his biceps writhed, huge snakes of muscles, as he grunted and sweated. The locks burst asunder and the chains fell away. The girl remained huddled on the throne, staring up at what to her could only have been a fearsome apparition—bloody, sweaty and begrimed, dark visaged and bearded and in a terrible temper.

Blade put his hands on his hips and glared at her. He could hear armed men in one of the passages, coming toward them. Another of the slumbering priests moved and groaned. Blade kicked him, thus venting some of his feelings, and turned back to the girl. She was standing now, trying to conceal both her breasts and her pubic area, although she obviously lacked a hand to do so successfully.

He began to bellow at her. "Do not stand and stare at me like some stupid cow! I am a stranger and know nothing of this place. It is you who must lead us out—and quickly, too, or we are both dead. Come on, woman! You are supposed to be a goddess? We both know better than that, but you must know the way to safety. How do we get outside this city, beyond the walls, into the marshes? Think, woman, and speak. Hurry!"

Her nose was straight and pert, her mouth wide and sensuous, her huge eyes gray with a violet tinge. She stared at him in fear and doubt. He kicked the still smoldering helmet and hurt his big toe. She laughed and her expression changed.

"Yes. I know a way. My people are waiting for me. You—you promise not to harm me?"

Blade had been through much. He stank of a sewer, he had numerous small hurts, every sense warned him that new dangers were fast approaching. He strode toward her. She quailed and shrank away, forgetting to cover herself. Blade smacked her hard across her firm white buttocks with the flat of his sword. The steel left a scarlet blazon on the tender flesh.

It was what was needed. She forgot her terror and spat at him, tried to claw at his eyes. Blade caught her up like a child, her fragrant breasts touching his face as he tossed her over his shoulder. He smacked her again, lightly, with the sword.

"Show me the passage,"—he rasped. "Show me it and then keep your tongue quiet or I will still it for you. Which one to your people and the marshes, woman?"

She pointed to where a torch guttered over a dark entrance. "Yonder. You must go carefully. There



is a fake turning and a secret stair, and a pit for the unwary. Listen to me carefully—heed every word or we will die in there."

Blade adjusted her weight on his big shoulder, one bare arm between her sleekly fleshed thighs. He shifted the sword to his left hand. As they reached the tunnel entrance there came a great outcry behind them. Blade swiveled for a moment to see armed men pouring into the chamber. They bore the circled snake on their shields and leading them, supported by two of his black-robed brethren, was Ptol. Blade cursed. Who would have thought the little fat priest so hard to kill.

Ptol saw them and waved his bloody bandaged stump. "After them—after them! A full basket of gold to the man who slays the big demon."

Blade ran, the scented flesh of the girl jouncing on his shoulder. So now he was a demon—the reputation might stand him in good stead. And now, also, he had a goddess on his hands. Or, rather, on his shoulder.

She whispered in his ear. "Just ahead you will see where the passage appears to turn right—look you sharply and you will find a false wall. Behind it the tunnel turns to the left and down a steep stair—beware of the pit at the foot of the stairs."

Blade grunted and ran on. Two small bands crept around his neck and locked there. Her cheek was soft against his shoulder.

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## CHAPTER 5

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Four days passed. In this time Richard Blade wrought a miracle. He brought Juna and her retinue—old men and women, children, ladies in waiting, four emasculates whose former duties included guarding the lady in her bath, and one stout young lad for whom he had some hopes—over a hundred miles of desolate and treacherous salt marsh. He bullied and begged, threatened and cajoled, had at times beaten them, at times carried some of the children and old women and in the end had come to the wild coast with a loss of only four.

He pitched a rude camp in the dunes, near where a row of tall and weirdly convoluted stones followed the surf line. These were the Singing Stones and it was here that Juna had guided him. Juna had sent a messenger to the Isle of Patmos, asking for help, and it was to the stones that the help would come, if it came at all. Blade was not sanguine.

Juna—Blade still called her so, and so thought of her, though she was no goddess to him—avoided him as much as possible. She kept her gaggle of servants and eunuchs and ladies close about her and, now and again, sent him imperious commands by messenger. Blade usually ignored the messages, scowling or laughing as the mood took him, but on occasion they caught him in particular ill humor and he booted an eunuch or two back to her goddess-ship.

Blade squatted on the sand, accompanied by the youth, Edyrn, and listened to the eerie skirling of wind through the Singing Stones. They did sing, in a way, an eldritch tirl of sound, a high threnody as the never ceasing wind blasted through the holes and crevices in the tall-standing rocks. The constant wail was beginning to get on Blade's nerves. He glanced at the gray, sullen sea and scowled. Several times, when the mist and scud lifted, he had spotted sails out there. One sail, glittering in a rare shaft of sun, and borne the snake with its tail in its mouth. Samostan ships. Waiting, Blade guessed, for a change in the weather. For days now it had been miserable, with the surf running too high to risk a landing. He kept his little company concealed in the dunes as best he could, for what it was worth. That was not much. As soon as the weather changed they would come in and kill or capture them all.

Blade had an inkling of what might lie in store for him. By now Ptol, unless he was dead of his wound, would have told Hectoris of Blade. The leader of the Samostans would be curious and Blade could guess at the orders—take the big stranger alive.

Right at the moment Blade was not too concerned—his stomach was knotted and gnawing. He had had his fill, forever, of roots and swamp berries. He was conjecturing on the possibility of catching fish when the lad beside him pointed with his lance and spoke, "Yonder comes the hag, sire. She who is called Kron. She has been listening to the stones and comes to make a prophecy, I wager."

Blade nodded grumpily. Edyrn was a good lad and, at the moment, Blade's right hand. He had honest blue eyes and a flaxen poll and knew how to handle a sword and lance. He was short and bandy-legged, but well muscled and something of a favorite with Juna's ladies. There was something of a mystery as to how Edyrn had become attached to the party, but Blade did not press it. The boy had brains and he was loyal—so far, at least—and Blade looked no further. He badly needed a lieutenant, a man who could understand and carry out orders, and Edyrn was the only such person available.

At the moment Blade was in no mood to talk to a crazy old woman. He pointed his sword at the ancient figure making her way so painfully toward them and nodded at the boy. "Go see what she wants, Edyrn. Keep her away from me. I have more important things to do than listen to tales told by stones—chiefly to get some fish from this ocean so that, when and if, help comes from Patmos we will be strong enough to board ship. Not that I put much faith in *hattale*, either, for I cannot see how ships from Patmos can break through the Samostan coast patrol. Go, boy. Leave me to think on matters."

Edyrn went off to do as he was bid. Blade scratched his ragged black beard and watched with a grim smile as the boy took the old woman's arm and led her away. She went under duress, hanging back and wailing and pointing again and again at Blade. He forgot her and went back to gazing at the sea. He scratched again. He had bathed in the sea, and so gotten rid of many layers of sewer slime, but now he itched intolerably. He scratched and listened to the wail of the wind in the stones and thought that they could make a net of rushes and so catch enough fish to keep from starving. He did not fear attack from the rear—Hectoris had not bothered to send troops, either foot or cavalry, into the marshes after the little party. Possibly the Samostan chief had reckoned on the marsh, the quicksands and the snakes and insects and wild animals doing the job for him.

There came a momentary break in the mist. Blade, who chanced to be staring straight out to sea, saw the flicker of a sail. That, the coastal patrol set up by the Samostans, was no accident. Blade doubted that Hectoris had thought of it himself. Ptol. The fat priest. Blade had bilked him, cheated and humiliated him and cut off his hand in the bargain. Blade had snatched Juna from the fiery helmet—there had been times during the past four days when he had had second, and dubious, thoughts about *that*—but he had done it and Ptol was still alive. He had not seen the last of Ptol. Blade, amid the desolation of sky, sea, sand and marsh, cursed himself heartily. He should have killed the little bastard when he had the chance. But for sudden misadventure, the other black robe flinging an arm and tripping him—Blade jabbed his sword fiercely into the sand. No use crying over blood that had not been spilled. He must pull himself together. Get matters organized and moving again. He had a mission, a duty to perform, and so best get on with it.

Again, as he had many times in the past few days, he pushed back the thought that he would not greatly mind, would in fact welcome, the head pains that presaged a return through the computer to Home Dimension. He roused himself, stood up and stretched his massive limbs. He did not *like* the way he felt—it bordered on shirking duty, even on disloyalty and, if you stretched it a point, treason. Yet there it was. His heart was not in the mission; over him there hung a strange lethargy and, name it, fear! He did not understand it at all—yet knew it was unhealthy, could be fatal, and something must be done at once. What he needed was action, to be rid of his role of nursemaid to women and eunuchs and a beautiful,

and impossible, female who still thought of herself as a goddess.

He thought of Nob and could grin. There was a man he could have used. The words came unbidden to his lips and he flung them into the scouring wind. "By Juna's tits, Blade, snap out of it. Do what you must do and stop feeling sorry for yourself!"

He felt better already. Edyrn found him smiling when he returned with the message from old Kron. Blade still smiled, but he listened. He had been making mistakes—mistakes he must not repeat. He had been forgetting that he was in Dimension X, where anything was possible.

The message sent by Kron, that ancient witchlike creature, was cryptic. Edyrn, his blue eyes wide with wonder and something of awe, repeated it word for word.

"The singing stones have sung to me and on the winds there came these words—seek you on the sands for him who was sent but did not go. Seek for the house that contains a message that will not be delivered. Seek not far from here a new house, built of bone from the old, and now inhabited by clawed things. Seek this and find this and you shall also find doom and hope. The stones are silent. . ."

Blade listened carefully. He made Edyrn repeat it three times. Blade ran his big fingers through his black jungle of beard and shook his head. "I make no sense of it, lad. Do you?"

Edyrn, in turn fingering the silky down on his cheeks, likewise shook his head. "None, sire. But it *must* have meaning—old Kron has been future-sayer to Juna since Thyrne was only a village of mud in a desert march. She has more years than she can remember and she is never wrong. There is truth in her words if we can but fathom it, sire."

Blade nearly said, "Bah-humbug," or a more profane version of the same, but remembered in time his promise to himself. *He was in DX*. Very well. Act like it.

"Fetch me the goddess Juna," he told Edyrn. "I wish to see her at once. Here."

Edyrn was back in a few minutes. "Juna sends her greetings, sire, and—"

Blade exploded. "I did not send you for her greetings! Where is she?"

The lad shrank from the blast, retreating a pace. But he spoke up bravely enough. "Juna says she cannot come to you. She is no servant to be summoned thus. She commands, if the matter be really important enough, that you come to her. She hopes that it is important—she is with her ladies now and does not wish to be disturbed for a trifle."

Blade opened his mouth, then closed it. He narrowed his eyes at Edyrn. The boy took another step back and waited, flinching visibly. But when Blade spoke his tone was calm.

"Go to Juna again, lad. Say this, my exact words—she is to come to me at once at this place. If she does not I will come for her, and she knows what that means. I doubt that she has a mirror in this wilderness, but remind her to use a pool of water or the eyes of one of her ladies, and to look again at the mark she carries on her backside. My mark! Say that if she does not come immediately she will have a mate for it. Go and tell her all that."

As he waited Blade fell to thinking on the hag's cryptic words. "...seek you on the sands for him who was sent but did not go. . ."

Blade snapped his fingers, grinned and stared up and down the strip of beach. Nothing moved on the lonely sands, they stretched away to desolation in either direction, there was only the sound of wind and water with no dirt or call of seabirds.

"...for him who was sent but did not go..."

It might be all mumbo-jumbo, still Kron was an ancient witch who would not risk her reputation as a seer for a whim. Blade combed his beard with his fingers and was thoughtful—Kron had been wandering aimlessly about since their arrival on the coast. No one paid her much attention, much less did Blade. She could have found something. But what? Where? He stared down the beach again, this time to his left and just as the haze shifted a bit. There was a point of land there, a promontory shouldering out into the sea. It was just possible—

Edyrn came back with the girl. She wore a purple cloak over a simple shift of white, and high laced sandals. Her ladies had bathed her and arranged her hair and bound it with ribbons. Blade had seen the leather chests carried by her retainers and had permitted it because the eunuchs were good for nothing else. We have gewgaws and ribbons, he thought bitterly, and powders and face paint, but no arms or food and no fighting men.

He bowed solemnly, keeping his face impassive, and said, "I am glad to see that you had second thoughts, Juna. Or did you perhaps glance in a mirror after all?"

She flushed and her sensuous mouth tightened, but the gray violet eyes met his steadily. The lad Edyrn, making nothing of the words, glanced from one to the other in bewilderment. Blade jerked a thumb at him. "Get you back to the camp, boy, and put the eunuchs to work gathering rushes and withies in the marsh. Set the women, *all* of them, to making a great net. Do you supervise, lad, and see that it is a net and not a sieve. I will expect to find the work well along when I return. It may be that we will have something to put in our bellies soon. Off with you."

The girl, her pale and lovely face expressionless, said: "I would have him stay. It is not proper that a goddess should be alone with a strange man."

Blade looked at Edyrn and when he spoke his voice was soft. "Go, boy."

Edyrn left hurriedly. Blade and the girl watched each other in silence broken only by the weird music of the lyre stones. She was the first to speak.

"You sent for me, Richard Blade. I have come, though against my better judgment. What do you want of me?"

"I want to talk," he said bluntly. "Of many things. Among them your shortness of memory—I do not understand it or your attitude. But for me you would be dead now, or you would be a faceless thing wishing for death. I have risked much for your pack of idlers and ball-less men. You owe me your life, Juna. I ask no payment, but I will have courtesy and cooperation. You have avoided me and offered neither. Why is this?"

The wind tugged her cloak open. Her shift was low cut and he could see her breasts nearly exposed. She saw his glance and hastily gathered the cloak around her throat.

"In serving me you only serve yourself," she said. "You ask too much credit. Your life was in danger as well as mine. Ptol is your enemy as well as mine. As is Hectoris. You are no Thyrnian, you are no Samostan, and certainly you are not of Patmos. You are like no man I have ever seen before and after much thought on the matter, I can find no reason why I should like or trust you. If I seek to use you for my purposes it is equally true that you seek to use me for yours. With this difference—you know my motives. To escape and seek sanctuary in Patmos. I do not know your motives in helping me."

This was a different girl. This was not the terror-stricken girl of the torture chamber. This was a shrewd and articulate wench who had her wits about her. Blade nodded and gave her a little smile. There

was sense in what she said, but no time to go into it now.

He would have changed his tone, and perhaps his tune, had she not ruffled him again by adding, "Another thing is your attitude toward me. You forget that I am Juna. I am a goddess, the physical incarnation of the everlasting spirit of Juna of Thyrne. You struck me as though I were a common kitchen maid. You do not address me properly, you do not make yourself humble before me, you do none of the things you should when in the presence of a goddess. Already my people have noticed. It sets a bad example, Blade, and I would have you remedy this if we are to be better friends."

She extended her hand. "They are watching now. If you were to fall on your knees and kiss my fingers it would do much to atone for your past manner."

Blade barely kept his temper. He did not even curse her, much less strike her, though the temptation boiled in him. He glared and his teeth flashed white in his dark beard as he bit off each word. "Very well, goddess! Persist in this flummery if you will, but expect nothing from me but laughter—when I feel like laughing, which is not at the moment. Come. We will stroll down the beach together. *Wedo* have matters to discuss and I do not mean such cursed nonsense. Do you come willingly or do I drag you? In full view of those idiots of yours?"

She put her hands deep into the sleeves of her cloak and crossed her arms on her full breasts. Her eyes were angry, but there was a glint of mischief also, a taunt. She nodded. "I must obey you, Blade. I have no armed men to my back. You are the only warrior among us, and my only protection. In such a situation even a goddess must make concessions."

Blade snorted. He took her arm, a bit roughly, and they began to walk toward the promontory he had seen. She flinched at his touch and he thought she gasped deep in her throat.

Because he was still angry, and because of another emotion which he did not want to acknowledge, he said, "Goddess again? Immortal Juna? Temple whore is more like, is it not? Come to that, I am something of a hero myself. Am I not then entitled to your bed? Can you lie and say that I would not be a better mate than Ptol?"

His hand was still on her arm and he felt her shudder. She went pale and would not look at him, yet her voice was firm. "I have done what a goddess must. It is no sin to give oneself to heroes of Thyrne. The mother spirit Juna knows and approves."

Blade closed his big fist about her slim arm. He hurt her and for the moment did not care. "And the fat priest? Ptol?" He was a good mimic and he spoke now as he had overheard Ptol speak in the tunnel.

"... you have enjoyed her favors? You know her beauty and her skill in giving pleasure..."

She stumbled and would have fallen but for his support. She tried to pull away from him and there was no mockery in her eyes now. She stared at him in terror and clutched at her breasts. "Who are you? What are you? How came you to know such things? Are you in truth a demon come to destroy me!"

He let go of her and stepped away. He felt no remorse, but she was after all only a woman and helpless. He strode on down the beach, saying roughly, "Enough for now. I have a riddle for you."

He repeated the words of Kron, not entirely without sarcasm. "Can you make sense of it, Juna, in your infinite wisdom?"

She shook her head. A tear fell and Blade pretended not to notice. She wiped it away with the sleeve of her cloak and said, "But Kron is wise. If she spoke thus it must have meaning. The wind stones, the singing—"

"Forget that," Blade said harshly. "She did not hear it from the wind. But she had been up and down the shore and it may be that she found something and chose wind song as a means of telling me. It does not matter now. We are going to have a look."

He pointed to the headland, now about a half a mile distant. It was barren and rocky, towered by castellated by great boulders whose pinnacles were concealed by swirling mist.

Juna had caught up with him and now matched his stride. Her eyes were dry and so was her tone. "For what do we search, Blade?"

"I am not sure," he admitted. "But you sent a messenger to Patmos? Did you not tell me that?"

She nodded. "I did. His name was Tudd—a faithful servant of mine. When I knew that Thyrne was lost, and heard that Ptol intended to arrest me, I sent Tudd at once to this place. I mean, of course, the Singing Stones. He was to cross to Patmos and bring aid, ships from the island to ferry me across the sea."

Blade regarded her, fingers in his beard, eyes narrowed. She misunderstood and, flushing, said tartly, "Tudd was an emasculate. I did not bed him, if that is—"

Blade shook his head. "Enough of that, I said. But this Tudd, this eunuch, he had made the same trip before? For you? With messages to Patmos? And, I have no doubt, bringing messages back from Patmos?"

She refused to meet his eyes. Finally she nodded. "Yes. I—I did use him as a messenger."

"...seek you on the sands for him who was sent but did not go..."

He repeated the words aloud. Then he looked at her and laughed. "There, unless I am much mistaken, is part of your riddle. A messenger is sent, is he not? But if that old hag, and the wind of course, is right, this one did not go."

They reached the base of the promontory, a triangular finger of rock jutting into the sea. The land rose precipitously to a wall of boulders. Blade studied the stone barricade for a moment; it might be an accidental, a natural, configuration, but he doubted it. Men had built it.

Juna hung back. She shivered and pulled her cloak closer against the dank mist. "I do not like this place."

Blade pushed her up on the slope. "To get back—if your messenger did not go he may still be here. We'll have a look."

She stumbled over a rock and Blade caught her. For a moment they were close, her unbound breasts touching his massive chest. She disengaged herself, not meeting his eyes, but her breath quickened and a fine tremor ran through her.

"You are mad," she said. "Why would Tudd, my messenger, come to this place?"

He helped her over a rock stile. "I am guessing, of course. But he must have had a boat of some kind, and he would need to conceal it. He could not do that on an open beach. This is the only place for miles in which anything could be hidden. It will do no harm to look. Just as old Kron did."

She shook her head. "I do not believe that Kron was here."

"I do. I think she was here and found something and wanted to tell me about it. Being a future-sayer, of course, she had to pretend that she had it from the lyre stones."

Juna halted for a moment to catch her breath. The slope was steeper just before the wall and littered with jagged slabs of glassy black stone. She gathered the cloak over her heaving breasts and looked at Blade with a mingle of awe and anger. "I am right to fear you. You hold nothing sacred. You mock and scoff at everything." Blade stared at her. "Not everything," he said quietly. For a moment their eyes met and Blade felt himself lost in those luminous depths, those gray-violet pools. He desired her. He meant to have her. He longed to be kind and yet knew that he must be stern. She was an unknown quantity to him, just as he was to her. The only thing they had in common was their flesh. And she was, he reminded himself reluctantly, little better than a temple whore. He did not like thinking about that.

He extended a hand to her. "Come on. A little more and we'll be on the wall. This eunuch of yours, Tudd, must have had a boat and I expect to find it. Unless he swam the thirty miles to Patmos and back, which I doubt."

They reached the wall. Smaller rocks had been arranged in stairsteps and a moment later they gained the top. Blade smiled as he pointed down to what appeared to be a small volcanic crater.

"You see! You never know what you'll find until you go looking."

He watched her closely. By her expression she was as surprised as he was. More, because *he had expected something*.

The miniature temple appeared to be floating in the mist. It stood at the bottom of the crater, on a broad plinth of glossy stone, open on all four sides, with three slender fluted columns facing in each direction. The roof was pyramidal and open at the top.

Juna shivered and moved closer to him. He put an arm about her slender waist and she did not object. There was a brooding beauty, an aesthetic perfection, about the little temple floating in its sea of dank white mist, and there was also an evil about it. Blade felt it also, but when she turned and tried to go back he stopped her.

"Come on!" He guided her down a path of crushed stone. "I think this ice has something to tell us. Let's find it."

"Oh—Oh—no—no—"

She spun about and buried her face in his chest. He held her and gazed over her shoulder at the body.

It lay just where the path ended at the temple plinth. The body of a man, dismembered and with each quarter indicating a cardinal point of the compass. The severed head was in the middle.

Juna clung to Blade and sobbed, holding him tightly. He wondered at this. As a goddess she surely must have seen worse. Was this the same girl who had flared so defiantly at the fat Ptol?

He stroked her hair and felt her body sag against his. "Your messenger? The eunuch Tudd?"

She nodded against his chest. Her hair was a fragrant cloud brushing his face, sparkling with mist gems, and her body was soft and warm and enticing as she moved still closer. Blade wondered at all this, too, but did not question. He was on his guard and in time she would reveal herself. In the meantime he meant to be the gainer.

He held her and looked closer at the body, recalling the old hag's words and smiling. He was right. Kron had been here.

There was sand around the body. Neat killers, they had used sand to blot up the blood. The "house" was the body, of course, and it was now built of bone because crabs had been at it. Some of the arm

and thigh bones had been picked bare.

"... you shall find hope and doom. The stones are silent..."

They had found the doom. Where was the hope?

Juna moved against him. Her lips brushed his face and her breath was sweet. Her tender body was against his from knee to shoulder and he felt a surge of desire in his loins.

Juna whispered. "I have a sudden great longing for you, Richard Blade. I have feared this moment and did not wish it. It was so that I pretended coldness and anger. I am afraid of you, you fill me with terror, and all the while my heart and my body cry out for you. My mind says no—that you are a danger to me—but my body will not listen to wisdom. Let us go from this place, my love. Quickly. This moment. We will find a bed on the white sands and—"

Blade silenced her with a kiss. Her mouth was hot and wet, her tongue a rasp of flesh invading and inflaming him. Blade kissed her and gazed over her shoulder and wondered. Why the sudden sexual con? What did she know, what had she seen, that he did not know and had not seen? There had to be something. He stared at the dismembered body of the eunuch Tudd. What? *Something* had frightened her into using her body to lull him. Something she did not want Blade to see.

There it was. Near the stiffened fingers of one hand was an ivory baton. It must have been left in the hand, for someone to find, but the dead fingers had twitched in reflex and dislodged it.

Juna moved her body against him. "Let us go, Blade! I cannot abide this place. And I swoon for you."

He stroked her hair and caressed her slender throat with his big fingers. He thrust himself against her, let her feel the throbbing hardness of him through her clothing. Her fingers slid down and found him, caressed, and the tempo of her breathing increased. He doubted she was faking it now. The lady, in arousing him, had aroused herself.

"We will go," he whispered tenderly. "I long for you also, Juna. You *are* a goddess, though not as they think of you in Thyrne. But first there are things to be done. Our bodies, and our love, must wait."

She pressed harder against him. Her fingers were busy. "Why? I cannot—I will not wait. I want you now."

He kissed her again. "Just a question or two," he soothed. "When did you send Tudd with your message to Patmos?"

She tried to pull her mouth away from his, to look at him, but Blade held her tight. At last she mumbled, "A week gone."

Blade thought back. That would have made it two days before the Samostans stormed Thyrne. He, undreamed of in their state of things, had still been in Home Dimension.

Juna moved her pelvis against his. "Cannot we go?"

"A week ago, Juna? You sent Tudd two days before Hectoris attacked through the sewers. You knew he would attack, you knew that the sewers would be opened to him by Ptol—the real reason why Ptol would have you killed is because you knew he was the traitor—and yet you gave no warning to the Thymians. You said nothing to their high command. You stood by while the city died, and you sent a messenger to insure your own safety."

She tried to struggle away from him, aware too late that he was not fooled. She sought to be the



goddess once more. "Lies! How dare you speak to me so? And why—why speak so now when I was ready, when I was longing so for—"

Blade also dropped the mask. He grabbed her wrist and dragged her roughly toward the quartered body and the slender ivory baton. She fought him, trying to break away, but when he picked up the baton she snatched at it. Blade held it high out of her reach and mocked her.

"I think, my Goddess, that you and Ptol are two of a kind. And Ptol outsmarted you. I think this is the work of his men, for you to see had you ever managed to arrive this far without me, and I think that Ptol would have had his little joke and have been waiting for you in a ship offshore. The killing of Tudd was insurance, no more. Ptol never expected you to get here. There is no help coming from Patmos, Goddess, none at all, and I advise you to be content with what you have, namely me, and leave off your airs and lies. And now tell me true—goddess! Do you still long for me?"

For the moment, at least, she was defeated. He sensed it in her and let go of her wrist. She rubbed it and gave him a sullen look.

"You hurt me, you great oaf. For which you will pay. None of this is your affair. Why do you poke and pry so? If you are a demon, and I believe this, you must have many strange powers. Use them, then, to get you back to your own land and away from me."

Blade grinned and tickled her under the chin. She jerked away and struck at him with a small hand. "Do not dare to touch me!"

He laughed. "I like you better this way, Goddess. When you show spunk and spirit."

Blade hefted the baton in his hand, laughing at her sullen helplessness as she watched, her fingers curled into little cat claws. He screwed a cap off one end of the baton. There was a roll of parchment within.

"Now," said Blade, all agrin, "now I think we begin to get somewhere. Who knows?—we may even get at a truth or two."

Juna spat and would not look at him. He began to read aloud from the parchment:

*To Izmia, Pearl of Patmos—to inform your Graciousness that my task is near finished in Thyrne. I can do no more, must look to my own life and those of my people, and beg you send us transport to a place that Tudd—he who brings this—will know of. I plead you make all speed, for things are very chancy here. Our plan has succeeded in the main, in that I have encouraged battle between Samosta and Thyrne—so that both may be weakened thereby, especially Hectoris—and so gain for Patmos precious time in which to prepare for the invasion we know will come. I am suspect by Ptol, who judges rightly that Thyrne will fall and already seeks to curry favor with Hectoris. I know that Ptol is traitor to Thyrne, but cannot prove it and there is no time. I will explain all else when I see you. Now, as I have done the task assigned, great Pearl of Patmos, do I ask you to send succor to me at once. Your obedient and loving Vilja.*

"Oh, ho," said Blade, waving the parchment at her. "Ptol had some of it right after all. You did betray Thyrne."

She set her jaw; her eyes flashed. "Not so. I am no Thyrmian, so could not betray her. I never served her. I am of Patmos and serve only her—and my Queen, Izmia, Pearl of Patmos."

Blade saw it then. As clearly as though he were reading a blueprint. *Provocateur!* An agent of Patmos paid to instigate war between Thyrne and Samosta. He tapped the parchment scroll against his teeth and surveyed her with new understanding and admiration—as one professional to another. This

was, after all, his own line of work.

"A spy," he gibed, hoping that in anger she would give him more information. "A spy posing as a goddess! Juna conspiring to bring Thyrne and Samosta to battle so that Patmos will emerge the winner and be secure on her island. Clever girl. Cunning Izmia, whoever she is."

Blade was familiar with the technique, an old standby back in Home Dimension. England had practiced it for centuries.

Juna, or Vilja, did not answer him for a moment. She studied his face instantly and Blade knew what she sought there—could she trust him and so unmask herself completely? Both understood the situation—she was completely in his power and at his mercy. When she took a step toward him he knew she had opted for candor and he felt relief. His own task was just beginning and he welcomed any easing of it. He would rather have her as friend than enemy. And there was the other thing—he intended to have her body and rape was not natural to him.

She extended her hand. Blade took it. "Let us go into the temple," she said. "I will answer your questions with truth."

She pointed to the remains of the unfortunate Tudd. "I need your help if I am to live and escape Ptol. Izmia has not had my message and will send no ships. But you, Blade, also need my help. You are a stranger—and, I still think, a demon—and vastly ignorant of matters. I will guide you."

He nodded in agreement. And reminded himself that everything she told him he must accept with grain of salt. With that in mind, it could be a fair enough exchange.

They skirted the poor sundered body and climbed the plinth to the temple floor. Blade saw now that the structure was not put together in any ordinary manner, but had been carved out of living rock. Volcanic glass not black, as is obsidian, but burnished to a dull milky color. Blade had seen the great ruins of his own world; he had never seen workmanship like this. It must have taken centuries to complete. There was not a peg, a nail, nor a joint, and time had smoothed and obliterated the tool marks. Two altars stood directly beneath a pyramidal vent in the ceiling. Mist condensed and dripped to fall on an antique statue of Juna carven from the same milky glass stone as the temple. They stood, hand in hand, contemplating it. Her nose was missing, as was one ear and a hand which had been shorn by time or vandals. Yet the resemblance was there, the likeness to the flesh and blood beside him now, and Blade felt a chill along his spine. He countered it by concentrating on the lesser altar nearby. It was smooth, the size of a bed, and he marked it for use. Brown stains deep in the stone did not deter him.

But that could wait. He could wait and in the end be better pleased for it. He pulled her down beside him on the small altar and put a big arm around her. And noticed, just opposite him, a rectangular dark hole in the temple wall. There would, he thought, be a boat of sorts concealed in there. Later.

He kissed her lightly. She clung to him and would have put her tongue in his mouth, but he pulled away. Business first.

"Now: Juna, Goddess or Vilja? Which is it to be?"

She nestled her head on his shoulder. "Vilja is my birth name. I am fourth grandchild to Izmia, Pearl of Patmos."

He would be dealing with an old woman, a grandmother. It did not disturb Blade. He could handle old women as well as young ones.

"I will call you Juna," he said. "I like it better and it was so that I first knew you. But only Juna—we will forget that you are, were, a goddess. But tell me—how came you to be a goddess in the first place?"

As she explained he admitted that it was a masterpiece of foresight and planning. An astute move in the Triangular War and that had been waged for over a century between Thyrne and Samosta and Patmos; a war that flared the fiercer because of long periods of peace. Of the three countries Patmos was the weakest—for reasons which Blade, to his infinite disgust, would soon find out—and the most blessed because Patmos was an island. Heretofore this had saved her from invasion.

"But now," said Juna, breathing a bit faster and nestling closer to Blade, "now the sea is no longer a barrier on which Patmos can depend. Hectoris, chief of Samosta, began years ago to build a vast fleet of invasion craft."

Blade nodded and nibbled on her soft fragrant ear. "I know already that Patmos has good intelligence. You knew of this ship building and took steps to counter it. I understand all that, but you evade me—how came you to be the goddess Juna?"

She held out a small hand and counted on her fingers. "Four years I have been Juna. I have nineteen summers now and, when I had but fifteen, was secretly smuggled into Thyrne and eventually "found" by an old priest named Clystis. He saw in me the reincarnation of Juna and so said to all of Thyrne. I was brought into the city and given to the care of the priests and, after my nova time, proclaimed Juna the goddess."

Blade said, "And this old priest, this Clystis? He would not, perchance, have been in the pay of your Izmia, this Pearl of Patmos who you call grandmother?"

Juna put her fingers to stroking Blade's inner thigh. Blade had to struggle to keep from reacting. "Of course," she said. "He is dead now and no harm can come of telling. Clystis was one of us, though he had not lived in Patmos for years, and for gold he proclaimed me to be Juna. Surely you know the rest?"

Blade smiled at her. "Surely I do, Juna. I look forward to meeting this old lady, your grandmother, for she is an old woman after my own heart. Why do you smile, girl?"

"Do I smile, Blade? Perhaps. But it is nothing—or perhaps I smile only in anticipation. Have we not talked enough, Blade? There will be time later, you know. And I long for you as I said—that was not all a lie. So have done with talk for now and gratify me—if I am, as you say, a temple whore." She opened his breeches and bent swiftly and he felt the hot caress of her tongue.

Blade put his hand into the front of her shift and toyed with the white velvet fruit he found there. His fingers touched a chain and he traced it back to a small scabbard dangling between her shoulder blades. He drew forth a tiny golden dagger and held it up to the light. He laughed at her.

"You would not, by chance, have planned to put this in my back as I lay on you?"

"Nay, Blade. Nay. I swear not." She suckled him a moment, her mouth a sweet vacuum, and then looked up into his face. Her eyes were wild, alight with green fires, and her mouth moist and scarlet. She rubbed her lips against his chest. "It is true, you know. You spoke of me in the right, Blade. *Iama* temple whore! I do not belie my nature. I would not if I could. My grandmother, and old Clystis chose well when they picked me for Juna. Ahhh, Blade! How long must I wait?"

He tossed the little dagger to one side and unfastened his sword belt. If he were beset now it would go hard, but he did not hesitate. He needed this relief, this cleansing, and thought that he would think the clearer and fight the better for it. He lifted her head gently and put this face to the softness of her breasts and laid her back on the altar, the stone of which seemed warm from her body. Her cloak was tossed aside and she herself lifted her shift up over her waist and disposed herself for his comfort. She closed her eyes and extended her arms, her fingers twitching, and softly said, "Come to me, my demon. Enter the house of Juna. I will show you how a goddess loves. Now, Blade! I command it—I want

it—I—Ohhhhhhhhhhh—demon—demon!"

As he thrust hard into her Blade chanced to look up. The statue was watching with blank eyes, painted once but now veneerless stone, yet seeming to know and understand. It occurred to Blade that the broken nose was still haughty, the stone lips curled in disdain, the mamoreal breasts defiant and virginal. She, this stone Juna seemed to say, had stood inviolate for all the centuries and now must witness such a coarse and common coupling. Blade gave her an enigmatic wink and set about his work. The moist underparts of the living Juna had him in thrall, engulfed him, squeezed and milked him with a frenzied play of expert muscles to the accompaniment of many sobs and cries. As he felt the challenge and bent to satisfy her Blade admitted that, if she was indeed a temple whore, she was of the best. Juna, in brief, knew her business. Already he was laved in her body juices and always she pressed on for more and more and more. He recognized her type, a difficult one for mere man to cope with, and knew that with each outcry she climaxed and that each climax led to the next and the next.

Juna's slim thighs crept up his body and locked, her ankles crossed over the small of his back, holding him in the trap of her vagina, her hands clutching at his buttocks and her nails tearing him. A never ceasing moan came from her parted lips as she sought for the impossible—to pull Blade's giant body entirely into her own. That, and only that, would have satisfied her.

When Blade spent with a mighty lurch and groan she cried out and was stubborn and would not release him. She squeezed and compressed her legs, narrowing herself, striving to the bitter end to keep him, to hold the helpless small worm of flesh she had just defeated. In the end she lost and he slipped out and away from her. Juna sighed and lay inert, her eyes closed, and did not bother to pull down her shift. Blade did it, and then reached for his sword belt and watched her as he buckled it on. She was near to sleep, in limbo, and no danger to him for a time. He smiled and left her so. For the moment he was master and they both knew it.

He went to explore the dark orifice in the temple wall. It was nothing more than a barren room in which lay the parts of a small boat. It took Blade a moment or two to puzzle it out, then he nodded in pleasure and admiration. The boat could be taken apart and assembled again. It was a simple thing, made of withes and rushes and caulked with dried mud, and when he visualized it in tine piece he saw that it would resemble an oversize bathtub. It might hold as many as three, or perhaps four, and it would be good only in calm water. There was but a single double-ended oar and steering would be a hazard.

Blade plucked at his beard and considered. The thing reminded him of coracles he had seen back in HD; the Welsh used them for fishing and did well enough as long as there was no wind or surf.

He went back to where Juna was stirring on the altar. She opened her eyes and licked her lips and looked for all the world like a contented cat. She coaxed him with a finger. "Ah, Blade! If you are a demon I will have none but demon lovers from this day on."

She extended her arms. "Come to me again?"

Blade laughed and tugged her off the altar. "I begin to see why the men of Thyrne would be heroes. But forget that now—we must get back to camp and I must countermand an order. It is not nets I want, but boats. And I will have them."

Reluctantly Juna arranged her clothing and looked at him in puzzlement. "Boats? I do not understand. How are we to come by boats?"

He tossed her the cloak and, retrieving the little dagger, gave her that also. "See that you do not sheathe it in my flesh. Now come and see."

Juna was not impressed by the crude disassembled boat. She made *amou* of disgust. "We are to

cross the open sea in that?"

Blade nodded. "We are. Our bellies can wait. We will make boats instead of nets. I can use this one for a model and make them larger and, by means of a centerboard and outrigger, more stable. But we must hurry. This mist will lift and the sea will calm, and we must be ready when that happens. We will go at night and try to sneak past the patrol boats. We will need all our luck, but I think it can be done. I have a sword and Edyrn had a lance—they can be made to do for axes. But there are problems—many problems. Will you hurry, Juna!"

They had left the promontory by now and Blade was striding along at a great pace. Juna ran to keep up.

"You change like sunlight on water," she complained. "But a moment gone you were my lover, a great demon in me and tender with it, and now I do not know you at all."

He reached back a hand to tug her along. "Come, woman. We will speak of that another time. This bad weather, which has been our friend, is going to desert us soon. We must be ready." He added, with intentional cruelty, for he did not like her dwelling on what was past, "Do not forget what will happen to you if Ptol takes you. And those ships are out there by Ptol's command, make no mistake."

For a moment she trotted along beside him in humble silence. Then, "Until we come safe to Patmos it would be as well if I were the goddess Juna. You do not believe, but my people do. I have more authority than you think. It may be of some help in this thing you plan."

There was truth in her words and Blade nodded. "You do that, Juna. Play the goddess as much as you like, so long as you do not do so with me, and as long as you do not plot against me."

After a moment he said, thinking no harm done to throw a little scare into her, to let her know that because he had enjoyed her body, and she his, it in no way made him her serf, "I found you to my liking just now. I will again when the mood is on me. You, if sounds are any gauge, found it the same. Keep it in mind, but do not presume on it. I have had your body, Juna, and if you cross me I will have your head."

By then she had fallen behind him again and so he did not see the look she directed at his back.

## CHAPTER 6

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The escape was greatly aided by the arrogance of the Samostan patrols. As the weather cleared and visibility improved, their running lights were as good as marker buoys to Blade. By this time he had completed half a dozen of the frail basket craft, as many oars, and his luck held in that the night was moonless. He put each of the emasculates in charge of a boat—castration had not affected their muscular development—and promised them dire punishment if they failed. None of the eunuchs chose to mention—if indeed they thought of it—that if they failed they would not encounter Blade again.

Blade put himself and Edyrn in charge of the remaining two boats. Edyrn's was overloaded, with two children and two of Juna's ladies, but his was the strongest boat by Blade's reckoning. The last, and the smallest boat, he reserved for himself and Juna. If he made it to Patmos he would need her, whether as hostage or interceder only time would divulge, and he had no intention of losing her. He had the thought that, if worst came to worst, he might be able to swim to Patmos with Juna in tow. Even so it would be a long swim, even for Blade, and every mile gained was precious.

When the time came to depart he was not overjoyed to find Juna whispering to Edyrn on the beach. She gave him a mocking smile as he approached and the boy looked flushed and uneasy as he saluted

with his lance.

Blade, having remarked this, chose to ignore it. But he scowled at the lad as he gave final instructions. He pointed to the lights of the patrol ships, three of them, at this time some two miles offshore and a mile or so apart.

"Only three things to remember, lad. There must be absolute quiet. No talking. You have my order to kill anyone that makes a sound. You must steer directly between the lights, so giving you the greatest distance on either side. Thirdly, and this is not important until you are past the patrols, you will guide on the end star of the Lancer. She has told you of this?"

Edym glanced at Juna—uneasily, Blade thought—and then at Blade. He pointed his own lance to a constellation just visible over the seaward horizon—it vaguely resembled a warrior carrying a lance.

"She has instructed me, sire. I follow the star at the end of the lance and it will guide me to Patmos."

Blade regarded the lad for a moment, chin in hand, then nodded brusquely. "I hope so. Go, then. Go with good fortune, lad."

Edym saluted and ran down to where his frail craft waited with its hapless cargo. Blade took Juna's arm and followed him. They watched as the five boats were pushed into the light surf. It could hardly be called surf, the sea having calmed so rapidly, yet even the small waves caught the crude little boats and spun them like corks in a whirlpool.

Blade looked grim. "They will need more than fortune," he told the girl. "They will need a miracle."

At that moment one of the basket boats overturned. Blade heard a single shrill cry for help as he raced down and plunged into the sea, then there was silence. When he reached the overturned boat he saw that it was disintegrating, was nothing but a tangle of flotsam, and there was no sign of the occupants. Something touched his leg and Blade went under and came up with a naked child. She coughed and spat water and clung to Blade with cold little arms. He cast a last look around and swam back to the beach. As he handed the girl child to Juna he said, "All gone. Kron was in that boat, I think."

Juna wrapped her cloak about the little girl, who began to cry. Blade winced. It was a welcome sound, for the child lived, but he was thinking of the patrol boats. He combed out his sodden beard with his fingers and stared down in perplexity.

Juna sensed his thought. She gathered the wailing little girl to her breast. "Her name is Thamus and she is daughter to one of my ladies—I will not leave her."

Blade grimaced at her. "Who said anything about leaving her?"

Juna cuddled the small bundle. "You had the thought, Blade. I saw it in your face."

It was half true and Blade knew it. He nodded. "She will come with us, then. Very like she will be our death. Sound carries a far distance over water and the crying of a child will alert them at once. But so be it."

She regarded him stonily. "When that time comes I will know what to do. Let us go."

Blade helped her into the boat and handed the child in. There was no trace of the others as he waded out into the slight surf. For better or worse they had vanished into the night.

He swam for a time, pushing the light boat ahead of him, giving Juna time to adjust to the precarious balance. He shoved the boat through the faintly creaming surf line and into deeper water. He headed for a point midway between the ship's lanterns to his right; to his left, and too near for comfort, gleamed a

third point of light. It moved. One of the patrol boats had left its position and was approaching another. Why? To hail a warning? Had one of the basket boats been sighted or sunk, or taken? Blade bore a little more to starboard. As they were about to pass between the stationary ships he crawled into the boat and took up the oar. He made a sign to Juna and whispered.

"Keep the child quiet now. For all our lives!"

Blade began to sweat. He cursed and raged inwardly. Bad luck. A current caught them and bore the craft toward the nearest patrol ship in spite of anything he could do with the oar. He damned this most unstable of boats. There was no weight to it, hardly any draft, and the crude outrigger and center board did not work as well as he had anticipated. The boat bobbed and twirled and spun crazily, sucked down and driven up by every vague breeze and current, and Blade could keep no way on her. There was worse—the tide, on which he counted heavily, had nearly reached the ebb. In a few minutes it would turn and begin to carry them back to shore.

The child began to whimper.

Blade, sweat chilling on him, paddled with all his strength. They were so close to one patrol boat that he could hear the crew talking on deck and see cordage and mast revealed in the single light. The child made another sound, a smothered cry, an inward sucking of air as if readying itself to scream. Blade cast a beseeching look at Juna.

The child hushed. Their boat drifted past the patrol, just beyond the aura of light and in slack water. There was a faint luminescence, reflected light from water, and Blade smiled as he saw that Juna had given the child one of her lush round breasts. He nodded. The child was too old for suckling, no doubt, but seemed content enough. It was not, Blade thought, the most unpleasant way to be silenced.

As soon as they were safely past the patrol he went over the side again and began to swim and push. He did not really mind when the useless oar fell overboard and floated away. He hoped that Edyrn, or even some of the eunuchs, had brains enough to experiment and do as he was doing. His big body and powerful legs drove the little tub through calm water at a good pace. After a few hours, as he rested, he began to smell the effluvia from the land. It could only be the odor of Patmos, for he had lined up correctly with the Lancer in the sky. Never in his life, in any dimension, had he smelled the like of it. The air was soft as velvet and bore a sweetness that could only be the mingle of millions of lush blooming plants. He could not isolate a single odor—it was like breathing a meld of roses and myrrh, of cinnamon and sandalwood and lilac, of clove and orange and coffee and tea with a dash of jasmine. A land breeze from Paradise.

Blade breathed deep and saw that Juna was doing the same. The child was asleep at her breast. When she saw him looking she took the teat from it and arranged her shift to cover herself. Blade gave her a wide smile.

"I think I am going to like your island, if smells are any auger." He sniffed again. "I can almost forget the sewers of Thyre."

Cautiously, careful not to tip the wayward boat, he crawled aboard. "The land is not far now?"

At that moment a beacon flared yellow on a headland. She pointed to it. "Yonder is the master flare that points to Cybar, our capital city. I think we are awaited."

Blade, now paddling with his hands, shot a look at her. "How is that? Your messenger did not get through."

The moon, coming late, had vanished early. It lacked an hour until dawn and the star sheen was

blurred by milky clouds. He could see the white smudge of her face, nothing more, yet it seemed that she smiled.

"Izmia, my grandmother, is not a fool. She has other spies in Thyrne and will know what has happened—and this part of the coast is always well guarded. It will be especially so now that Hectoris is victor over Thyrne—his agents will be as thick as lice on a beggar."

Blade took another deep breath. He was weary and hungry and caked with brine. On Patmos, in the city of Cybar, surely there would be a chance to rest and bathe and eat his fill, a time of surcease so that he could recoup for the new tasks and dangers that must lie ahead. To this end he was counting heavily on Juna.

He told her so. "I trust that your grandmother, Izmia, Pearl of Patmos, will be a friend to me. I think I have earned that, and I count on you to speak for me when the time comes." He stifled a yawn. The silken scented air was making him sleepy. "And that time can come none too soon for me, Juna. And you—you must also be weary."

She pointed to the beacon flaring on a point of land. "There will be time to speak of these things later. Get us ashore, Blade. We are not safe yet. Patmos has no ships and those of Hectoris approach our shores at will. I beg you to hurry."

Blade slipped over the side again and began to kick the little boat inland. Juna busied herself with the child, awake now and squalling in hunger. She did not offer her breast again.

He skirted a reef and found that he could touch bottom some two hundred yards out from a rocky beach. They had been seen now and a knot of men, soldiers as best he could make out in the first dawn, came to the water's edge to greet them. Blade began to walk ashore, pulling the boat behind him. As he grew closer he could make out archers and lancers, a dozen or more in the charge of an officer. They clustered near a tall pole on which the beacon flared. Blade stopped for a moment, considering, then reached into the boat for his sword belt. It was gone.

Blade halted abruptly in water up to his waist and glared at Juna. "Where is my sword, Goddess?"

She clutched the crying child to her breasts and, in the rapidly paling light, he saw that she smiled in triumph. She met his stare defiantly.

"As to that, Blade, you will have to ask among the sea creatures. I gave them your sword some time back."

And very slyly, too, for he had not seen her move nor heard a sound. He glinted his teeth at her and gave the fragile boat a great shake.

"You presume too much, *Goddess!* I am not your slave, nor yet a believer in your divinity. In short, I am not a fool."

She laughed at him, a tinkle of sound, a clear little bell in the morning. "You are not, Blade? I disagree. I think you look much like a fool at the moment. But be not alarmed. What I do, what I have done, is for your own good. And for mine."

Blade could have smiled, but he restrained the impulse with no great difficulty. She needed another lesson, and in time he would give it to her, but for the moment he had been outsmarted. And there was always the chance that she knew what she was doing. This was her country and her people. He was the stranger. Nevertheless he gave her a scowl and a growl, saying, "I still have you—and the child. I could wring both your necks before your friends could reach us."



Juna laughed in his face. "You will not, Blade. I know you better than that. You are a demon, no doubt of it, but you will not harm me or the child. Now do you listen to me—I sent a message with Edyrn, to Kador and Smyr, asking that this thing be done and—"

Blade scowled again. "So that was the whispering on the beach! And just who are Kador and Smyr?"

A hail came from the beach. "Juna! Juna, Goddess of Thyrne. We are bid by the king, and by his gracious sister, the queen, to make you welcome to Patmos."

Juna ignored the call. She was whispering urgently to Blade, her fingers reaching to touch one brawny arm.

"There is no time for detailed explanations now. Kador and Smyr are king and queen of Patmos, and some kin to me. There is no time to explain *allthat*, either. But Edyrn has landed and carried out my bidding and we are met by the proper party. I had feared for your life else, Blade, for the soldiers of Izmia are a rough lot. And I greatly fear for you anyway, for this is Patmos, not Thyrne nor any land you have been in, and you will be as a babe in arms at first. I—"

Blade roared with laughter. "A babe in arms, is it?" He nodded toward the beach. "Hah—I do not need a sword to handle that lot! By the looks of them the child there could do it. Ho—if there is trouble my fists will be enough."

Juna moved close to him. She struck with her little fists at his great chest. "Will you listen! It is just as I feared—for I know your temper and your strength. I warn you—do not put too much faith in that strength. This is Patmos, where children are born knowing more of intrigue than a great rogue like you can ever know. Believe me in this, Blade. I beg you. Bide your time, and keep your temper in check, until you can see matters for yourself."

He fingered his beard and eyed her. "And if I do all this—if I play the weakling and submit to whatever you, and this king and queen of yours, have in store for me? What then?"

Juna smiled at him. "Then all will be well, my love. In time you will come to understand. You will be happy in Patmos for so long as we have, for invasion is coming, and I shall be happy with you. See—they are coming to escort us in. I have your promise?"

His look was dour. He had already decided. He did not want trouble, certainly not bloodshed, and for the moment he was at a disadvantage. No point in trying to figure out her motives. Impossible. He had best look to himself.

Still, at that very moment, he would almost have surrendered his hopes of returning to Home Dimension for his sword.

A splendid and rather dainty officer—or so Blade thought—was first to reach the boat as it was pulled onto the beach by soldiers. The officer ignored Blade for the moment and bowed to Juna. Blade had some difficulty in repressing a smile, for he had never in all his military service in Home or X Dimensions seen anything like this popinjay.

The officer doffed a silver helmet decorated with gay plumes. His hair was of shoulder length and in tight ringlets and emitted a strong perfume. Blade wrinkled his nose. The officer's chest armor was of gold, chased with silver, and the slender rapier slung on a bejeweled baldric could only have been intended for ceremony. He wore a kilt of gold cloth and greaves of polished gold. His shoes were high laced and bound with thongs about the calf, and had long pointed toes that turned up and were tipped with rosettes of colored ribbon. Blade wondered how the man could walk in such footwear, much less

fight in them. The latter speculation, he told himself as he studied the rest of the little troop, was idle and beside the point. These men had never fought a battle in their lives, nor would they. These were "show" soldiers, a palace guard, spit-and-polish men. Blade thought of Hectoris, and of the invasion that was forthcoming, and thought that only God could help Patmos.

And not even that—if the legend beneath the circled snake bore any truth. *Ais Ister*. I act for God!

The thought brought Blade a new awareness of his own peril. Lord L had warned him to expect a longer stay in Dimension X this time. In escaping from Thyrne to Patmos he had gained a little time and not much else; Hectoris would come, and the false priest, Ptol, and Blade did not care to think of his fate if he were taken alive.

Juna and the child were carried ashore by soldiers. The officer touched Blade on the shoulder and said, "You will come with us, please. It is the wish of the Goddess Juna, and of our king and queen. Any time you are ready, sir."

The fellow was polite enough. He was obviously bored and had better things to do. He fiddled with a drooping yellow mustache and regarded Blade with sheer ennui, obviously in no hurry, awaiting Blade's pleasure. The escort, a half dozen soldiers carrying dress lances with ribbons bedecking them, looked on with equal boredom. Blade nodded and shrugged his huge shoulders. If this was being a prisoner it might not be so bad. He glanced to where Juna was being helped into a two-wheeled cart drawn by a dozen men in gray breeches and blouses. They stood as docilely as the horses they replaced, their heads drooping, gazing at the sand glittering in the sun's first rays. Men as beasts of burden. In that moment Blade understood a little of the Patmosian truth—it was a slave society.

Blade took a tentative step toward the cart, his fists clenched and ready. He vowed to keep a curb on his temper, and meant to keep it so, but it was just as well that the officer stepped aside with a smile and a slight bow.

"I would have a last word with the goddess," said Blade.

"By all means, sir. But if you would be brief? It is a long ride to the prison and it is nearly time for first music."

Blade made no sense of the last word. The sound of "prison" was enough. He was frowning as he pushed through the soldiers to reach Juna in the cart. She was still holding the little girl.

He seized a cart stake and shook it. "What is all this talk of prison?"

She glinted a row of dainty white teeth at him. The first sunlight burnished her hair like a golden helmet, but revealed lines of fatigue, and little pools of shadow beneath the violet-gray eyes. He knew her to be near exhaustion and still thought her as lovely a woman as ever he had seen—if only she were not such a bitch! Or a goddess.

Juna tugged her cloak over her breasts. "It will not be for long, Blade. Trust me."

"Trust you? That is exactly what I do not do, woman!" He was angry again, but kept his voice down.

She raised a finger and glanced around at the guards. They, in all their finery, appeared as bored as their officer. One said, "We are going to miss first music."

Juna said, "It will not be so bad, Blade. Go quietly and see for yourself. Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth closed—if that is possible. Soon you will begin to understand and many of your questions will be answered. As for trusting me—what else can you do?"

She had him there. Blade took it with as good a grace as he could manage. A sub-officer gave a

command and the men in harness obeyed dumbly, putting their shoulders to harness attached to the long tongue of the cart. Blade nodded toward them. "Who are they—these men who serve as horses?"

Juna shrugged. "The Gray People? Pay them no attention. They are of no importance. They—they are only the Gray People."

The cart moved off. Juna waved. "Goodbye, Blade. I will see you as soon as I can arrange matters. Meantime—heed my words and bind your temper."

The officer in charge, still courteous, waited until the cart vanished from sight among the dunes of white sand. Then he touched Blade's arm.

"By your leave, sir. We have already missed first music and I would not like to miss the second. Nor would my men."

Blade followed to where a second, and smaller, cart stood concealed by dunes. Six of the men in gray breeches and blouses waited in the harness. Blade nodded to them and looked at the officer.

"Slaves?"

The officer, who said that his name was Osric, touched a dainty finger to his perfumed mustache and smiled. "There are no slaves in Patmos, sir. These are Gray People, eaters of *penthe*. They are happy and content and would not change their lot if they could. If you would be so kind as to enter the cart, sir, we can be on our way."

Blade shrugged and obliged. The officer followed him into the cart and they lurched away as their escort fell into place on either side. Blade saw how they straggled along, out of step and with lances tilted every which way, and thought again that Patmos was doomed if these were the men who must face Hectoris and his hordes. They could not even march! He made a sour face and forgot these sad soldiers as he concentrated on the journey into Cybar. Observation! He must see, *really* see, everything and store it away in his memory file.

The cart left the dunes and began to follow a lane of red cobbles. The lane ran arrow-straight through vast fields of flowers that stretched away on either side as far as Blade could see. The odor was overwhelming, the same mingle of fragrances that Blade had sniffed at sea. The stalks reminded him of sunflowers, tall and sturdy, but each stalk supported a dozen dish-sized blooms of various colors—blues and yellows, reds and greens, brown and purple and orange. Blade breathed deeply and again felt sleepy and lethargic. The world was a softer and warmer place, the sun more comforting and pleasant than he had ever known it, and he began to experience a well-being, a stultifying low key happiness, that he had never known before in a difficult existence. His fears of the future vanished, his anxieties fell away, and he found himself smiling broadly at the officer. Osric, thought Blade, was not such a bad fellow after all. He had been wrong to be surly and rude to the man. The chap was only doing his job, and being very nice about it, too.

Blade grinned and asked about the flowers. Osric smiled in return, twirled his splendid mustache, and pointed out women in gray smocks working in the flower patches.

"*Loti* gatherers," explained Osric. "Gray People, of course, but only unmarried girls are permitted in the fields. The *loti* is crushed and refined and made into *penthe*."

"*Penthe*?" Blade was not breathing so deeply of the heavenly air now. Suspicion mounted in him and he breathed through his mouth and did not inhale deeply. He had already guessed that Patmos was a slave culture—was it also a drug culture?

Osric waved a languid hand and the cart stopped. "You shall see for yourself," said Osric. He made

a sign to his subofficer and said to Blade, "It is halfway through first music, and that is *penthe* time for the gray people."

It was only then that Blade became consciously aware, for the first time, of the music. So subtle, so sweetly insidious, that he had taken it for the sea wind. Now, as he cocked a conscious ear and really listened, he found that it was the wind, a continuous zephyr sighing over the land and bearing music to blend with the wondrous effluvium and drug the senses.

At that moment Richard Blade came alert to his danger and began to fight back. He understood the purpose of the flowers and the music, and the deadly beguilement thereof. And became aware also that Osric, for all his languid airs and ennui, was watching him closely. The better, Blade thought, to report back to Juna.

Blade masked his thoughts and played the simpleton. He said, "Why are we stopping? And whence comes the music?"

Osric smiled and flicked a finger at his mustache. It was apparent that he had been instructed to answer Blade's questions, at least to a point. To lift a hand to point to the horizon seemed to tax his strength, yet Osric managed it. Blade, following that limp hand, saw a black cone on the far, far edge of flower fields. The cone was flattened at the top, scooped out, and scalloped at the sides and ringed with snow. A faint coil of dark smoke drifted from the crater as Blade stared. A volcano. Still very much alive, if the smoke told truth. Patmos, in addition to all else, was a volcanic isle.

Blade shaded his eyes and stared long at the black cone. The snow reflected sunlight in a dazzle of gold. Blade turned at last back to Osric. "The music comes from that mountain?"

The officer smiled and nodded. "It does. Ask me not how, nor why, for I do not know. Only the Pearl knows that secret. But come it does, through pipes of wind to Cybar and all of Patmos. It never stops, though at times it is louder than at other times, and the legend is that when the music stops Patmos will cease to exist. But enough of that—you asked why we stopped? Look for yourself, then. It is midway through first music and time for the Gray People to have their second *penthe* of the day."

This Blade understood. He watched intently as a soldier passed among the Gray People and handed out small cakes of the stuff. Each cake was the size of a yeast cake in HD, and of the same smooth white color, wrapped in a single leaf. The Gray People, all men, grabbed eagerly at the *penthe* and chewed it rapidly while still staring at the ground or, vaguely, at the *loti* fields around them.

Blade, listening to the faint strange harmony and watching the Gray People partake so eagerly of what he knew must be a will-eliminating drug, decided to test his own position. He wanted a reaction. When the soldier returned with the leather box containing the *penthe* Blade held out his hand. The soldier looked startled, then glanced at his officer.

Osric nodded. "If you like, sir, you are welcome to the *penthe*. You are a guest of honor and the orders of Juna are that you have every desire."

Blade took a cake of the stuff and examined it closely. Osric watched. Blade smelled the stuff and crumbled it in his fingers. It was moist and velvety in texture and had the same perfumed odor as the fields around him. He put a fragment on his tongue and found it flat and tasteless. He smiled at Osric and flung the *penthe* away. "I do not think I would like it."

Osric smiled—obviously he could not have cared less either way—and waved a hand to his sub-officer. The cart began to move again.

Blade calculated that an hour had passed before they entered the outskirts of Cybar itself. He was

much impressed by what he saw. This city had been planned by a genius. There were broad avenues and spacious squares, long vistas where flowers bloomed and fountains played, and scores of small green parks where children ran and played. And music everywhere, traceable now to small white kiosks in the squares and at the corners of the avenues. From vents in the pointed tops of these kiosks the music leaked into the air. Again he was impressed—music somehow piped in from a volcano! Music such as he had never heard before; music that promised and lured and lulled; ineffable and treacherous, sinister in its very sweetness; Pied Piper music, at once compelling and enervating, insistent that the listener swoon and surrender and forget.

Blade began to feel sleepy again. He clawed at his flesh with his ragged dirty nails, inflicting pain, and deliberately seeking cause for anger and affront so that he would not lose his senses. Turning on Osric he demanded harshly how much farther it was to the prison.

"I itch," Blade complained, "and I have great hunger and thirst. I would have fresh clothing. If we do not reach this prison soon it may enter my mind not to accompany you at all."

It was an empty threat and Blade knew it. So did Osric, but with his customary politeness did not point this out. Instead he gestured down a long colonnade, flanked by myriad fountains and flower beds, to where an enormous palace glistened white in the sun. From a pinnacle there floated an enormous white banner decorated with a scarlet flower. Blade recognized the *lotibloom* and his mood turned even grimmer and more sour—this sweet smelling blossom against the evil circled snake. There could be little doubt of the outcome. Unless he, Blade, could do, something and, at the moment, he did not see any great possibilities. What could he, one stranger in a land of flowers and drugs, where intrigue must be as omnipresent as the seductive music, what could he do to prevent the victory of the ringed serpent?

Blade shook his head savagely and told himself that this was negative thinking. But that was the trouble—everything in Patmos, so far at least, was negative. He had been ashore little more than two hours and already he could see that—Patmos was a lazy land where matters were let slide and even efficiency, though it did exist, was muted. Blade frowned in near despair and paid some attention to Osric, who was still talking about the palace.

"It is the home of Kador and Smyr, our king and queen. It is possible that you will one day meet them, though such things are not for me to speculate on."

Blade gave him a savage leer, quite prepared to force a quarrel now, no matter where it led; anything to cast off the opiate of this place, the will- and strength-sapping effect of the sensuous air and music that promised paradise and, for all Blade knew, might even deliver it.

So he scowled and giped at Osric. "And yet you do speculate, Osric. I have no doubt that that must be a crime of sorts in Patmos—for it involves thinking. And, from what I have seen, and smelled and heard so far, that must be the greatest crime of all. Thinking! Tell me, Osric, what is the penalty for that? For thinking, for using your own brain? The gallows? The axe? Or perhaps more subtle ways? Locked away in solitary with a lifetime supply of *penthe* and that cursed music piped into your cell? Answer me, man, and when you do, try to stand like a soldier at least and do not lollygag so."

But Osric, that dandy, would not be drawn. He smiled and bowed a trifle and flicked his mustache again, all courtesy, but it was evident that he would not be sorry to be rid of his charge. And this time, as he spoke, his hand rested on the hilt of his rapier. Blade marked it and wondered if he had underestimated Osric. He chided himself. He had made enough mistakes on this mission.

"The Goddess Juna," said Osric, "warned me that you might be difficult, sir. My task is to cope with you, and so I shall do. And answer your questions, as I was also instructed to do. There are no such penalties as you describe in Patmos, sir. We have crime, as do Thyrne and Samosta, but we do not

punish as they do. We do not, in short, resort to crime to cure crime. If you take my meaning, sir?"

Blade, cooling a bit, and interested, took up the point at once. "But you have prisons. I am being taken to prison now, unless you have lied."

Osric smiled and pointed ahead of them. "We also lie in Patmos. We lie a great deal, especially the upper classes. It is a way of life and necessary for survival."

Osric preened his mustache and fixed Blade with a bored gaze. "And who is to say, after all, what is a lie and what is truth? They change from day to day."

Blade was about to ask to be spared the philosophy when Osric pointed ahead. "There is the prison. I will leave you and bid you good fortune."

"That is a prison?" Blade could not believe it.

"Aye," said Osric. "Another of the things you will find strange in Patmos. Our problem is not to keep men in prison, but to keep them *out*. Once they have spent a little time here they do not wish to leave. But if you observe, and think it through, sir, you will find it not such a paradox after all."

The cart rolled through the gates into a vast courtyard. There were fountains and flowers everywhere scattered on lawns as green and finely clipped as putting greens in Home Dimension. Here and there was a music kiosk with the strange harmonies emanating from it. There were numerous benches and tables for games and in the distance a group of men were kicking a ball around. The complex of buildings was low and scrubbed to a glistening sheen.

The cart stopped and Osric leaped down. The guard detail had halted at the gate. Blade looked around for other guards, for prison personnel of any kind, and could see none. He did see Gray People, both men and women, tending lawns and clipping hedges and carrying pots and pans about. The prisoners—or what he took to be the prisoners—were dressed in short white kilts and sleeveless singlets. They all wore red sandals. None of them paid any attention to Blade and none of them seemed to be doing any work.

Osric started toward one of the buildings, then turned back. He held out a hand to Blade. "You may not think it, sir, but I am your friend. It is enough for me that you are friend to Juna, whom I worship. And she is also your friend. Remember that, sir. This will be our last word in private, so hear me well: you have been brought here at Juna's command and for your own protection. She has not forsaken you. Bide patiently and wait for her to work out matters in her own way. It will be to your advantage. Above all you must trust Juna."

Osric glanced around, then stepped closer to the cart and lowered his voice. "Juna has loved me in the past—and cast me aside. This was when I went with messages to Thyrne. Now all that is over and I bear no malice. It is you whom Juna wants now, and I will aid her in this all I can. But it will not be easy."

Blade glowered at the dainty officer and shrugged his big shoulders. He did not trust either of them, but he forebore the saying of it. He nodded and said, "As an exlover of the goddess, Osric, I can understand that you should want to help me. That makes a deal of sense."

Osric shrugged in his turn and ignored the sarcasm. "We have a saying in Patmos—when love is dead friendship begins. Farewell, sir. I must go now and obtain a signature for you. You are free to come and go as you choose."

It was true. Blade leaped from the cart and strolled a bit. He was sure that he could have walked out the gate and no one would have tried to stop him. So he did not walk out the gate. There would be time enough for that when he had thought matters through and knew what he was going to do.

He found a bench near a group of men who were playing what looked like chess, except that all the pieces were of black stone and carved to represent various flowers. He had watched for less than a minute when he knew something else, something not mentioned by Osric. These men, these prisoners in their neat white clothes, were *pentheaters*. It was apparent in their vacuous stares and slow, drugged movements. *Penthe*. Blade nodded in realization—they either took the stuff voluntarily or it was administered to them. His smile was grim. That was why there were no prison walls. These poor fellows—once their minds were captured there was no need to chain their bodies.

For nearly an hour Blade sat on his bench, brooding and observing, before anyone came for him. He reached one sure conclusion—this was a political prison. The men around him, his fellow prisoners, did not have a criminal look about them. All of them, without exception, had the look of intellectuals, of quietists, and most of them were elderly. He guessed that many of them had been in this place for years and that most would not leave it alive—would not want to leave it. This model prison was home to them now, all the security they had, and it was doubtful if many, in their *penthe*-ridden brains, remembered the offense that had brought them here in the first place.

Blade spat and knew how careful he must be. Juna was playing some sly game of her own and Osric was her creature. He scowled. He had no doubt that she had admitted the officer to her bed, now and again, as payment. But what plans had she for Blade? He could not guess and he did not have time to wait or to speculate—he must somehow gain an audience with the Pearl of Patmos, with Izmia, with the old woman who was grandmother to Juna. For it was there the real power must lie. But how to accomplish this, and with what speed, he did not at the moment have any idea.

He was still deep in thought when one of the Gray People came for him. He was a fat little man dressed in the customary gray breeches and blouse, but wearing a chain of office and looking more alert than the other serfs Blade had seen. For so he thought of them by now. Serfs. Slaves kept in order and obedience by good treatment and the drug.

The fat man bowed low. "Welcome, sire. I am come to serve you. I am 00610. If you will come with me I will arrange a bath and fresh clothing. Then a meal and, if it pleases you, a woman for company. We have many to choose from today, sire. A new troop of women has just been brought in from the countryside."

"I wish no woman," growled Blade. He followed the fat little man along a path of crushed stone. "You say you are 00610? You have no name?"

The man turned to give Blade a cherubic smile. "Oh, no, sir! None of the Gray People have names. Numbers only. A number is as good as a name, sir, in the long run. And much more convenient. Makes it easier to keep files and records, you see. This way, sir, to the bath."

Blade wondered which came first—the *penthe* or the numbers? Not that it mattered much. The dehumanizing factor was the same. He supposed they were bred to specification, the Gray People, and allotted tasks according to their intelligence. He speculated on how long this had been going on. His guess was for centuries. His guess was also that the ruling class of Patmos had outsmarted itself; they lived a placid and sybaritic existence, supported by serfs, and they no longer bred warriors if, indeed, they ever had. They lived for music and flowers and other sensual pleasures, an assured and comfortable existence from cradle to grave. Sooner or later such a life schema would have to be fatal, to prove its own undoing.

Blade grinned like a wolf. It would be sooner—Hectoris, the barbarian, was all but at the gates.

He was bathed in a steaming perfumed pool and given a prison uniform. Much search was required

before a kilt and singlet could be found to fit him. He took the largest red sandals they had.

When he was offered a sumptuous meal he would not eat. This visibly dismayed the little fat man who, for short, Blade had taken to calling 610.

The dining hall was cool and spacious, and the meal tempting, for Blade was ravenous, but he would not touch it. 610 wrung his chubby hands. "But you *must* eat, sire. You must! It is a rule. Every prisoner must eat such a meal when he first arrives."

Blade laughed at him. "You are the warder, no? Then summon your guards and force feed me. Why do you hesitate? I am only a prisoner like the others."

There was more hand wringing. "But I cannot do that, sire. Violence is also against the rules. Not that the matter ever arises—we do not need violence or coercion. We never have—"

Blade crossed his mammoth arms and stared the little man down. "Until now," he said cheerfully. "Now, if you expect me to eat, you need it."

He added, "You had best bring a dozen of your best men, little 610, for you are going to need them."

Blade stalked toward the door. He did not trust himself if he were forced to smell the food much longer. *Penthe* or not, he would be tempted to gulp it down.

610, moaning and complaining, came along to show Blade to his room. He took some audible comfort in the thought that Blade would be even hungrier by the time of the evening meal and would cease to be a problem. As they walked down a long corridor, past open windows where flowers bloomed on the sills, Blade said, "I would have a room to myself, 610. I am very tired and would sleep long. I also require shears and a razor, for when I awaken I wish to trim my hair and beard."

610 smiled eagerly. "I will send a barber at once. It just so happens that we have a new girl who is skilled.

"No girl," Blade said harshly. A woman, in certain circumstances, could be as deadly as the *penthe*. At the moment he wanted only to be alone, to sleep and then, his brain refreshed, to think. Think how to gain audience with the Pearl of Patmos—and how best to use that audience when he had gained it.

"You cannot be alone," said 610 sulkily. "That is also against the rules. All newcomers must share a room with another newcomer. And that, sire, is a rule I cannot break even for you."

610 indicated the stone floor of the corridor and, with a pettish smile, said, "Of course I cannot force you to share a room. If you prefer the hard floor to a luxurious bed so be it. That is your privilege as a prisoner, sire. I am only a poor Gray Person and a warder."

Blade grunted. "I will share the room, 610." And added with a leer, "I do not wish to become a problem for you."

610 patted his hands in approval. "There—there. That is better. I did think for a few minutes, sire, that you were going to be a problem. I was, in fact, warned that you might be. I am glad to see that you are not going to be much of a problem. As for eating—you will come to it when you are hungry enough."

"No doubt," Blade admitted. He had no wish to rile the little man further. "We will see." He would not, he thought, be around long enough to go starving. When darkness came he might just be on his way. Surely, in a city the size of Cybar, or in the countryside around, he could find something to eat. Something that was not loaded with *penthe*.

610 had been trotting alongside, trying to keep up with Blade's long stride. Now he dashed ahead



and threw open an unlocked door. Blade could not, in fact, see a lock and guessed that the door was to afford privacy more than to contain him. 610 had mentioned women—was it possible that his roommate, for you could hardly call it a cell, was a—

It was not possible. In fact it was quite impossible. Blade stared at the man on one of the two large beds and did not believe it. The man was nearly as large as Blade himself and was wearing the same white uniform and red sandals. He had been clipped and shorn and shaven and now, with the dirt missing Blade could see the myriad scars. And the eye patch. That was the same.

The man stared back at Blade. He let out a bellow. "By Juna's golden ass! It's the master Blade himself. I will choke on one of Juna's tits if it ain't—Sire! I thought you was dead and gone in that sewer—"

Blade gave him an enormous grin. He felt better already. Nob, as coarse and rough as he was, an admitted thief and murderer—as Blade had seen—and a son of the gutter, was yet like a breath of icy air in this cloying land of Patmos.

"Nob," cried Blade. "Nob, you ruffian! I thought you were dead. I saw you fall beneath the horses, more afraid for your treasure than for your life. Nob—you welcome scum of the earth. It is good to see you."

As he crossed to shake the man's hand he saw 610 backing out of the room. 610 was wringing his hands and smirking a bit. Blade knew then that this was no accidental meeting, no coincidence. He and Nob had been thrown together intentionally. But why? And by whom?

Juna?

They shook hands and in that moment Blade reasserted his strength and his authority. Nob did not give up easily, but after a moment he grimaced and pulled his hand away.

"Enough, master, enough! Crush my paw and I cannot serve you with it. Have done—I acknowledge you strongest."

The door closed softly behind them. Nob leaned close to Blade, grinning and rubbing his hand, and nodded toward the music box high on one wall.

"Take care," he whispered. "It looks innocent enough and I like the music, but they use it to listen as well. I know not how it is done, but air currents carry our voices to them. But 'tis safe enough if you whisper."

Blade nodded that he understood. He gazed deep into Nob's one good eye and saw that it was clear and alert and as full of mischief as ever. They had not yet gotten to Nob with *thepenthe*.

Nob must have guessed his thought, for he whispered, "Did you bring aught to eat, Sire Blade?" He rubbed his belly and cursed when Blade shook his head.

"I," said Nob, "could cat—" And mentioned Juna in a most indelicate manner.

## CHAPTER 7

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The prison room was provided with a desk and ample writing materials and for a moment Blade thought the problem of communication was solved. Nob soon dashed that hope.

"I never learned my letters, sire. Old Nob never had time for that nonsense—he was too busy trying

to keep his belly full."

Blade glanced at the music box. They could not go on whispering forever. The very fact itself would make them suspect. Then he remembered the unlocked door and cursed himself for a fool. This was such an upside-down, topsy-turvy prison that a man could not think straight in it. He prodded Nob toward the door. It was as simple as taking a stroll.

No effort was made to stop them as they left the building and strolled about the well-kept grounds. As soon as they were away from any possible listener Blade commanded Nob to talk. That worthy, with his broken-toothed grin, was only too ready. He adjusted his eye patch with a flair and stroked his jutting smooth-shaven jaw. His rugged features, now shorn of facial hair, revealed many old scars and craters—the latter attributed by Nob to a bad case of pox in his childhood.

His right eye glinting with surly amusement, Nob said, "I caught a hoof on the back of the sconce, master, and it must have made me look like a deader for sure—when I come to the Samostans was all gone and I had the square to myself."

Nob screwed up his ugly visage and shrugged. "That were a odd feeling, master. You was gone into the sewer and me all alone there with the dead."

Blade shook his head. "All of them? Every Thymian soldier died?"

"Aye. Unless, mind you, there was others playing dead like me. But old Nob didn't stay to see. I found a few of me jewels and gold pieces, not all, for those thieving Samostans had taken them, and I crawled my way through the piles of corpses and out the gate into the salt marshes. There was naught to do but make for the coast, and that I did. I fell in with a party of riff-raff like meself, you might say, and together we made the coast in three days. Once there—"

They stopped to watch some men tossing an oblong bladder about. Blade gave the man a sharp glance. "And then?"

"Well, sire, we had what amounted to a falling out." Nob did not meet Blade's eye. "There was some difference of mind, sire, on how to divide up the treasure and arms we had, er, acquired, and about how many could go in the little boat."

"You had a boat?"

"In a way, sire. One of the other—other rogues knew where one was hid. I think he must have been a smuggler, sire." Nob sounded so virtuous that Blade had trouble suppressing a grin. He studied Nob for a moment, then nodded. "You say you had a quarrel?" Blade looked away lest he smile. "What came of it?"

Nob stroked his lantern jaw. "You might say, sire, that I came of it. I tried to reason with them, sire, but they would have naught of it. In the end—well, master, I swear that I buried them decently and said proper prayers over them. By Juna's blonde fleece I did! I seen them off all right and proper."

Blade believed him. And dismissed it with a nod. "And you came to Patmos in the little boat? And how to prison?"

Nob muttered gloomily. "Aye, straight to prison. I had no chance at all, sire. The coast was alive with troops and watchers. At first I thought to fight, for you have seen what the soldiers are like, sire, and I could have eaten a score for breakfast—which reminds me, master, when are you going to find us something to eat?"

Blade, if he had acquired a good right hand and a servant, had also acquired a responsibility. As they

circled a fountain and headed back toward the buildings he said, "Why did you not eat the meal in prison, Nob?"

The man's good right eye glittered and he smote a horny fist into his palm. "For the same reason you did not, master. My brains are not much, but they are mine and so far are not addled. I would keep them so. They put the drug *penthe* in the food here, to keep men happy and from thinking, like the salt they use in Thyrnian prisons to keep a man's cock limp. In the end it is the same—a man is not a man!"

They strode a few paces in silence. Blade said, "How did you chance to know of the drug, Nob? You have been in Patmos before?"

For a long time Nob did not answer. Blade began to think that he was not going to answer when he finally cleared his throat and growled: "I have a feeling, master, now that we are twice met, that we are cast to each other for worse or better. So I must trust you, it seems."

Blade met his eye. "I will not betray your trust, Nob. But what you tell must be of your own free will. The future is what interests me, not your past."

"Aye. I know that. But I will tell you nonetheless—I have been in Patmos before now. I served in the army, which is how I come to know how poor it is, and if I am recognized I will be branded a deserter."

Blade was not too much surprised at this intelligence. "What is the penalty for desertion here? Certainly not a violent punishment?"

"Nay. But a miserable one, sire. They force feed you the *penthe* and exile you to an isle for the rest of your life."

Nob, after a moment, and with a scowl and in a tone of horror, added, "An isle without women, sire!"

Blade nodded in sympathy. In this he and Nob were on the same level—it was an inhuman punishment.

They passed a group of elderly men sitting on the benches. They did not lift their eyes as Blade and Nob strolled past. Nob grimaced with his blackened stumps. "You see, master? Accept the drug and you become like that."

Blade inclined his head. Nob was right. Such apathy and inertia served to make a man little better than a corpse. It was death in life.

Nob said, "No half measures with me, master. I have told you that I am a deserter from the army of Patmos—so know also that I am likewise a deserter from the Samostan army." Nob did not try to hide his fear, nor the shudder that ran through his big body.

"That is one reason why I lagged in the fighting, sire. I always had thought to escape, and if not that I had intent to kill myself. For I am known to many officers in the army of Samos, and the penalty there for desertion is to be bound to a wheel and have your bones slowly broken with iron bars."

Blade halted and, chin in hand, regarded his newly acquired man. He was pleased with this latest information—even a private soldier could tell him things about the Samostan army that he did not know at present—but he nonetheless kept his expression grim.

"So, Nob, you are three times a deserter? You admit this—from Patmos, from Samos, and lastly from Thyrne. That is the truth of it?"

Nob gave him a hideous grim with his broken stubs, and scratched at his newly cut hair, but there

was a glint of anxiety in his good right eye. "In the main, sire, if you say it. But about Thyrne there might be a dispute of minds. I was pressed into Thymian service. I never joined of my free will."

"And yet you are a Thymian? Born there?"

"Aye, sire. Born there." Nob thrust his jaw at Blade and his eye hardened. "I showed you the gutter, if you remember. My birth bed."

They walked on toward the building where they were quartered. Blade kept silent. He began to see a little method in all this madness, to discern a thread of reason and logic, of cause and effect, running through the seemingly mindless tapestry of events. Or he thought he did.

They halted again in a deserted plaza of lawn and flowers. There was no music box nearby, nor any inmates or Gray People. Blade fixed his man with a hard stare.

"I care nothing what you have done or been, Nob. We must have an understanding there. As we must have about the future—if you cast your lot with me I will expect loyalty and good service. I will accept nothing less and will punish for lack of it. I, in my turn, will bind myself to you, to protect and aid you and see to your comfort and well being. Think well and hard before you make a bargain, Nob, for I am not an easy forgiver. And the way will be hard—I know little of Patmos and will make mistakes. A battle is coming and you know the odds against us, for surely our lives ride in the balance, and if they break your bones with iron they will do worse to me. Know you of the priest, Ptol?"

Nob spat. That was answer enough.

Blade smiled coldly and went on, "I humiliated Ptol, snatched Juna from him, and cut off his hand into the bargain. Now he has gone over to Hectoris—not a far journey, I suspect—and I doubt that he sleeps much for pain and dreams of revenge. But enough of that—I tell you so you will know that my life is as much risked as your own. Now, when you came to Patmos, in your little boat, how was it that you were brought to this very same prison as I was? For I think we were meant to meet here."

Nob rubbed his pocked face and looked stupidly at Blade for a moment. Obviously the thought had not occurred to him. At last he shook his head. "I do not know, sire. Your mind runs faster than mine. I had not thought that we met but by accident and—"

Blade was remembering various conversations that had taken place on his way through the salt marshes with Edyrn and the little party. He had not spoken much to Juna, who had been keeping herself to herself; he had spoken a great deal to the boy, Edyrn. And Edyrn, as Blade now knew, was Juna's man.

Man, he thought a little wryly, was the word. He had made a mistake in taking Edyrn for a mere callow stripling. A mistake of which Edyrn had taken full advantage. Blade had spoken of Nob, more to pass the time than anything else, and to make the miserable wet camps more bearable. It had seemed natural enough at the time, Blade thought now, but he was still a fool. Prattling on about his narrow escape in Thyrne, about his adventures, with Edyrn soaking in every word and reporting it to Juna later.

It only required confirmation and a moment later Blade had it. Nob said that a young officer resembling Edyrn had indeed interviewed him soon after his arrest.

"Aye," mumbled Nob, searching his memory. "A short and bandy legged young cock he were, with blue eyes and yellow hair. Had an honest look to him, though that means nothing."

"How was he dressed? How did he act? Think, man! Was he in command? Did he show authority or was he only a courier?"

"Oh, aye, he was in command right enough." Nob wagged his long jaw. "Had a file of soldiers to his back. Ummmm—that's queer, now that I recall—"

"What was queer, man? Stop your maundering and tell me clearly what happened."

Blade had no doubt that it was Edyrn being described. An Edyrn not so young and guileless as he had posed. An officer in the army of Patmos. And Juna's man all the way—or was he?

"The soldiers!" Nob smote a great fist into his palm. "That was different—they looked like real soldiers, clad in old leather and iron, and they carried weapons like they knew what they were for. How could that have slipped my mind? They were real soldiers, not like these nambies we've to do with, or I would not have gone along so easily."

Blade thought that over for a moment. "They brought you straight here? To the prison?"

"Aye. And in silence, too. It was forbidden to speak."

"And they mentioned nothing of me? This young officer—he is a man called Edyrn—he said nothing to you of me? No hint that I would come and join you in this prison?"

Nob shook his head. "None, master. I was treated well enough, but they told me nothing."

Blade kept after him. "How was this Edyrn dressed? What rank did he display?" Nob was like a sponge. The information was there but you had to squeeze him to get it.

Nob put a finger to his hairy nostrils. "Aye—that is something else comes back to me. This younker officer were dressed in battle armor, like I said, and wore rank of a captain in the Pearl's own guard. I am sure, now, though I have seen it but once before. On his shoulders he wore the insigne of the black Pearl of Patmos. Of Izmia herself. She who lives in the volcano."

They were passing a last bench before the entrance to the building. Blade sat down abruptly. It was coming too fast. He held up a hand to silence Nob.

There was no great mystery as to how Edyrn had come to Patmos so much before Blade—he had left earlier and he must have made the trip many times before, he would have known the currents and winds and the most direct route. The men he commanded might have been waiting for him. He had carried out Juna's orders and had Blade met and taken to prison—no great mystery to that, either—but *before* that he had encountered Nob—a chance meeting?—and at that time he had been in the uniform of a guardsman of the Pearl. Just who did Edyrn serve—Juna or the Pearl of Patmos? Or both? And what possible purpose could Edyrn serve in throwing Blade and Nob together? And on whose orders?

Blade shrugged and gave it up for the moment. He looked at Nob and smiled. "Let us get back to the room and sleep a time. I have a feeling that we will need it. And I have another feeling—something is going to happen."

Nob rubbed his belly. "Will it have to do with food, master?"

"I know not. Just as I do not know if it will be for good or ill, but there is something afoot. Come, Nob. Before we fall asleep I wish to know all I can about this old woman who is called Pearl of Patmos. She who lives in a volcano? Is she black, then?"

They saw no one as they returned to their room. The music, still sweet and insidious, filled the room with languorous chords. Nob jerked his head at the music box and grimaced. "It never stops, sire. How can we outwit it?"

Blade motioned to a corner. "I will sing. You whisper in my ear. Tell me of this old lady who is said

to live in a volcano, this old woman who Juna claims as grandmother."

Blade began to sing. For some reason he could remember only a tune from Balfe, a thing his first nanny had often played on the piano and as often had sung to young Blade to lull him to sleep. He had not even thought of the song for years, now he sang it very badly and off key: "*I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls...*"

Nob was staring at him as though he were sure Blade had gone daft. Blade scowled and jammed an elbow into his ribs. Surely his singing was not that bad! And it did not matter—he had no intention of giving a concert, he wished to hear about this strange old lady of the volcano. This Pearl of Patmos—black Pearl?—in whom resided the real power on this island, and was Blade's best chance of survival.

Nob still stared, his jaw agape. Blade nudged him again and whispered, "Speak, man! What of this Izmia?"

Nob's coarse whisper came like the croaking of a giant frog. "I know not how you came by this information, master, but you have surely been talking to a liar or a fool. Izmia, the Pearl, may be a grandmother—I have no cause to doubt that—but if so she is such a grandmother as I would wed in my dreams. For the truth is, sire, that Izmia has no age! Others have age, not the Pearl. She remains young when others wither and die. As for color—she is called black because, I wot, she is not exactly white. Nor brown nor yellow nor green. Her flesh, so they say, for I have never seen her with this eye, is the color of flame. They say her skin changes color like a strange lizard that sailors tell of, though I have never believed that tale.

"But there *is* a black pearl, or so the legend goes, and it is as big as a cabbage and lies at the bottom of the volcano pool. Lies there with the sword of Patmos, the very sword of he who founded this island in the dawn of time. All this is, you understand, only a story, master. A myth and a legend to be told to fools and children. Men of the world like ourselves, sire, will not believe in such drool. Please, master, could you leave off singing now? I cannot stand it on an empty belly."

Blade glared at him, but broke off to whisper. "But this Izmia, this woman called the Pearl of Patmos—the black Pearl as you say—she does really exist? I must know for certain, Nob. For if she does exist, and has power as she must, we are going to make our way to her as soon as we can."

Blade began to caterwaul again. "*I dreamt I dwelt in...*"

Nob winced and whispered hastily. "Aye—she exists sure enough. In all her beauty and her years she exists. But she is a recluse, master, and never leaves her volcano. Her guard slay all who try to disturb her privacy. I swear by Juna's golden ass, sire, that there is no way in which a mere man may come to look on Izmia. Unless—"

Fury exploded in the corridor outside their room. There was much shouting and a rush of feet and the clang of steel on steel. Men cursed and men screamed.

Blade left off singing and stared at the closed door. The skirmish in the hall was continuing and coming closer. He heard a familiar voice cry out a command: "That is enough of killing. Take the others prisoner—lock them in a room until we are gone. Now hurry—that door yonder."

Blade looked at Nob, whose mouth was still open. "Unless what, Nob?"

Nob gulped. "Unless, master, Izmia sends for us."

Blade stroked his jaw and eyed his man. "I think, Nob, that it has come to pass. We will know in a moment."

The door was dung open. Edyrn, wearing battle dress and, sure enough, the black pearl on his shoulders, looked in at them. His sword was bloody. He bowed formally to Blade.

"I am glad to see you safe and well, sire, and glad that we meet again. I am sent to take you from this place to another. If you are ready? There is no time to waste."

Blade went to the stout lad and shook his hand. He smiled. "It is I who am glad to see you, Edyrn. We go, I trust, to the volcano to see Izmia?"

Edyrn bowed again. His blue eyes were as cool and direct as ever, but his smile was tentative. There was a fresh dent in the steel helmet covering his flaxen pate and blood on his body armor. Blade admitted his mistake again. This was no boy, never mind his years—this was a man and a warrior.

"We go to the Pearl," said Edyrn, "but the long way around. Matters have taken course much faster than we anticipated, sire, and Patmos is in mortal peril. Hectoris cannot yet be ready to invade us—all our spies tell of his unpreparedness—yet he does make the attempt. A small party of Samostans landed on our coast not an hour gone. This must be seen to at once."

For once Nob appeared awed. He followed Blade as they were escorted down the corridor and out of the building. Blood and bodies were strewn around the hallway and, somewhat to his sorrow, Blade saw that one of them was the Captain Osric who had taken him prisoner on the beach. Osric had died well enough, his dainty ceremonial sword through the throat of one of Edyrn's big soldiers. All the other dead were the effete troops whom Blade had so despised at sight.

Edyrn pointed with his sword at the dead Osric. "A former friend of mine, and a good man, but he chose a different path. He was coming for you, with his men, just as I came with mine. A near thing, sire."

Blade's glance flicked around the bloody hall. "Juna's men? She sent Osric for me?" She had promised that she would not forsake him.

But Edyrn shook his head. "No. Not Juna. Osric loved her, and sometimes served her, but he was commissioned to the King and Queen. To Kador and Smyr. It was they who sent Osric for you, Sire Blade, not Juna. You are most fortunate that I came, when I did, and that I brought soldiers with me and not courtiers."

Blade's head was spinning. Later he would sort it all out. Much later, if he had his way. Now it was enough to step out into the sunset and smell the perfumed breeze again. And to think of food. Food without *penthe*.

Edyrn handed Blade a sword and belt. Blade hefted it with joy. It was a broadsword, longer and heavier than the one Juna had thrown into the sea. He buckled it on with a grin. Matters were beginning to shape to his liking at last.

"We will get you full armor later," Edyrn explained. "Now we had best be gone into the countryside as soon as may be. I have but few men and a task to do, and I do not wish to encounter any more palace troops. In case you do not yet entirely understand, sire—there is civil war in Patmos this night."

Blade had not understood; not at all. Civil war? Just another of a thousand things he did not understand, but he let his face show no trace of his bewilderment.

"Civil war, Edyrn? Who fights?"

"The King and Queen have risen against Izmia, the Pearl of Patmos. They think victory certain because they know that the Pearl has only her Guard to protect her. But they choose a bad time for it—as I told you, Hectoris has chosen this very time to put his first troops ashore."

Blade gave him a look. "Are you sure that it is coincidence? Is it such a bad time for them, for Kador and Smyr? Is it not possible that they intend to betray Patmos from within? And what of Juna in all this? You seem reluctant to mention her, Edyrn. Why? Has Juna come to some harm?"

By now they had left the prison complex and were marching across far-stretching fields of *floti*. Cybar was behind them. Blade, glancing back, could see the shining silhouette of the palace against the sunset. It was quiet. None moved but themselves and a few Gray People working in the fields at late tasks.

Edyrn gave a command and his men flung themselves on the ground to rest. Nob looked at Blade, then did like wise. Edyrn took Blade to one side and spoke most respectfully.

"There is much I do not know, sire, and much I could not tell you ever if I did know. All that has happened has come suddenly and caught us unready."

Blade sniffed at the perfumed air, bearing a slight tang of salt now, and listened to the omnipresent music from the kiosks; he watched the drugged Gray People toiling in the fields and thought it not at all strange that Patmos had been caught off balance. Unready, as Edyrn put it. Blade doubted if Patmos had ever been ready.

Edyrn continued, "Juna, as near as I know, is safe in the palace, though under arrest. There is much political in this that I cannot explain at the moment, sire."

Blade nodded agreement and fondled his sword hilt. "I agree. Forget everything else but this force of Samostans. Where are they and in what strength? Who leads them? What are their intentions? Have we men enough to handle them?"

Edyrn gave him a strange smile. "Some of those questions I can answer and some I cannot. But first you should know, sire, that we were most fortunate and have taken a prisoner—a prisoner I am sure you would like to question."

Blade scowled. His first elation was passing and he had hunger pains again. "No riddles, Edyrn! Who is this prisoner? And why is it so important that I must question him personally?"

Edyrn slapped his thigh and laughed. He called to his men, then bowed to Blade and said, "His name is Ptol, sire. We caught him seeking to sneak into Cybar in the dress of the Gray People. Are you answered, sire?"

Blade laughed and nodded. He was answered indeed. Ptol! As Nob would say—by the Goddess Juna's golden ass! Ptol! The fat little priest himself. The lisper. Caught trying to get into Cybar. Must have been heading straight for the palace. Blade could smell it. Another sell-out was in the making. Treason and treachery. How could he stop it? What could he and Edyrn and Nob and a few others do against the barbarian horde, the tough soldiers, of Hectoris? Blade had seen the fall of Thyrne—he knew the mettle of the Samostans.

So did the king and queen—thus the treachery. Hectoris had probably promised them their thrones if they aided in the overthrow of Izmia. Not that he would keep his word when the need for them was past.

And Juna? What of her? Why should he, Blade, worry about her? His own life was at stake.

Edyrn had waited patiently, unspeaking. Blade said, "Where is this Ptol?"

Edyrn smiled. "A mile from here, sire. Near our lookout point. Shall we go and have a look at him?"

Blade's look was grim. "I care not so much to look at him, Edyrn, as to hear him speak. He lisps and he sprays spit this way and that, but I think there is much he can tell us."



They were on the move again. Edyrn said, "He is defiant, sire. He knows that I am only a captain and he keeps demanding to be taken to a higher up."

"Does he, now?" Blade nodded. "I think we can arrange that."

Edyrn went to the head of his troop. Blade fell back to be alone. Nob, seeing the expression on his face, gave him a wide berth.

Blade knew that the time had come. Time to move in and take command of the situation. He must be head man, must seize and use all the power he could, as speedily and effectively as he could. It was a tried and true technique and the only way to survive in Dimension X.

He stopped and drew the broadsword and examined it. The last rays of sun glinted red along the shining steel. He closed his great hand about the cold hilt until his knuckles were white.

Blood! So be it. Perhaps his own. But there was no other way—no other way in this strange world he must contrive to live in. Or die in.

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## CHAPTER 8

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He came awake and was aware of warmth, of a fire flickering somewhere in the vast cavern. He thought the cavern floor trembled occasionally as there came a rumbling roar from afar, and sometimes over the drift of incense he caught the acrid odor of volcanic ash. He was only dreaming, of course, for he was safe in bed in his Dorset cottage. The real nightmare would not start until tomorrow—when he must journey to London and meet J and Lord L and go once again through the computer into Dimension X. Yes. It was a dream. And yet...

She came out of the shadows near the fire and stood looking at him. A giantess, as tall as Blade himself, and naked but for bits of cloth at breasts and pubis. Her hair was pure silver and her wide-spaced eyes were amber torches flaming in a face of such beauty and purity of feature that Blade could not comprehend it. This *must* be a dream, as palpable and fleshly as it seemed, for no such beauty existed in the real world, or ever would. He kept his eyes closed, but for slits enough to watch her, and saw her flesh glisten and glimmer and appear to change color as she drew nearer. He could not name her flesh color and it did not matter—tawny, brown, dark, yellow? All those, and yet none of those, and as she bent over him, her perfect breasts hanging to brush his chest, there was a flash of pale fire in that burnished flesh and for a moment she appeared to burn.

He became aware of the music then—where had he heard such music before?—and her deep voice blended with the music and there was the sweet oiled smell of her and the rake of her nipples on his bare chest.

"Blade? Richard Blade? Do you wake?"

He kept his eyes shut and his breathing regular. This was a dream, nothing more, and yet suppose it were *not*! Suppose some wild impossible thing had happened and—

Her laugh was soft. "I think you feign, Richard Blade, but no matter. There is little time for us, for you must fight and I must go to meet my Weird, but there is yet time for you to pleasure me."

She touched him and Blade knew it was no dream. This was reality. Just *what* reality, and how and why he had come to it, he did not know. But he did know what must have happened—he was in Dimension X. He had left Dorset and gone to London and had been put through the computer. And did not remember a thing about it.

The woman had not spoken again. She was intent on the business of the moment. Blade kept his eyes tight shut and tried to think—if anyone *could* think at a time like this.

Her hands were soft and skillful and she crooned a little song as she fondled and stroked and caressed and kissed. At last she had him to her satisfaction and she threw a long slender leg over him, placed him to her exact wish, and straddling, came down with a little exhaled sigh. She was narrow and tight and moist and there seemed no end to her cavern.

It was surely a strange love-making and Blade, man of the world and of many dimensions, sensed that he would never see or know the like of this woman again. If indeed she was a woman. At the moment he was not entirely sure. For if he was once again in Dimension X, and he was sure that he must be, she might be anything—fairy, demon, succubus or witch, Lilith, Thais, hag spirit in lush facade, carnality incarnate, or mere female having a last orgasm before the well was dry.

There was no end to it. She bent over him, her breasts heavy on his face, and sank deeper on him with every thrust, her amber eyes wild as she adjusted and engulfed his flesh peg and her strong muscles sucked and milked at him until Blade was near to crying out. Yet he kept silence.

When at last she exploded it was as though the cavern trembled and moved, rocked and split, and Blade heard again a deep gut rumbling and thought he sniffed of brimstone. The woman gave a single loud cry and toppled from him to the floor, where she lay unmoving. He could not see her. He heard the strangled sobbing of her breath and, his mind in a whirl, only then realized that he had been holding back and had had no relief. No matter. It was but a dream after all. The phone would ring any moment now and J's voice would summon and—

Not so. He heard her stir and sigh at last. She looked at him and the amber eyes glowed and the white teeth sparkled. She patted his chest. "You still feign, Richard Blade. Good. Keep it so. I will bring you surcease. Izmia will never be a cheat."

She left him for a moment and Blade heard the clink of metal or pottery, some chiming sound. He kept his eyes closed and tried to concentrate. Izmia? Izmia—surely he had heard that name before? Where and when? No use. He could not remember.

The woman came back. Blade peeked. She was carrying a small bowl, of some metal and handsomely chased, and she settled in beside him and had her hand on him before he realized what she was doing. When he did realize there seemed little point in stopping her, even had he wanted to. Which he did not. Enjoy the dream—stubbornly he kept coming back to the theory that it was a dream—for soon enough he must awaken to harsh reality.

She held the bowl and her fingers teased and stroked him at last into a thundering emission. Blade writhed and groaned and saw that she judged expertly and spilled not a drop. He relaxed and watched as she put the bowl, covered now, on a ledge near the fire. When she returned she wore a swirling robe of purple that cloaked but did not disguise her figure. Blade sat up and stared into those amber eyes. Face it now. *This was no dream*. He was in Dimension X and could not even recall going to the Tower, much less going through Lord L's computer. He had no idea how long he had been in this Dimension X, or any recall of what he had done, or not done, or had had done to him, since he had arrived in it. He decided to bluff a bit. He stroked his chin and was surprised at the growth of his beard. It was thick and had obviously been clipped and cared for—that meant some time in DX, at least several days, for he never cultivated a beard in Home Dimension.

"You are Izmia?"

She settled to the floor beside him, sitting on her feet, as lithe as a girl and as regal as a queen. She inclined her head gravely.

"I am Izmia to my friends and to certain of my class. To the common folk of Patmos, and to the Gray People, I am the Pearl of Patmos. Some call me the black Pearl, though as you can see my skin is of no certain color. We will speak later of the real black pearl, and of the great sword which, if you are he of the legend, you will recover from the pool and bring to me. But for now—what of your head? Does it pain you?"

Blade tried not to look startled. His head *did* hurt, now that she mentioned it. He put a hand to the crown of his skull and felt about in the thick dark hair until his fingers touched the sore spot.

"Ohhhh!"

Izmia pulled his head against her breasts and, pushing his hand away, probed with tender fingers. "Some of my people say that I have a healing touch. It can do no harm."

Blade, cradled and coddled by this big woman, felt as secure and comfortable as a babe. He felt like drifting into sleep, his loins empty and spent, held and rocked in these magnificent arms. He fought the urge. He had amnesia, no doubt of it, and the bump on his head was relevant.

He knew who he was, for which thank the gods of this strange land, whoever they were. Now he must find out what he had been doing and how long he had been doing it. The better part was silence. Let her talk and he learn. The less she knew of his amnesia the better. For some reason, call it vanity or sheer Bladian stubbornness, he did not wish to appear weak or in any way lacking in her eyes.

To get her started he asked, "How long have I been here? How long unconscious?"

"Three days this sunrise."

He could not control his start. "That long?"

"Yes. You suffered a great buffet on the skull, so I am told by Edyrn and your man, Nob. You were carried here as though sleeping and have not stirred until now, but for some moaning and strange words the like of which I have never heard."

He nestled against those superb breasts. It was comfortable there and he did not want her to see his face.

"What words did I utter?"

His head felt better. Her fingers were stroking the dull pain away. He must have taken a hell of a blow, he thought, for it to knock his memory out of kilter like this. But there was no wound, only the knob, which meant that he must have been wearing armor, a helmet. Assuming that he had been in battle. But who was Edyrn? And who, was Nob, his man? Whatever that meant.

"You cried out of a thing called jay and lordell. Many times. I wiped your tears away and still you spoke of this jay and lordell in fear and, I thought, in anger. But that is all over now—they were but demons in your dreams and now are gone forever. You wake again and all has been done as you bid us do. The Samostan ship escaped, after you had made them pay dear for their audacity, and they will deliver your defiance to Hectoris. And the prisoner, Ptol, is tortured as you ordered and awaits your pleasure."

It was all Blade could do to keep from exploding in frustration and rage. Goddamn lordell and jay—for who else but Lord L and J had he called to in his sleep—and goddamn the computer. They had done it now. His brain was so altered and twisted, so restructured, that a single blow on the head sent him into deep amnesia.

A fearsome thought came then and he would not face it because he could not bear it—suppose, just

suppose, that the blow, the resultant amnesia, so affected his brain structure that the computer could not make contact again! He would be doomed to spend the rest of his life in this Dimension X. Patmos?

It did not bear thinking about. His only remedy was action. Move forward. Keep going. Finish whatever it was that he had set out to do. Whatever it was! Piece it together, bit by bit, and feel his way along until he had his bearings.

"I will attend to Ptol later." Ptol? Blade fretted. For an instant the name had nearly assumed meaning. Now it was gone. Ptol? Someone who was being tortured on his orders. Blade did not like that, for normally he was not a man who found pleasure in inflicting pain, but if he had ordered it he must have had good reason.

He disengaged himself from Izmia and stood up. His legs were weak and he stumbled a bit. Izmia watched him, still seated crosslegged on the floor, her yellow eyes narrowed, teeth showing, her skin gleaming like pale fire.

It cost him, but Blade stood erect and squared his big shoulders. Perhaps the bluff was a foolish one, and did not deceive her, but it was Blade's way.

"I am hungry," he said brusquely. "A man can nigh starve in three days. And if it has been that long I am very late in all matters and had best get moving. I will be shown quarters, Izmia, and have food and be bathed and shorn and newly clothed. Later I would have Edyrn and Nob sent to me. Nob first, I think."

Izmia touched a gong with a baton. "I will send him now. He has been anxious about you and has been hanging about plaguing my maids. You had best warn him that it is forbidden to cohabit with Gray girls."

Blade nodded, for all the world as though he knew what he was doing, and was led to a smaller cavern by a girl dressed in a gray smock. She kept her eyes downcast and did not speak to him. It seemed to Blade that they went ever downward, along winding passages on which moisture glistened. Once he clapped a hand to a wall and drew it back with an oath. It was hot!

She drew aside an ornate hanging and Blade entered the little cavern. It was well furnished with bolsters and rugs and in a corner was a large tub carved out of black stone. From a bung set into the wall came steaming hot water. A large and roguish-looking character, with a patch over his left eye, looked up from sprinkling salts into the bath. He gave Blade a wide and toothless grin. Most of his front teeth had been broken off at the gum line.

"Aye, master, it is good to see you recovered. That was a hot enough brawl, for a time, and the rascal fetched you a good clout on the scone afore I put my iron through him."

He glanced past Blade at the movement of the drape. "Who 'twas brought you here, master? A pretty little Gray thing by name of Ina?"

Might as well get it over with, Blade thought. He studied the big fellow, arms akimbo, scowling. The man wore the leather and metal armor of a foot soldier. On his shoulders were black tabs—the black pearl insignia.

The man was a bit too familiar, Blade thought, and no harm in putting him in his place. He made his voice harsh: "Izmia tells me that it is forbidden to cohabit with Gray women. You will not do so. And what is that you pour in my bath?"

Nob, for so Blade supposed the servant to be, dropped his lantern jaw and stared at Blade. He looked at the salts he was still pouring into the steaming water, then back at Blade. He gulped and

appeared to choke on an Adam's apple obscured by whorls of dark stubble. At last he found his tongue.

"It be naught but a potion to make ye smell pretty, sire. What did ye think—a magic to rob ye of manhood?" And Nob again showed his gums in an uncertain grin.

Blade nodded and began to disrobe. "Fair enough, but keep in mind what I said about women."

Nob rubbed a hand over his scarred face. "Oh, aye, of course, master. 'Twas nothing but a bit of fooling, like. But yon Ina, she did smile on me—and not many does on old Nob—and I thought that—"

"Don't," said Blade curtly. "Now I will bathe whilst you lay out fresh things. I will talk and you will listen and, when called on, answer me to the point. This is understood?"

Nob was wide-eyed and his jaw still hung askew. He nodded. "Aye, master. But for one thing—what is the word you used to me? This cohabit—what do it mean?"

Blade told him. Nob roared and slapped his leathernclad leg. "Do it now! By Juna's golden tits! I would never have called it that in a million years—but once you have the meaning of it there is no doubt. I mean to say, sire, it is the doing of the thing that is important and not the calling of it. I—"

"You will shut up," Blade said calmly. He kicked away a pile of blood- and sweat-stained clothing and stepped into the steaming tub. Ahhhhh—it was good!

Nob finally got his mouth closed and handed Blade a box of fragrant powder. "For scrubbing, sire. Or so Ina tells me. And plenty of hot water, as you see. Comes from the volcano, it do, and if a man does not temper it with cold it will scald—"

Blade repressed a smile. Instead he frowned and said, "You are still talking too much. I said for you to listen." He balled his massive fist and showed it to the man. "Or must I convince you with this?"

Nob was arranging clothing and armor on a table. He shook his head as though in sorrow. "You are not yourself, master. I feared as much—for after taking that axe blow on your head, and sleeping all this time, I did not think ye would come so quickly to be well again. I—"

"*Silence!*" Blade's bellow set the door hanging to waving. He made a sign to the astounded Nob and dropped his voice, "Look to see if there are any listeners."

Nob snatched a long sword from a rack in a corner and swept the tapestry aside. There was nothing.

"Now listen," Blade commanded. "And hold your loose tongue."

He told Nob what had happened to him. The man's eyes grew wide again and his jaw fell farther aslant than before. But when Blade had done talking, and after a moment of frowning and scratching his frim, Nob smiled and said, "So there is no great harm done, sire. You are well and/remember all that happened. From the day we met in Thyrne and—"

"Thyrne? Tell me of it. I have no recollection."

Nob sank to a stool and shook his head. "None at all, master? Not even of Juna?"

Blade scrubbed beneath an arm. "Who is Juna? Or, should I say, what is Juna?"

Nob stared at the floor, his big gnarled hands dangling between his legs. He shook his head sadly. "A horrible and misbegotten blow it were, sire, as could make you forget Juna! Aye—I am more glad than ever that I killed the bastard that gave it to you from behind."

Blade was washing his hair now and he winced as he touched the sore spot. Half to himself he said,

"If the blow was such a bad one, and I took it from behind and off guard, I cannot understand why I still live."

"Aye, master, I can answer that." Nob was all agrin. He went to a closet and brought back a battered helmet. The crown was bashed in but the metal was unbroken.

"I took it off a Samostan corpse," Nob explained, "and begged that ye wear it. For ye had none of yer own. Aye—those bastard Samostans make good helmets and armor. That ye must give them. No helmet of Patmos, nor even of Thyrne, would have taken such a blow and kept ye alive."

Blade took the misshapen helmet from Nob and examined it closely. The plume, shaven to a mere tuft, was blue and the insignia, the medallion in front, was of a snake with its tail in its own mouth. There was a stirring in the curdled mists of Blade's mind and for a moment the circled serpent nearly had meaning. Then it vanished. He read aloud the legend beneath the snake.

*"Ais Ister."*

He frowned at Nob. "What meaning has it?"

Nob, scowled in his turn. "Hectoris is not one to hide his brag, master. 'I Act for God'—that is the meaning of it."

Blade held out a hand as he let the helmet drop and roll on the floor. "A towel, if you please. 'I Act for God.' Hmmm—you are right, Nob. This Hectoris, whoever he may be, is not a man of becoming modesty. I would like to meet him one day."

Nob bent his big body and laughed. He could not stop. He laughed and laughed and Blade, who had come to like the rascal so soon after rediscovering him, did not know whether to laugh also or curse him. He did neither and waited for the spell to pass.

"You will meet him," Nob could say at last. "No fear there, master. We have sent his scouting party running in defeat and disgrace, and we have taken his pet priest, and in the bargain you sent him such a message of defiance as no man could hear without his ears scorching. And Hectoris is a proud man and nothing has ever stood before him—as ye know from what happened to Thyrne when you and I first met and—"

Blade held up a hand. "That," he said, "is just what I *donot* know! Try to get it through that thick pate of yours—I remember nothing. Tell me. Tell me all of it."

Nob looked at him. His jaw was hanging again. "Aye, master, I suppose I must. But it is a long story and there is little time—our lives and that of Patmos is in the balance, or I do not love Juna's fleece, and Hectoris will not bide his coming. But I will—"

"You will be brief," said Blade fiercely. "Now get to the matter. Everything that is important, nothing that is not important, and from the beginning. Briefly!"

Nob did not do so badly, for Nob. Scarce an hour had elapsed before Blade knew all that he must. Some of it appalled and frightened him. Of some of it he was proud, and of a very little he was ashamed. But one thing was certain—he had set a great many wheels in motion and now time flitted away and he had best look lively or those very wheels would crush him.

When he had heard Nob out he said, "Go find Edyrn and ask him to meet me in the place where Ptol is kept. As soon as may be. Then see that Izmia receives this message—that I will see her when I can and I cannot say when that will be. Repeat that."

Nob did so. Blade nodded at him, then smiled, and clapped him on the shoulder. "It appears that you and I have sworn friendship, Nob, and so bound our lives, or our deaths, together. So you tell me and so I take it to be, for though I am sure you are a great liar when it is required I do not think you lie to me."

The man showed his gums. "Aye, sire, that is the truth of it. We swore an oath each to the other."

"Then be about your tasks, man. And I will be about mine. I must find out what I have been doing, rightly or wrongly, to save our lives and defeat this barbarian Hectoris."

"Ye have done a great deal, master. Some of it, mind ye, I did not approve of—such as enlisting the Gray People and taking away the *pentheand*—"

Blade pointed at the door. "Go."

Nob had the last word as he brushed aside the door hanging. "If ye want to see Ptol alive, master, ye had best hurry. He has not so much blood in him as a fat man might be thought to have. And he is a stubborn wretch—he has spoken nothing yet of import."

"I will see to it," said Blade. "Ptol will talk."

## CHAPTER 9

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Blade marveled at his own cruelty. He knew that the Richard Blade of Dimension X was not the gentlemanly Blade of Home Dimension; still he wondered. And wondered also at the Patmosian idea of torture. They had merely locked the fat priest into a dungeon and there, after bleeding him a little, and touching him lightly with hot irons, had left him for Blade to deal with.

Ptol cowered at the sight of Blade. He whimpered and lisped and clutched his leather-cuffed right stump to his flabby chest. Blade, accoutered all in black leather and metal harness, wearing a gleaming helmet with the medallion of Izmia on it, loomed near seven feet tall. He drew his great sword and, leaning easily on it, surveyed the priest. He remembered nothing of Ptol save what Nob had told him. Ptol did not know that.

Blade prodded with his sword at the leather bandage. Ptol screamed and tried to squirm away.

"What happened to your hand, priest?"

Ptol had lost weight. His flabby jowls swayed as he raised his head to stare at Blade. Blade credited him his due—there was still a hint of defiance in the man.

"You ask that?" Ptol was sullen. "You who struck it from me?"

Blade touched his sword to the man's remaining hand. "So I did. And it occurs to me that, since I have taken one of your hands, I may as well have the other. What say you to that, priest?"

Ptol thrust his left hand at Blade. "I say strike it off and be damned! Kill me. Juna will revenge me."

Blade smiled. "You are hardly one to call on Juna, priest. But keep your hand. There are other ways. But first—will you talk? I would know everything you hide in that fat little carcass. Everything! The plans of Hectoris, his numbers of men and ships, his landing places and, not least, the intrigue you were sent to carry out in the Palace."

Something flickered in Ptol's eyes, then was gone. Blade turned on his heel and stalked out. "You have five minutes, priest."

It took ten minutes for Blade to make his arrangements. When he returned to the dungeon Ptol was still defiant. To Blade's vast amusement he offered Blade a deal.

"We should be friends," Ptol lisped. "I come bearing an offer of great honor from Hectoris—he has heard of you and wants you for his friend and companion in arms." He stared bitterly at his leather stump, then added, "I will forgive this, Blade. Come over to us. Patmos is doomed and you cannot save her. The king and queen have declared war on Izmia and have fled to the safety of Thyrne, which Hectoris now rules. They—"

A faint memory stirred in Blade's mind. A will-o'-the-wisp, yet he thought it of something physical remembered, something physical and emotional. He broke in.

"What of Juna, priest?"

Ptol did exactly the wrong thing. He smiled craftily and, with spite, said, "She is taken along as hostage, naturally." Again the crafty smile.

Blade leaned on his sword and frowned. "What value could she have as hostage?"

Ptol's small eyes were lewd. He nodded and a thread of spittle dribbled from a corner of his pursy mouth. "We have many spies in both Patmos and Thyrne—there was a spy in the party you took through the salt marshes, Blade. We have heard that the goddess Juna, or Vilja, if you will, is very fond of you. And you of her. It is rumored that you have lain together and were seen thus."

"A lie," said Blade. Or was it? He did not know the truth himself. If it had happened he had not confided it to Nob, so could not hear it back. And yet Nob must have guessed, or suspicioned.

Ptol touched his stub with dirty fingers. It must be painful, thought Blade.

"We do not think it a lie," said Ptol. "But no matter—there is Izmia and she is grandmother to Juna. Yet another string to our bow. Would she see her grandchild torn apart and fed to dogs? For such it may come to."

Blade fingered his beard. "You mistake Izmia," he said. "I think she would do just that. But enough of talk. You have had your chance. Bring him along, guards."

By this time Blade well knew that he was inside a living volcano. The quakings and the rumblings, the jets of steam and scalding water, and ever and anon a thunderous explosion, all bore witness to that. It did not take him long to find what he sought.

When they reached it the pulley and scaffold had been rigged as Blade ordered. The crevice was deep and jagged, irregular, and some hundred feet down was the terrible surge and writhing of molten lava. The heat and stink of it spewed from the crevice. Some of the guards, brawny men wearing the black pearl, looked fearful and tried to hang back. Blade urged them with the flat of his sword.

He pointed to the priest. "Rig him by the heels, and mind you do it securely, and swing him out over the pit. Hurry."

Ptol cringed back and began to whimper. "No—no—"

Blade bared his strong white teeth at the sniveler. "You are a priest. You should welcome a chance to gaze into hell, if only to avoid it. And you can avoid it, for a time, if you talk. Well?"

Ptol began to sob and shook his head. Blade motioned to his men.

The priest was lowered head down into the pit. Blade pointed his sword at the guards manning the



tackle. "Drop him and you will follow. And be alert—I do not want him dead. Quite."

He alone would venture to the edge of the pit. And he alone could bear the sight of the white hot caldron seething and bubbling and sending up its stinking vapors. He did not reckon Ptol to last long, and soon raised a hand. The priest was drawn up. Cold water was doused into his face. For a moment Blade feared he had overdone it and bent to listen. The heart was still beating.

When Ptol opened his eyes Blade knew he had won. The priest was finished. He had come back from hell and would not venture again. He nodded and gasped. "I—I will tell you. I will tell everything. Everything!"

It was no time to show mercy or compassion. Blade put the point of his sword against the priest's throat. "Mind you do. One lie, just one—and I will know—and next time there will be no rope to fetch you up."

He gave Ptol no chance to recover his nerve or to think of lies. He summoned a council at once of all officers. He invited Izmia, as he knew he must, but she did not appear and he was thankful for it. And he made reacquaintance with Edyrn, whom he now proposed to use as chief liaison with Izmia until he had matters well in hand and could cope with her. If Edyrn, as cool and capable as ever, had suspicions of Blade's loss of memory he avoided mentioning it.

The counsel lasted for hours and Blade gave none of them any respite, least of all Ptol. When he was satisfied, and he had good reason to be, he ordered that the priest's stub be seen to and that he be well treated so long as he behaved. He was to be closely guarded. Then he dismissed them all but Edyrn and Nob, who had not been bidden to the gathering of his betters, but had come anyway and gained entrance and had been hovering about Blade with the nervous air of a man with something to impart.

While Edyrn gathered a mass of parchment and maps and stuffed them into a carrying bag, Nob sidled close to Blade and caught his ear.

"*She* bids you come to her this night, sire, when you have finished your business. She will wait for you in the cavern of music. She bids you come alone."

Blade cocked an eye at his man. "And where is this cavern of music? And how shall I find it?"

Nob's good eye closed slightly. "My Ina, the Gray girl you know of, sire, will take you there. I have arranged everything."

Blade smiled and, dismissing him, said, "Have a care that you do not arrange trouble for yourself. And do not waste your time—I have put you in charge of the beggars and mendicants and you know what to do. I expect results—if I do not get them, and I find it is the fault of your lust for women, it will go hard with you."

"Aye," said Nob hastily as Edyrn approached with his heavy bag. "Aye, master, I understand. Do not misdoubt old Nob—always business before pleasure with me, sire."

Blade smiled. "See to it, then. Your beggars and thieves are all the intelligence I have. I depend on them."

Edyrn, when Nob had gone, bowed and said, "If you are ready, Sire Blade? I will show you what you wished to see."

Blade nodded. "I am ready. You say it is a long walk? Good enough, Edyrn. We will talk as we go."

With his knowledge of events furnished by Nob, Blade found no great difficulty in coping with Edyrn. They left the caverns and walked along a path of crushed lava. They skirted a darkling tarn and Blade

glanced back at the looming bulk of the volcano they were leaving behind. There was a lurid flare for a moment, a movement of flame deep within the bowels of the cone, and Blade was sure he saw the silhouette of a tall woman against the fire, like a puppet seen for a moment before an open furnace door. He stopped and gazed, blinking, wondering if the blow had affected his eyesight as well as his memory. There was nothing there now, nothing but the sullen rumble and belch of volcano.

Edym touched his arm. "We must hurry, sire. There is much to do and little time—"

Blade pointed. "I thought I saw—"

"You did, sire. It was Izmia, the Pearl. My grandmother. She goes often to the brink to look and think. For her Weird is in the fire and soon she must meet it."

Blade did not question. He merely looked at Edym and nodded. "You and Juna are brother and sister?"

Edym nodded in his turn. "Aye, sire. By another hero who came from nowhere, as you have come, and who vanished into nowhere as you will vanish. Shall we go on, sire?"

They came out onto the plain and walked through fields of fragrant *loti*. Ahead of them loomed an angular, open work tower supported by three legs. The fields were deserted.

Edym said, "All supplies of *penthe* have been destroyed as you ordered, sire. The Gray People have been put to work on fortifications and fire trenching, such as are able to work after withdrawal."

Blade cast him a sidelong glance. "How did that go, Edym?"

"Badly at first. There was much murdering and rioting, and a deal of insanity. Cybar was destroyed by flames."

"A pity," murmured Blade. "It was a beautiful city."

Edym stared at him in surprise. "But you yourself ordered it burnt, sire."

Nob had not told him that. Damn the rascal. Then Blade withdrew the thought. Nob was only Nob, after all, and it was not his fault that Blade had amnesia. And Nob had saved his life after he had taken the blow on the head in the beach skirmish. But Blade began to wonder what other things he had done, or ordered done, that he could not remember and of which Nob did not know. Edym would have to help him there.

The tower was some three-hundred feet tall. Several Gray People manned a winch and basket and Blade and Edym were lifted to the top. On the way up Blade said, "How as to horses, lad? We are going to need them badly."

"There are no horses on Patmos, sire. There never have been. We have never felt need of them."

Blade remembered what Nob had told him of the charging Samostan cavalry in the Beggar's Square in Thyrne—and scowled.

"Well, Patmos has need of them now."

They were nearing the top of the tower. "Hectoris has horses," said Edym. "Thousands of them on transports. They lie off our coasts at this very moment."

Blade fingered his newly shorn beard and smiled. "Yes. I had that thought myself."

A single great room perched atop the tower. All four sides were transparent. There were desks and

chairs. Edyrn went to a large desk and began to unload his bag of maps and papers. Blade walked about the room. From this vantage he could see the whole of the island and was surprised. He had not thought Patmos so small. To his right, and level with his line of sight, was the smoky maw of the volcano. This coign of vantage allowed Blade to see what he had not seen before—a path leading to the edge of the crater and ending there in a flat stone platform. Blade felt a visceral twinge and knew, without any conscious knowledge, the purpose of the platform.

"Her Weird is in the fire."

For a moment he thought Edyrn had spoken the words again, but when he turned he saw the boy still busy with his maps and documents. Blade went to join him. And got straight to the point:

"How many real soldiers do I have?"

Edyrn straightened and squared his shoulders. "There is only the Pearl's Guard, sire. Which I command. The toy soldiers of Kador and Smyr are useless and anyway most of them have fled the island. The Gray People, even without *penthe*, are cattle and can only be used as such. And your man, Nob, has gathered some ragamuffins and knaves, but—"

Blade gestured impatiently. "No matter that! How many men?"

Edyrn consulted a paper. "A thousand and three, sire. Counting myself."

Blade turned away so that the boy could not see his face. It was not much of an army with which to face Hectoris, the barbarian, with his lancers and his bowmen and his cavalry, his catapults and his battering rams. It was, in fact, no army at all and Blade knew that Patmos was lost, and so was he, unless he could somehow bring Hectoris to single combat and kill him. This had been in his mind all along and now he examined it openly and did not see how it could be accomplished. Hectoris was anything but a fool. Blade let it go for the moment. When the time came he would have to think of a way.

One great advantage he had—he knew of the Samostan plans. Unless Ptol had lied, and Blade did not think he had. There was a chance, a bare chance, that he could force a confrontation with Hectoris and taunt him into battle, hurl the gauntlet, force the Samostan chief into a position from which he could not retreat with honor. All that would have to wait. First things first.

Edyrn came to stand beside him. Blade, realizing that by now the boy must have guessed the truth—and yet for some strange quirk of his own not wishing to admit it—kept mostly silent as Edyrn pointed out this and that and kept talking.

"Your orders, sire, have been obeyed to the letter. The Gray People, and all others who can be pressed, toil at the fortifications and shore barricades and cavalry traps. Most of them are fakes, manned by dummies as you ordered. Such of the Gray People who can fight have been armed with wooden swords and lances, for we have not enough arms, and we keep them marching and counter-marching to give the impression of numbers. We keep a diligent watch for spies and do not slay them, but treat them well, question them, and try to win them over to our side. In this we have been many times successful, for Hectoris is not loved. I have stationed small units of the Guard about the island, sire, but keep the main force in reserve near the volcano."

Edyrn pointed past Blade's shoulder to a largish camp laid out in rectangular fashion. Much, Blade thought, as an old Roman camp would have been. Had he ordered *that*, too? Again he damned his amnesia and the computer and the whole of Dimension X. He felt a longing for the head pains that would presage his return to Home D, and pushed the thought away. His duty was here. Duty? The thought was not supportable by logic, made no sense at all, and yet there it was.

This was a wasted mission and he knew it. There was nothing to be gained for England in this particular Dimension X and every moment he lingered he risked death. Worse, in this case, because if he were taken alive and given to Ptol's priests they would find means of keeping him alive a long time. A burning helmet would be the least of it. Yet, deep in his heart, he was content that the computer did not reach for him. He was stubborn, and probably quite mad, but he wanted to see this thing through. Blade laughed aloud. He was, in short, a fool!

Edym broke off his recountal to stare at the big man. "You laugh, sire? Perhaps you will share the joke with me, for I find little enough to be cheerful about."

Blade smote him on the shoulder and laughed again. "I wish I could, lad, but I cannot and it is no matter. Now—you were saying of how clever I had been. Tell me that again, lad, for I like praise as much as any man. And it will refresh my memory."

Edym cast him an odd glance but did not comment. He picked up a paper. "I will read it back to you, sire, just as you dictated it to me." He began to read from the paper.

It was a strange feeling, listening to words that he could not remember having spoken. One thing Blade recognized immediately—the cunning and the knowledge of making primitive war upon which he had always before been able to rely in Dimension X. The question now was, as he heard his own strategy revealed, would it work? Would Hectoris be baited into the trap that Blade had set?

"...you spoke of a scorched earth policy," Edym was saying. "You promised that all of Patmos would be destroyed, that Hectoris would capture nothing but ashes and desolation. Such was the message you sent him."

Blade nodded. "You have a record of his reply? If any?"

Edym half smiled. "I have, sire. He sent back word that if Patmos was destroyed he would come anyway, come in revenge, for he had always had a mind to settle and live out his days on Patmos. He also threatened tortures of the worst kind and has set a special force of priests to thinking up new ways of prolonging life and agony."

Blade battered a great fist into his palm and his laugh was harsh. "We had best see to it, then, that if worse comes to worst we all die."

Edym said calmly that he had seen to that, at least among the Guard. If the battle was lost they had compacted to slay each other, and had drawn lots to arrange the order of it.

"You, sire, must do as you list. As will Izmia, the Pearl. But there is still Juna to consider. She is prisoner of Hectoris, betrayed by Kador and Smyr, and Hectoris is sure to bring her along as a captive and seek to bargain with her. It is all important to Patmos, sire, that Juna live. But Izmia, my grandmother, will have spoken to you of that?"

Blade nodded vaguely. Izmia had done no such thing. Perhaps this night, when he met her in the Cavern of Music, she would explain. That too would have to wait.

Edym was unrolling maps and weighting them with metal blocks. "So far, sire, your plan has worked. Our defenses are so built as to channel the attack to North Harbor, to make Hectoris think it is our weakest point when in fact it is our strongest. It is at North Harbor that his main attack will no doubt fall, though it is to be expected that he will mount feints at other spots along our coast."

Blade gazed out over the island. It was getting dark and thousands of fires were blazing. Off to his right was a great glow in the sky that could only be the remains of Cybar.

A lick of flame, like a dragon's tongue, leaped from the volcano nearby and then withdrew. *Aes Triplex*, thought Blade, remembering some of the classics he had read at Oxford. Triple Brass bound, the hearts of men who lived in the shadow of a volcano. The Guard was brave enough—and the Guard would die.

His own head must have been stuffed with brass, Blade admitted now, to think that even if his plan worked and he brought Hectoris to battle at a place of his own choosing, that he could defeat the barbarian hordes. He simply did not have the men. Hectoris would overwhelm him by sheer force of numbers.

Edym pointed to a spot on the map and then to its counterpart on the darkling horizon. "North Harbor, sire. The Samostan scout ships approach it even now. By dawn Hectoris will be ready to invade in force. Everything has been done that can be done, sire, and all your orders carried out. And now?"

Blade gave him new orders, brief and to the point, and left to keep his appointment with Izmia.

## CHAPTER 10

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Nob, as he prepared Blade's bath and laid out fresh clothing, was full of chatter.

"The Samostans will land at dawn at North Harbor, master. I have had a score of reports from my beggars and they all agree."

Blade, scrubbing away, nodded. "That is stale news, man. Have you nothing later to report?"

Nob grinned his toothless grin. "Aye. Hectoris has put a hundred foot and a hundred horse ashore near Cybar Port, but that is only a feint, a scouting party. They are pushing this way."

"That is better," conceded Blade. "We will let them push in a little way and then we shall see. That will be your task, Nob. I have given orders as to it—when you leave me you will go straight to Edym and he will give you command of a squad of the Guard. Listen well, for this is exactly what I want you to do..."

Ina, the Gray girl, led Blade down and down into the bowels of the volcano. There seemed no end to the passage. At first it was hot and Blade sweated, then it grew cool and even cold and he found himself chilling. The girl spoke not a word all the while.

They came into a vast open space and Blade heard the music again. Sensuous, sweet and strange harmony, and now he found himself in the very center of the music. It was not loud, he barely heard it, and yet it filled his brain. The girl left him without a word and Blade began to make his way through a glistening maze of what looked like giant cobwebs stretching from floor to ceiling of the cavern. He touched one of the shining strands and it gave off a faint and plangent twang. It felt like rubber or plastic. At the same time he was aware of air moving through the cavern in a constant stream. Air that brushed through the billions of cobweblike strands and produced the music.

That was the secret. The whole island, Patmos itself, was a great volcano. It was riven by volcanic tubes, perhaps hundreds of them, and through these the music drifted to all parts of the island.

"BLADE!"

Izmia's voice. He could not see her, yet the sound came from in front of him, deeper in the cavern. Blade pushed on through the harplike strands, each one humming and vibrating in the air. There was a

path, easily discerned when you were close enough, and he pushed on like Theseus in the Labyrinth.

"BLADE!"

Close now. Blade halted in the midst of siren song and looked about. Music engulfed him.

"BLADE!"

He saw a light and made for it. He left the giant harps and entered a smaller cavern. In the center stood a great catafalque all draped in black. On it, her naked body gleaming and changing color even as he approached, lay Izmia. Her silver hair was draped over her breasts and on her flat belly something gleamed. He recognized it as the metal bowl in which she had caught his semen.

Izmia spoke again, softly this time. A single word. "Blade."

He halted and contemplated her, arms akimbo, frowning a bit. "I am here, Pearl of Patmos. Come as you bid me. What now?"

His eyes roved over her massive and perfect body and he felt no stir of excitement. There was to be no sex, no mingling of flesh, this time and he felt an odd mingling of disappointment and relief. And felt something else—something that chilled the flesh along his spine. There was no warmth in her golden eyes this night—only a blankness and a farseeing look.

She did not speak. She watched him and Blade felt himself as drowning in the lambent whorls of those amber depths. He shrugged impatiently and scowled.

"Did you summon me to exchange stares, Izmia. It is not a time for games. I will tell you the truth of things as they are on Patmos. Your island is lost unless I can bring Hectoris to private battle and—and thereby hinges everything—defeat him!"

Izmia held up a hand. "I did not send to hear of that. It is no longer my concern."

Blade gaped. "It is not? Whose, then?"

The golden eyes narrowed. "Yours, Blade. In your hands it lies. And in the hands and body of Juna, if it so be that you can save her and bring her to this place and to her heritage."

Blade was beginning to feel awe and he did not like it. He feigned anger to disguise his uneasiness. "You may have time for such riddles, Izmia. I have not. Dawn comes in a few hours and I must be at North Harbor to face Hectoris." He bowed curtly. "So by your leave I—"

Izmia raised herself on an elbow. She took the bowl from her belly and held it aloft. "You will remain, Blade. You will listen and you will obey. Without question."

And Blade somehow knew that it would be so.

Izmia pointed. "You will find a chalice in the cabinet yonder. And a vessel of wine. Fetch them to me."

Blade did so. When he returned Izmia was standing on the catafalque and holding the metal bowl aloft in both hands. Blade put the chalice and the wine at her feet and gazed up at her magnificent naked body and now desire moved in him. His loins tightened.

Izmia smiled down at him and shook her head. "No, Blade. That is over for us. It is the time of my Weird and I must face it. I leave this life and you will bring another to take my place."

Juna? And how was he to wrest Juna from Hectoris?

Izmia was tipping a powder into the metal bowl. She took a small instrument and scraped and stirred and crushed, using the instrument as a chemist uses a pestle. Her flesh quivered, the huge firm breasts trembling as she moved. An aromatic smell drifted from the bowl to Blade's nostrils.

Izmia held out a hand. "The wine."

She poured wine into the chalice and stirred it again. There was a frothing, bubbling sound and faint smoke rose from the bowl. Izmia held out the bowl to Blade. "Drink."

He did so. Without protest. This was Dimension X and things would be as they would be—and in this case Blade knew that he did right. Izmia knew what she was about.

She lay down on the catafalque once again and extended her arms to Blade. "Now come lie with me and you shall hear."

Blade was moving as though in a dream darkly; the potion removed him one step from reality, slightly blurring the focus of things, and gave him a deep sense of inner contentment and a desire to please Izmia, to do whatever she asked.

Izmia enfolded him in her arms as if he were a babe. Her body was cool and warm at once, and she pillowed his head on her naked breasts and whispered of what he must do. Blade listened, half drowsing, and understood and knew that it must be this way and no other.

When she had finished Izmia held him a moment longer. She kissed him on the lips and, for a moment, there was warmth and life in the golden eyes once again, then it vanished and her eyes grew blank.

"Come now," she whispered. "It is time."

She took his hand and led him to yet another cavern. It was small and cold and dank. In its center, like a baleful eye, was a dark pool. The black water, smooth as taut velvet, promised an inky coldness and depth that set the big man to shivering. And yet he was not afraid. It must be done.

Izmia stood unspeaking as Blade stripped off his armor and his heavy sword and belt. When he stood naked at the edge of the pool, she came to him and touched him lightly here and there and her smile was sweetly sad and Blade knew that this was the real farewell. Her hands lingered on him for another moment, then she stepped back and nodded toward the pool.

"Go, Blade. I have explained. You have one chance. You will triumph or perish."

In the gloom of the little cavern her body shimmered like heat lightning. Blade gave her a long look, took a deep breath, and went headfirst into the pool.

He made his way down through black ice. His eyes were open to no avail—the darkness was total. This was a place that had never known light. It was narrow, little more than a well, and at times he brushed the sides of cold stone.

Blade went down and down and down. There was no bottom. The first faint pains began in his lungs. The pressure was a dark hand crushing him. Down—down—down—

No bottom ever. He was diving into eternity.

Pain growing now. Flame in his lungs. Soon it would be unbearable. Still he swam downward. And down—and down

Bottom.

His fluttering hands encountered them immediately. The sword and the pearl. Just as Izmia had said they would be waiting for him all the aeons long.

The pearl was the size of a billiard ball and filled his hand with chill convexity. The sword was long and cumbersome and immensely heavy. Blade grasped them and kicked his way upward. Straight into the slimy coils.

Izmia had not warned him of this thing, whatever it was, that held him now. Serpent, monstrous worm, water dragon, whatever it was, it had him in a firm grip and the coils were multiplying and tightening all the while. The more Blade fought, the harder he struggled, the deeper he became enmeshed. His lungs, already screaming for air, began to collapse under the terrible squeeze the creature exerted.

For a moment Blade panicked. Fear screamed and shivered through him. Not so much fear of death, or pain, as of the unknown terror of the moment—this loathsome beast that he could not see, this great leechlike nightmare attached and sucking and squeezing at his body. His arms were bound tight into the coils and he could not draw the sword and pain was raving in his brain.

One of the thick coils slipped across his mouth. Blade, without thought, knowing only that this was his one chance, fastened his strong teeth in the rubbery flesh and bit with all his might. He bit and chewed and ravaged like a wolf feeding. The flesh in his mouth was foul and bitter, noisome and stinking, and yet he felt the thing shudder and the coils relax a bit. Blade, near to being a mindless thing himself now, ravened on. He savaged the flesh of the thing.

The coils fell away. Blade shot toward the surface, still clutching the sword and the pearl.

Izmia was not there. Blade had known she would not be. She had explained it all to him. He dragged himself out of the pool and lay gasping for a few minutes, then donned his armor and his sword and belt. There was no cause for hurry now. Izmia would wait.

When he had dressed and fully recovered he examined the sword and the pearl. The sword was broad and long, handsomely sheathed in a scabbard that glistened with jewels, and when he drew the steel it glimmered and glistened as though it were from the forge. Blade put the point on the floor and held the sword away from him. The hilt came to the level of his chin.

The pearl was as black as the pool from which it had come. It glowed with dark fire. Blade stroked it with his fingers and it seemed to throb and come alive, to take warmth from his body, to glisten and respond and almost breathe. He hefted it again and again in his hand and regretted the eventual use to which he must put it. It was, on closer inspection, larger than a billiard ball and he knew he would never see its like again in any dimension. For a moment he regarded both pearl and sword intently, then sighed and went back to the larger cavern where Izmia awaited him on her catafalque.

She slept: Blade stood by the catafalque, gazing down at the naked beauty of her, dreading what he must do. But he had vowed and it must be done. He put the sword on the catafalque beside her and placed the great black pearl in the cabinet with the chalice and the wine. He came back and picked up the sword.

Her flesh was all shimmering flame, the marvelous breasts rising and falling with her slow breath. Her features, in repose, appeared to have shrunken, to have pinched together, and the facial flesh had taken on such a translucence that Blade could have sworn he saw the skull. Slowly Blade raised the sword.

The drug was strong in him, enforcing his will rather than sapping it, giving him a slow and blurred determination. He must do everything exactly right, exactly as he had been instructed. There was no tremor of his hand as he lifted her left breast to place the point of the sword exactly. Her flesh was cold, yet seared his hand, and it was all he could do to keep from snatching it away. He positioned the sword



point, then leaped onto the catafalque and stood astride her.

At that moment the golden eyes flickered open and stared up at him and Blade stared down into a volcano where amber sparks swirled. He grasped the sword hilt firmly in both hands and bore down with all his strength.

Izmia arched and screamed once. Her body writhed, embracing the sword as though it were a steel phallus and she smitten with death desire. Blade, made impassive by the drug, drove the sword through her and into the catafalque beneath. His face contorted and sweat streamed from him and he was unknowing of this. He bent to his task. His massive biceps bulged and quivered as he forced the sword lower and lower, driving it deeper into the catafalque, until the hilt rested on her breast.

His face was close to hers and he saw the beginning of it. Her eyes closed and he saw peace, calmness and tranquility, invade her features like a conquering angel. Her lips fell away from her teeth in a rictus that was more smile than grin and then a kind of ecdysis began and her flesh ceased to shimmer and turned a dull gray. Blade tugged out the sword and leaped from the catafalque to stand beside her. He was only dimly aware of his own sobbing breath.

He watched, bound fast by the web of drug, as Izmia's flesh aged before his eyes. She had been—so she had whispered—an old, old woman and now her flesh, freed from whatever necromancy had held it in thrall, spoke the truth at last. It did not take long.

When the body that had been Izmia became a crone-thing, a bag of wrinkles and bones, Blade picked it up and left the cavern. He found a door she had said would be there and followed the path laid out for him. He stalked along, not hurrying nor lagging, clutching the thing to his breast, and in a few minutes came out on the stone platform overlooking the maw of the volcano. Had it been light he could have seen the tower room where he and Edyrn had plotted their battle, and from which he had first spied this very platform. He approached the edge and stared down into the reeking mouth. A thin sulfuric mist drifted up to choke and half blind him. In the far depths a tongue of flame leaped up and outward from the walls, as though in signal, then retreated.

Blade lifted the body, as light as a feather pillow now, and hurled it out and down. Again flame licked and smoke roiled and Blade raised his hand in farewell. He stalked back the way he had come. As he left the Cavern of Music his head began to clear, the drug faded, and though he had perfect recall of everything he felt no pain, nor regret, but rather the sense of a thing well and rightly done.

He went to his own cavern and threw himself on the bed and slept like a babe. When Nob woke him, half an hour short of dawn, Blade felt refreshed and confident and ready for whatever the day might bring. He sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes, and grinned at the one-eyed rascal.

Nob handed him a cup of steaming broth and reported that the counter-raid had gone well.

"A dozen horses taken, master, and some fifty Samostans slain. We lost but twenty of the Guard. We took more than a hundred prisoners, but I gave them your message and released them as you ordered. They will make their way back to the beaches and spread the word. I am sure of it."

Blade finished the broth and beckoned for his armor. "That is good, so far. But it is not enough—all the Samostan army must know of my challenge. You have put your beggars and thieves to work?"

"Aye, I have, sire. I have made loud hailers, of paper as you instructed, and my knaves are all up and down the beaches, on the cliffs, everywhere, shouting your words to those who may come ashore."

Nob scratched his jaw. "I was not of your mind at first, master, for I have never seen a battle won with words, but now I begin to think it might work. Certainly it is clever enough—as a soldier myself I

know that a soldier does not want to die unless he must. He will take an easy and painless victory every time or, lacking that, he will even choose defeat with honor. Either is better than dying. Yes, master, it just might work. You prey on their weakness—one we all have—a desire to live."

Blade nodded slowly. "We will see," he said gravely. "If Hectoris is as vain, and as proud and brave as he is said to be, then it will work. But there is an irony here, Nob—if Hectoris is a coward we are lost."

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## CHAPTER 11

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Dawn broke as Blade rode northward. A bloody sun, wrapped in mist, was a harbinger of weather to come. Nob, riding on Blade's left—Edym rode on his right side—cocked his good eye at the eastern horizon and opined, "A sky like that means but one thing, master—a gale before dark. And gales are fearsome things in Patmos. I have lived through one or two and I know."

Edym looked at Blade and nodded in agreement. "It may be that a gale, if it comes, will do our work for us. If the Samostan fleet is broken up and driven ashore piecemeal the Guard will be able to handle them."

Blade said nothing to this. He was prepared to welcome a storm, but only after he had confronted Hectoris. Not much good in killing the little serpents if you let the big one escape.

He was riding a fine black stallion shod with bronze and bearing scarlet equipage. Nob himself had slain the officer who rode it, and had marked the horse for Blade at once. Edym rode a mettlesome gray and Nob a brown hack of enormous size. The other captured horses had been distributed among the Guard officers.

Two miles south of the harbor the land began to slope down to the sea. There were no cliffs or natural obstacles here, the terrain forming a shallow bowl that ended in long wide beaches of powdery sand. It was a natural spot for invasion and Blade had carefully left it undefended, gambling that the positioning of his other defenses, both real and faked, would exert pressure enough to channel the attack to North Harbor. The harbor, with its superb beaches, was the funnel through which he wished the Samostans to attack. It was true that he had not foreseen a gale, and that the harbor would give the Samostan fleet more protection than he cared to extend, but you could not have everything. In any case it did not really matter. If he could not bring Hectoris to private combat, no gale, nor indeed anything, was going to save Patmos.

Nob's one eye was sharp. He pointed to a moving cloud of dust on the horizon. "Cavalry, master. They've put another scouting party ashore."

Blade held up a hand and the column halted. He had taken a third of his reserves from the volcanic area camp and they were strung out behind for a half mile in a column of fours. Blade stared at the oncoming war party.

"How many do you make them, Nob?"

But it was Edym who answered. "Some hundred horse, sire. And they have seen us."

Blade nodded and gave orders. Four of the mounted officers went galloping back along the column. The other mounted officers, with Nob and Edym, grouped around Blade. The black, sensing combat, began to curvet nervously. Blade gentled the animal by pressure of knees and hands and said to Nob: "They are going to attack. Fair enough, for we face a test sooner or later. If we give a good account of ourselves it will win respect. But do you slip off, Nob, and bring me word of affairs at the harbor

beaches. See how our word war is progressing, for if we are to have a chance we must be at the beaches before Hectoris is ashore in strength. Go at once."

Nob scowled. "Aye, master, but I will miss the fighting if I go now."

Blade scowled. "Go, man! This moment."

The man grumbled but he went, riding off to the left flank under cover of a shallow ridge. Blade pulled his steed around and nodded at Edym. "Let us get into the square. They will be on us soon enough."

The Guards, by marching left and right flank, had completed the formation of a hollow square. The ranks parted to let Blade and his officers ride in, then closed in again. Blade leaped to stand on his saddle and study the formation. He nodded in approval at what he saw.

The files were three deep. First a rank of kneeling men with long cruel pikes, then a rank of javelin throwers and last a rank of bowmen. All of them, in addition to their special weapons, carried short heavy swords and daggers. Inside the square, near Blade and the other mounted men, was a small party of slingers now engaged in counting and grading their jagged lava rocks. Blade looked them all over and sighed. If only he had more of them! If only he were not so hopelessly outnumbered he would have risked a pitched battle with the Samostans and forecast victory. But wishes did not make it so. He must stick to his original plan.

The Samostan cavalry by now were deployed in a crescent before Blade's square. Trumpets shrilled and banners fluttered, but they did not attack.

Edym touched Blade's arm. "They want a parley. Yonder comes Lycus, their commander. I know something of him—a cruel man and a skilled warrior. Shall I order the slingers and bowmen to open fire? If we kill Lycus they may leave us alone."

Blade shook his head. "No. I do not want them to leave us alone. I must see how your Guard fights and now is good a time as any—and I have use for this Lycus. Pass the word that he is to be left to me. To me alone!"

Edym looked puzzled, one of the few times he had done so, and rode off to execute the order. Blade spurred nearer to the ranks and watched a burly horseman leave the Samostan line and gallop toward the square. He held up both empty hands to signify peace and reined in just short of the line of pikes. Blade rode toward him, the black prancing and skittering as it threaded through the ranks. One of the bowmen, sighting his weapon, grinned up at Blade as he passed.

"Let me have a shot, sire. I can bring him down from here, or you may skin me else."

Blade smiled and shook his head. "Later—later. I will fill your craw with fighting."

The Samostan officer called Lycus stared curiously at Blade as he cantered up. Blade returned the stare with interest. This Lycus was a powerfully built, thick-chested brute. His helmet, with its nose and ear guards, boasted the long blue feathers of Samosta. The shield on his left arm bore the snake with its tail in its mouth and the legend—*Ais Ister*.

I Act for God. Blade's lips quirked in a half smile—he hoped to test that theory in reverse. Would the god of Hectoris act *for him*.

Lycus sat easily in the saddle, one foot out of the stirrup and dangling. His right hand rested lightly on his sword hilt. He showed his teeth like a wolf as Blade rode up.

"You are the stranger called Richard Blade?"

Blade met the cold stare with one of his own. "I am. What is your business? Why do you parley instead of fight?"

The man's chest armor strained as he bent to laugh. "I'll fight you, never fear. Unless you are a coward, or a more reasonable man than I have heard, and heed the message I bring you."

"What message?"

"From my master, Hectoris himself. He has great admiration for you, Blade, but is no friend. You must understand that—I make no false pretenses. But any man who can thwart him as you have is of interest to Hectoris. He wishes to meet you."

Blade smiled faintly. "And I him."

Lycus fingered a lantern jaw. "Then it is simple enough." He gestured at the Guard in its square. "Disband your men. Let them surrender their arms. They will be well enough treated. And cease all destruction in Patmos, for it is this which angers Hectoris most—he does not want to conquer a desolated country. You will be treated as an honored guest as long as you choose to remain and there will be high office for you if wish to serve Hectoris. Izmia, she who is called the Black Pearl, will keep her suzerainty and all close to her will be favored. She will still be spiritual ruler of Patmos and her caverns will be respected as sacred to her."

Blade nodded. "And who will actually rule Patmos? The traitor King and Queen—Kador and Smyr? Or perhaps Juna?"

He had little doubt that this Lycus had been sent to seek him out and strike a bargain. Hectoris did not want to fight unless he must. Blade glanced at the sky. It was looking more ominous by the moment.

The Samostan officer saw Blade's glance and must have gathered its meaning, but he said, "Kador and Smyr have been executed. They were traitors, sure enough, and plotted against Izmia, but they made a botch of it. Their plans were known to Izmia all along, and they could not even hold you captive. Hectoris does not abide bungling."

"And what of Juna? It is said that she was taken with Kador and Smyr to the *safety* of your master's ships—has she also been executed?"

For now, to carry out his vow to Izmia, he must again possess the person of Juna. He did not know how he would do it, or if it could be done, but he had promised Izmia and he must try.

Lycus slapped his thigh with a hairy knuckled hand and laughed. "It must be true, then, what the spies have said of you and Juna? You have tasted the favors of a goddess and wish to taste again, eh?"

Blade's mouth tightened but he refused to be drawn. He would settle accounts later. He said, "You do not answer my question, man."

Lycus made a fist and scowled. "Do not use that tone with me. Or that term. I am a captain in the army of Samosta."

Blade smiled. "Forgive me, Captain. But I still await an answer. What of Juna?"

"She is on the command ship of Hectoris and well-treated, though not as a goddess. Surrender and be friend to Hectoris and I have no doubt that he will be generous and give you Juna."

Blade already knew this from his questioning of Ptol. Just as he knew that the Samostan army, as hard and efficient as it was, was a war-weary army of veterans who longed for peace and the fruits of weary years of campaigning. Blade was counting a great deal on this.

Abruptly he changed tactics. In a cold voice he said, "Hectoris has had my message? He is aware of my challenge?"

Lycus nodded. "If you mean the rumor that has spread, that is shouted from the shores by your beggars who will not fight, if you mean the talk that is meant to corrupt good Samostan soldiers, I say yes. Hectoris has heard it. And ignores it."

Now was a time for guile, for cunning. Blade managed a look of surprise. "Ignores it? How is this? I have heard many things of Hectoris, but never that he was a coward. Is he afraid to risk single combat with me?"

Lycus put a hand to his sword hilt again. "Hectoris is afraid of nothing."

Blade, mocking, pointed to the snake on the man's shield. "Nothing at all? Not even the god for whom he acts?"

"Not even his god! But why should he fight you, Blade? What gain could he have of it?"

Guile. Blade put sorrow and sweetness into his smile. "Hectoris gain? I say only his death at my hands. But you, Lycus, and all the men of the Samostan army, they would gain. Gain life, for even if you do overwhelm us in the end you know that many will die. We will die hard and you will win nothing but a ruined country and piles of corpses. I hear that Hectoris has had you at the wars for twenty years—a pity that when it is over your men will find not women and wine, but only death. The life of a common soldier is as precious to him as that of a general is to him, Lycus. If you doubt it ask among your men."

Lycus spat. "I have heard all this before, Blade. It is the propaganda your spies whisper among our troops, and that your beggars cry from the beaches and hill tops, but you waste your time. It will not avail you. Hectoris will not fight you."

Blade, with a sureness he was far from feeling, spoke again. "I think he will. No man can command who will not face the same dangers he asks his troops to face. He would be a fool to try and I do not think your leader is a fool. In the end he will have to face me—I march to the beaches now and I will cry out for all to hear that Hectoris is a coward and no man at all unless he faces me. I will offer him such a bargain in combat that he cannot afford to refuse it, for if he does he will lose all credit with his army and his officers will be plotting against him before a week has passed."

Lycus half drew his sword. His laugh seemed forced and for once he did not look Blade in the eye. "You will not," said he. "For you will never reach the beaches. I am sent for that purpose—in the event that you are an unreasonable man and will not take terms. As I begin to see you will not."

Blade ignored the half-drawn sword and leaned toward the officer. The seed must be planted, whether it burgeon or not. "Let us suppose," said Blade, "that Hectoris did meet me in fair fight and I killed him. I have no ambitions here in Patmos, nor in Thyrne nor in Samosta. You will soon see the last of me. Now, in such case, who would come to the throne and the power of Hectoris?"

The eyes of Lycus shifted away. "There would be a council of high officers. A new leader would be chosen. There are many who would aspire—"

He broke off and scowled at Blade. "It is said that you are a demon and I believe it well-spoken. But you will have no treason out of me. Enough of this twaddle—will you disband your men and come with me in peace?"

Blade shook his head. "You know the answer to that, Lycus. I will go to Hectoris in my own way and on my own terms."

The man pulled his horse about and scowled back over his shoulder. "We will see as to that. I will send a part of you to Hectoris, though the mouth will not be so glib when he sees it. Make ready, Blade, for I attack."

Blade sent the black galloping back into the square. He gave orders to disperse his slingers and grouped his mounted officers around him. Cheers went up from the ranks of the Guard as they saw there was going to be a fight.

The Samostan trumpets began to ring clear in the dank misty air. The sky was fast curdling into black porridge and the wind was rising. This must be short and sharp, Blade told himself. He must make the beaches before the storm struck in full fury or all his planning was for nothing.

The cavalry of Lycus wheeled and trooped by left and right flank and came into a line of charge. Blade was surprised. He did not deem the man a fool, and yet a frontal attack in these circumstances was a fool's trick. Either Lycus was angered and had lost his judgment, or he was so arrogant that he trusted his horsemen to break the square by sheer fury and weight of numbers.

Blade gave orders that unleashed his slingers and bowmen, the latter firing over the two ranks in front of them.

"Aim at the horses," Blade commanded. "The horses first. When they are afoot we can handle them easily enough."

He called his mounted officers to form around him. "We are the reserve," he told them with a wry smile. "All of it. If they break the square we must be quick to plug the hole and beat them back." He glanced at Edyrn. "If they break through in another place you will take half the men and see to it."

Edyrn nodded understanding. There was time for no more. The first wave of cavalry smashed into the square with a shock and din that drowned even a man's thoughts.

Each of the pikemen in the first rank, at Blade's orders, had dug a slanting hole in the earth and couched his pike in it. The pikes, twelve feet long and cruelly pointed, thrust outward in a savage picket. Into this came the galloping cavalry of Lycus.

Blade, standing high in his stirrups for a better view, watched the carnage with bitter satisfaction. The slingers and bowmen wrought havoc on the charge and now concentrated on the Samostans who had been dismounted. The war horses, fierce and obedient, ran their bellies onto the pikes and were gutted or went down with broken legs. More came on behind, only to pile up on those dying before them. The charge had broken.

Blade sought for the blue plumes of Lycus in the melee and found him only just in time. The Samostan officer, his mount dying on a pike, leaped agilely to earth and called a group of other dismounted soldiers about him. With his sword he beckoned a solid contingent of his horsemen into a mass attack on a small segment of the square. They came on in a last effort, some twenty horse against two files of pikemen and javelin throwers and bowmen. Ten went down in the effort. Ten broke through, hewing a narrow lane through the square, and Lycus led his impromptu infantry in behind them. These Samostans were all tough and well-disciplined veterans and they knew what to do. They wheeled and faced right and left, fencing off a corridor through the square. A sub-officer on the field began to organize what cavalry was left, and those wandering afoot, and direct them into the channel. Blade watched all this with calm.

The Guard was now hampered by their numbers and the close quarters. Blade called a halt to sling and bow fire, lest they slay each other, and sent Edyrn galloping to close the gap on the outer side of the square and contain the Samostan forces beyond it. He spurred to meet Lycus who, with some thirty men behind him, was determinedly hacking his way into the square and certain death. A death that Blade, at

the moment, had no intention of giving him.

As Lycus and his little band broke through the square the mounted officers around Blade watched him and waited for his command to ride the Samostans down and slash them to bits. Blade gave no such order. He waited.

After a moment he held up a hand and bellowed a command that all the Guard cease to fight. Bewildered, the sweating and bloody men did so. And stared at Blade.

Lycus also, his sword dripping, his harness battered and slashed and his plumes clipped by a javelin, rested and stared at Blade in amazement.

"What now, man? You have had the best of it. I was wrong and did not think your Guard to fight so well. Why do you hold off? I have lost and am dishonored and have nothing left but death. So have on with it. I will never surrender."

Blade noted that the square had closed, healing the wound, and the remaining Samostans were in full retreat. Edyrn came back and Blade gave him new orders. "These men are prisoners until I say otherwise. No man is to fire or attack them. See that all understand this."

Blade dismounted and walked toward Lycus, where that officer stood with the group of soldiers who had followed him into the square. Blade held up a hand for parley. Lycus, bleeding from a long cut on his cheek, showed his teeth in contempt.

"You want *totalk*, Blade, when you have us in such a trap! I was wrong—you are no demon. You are an idiot. The first rule of war—"

Blade held up a hand for silence. He ignored Lycus and spoke to the Samostan soldiers clustered around him.

"I am Richard Blade. Most of you have heard of my challenge to your leader, Hectoris, but for those who have not I will repeat it now. Listen carefully, and remember, for I intend to free you, with your honor and your weapons, and send you back to Hectoris that you may remind him of these words. Here is my challenge:

"I will fight Hectoris on the beach. Man to man, in single combat. I will use shield and, sword, nothing more. As for Hectoris, he may be horsed and use any weapons he likes—sword, lance, mace, bow and arrow, I care not. I give him these great odds because I deem him no true warrior and know I can defeat him."

Lycus was staring. His men gaped and muttered amongst themselves and cast furtive looks at their officer. Blade pressed on.

"You will see the equity of it. Hectoris has all the advantage. If he defeats me your lives are spared, for the war is over. If I defeat him we will talk of terms and I think there will be no war, and again you will be spared. I have no quarrel with common soldiers or with officers who merely obey orders. Why should you die for Hectoris when I offer him terms that nobody but an arrant coward can refuse? And if your leader is a coward it is time you found him out! What say you to all this, Lycus?"

That officer snarled and spat in the dirt. "I say it is a trap for Hectoris, though I know not how you intend to spring it. I say I will have no part of it." He glanced about him. "And I say that any who listens to this liar, anyone who passes on such talk, is guilty of treason and will pay for it—I will see his bones broken to powder on the wheel."

Blade sighed inwardly. He was going to fail with Lycus, and it was he most of all that he desired to

win. But there was no help for it. He drew his sword, and approached Lycus. Edym gave an order and an outer ring of the Guard began to press in. Bowmen and slingers moved into easy range.

Blade halted six paces from Lycus and spoke past him, over him, to the Samostans huddled behind. "This is not your quarrel. Remain out of it and live. I promised you life and your honor and your weapons and you shall have them if you do not interfere."

Lycus whirled to face his men. "Do not listen to this Blade. I command you die with me."

Blade waited. The Guard waited and for a moment silence hung like the dust over the battlefield.

Blade said: "Think well, men of Samosta. If I lift a hand you all die. You have fought bravely and have not been dishonored. Why should you die for the likes of Hectoris—will he comfort your wives and sweethearts? Will he provide them with bread and a roof to shelter them? And think you, Lycus, are you not the equal of Hectoris and might not you be elected in his stead if I slay—

The Samostans around Lycus stepped back and lowered their weapons. Lycus spat at them and leaped at Blade. "Your tongue is a weapon indeed, Blade. Let us see if your sword matches it."

The man was determined to die. Blade, even as he took the first ringing blow on his shield, felt the pity of it. He could have used Lycus. But it was worse than that—now he must kill the man and show proof of his prowess at arms. This he had wanted to conceal from Hectoris until the last moment, had wanted the Samostan leader to reckon him nothing but a braggart and a boaster, a man to be held in contempt. That would not work now. He must play the opposite tactic; he must prove himself to these watching Samostans and let them spread the word and so subject Hectoris to a different sort of pressure.

And yet he made a last effort. He fended off the flurry of blows and spoke loud to Lycus. "This is not a fair fight. I am fresh and you are battle weary. Why are you so intent to die, Lycus?"

The officer was already panting, but he bore in and began to force Blade back. Sweat gleamed through the blood on his face and in his beard. His shorn plumes drooped and there was a great dint in his helmet.

"I swore my faith to Hectoris," he gasped, "and that oath I will keep. I have failed my mission and I deserve to die, but if I take you with me it will not be total failure."

"So be it," said Blade. And determined to make it as fast as possible. He had wasted a deal of time and the sky was black and the wind steadily rising. He had planned everything to this day and this hour—if it passed and nothing came of it he would not get another chance.

For a moment Blade took the sword blows on his shield. Then he thrust suddenly and as Lycus skipped back and to one side, for the moment on the defensive, Blade fell to the attack. He went both to the point and to the edge, sudden darting lunges and massive battering blows that spun the shield of Lycus in his grip and sheared away the rim. Lycus began to fall back, gasping, his legs slow to respond. Blade kept after him without mercy.

The circle tightened around them, pressured by the curious Guard who had broken their square and fought for a place with a view of the fight. Blade herded Lycus neatly into the very center of the circle and then, seeming to lapse, offered him an opening by lowering his shield and speaking. "Lycus! You have proven enough. I—"

Lycus made a desperate lunge. Blade parried it, dropped to one knee, took another stroke on his uplifted shield, and slashed at the legs of the officer. It was a savage stroke and cut the muscles of both legs above the knees. Lycus sagged and, with the blood spurting, tried to support himself with his sword. Blade fainted at his throat. Lycus brought his sword up to parry and began to fall as his legs failed him.



Blade leaned into the thrust and aimed at a rent in the man's chest armor. His steel went in with a jolting shock felt clear to his shoulder, and stood out half a foot behind Lycus. Bits of gut and lung tissue dripped and fell away as Blade withdrew his sword and let Lycus sway and topple to fall with a crash at his feet.

Blade did not hesitate. He hacked off the head, thinking that here had been a man indeed, and sent for a pikeman. When the pikeman arrived on the run Blade gave orders. The head of Lycus was fixed on the pike and given to a Samostan sub-officer. A way was opened in the square.

Blade stared at the sub-officer and said, "Take that to Hectoris. Remind him of my terms. I will be at the beaches in a few hours and, unless he be craven, I will expect to find him waiting for me. And if you are wise, and as weary of war as you seem, you will spread word of what you have seen and heard here. Come to wisdom, man, you and all your fellows! Let Hectoris take the risks for once."

As the remaining Samostans were filing out of the square Blade called the sub-lieutenant back.

"Remind Hectoris that Juna is part of the bargain. I will expect to find her on the beach as well. Tell him this from me—that he brought Juna as a bargaining point, so now let him deliver on his word. Go. I will give you half an hour start of me."

Blade remounted and listened as Edyrn gave him a report of the dead and hurt. "Dose and bandage those who can walk," he ordered. "We must leave the others."

Edyrn agreed. "It is the custom to cut their throats, sire. It is an easier death than lying hurt and waiting for wild beasts and vultures."

For a moment Blade hesitated, then shook his head. "No. I do not act for God. Let them be. A man may sometimes live no matter how grave his hurt. I will not deprive him of that chance."

A mounted officer cantered up. "Your man returns, sire."

Nob made a sour face as he approached Blade. "I knew it, master. I told you it would be so—I have missed all the fun." He glanced at the heaps of Samostan dead and whistled softly. "Aye, you handed them a better whipping than even I thought, by Juna's fleece. And me without a chance to unsheath my sword. I tell you it was not fair, master. I owe these Samostan dogs for many a blow and curse and I—"

Blade looked at him and Nob closed his mouth.

"What of the beaches, man?"

Nob wanted to grumble more but dared not. "Nothing of them," he said sullenly. "The wind at the coast is twice as strong as we feel it here and the waves are tall already. The Samostan fleet lies off in the harbor and will not venture. I have called off the crying of my beggars because the wind drowns their words."

Blade cursed. "Do not exaggerate with me, Nob. Surely the storm is not that furious yet? That small boats cannot make their way in?"

Nob nodded dourly. "Oh, that can be done, master. And no great skill required. A small boat has no draft and will not catch on the reefs, though it may founder in the surf. But the fleet, the great battle ships of Hectoris, they all retreat to the outer harbor and I do not think there will be an invasion today."

Blade leaned toward him. "But one man, and a horse, and perhaps even a woman—they could come ashore without difficulty?"

Nob shrugged. "If the sailors be skilled, I think yes. But I would not count on it, master. I do not

think Hectoris a coward, nor do I think him a fool. I have been thinking and I—"

Blade slapped the fellow's knee and grinned at him. "You mistake your function, Nob. You are not to think. It will tax your wits beyond bearing. Enough. Ride to Edyrn yonder and give the order to march at once. Double time to the beaches."

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## CHAPTER 12

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As they neared the harbor Blade and Nob rode ahead to a point of land overlooking the sea. Blade ordered Edyrn to halt the column and keep it out of sight. Nob was provided with a trumpet.

"If you hear four long blasts," said Blade, "come with your Guard and be prepared to die. I hope it will not be so."

Edyrn gave Blade a long look and clasped his hand. "The spirit of Izmia go with you," he said. Blade realized then that Edyrn knew what had happened to his grandmother, even though he had not spoken of it.

Blade's mount lagged somewhat and it was Nob who first spied the beaches. He raised in his stirrups, hooting in joy, and pointed.

"You have done it, master. Hectoris awaits you. Your plan works! You have shamed him into combat."

It appeared so. Blade reined in the black at the cliff edge and gazed down at the wide beaches that stretched for miles in both directions. Almost directly below him, well above the tide line, was a great tent of black and silver cloth. Before it was a pole and on the pole a shield bearing the circled snake and the legend—*Ais Ister*. Nearby, fully accoutered, was a massive war horse held by an attendant in Samostan livery. By the flap of the tent, closed now, was a rack of tall lances.

Nob was gazing down with something akin to awe. "It is Hectoris himself, sire, for I have seen that tent before. And that steed. He must be inside."

Blade merely nodded. He studied the deserted beaches where waves were piling in to crash in thunderous surf, flinging spray far inland and sucking great runnels in the sand as they retreated. He could see for miles both right and left and sensed no trap, and one glance at the surf was enough to know there would be no invasion this day. Whichever craft had brought Hectoris and his war mount to the shore had returned to the fleet.

Nob was counting the ships of war hove to in the spacious outer harbor, using his fingers and making marks on the ground with his lance point. Blade made a fast count of some three hundred; Nob came up with an exact tally of three hundred and nine.

"Two hundred of troops," he said. "The rest will be horse ships and supply, forges and the like, and some few for camp followers. They are far too many for us, master." He looked at Blade with resignation. "You will have to fight him now—there is no other way. Even had you thought of trickery—for you do not tell me everything, as I well know—I cannot see that it will avail us."

Blade watched the increasing gale toss the legions of ships about. There would be thousands of seasick soldiers out there, and they no threat to him now. He glanced down at the tent again. There was no movement about it, the flap still closed, and the Samostan soldier walking the battle horse up and down. The sky turned darker by the minute and the wind bore occasional spates of cold rain. Blade turned to Nob.

"We will go down to the beach. When we reach it sound your trumpet once."

They found a steep path and as the horses picked their way gingerly downward Nob cast a sideways glance and said, "We are alone now, master. None can hear. How is it that you really plan to slay this Hectoris—for I know that the message you sent was only bait, to tempt him."

Blade looked at his man and laughed. "You are a rogue, Nob, and therefore think the same of others. I sent no lies to Hectoris. I will fight him as I promised—on foot against his horse and lance and whatever other weapons he may choose."

Nob's jaw fell in disbelief. "B—but you are no fool, master. I cannot believe this—a man on foot has no chance against a horseman. He will ride you down at the first pass."

"We shall see. Sound your trumpet now, Nob. One blast only."

They reached the beach a hundred yards from the tent. They halted and Nob blew a great blast on the trumpet. Blade dismounted and readied his sword and shield. He bade Nob keep to his horse and retreat a hundred paces.

"But, master, if there is some trap here you will need—"

Blade scowled. "Go, man. Do as I say."

Nob persisted. "That tent could be full of armed men and—"

Blade smacked the horse with the flat of his sword and that settled the matter. He turned to stare at the tent now billowing and flapping in the gusts. No sign of life yet.

And then they appeared and were walking toward him. Juna and a tall man. The man, rangy and thin, with long shanks, was bald except for a few wisps of dark hair blowing about his pate. He was in full armor and carried a shield, but his sword was sheathed. He raised his right hand with the palm open as they approached. Blade did the same, but his eyes were riveted on Juna.

She was wearing a white cloak girdled with a scarlet cord that matched her shoes. Her white-gold hair flaunted in the wind like some bright banner. Beneath the cloak her body moved in the fluidity he remembered, the good breasts rippling, and though the time was not right he felt his loins stir and thought back to how she had made love in the little temple. Temple—temple whore! Yes. And it mattered nothing. If he won today he would have her a last time, for so Izmia had bidden him, and then she would be lost to him and to all men. Watching her stride toward him now, so beautiful, he regretted what he must do to her. If he lived.

Then he forgot Juna. Business was at hand.

The couple stopped some dozen feet short of Blade. Juna was silent. She gave him one blue glance and lowered her eyes. The man with her studied Blade for a moment and took his time in speaking.

"You are he called Blade?"

"The same. You are he called Hectoris?"

"I am. He called Hectoris. Master of Samosta, of Thyrne and of Patmos."

Blade smiled. "That remains to be seen—insofar as Patmos is concerned. I grant you Thyrne and Samosta."

The slim man, he was as tall as Blade but much thinner, scratched a shaven chin and stared at Blade with dark eyes that were small and well set beside a long thin nose. He wore a wreath of some sort on

his high bald forehead that could, Blade thought, be reckoned as a crown. He waited, alert, for he knew he faced a formidable intelligence. Juna stood two paces back, staring at the sand.

Hectoris said, "I have waited long for this meeting, Blade. And hoped it would be otherwise—for I do not wish to kill you."

Blade nodded. "I am in accord with that. I do not want to die."

"And yet the terms you sent—you will abide by them? I am to be horsed and you on foot?"

"I will abide by them," said Blade, "if you meet the other terms I sent."

Hectoris glanced back at the girl. "Ah—if you win you are to have Juna. I agree. But forget dying and come over to me and you may have her in any case. She is no goddess, you know, not to us Samostans. She is lovely but there are others lovelier. She is skilled in love but there are others more skilled. She—"

"I know what she is," said Blade curtly. "I have my own reasons for wanting her." *Izmia's reasons.*

Hectoris stared and nodded. "I suppose so, though I cannot fathom them. Beyond the obvious, but so be it. If you win you shall have her."

"And Patmos will be spared invasion?"

Hectoris grinned and the dark eyes were amused. "As to that, Blade, there may be some difficulty. You are to blame, for the way you have so cleverly forced me into meeting you. For if you win I must die, and when I am dead I cannot promise for my captains. They will not seek to avenge me, for I am not that much loved, but it may be that they will want Patmos after all, what you have left of it."

Blade pondered that. He was by now convinced that Hectoris was playing a straight game. Why not? He had all the advantage. And Blade had pressured him into a corner that had no exit. Hectoris had to fight, and fight fairly, or be disgraced before his watching army.

Hectoris was looking at Nob, astride his hack fifty yards off. He looked back at Blade. "That is your only man?"

Blade nodded and gazed beyond Hectoris at the tent. The other man smiled at that and raised a hand. The Samostan orderly left the horse for a moment and pulled a rope on the tent. It came, fluttering down, flattened to the sand, and then was lifted and filled and ruffled by the wind. There was no one inside. Hectoris gave Blade a sly look.

"You feared a trap?"

"It had entered my mind."

Hectoris smiled again. His teeth were long and stained brown. "And mine, too. But you were too clever—trapping you would have stained my honor as much as ignoring your challenge. You have outwitted me, Blade, and I admit it. I am a great leader and you put your finger on my one weakness, for a leader must lead! So, since you will not listen to reason and join me, I shall take pleasure in killing you."

Blade smiled in his turn. "Shall we have at it, then? Your man, and mine, will keep the girl with them. If I live she comes with me, if you live she remains with you. Both men, yours and mine, to be unharmed no matter the outcome?"

"Agreed, Blade. Where will you fight?"

Blade gazed around him, shielding his eyes against the wind-whipped sand. The beach here sloped gently to the sea and was some hundreds of yards deep and on either side stretched to distant headlands.

"There is space enough," said Blade. "I cannot run away." He pointed. "I will take position there."

Fifty feet in from the surf and the sand wet from the ebbing tide. It might slow the war horse a bit.

"As you will," said Hectoris. "Make ready then, Blade, and expect no mercy. You ask for this death."

He made a signal to the Samostan soldier. Blade signed to Nob. His eyes met those of Juna for a moment and he saw, or thought he saw, tears. Why would a temple whore cry for him?

Juna was led away between the two retainers. Blade drew his sword and adjusted his shield and walked down the gentle slope of the beach until he was within fifty feet of the water. As he retreated, as he must at first, he would have the water to his back. That left only three sides from which Hectoris could attack him.

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## CHAPTER 13

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Blade watched as Hectoris was aided into the saddle by his man, adjusted the serpent shield on his left arm and took a lance from the rack, loosened his sword in the scabbard and secured mace to saddle. Blade grinned sourly. Hectoris was taking him at his word and coming armed to the teeth. Blade turned his attention to the war horse, now dancing and snorting and fighting the reins as it scented battle.

It was a magnificent beast. Blade judged it to weigh a ton or more. Superbly trained for battle en masse, but he gambled that it would prove slow and ponderous against a single agile man. In that lay much of his hope. The horse wore head armor, with a long spike between the eyes, and a quilted covering into which rings of mail were closely sewn. None of this disconcerted Blade: the bronze greaves, from fetlock to knee, did bother him. No use slashing at the shank or cannon in hope of felling the steed. One trick lost to him.

Hectoris, as befitted a man with supreme confidence in the outcome, was taking his time. He put his mount through its paces, letting it rear and paw the air and slash down with shod hooves. The waiting Blade got the point, but he sneered and made a derisive gesture and halloed into the wind: "I grow impatient, Hectoris. What ails the master of Thyrne and Samosta? Cold heart?" Hectoris reined in his mount and couched his lance. Blade glanced back at the sea behind him. A ten foot wave curled in and broke with a roar on the damp sand, sending salt spray around him in a haze. Blade retreated ten steps and took his stand for the first attack.

The massive horse gained momentum slowly on the sand. The loose stuff shifted under the great hooves and clung to them. Blade had counted on this when he elected to fight on the beach.

Hectoris bore the lance to his right. Blade moved to offer the target of his shield, kite shaped and with its secret well-grooved and varnished over. He stood his ground as the horse and rider thundered down on him, Hectoris low in the saddle, the lance steady on the target. The beach shuddered beneath Blade as the animal came on and on and the lance point gleamed pale in the dull light.

Blade leaped to his right, his timing perfect, his movement that of a heartbeat, and Hectoris rushed past. Blade smote the rump of the horse as it brushed him. And laughed loud enough for Hectoris to hear even above the whine of the wind; if he could anger the man so much the better.

The war horse ran nearly into the angry sea before it could stop. It reared, dancing on its back legs, and for a moment Blade thought Hectoris would be thrown. He tensed and started forward, but the Samostan regained his seat and fought the mount into a sideways canter out of the creaming waves that licked at its feet and frightened it. Blade ran quickly to his right, closer to the water, and took up position again. Hectoris would learn from that mistake and would not make it again.

Nor did he. Hectoris rode off a little way and wheeled his horse about; this time he would attack along the beach line. Some gain and some loss for Blade. The damp sand would cling and slow the horse even more, but he no longer had the sea at his back. Hectoris couched his lance again and came on, slowly at first, then faster and faster. He still carried his lance to the right, but in his left hand now he swung the mace.

Again Blade executed the same maneuver, leaping away from the lance point, but this time he took a mighty blow from the mace on his shield. That weapon, a spiked iron ball attached to a short handle by a length of chain, put a dint in his shield and nearly wrenched it from his hand. Hectoris wolf-grinned and snarled something as he passed but Blade did not make out the words. He faced about again and only just in time, for the war steed proved not so slow or clumsy as he had supposed and was thundering at Blade again almost before he could draw breath. Blade took another mace blow on the shield that beat him to his knees. And Hectoris wheeled and was coming back again.

This time Blade did not leap away from the lance. He took the point on his shield, near the boss, and deflected it, but his left side was numbed by the impact. Nonetheless he thrust and drew blood from the horse as it passed him. A superficial wound, of no advantage to Blade, yet it cheered him.

Hectoris did not come again at the moment. He inspected his lance point and went to the rack for a new lance. His manner was that of a man who has all the time in the world. Blade glanced beyond the ruins of the tent to where Juna stood between Nob and the Samostan soldier. She was shielding her eyes against wind and sand, staring down the beaches.

Hectoris couched his new lance and swung the mace a few times over his head. Blade gave attention to his own shield. Time to bring out his trick.

A hole had been bored near the boss of the shield and another near the rim. A groove had been cut so that the thin chain would lie flat and, covered with a heavy coat of varnish, unseen. It was taut now and seemed a part of the shield. Blade loosed it on the inside, near the hand grip, and tugged it out of the groove and it fell into a loop. A loop of chain that might catch and hold a lance head.

Blade moved closer to the sea. Hectoris could not charge him down the slant of the beach, lest his mount run into the sea and founder in the harsh waves, so he moved again to the side. Blade shifted to face him. The war horse began to gain speed, mane waving, teeth and red mouth showing in froth, screaming in shrill rage as it had been schooled. The wind caught the sound and flung it over the beaches like a demon's cry.

Blade braced for the shock. If he could catch the lance point in his chain loop and wrest it from the grip of Hectoris he would have another weapon. That was well within the bargain, for he had kept his word and started combat with only sword and shield. And did Hectoris, surprised and unready, cling long enough to the lance he might be unhorsed. In the end it must come to that if Blade was to win. Closer now. Closer...

The computer struck. A maniac raved in Blade's head and he lowered his shield and screamed in pain, for the moment driven mad by the bludgeoning hurt. Of all times—in all this time—not so much as a twinge to hint that he was sought by Lord L—and now—now—in the red fog he fell to his knees and twisted away as best he could. Cursing and bitter. The computer sought him too early and too late. It would not take him this first time, it never did, but yet it would be the death of him. He was blind with pain, contorted with it, made helpless by it.

Hectoris, mayhap unnerved by Blade's scream and sudden crumble and fall, was off the target by inches. His lance point shifted at the last possible second and tore the leather and steel from Blade's shoulder and barely scratched the flesh. Blade's armor ripped away at the join and the lance bore away

the sleeve as trophy. Hectoris cursed mightily and reined the mount about. Now to finish it.

The pain vanished. Blade staggered to his feet. He had lost his sword and there was no time to search for it. He had time only to adjust the chain loop and throw his shield high as the Samostan came at him once again.

He stood his ground and offered a fair target for the lance. The dark eyes of Hectoris spoke death as he bent low and forward to make the final thrust. His men in their thousands were watching from the ships and it was time for an end. And, give him his due, Hectoris was not a man to bait and taunt a brave foe.

The lance thudded home. The sharp point engaged the chain loop. Blade felt his arm being torn from his body, but now all his great strength counted and he fell to his knees and twisted the shield and chain. The point slid away and the shaft, caught by the chain, turned in the grasp of Hectoris and exerted a great leverage. Hectoris did not loose it in time. He was pulled from the saddle and fell heavily a dozen paces beyond Blade.

Blade ran at him with the lance. Too late. Hectoris rolled and was up. Blade gambled and hurled the lance with all his might and the Samostan fended it away with his shield. Blade halted and began to retreat, glancing about for his sword. There, gleaming in the sand near the water. He moved toward it.

Hectoris was there, between Blade and the sword, mocking. He swung his mace and the spiked ball slammed on Blade's shield. Again and again, high and low, the mace thudding and thundering and bending the shield as Blade was forced back and back and always away from the sword.

Blade plucked a dagger from his belt and tried to close with Hectoris. The other man laughed and leaped away and swung the mace again. Blade half slipped, was beaten to his knees, and the mace reined blows in ceaseless fury. Somehow Blade fought to his feet and, feinting to his left, tried to circle right and reach his sword. Hectoris was there.

Both men gasped now, breathed with pain, and streamed black and bitter sweat. Hectoris, near to exhaustion, came on again. Blade, staking all, did not retreat but sprang into the mace blow, fended it, and smashed his shield into the lowering face of his enemy. Hectoris gave ground for the first time. And slipped a bit in the sand. It was enough. Blade darted past him and ran to where his sword glittered.

Hectoris cursed and the screaming wind bore the oath to Blade. Hectoris flung the mace. It struck Blade at the knees, from behind, but no true blow. The spiked ball missed and only the chain and handle tangled his limbs and brought him down. He fell forward, sliding and with hand reaching for the hilt of the sword. His fingers touched it.

Blade scrambled and rolled on the sand. Hectoris, both hands to his sword, slashed the sand where Blade had just lain. Blade, in attempting to gain his feet, slipped and took another sword stroke on his battered shield. Part of the rim was sheared away. Blade thrust at the groin and drove Hectoris back and at last was on his feet. Water creamed and foamed about his boots. They were fighting now at the very edge of the sea.

Hectoris—there seemed no end to the strength in that lank slim body—leaped in and began to lay about Blade, who knew he had met his equal. Hectoris matched him point for point and edge for edge. The Samostan had lost his laurel crown and, along with it, his arrogance, but he gave Blade no respite. Slowly, reluctantly, Blade gave ground and was forced back into the pounding sea. A breaker curled in and smashed down over him and his enemy vanished in spume and mist, only to come on again as the wave receded. Blade began to plan, knowing the only way he could win, and prayed that the computer pain did not come again until it was over. If he faltered now he was a dead man.

When Hectoris leaped in again Blade did not parry and retreat, or shift position, but ran in close and, their steel locked, face close to panting face, tried to dagger Hectoris. The man's armor turned the thrust and Hectoris pushed Blade away. Blade kept the dagger in his left hand, menacing with it, wanting Hectoris to keep it in mind, to be aware of it. The next time...

They were fighting in water up to their waists. Hectoris slogged toward him. The Samostan had lost his helmet and his bald head gleamed in the dull light and wind tossed his fringe of hair. Blade retreated a bit, not daring to glance behind him, but listening for the next surge and roar of an oncoming wave. If his timing was right—

A wave curled and towered. Hectoris and Blade sprang at the same time to the attack. Blade feinted with his dagger and when the other man moved to fend it Blade dropped the little weapon and gripped the sword belt of Hectoris. He dropped his own sword and fended off a last blow from Hectoris and then dropped his shield. With all his strength he drew the man to him, embraced him in a bear hug, and kicked his legs out from under him. The wave smashed down like the hammer of doom and inundated them, swept them along topsy-turvy and slamming their locked bodies against the rough bottom sand. Blade, knowing his own plan, had drawn one deep breath. He got the head of his enemy in the crook of his left arm, seized his own left wrist with his right hand, and brought his terrible strength to bear.

The wave carried them shoreward. Blade felt bones break in the neck of Hectoris. He dug in with his feet, fought to his knees and clawed back into deeper water. He rolled and, using his weight advantage, took Hectoris to the bottom again. The Samostan had drawn his own dagger and was feebly slashing at Blade's legs. There was some small pain and a little blood, but Blade was content. He had won.

Blade let four more waves pound over them before he stood up and dragged the lifeless body of Hectoris ashore. He glanced out at the ships massed in the outer harbor; the ratlines and crows nests were black with watching men. Blade dragged the body up the beach, far beyond the tide line, and dropped it. He found the lance and thrust it into the sand near the lolling head. Hectoris had not drowned. Blade had broken his neck.

He stood for a moment by the body and looked out at the fleet. He raised a clenched fist and shook it three times, then turned away. Nob and the Samostan orderly, with Juna between them, came down the beach to meet him.

Juna, her arms folded over her breasts, her hands in the long sleeves of her gown, stood silently by as Blade spoke with the two men.

To the orderly Blade said: "Yonder is the body of your master. See to it. He was a man, but fought like a devil, and it was a near thing. Tell your captains that I, Richard Blade, said this. Tell them also that I will send Ptol, the priest, with terms by which Patmos and Samosta may come to peace. If this peace is refused tell them they may expect nothing but death and fire and desolation. They will inherit nothing but ruins. Go now and keep watch by the body. When we are gone, and the storm lessens, they will send a boat for you."

The man bowed, his eyes huge with awe and fear, and hurried off. Blade looked at Nob and pointed to the war horse. It had found a tiny patch of rank beach grass and was grazing.

"Fetch the horse for my lady, Nob. When we have reached the caverns again it is yours to keep." New pain moved in Blade's head.

Nob did what Nob had never done before. He fell to one knee before Blade and from his good eye a tear scoured through the dirt on his rugged face. "Sire! I had thought you dead—my eye did not believe and I had no faith. And I—I had already thought how to make my terms with the Samostans. I am not worthy of such a gift, master. I am worthy of nothing. I—"



Blade clapped him on the shoulder. "On your feet, man. It worked out well in the end and you will not have to change your coat again. Go now. Fetch the horse for Juna."

Nob went. Blade looked at the girl, gazed into those blue pools, and nearly lost his resolution. But he had promised Izmia.

Juna took a step toward him. She knew. It was in her glance and manner. She stared long at Blade. Wind moaned about them, tossing her hair wildly.

Juna said, "Must I, Blade? I would not have it so. Since I first saw you I have schemed to have you with me, to love you always, to face the intrigue and plotting together and somehow, when it was over, to be happy together."

Blade shook his head. It pained him still, but was bearable. The computer was seeking.

"I cannot stay, Juna. What you do is, must be, decided by you. You know of what Izmia has spoken to me?"

"I know." Her voice was cold, bitter. "Since a tiny child I have known this day must come. You could save me, Blade. You could take me with you."

"I cannot. Of all things in the world that I cannot do."

Nob was approaching with the horse. Juna was pale, her lovely face gleaming with moisture borne by the wind, her eyes half closed as she surveyed Blade up and down. She gathered the white cloak about her slim body.

"Let us go, then. If there is no help for it. Izmia told you all that must be done?"

"Izmia told me."

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## CHAPTER 14

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In the little cavern, close by the Cavern of Music, Blade and Juna lay entwined and made love for the last time. Juna, clasping his brawn with her with pale limbs, whispered, "Do not spend all, my heart. Some of you must be saved for—you know what."

"I know."

They lay on the black catafalque. Nearby was the sword and the pearl and the chalice and the wine. They waited, symbols all, wind and water, fire and earth.

Juna, her tongue hotly enshrined with Blade's, whispered again. "Why am I thus cursed, Blade? I was dutiful, obedient. I gave all my life to Izmia and to Patmos, I was her envoy and her creature in good faith and in intrigue and treachery. And never doubted the right of it—until I saw you. Now I would be but an ordinary woman, free to love the man she chooses, and I cannot. It is bitter."

He could only nod and hold her close. Aye, it was bitter. And must be done. Quickly now. The head pains were recurring every few minutes; he had not much longer to stay in Dimension X.

But it was Juna who finally said, "If it must be done, Blade, do it now."

From the catafalque she watched as he took the black pearl in one hand and the sword in the other. With great force he smashed the hilt of the sword against the pearl. It shattered into shards and dust.

Blade put wine in the chalice and three pinches of the pearl dust and returned to the catafalque. Juna took the chalice from his hand and knelt beside him. Blade was near spent and she must perforce suckle him for some moments. Then, with expert fingers, she brought him to climax and caught his spew in the chalice. The effort cost her and her eyes were haunted as she handed him the chalice again and fell back on the catafalque. Blade could not rest.

He mixed the potion in the chalice, stirring it with the sword point, and when it was thick and giving off a faint smoke, he anointed the steel with it, from hilt to point. A patina formed on the sword, dulling the sheen, and from it arose the same faint mist. Blade, sword in hand, turned back to Juna.

She was ready. Legs wide spread, naked, breasts trembling as she breathed and stared narrow-eyed with fear and regret and—or did he only imagine it?—anticipation.

Blade hesitated. He gazed from the sword to the body of Juna. Was it possible? Even in Dimension X—was it possible?

Juna cried out. "Do it, Blade. Do it now! Else I lose courage."

Blade lowered the sword point and guided it in between her outflung legs.

Juna arched and flung her, head back and screamed once. Her face became a mask through which eyes watched Blade and they were not the eyes of Juna. They changed color, became amber lakes in which smoke swirled and clotted and vanished and came again.

He kept sharp watch for blood and there was none. Juna—this woman creature who had been Juna, moved and writhed and contorted on the engorging sword. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the steel crept within her body. She engulfed it, swallowed it, welcomed the steel into her inner recesses. Her eyes were golden caverns now in which there flickered the fires of some ecstasy Blade could never know. Her features began to alter, subtly at first, then with speed until he saw not Juna. The blue-eyed maid was gone. He saw—Izmia.

Her body flesh changed color, shimmered with light and flame, flickered through the spectrum. Blade, running with sweat, pressed the sword home until the hilt rested against her flesh, pinned there like some shining ornament. The great sword lay within her body, a body now grown turgid, enhanced in every limb, breasts larger and heavy, legs longer and shoulders wider.

Blade stepped back and stared at her. And knew her—young Izmia!

There remained but one thing to do. He seized the hilt of the sword and plucked it out with a single motion. She screamed loud and writhed and sent the echoes scurrying through the cavern. Blade flung the sword from him.

Izmia stirred and raised herself on the catafalque and looked at Blade. She smiled and lifted her hand to him. Blade.

The roof blew off the world. The volcano cast off its mute and exploded in a delirium of sound. Blazing lava poured into his brain and he heard himself scream in agony as the cavern collapsed around him. The catafalque and the woman vanished in a whirling pinpoint of nothing. Blade ran at an insane pace on a treadmill of *loti* and on either side was whacked by balloons with phantom faces. He shrank to midget size and the gauntlet stretched to the ends of the universe. Fylfot banners flapped about him like evil wings and a snake, tail in mouth, pursued him like some dreadful hoop with intent to strangle. The balloons turned to faces and floated past—Nob, Hectoris, Edyrn, Gongor and Captain Mijax, the lisping evil of Ptol. Blade screamed and ran on and on—and on.

There was no succor, no escape. But yes—for now he ran into the great wide mouth of Izmia. The

white teeth were cliffs and the red tongue a path and Blade slipped on the moist surface and fell and was sliding down that gaping maw, that gullet. The mouth closed, the great teeth snapped, and all was darkness while Blade fell a million miles into a stomach larger than the world.

Another taxi, another traffic jam. Blade, after a week in debriefing and hypnosis and hospital, was conscious of a feeling of *deja vu* that was enhanced by coincidence. Their taxi was trapped in Lothbury Street near Copra House. The same newsboy was waving a placard. It had all happened before—nine months ago.

There had been, said Lord Leighton, a time slippage. As a rule his Lordship did not worry about time in Dimension X; it seldom matched that in Home Dimension, but allowances were made and the matter was of no great import. But this time Blade had suffered a severe blow on the head—a hairline fracture of the skull that would heal of itself—and while this had brought on his amnesia it also baffled the computer until the proper adjustment was made. They had nearly given up on Blade.

J, beside him now in the taxi, showed the ravages of those nine lost months. His hair was grayer and skimpier, the lines around his eyes and mouth deeper. On first meeting, when Blade was free to leave the Tower, J had shaken his hand and said, "We thought we had lost you, old boy." Just that. But there had been tears in the old man's eyes.

The taxi had not moved for some minutes. Blade stared at the newsboy across Lothbury Street. He could read the headline on the placard.

#### DIANA HAS A BOY

By this time J was aware of the coincidence. He nudged Blade. "Do you remember? We were caught in nearly this same spot—the day we went to the Tower and were so frightfully late. You bought a paper?"

Blade nodded. "I recall. Diana and Sir David Throckmorton-Pell. The hanging judge. The one they call The Rope. She had just run away from him."

J smiled. "Yes. Not the first time, either. But she came back and they have just had a child. I doubt she will be running away again—not with a child to rear."

Blade knew then. Sea green eyes, so cold at first and then so warm. Black pants with no lace. A Dorset beach and the long swim out and the game they played and at last the coupling in the depths and the going away, the departures with no goodbyes.

Hercules and Diana. A sea game played once only.

J was saying, "Some of the nastier papers are hinting that Sir David is not the father. Short of libel, of course. But Tony Asquith, in the *Mirror*, is defending her tooth and nail. Of course everyone knows that Tony is mad for her. One or two of the really sleazy columnists have hinted that Tony himself is the father."

"No," said Blade absently.

J stared. "What?"

"I mean," said Blade, "that I doubt that a fop such as this Asquith seems to be could be the father. Why don't the bastards leave the poor girl alone? And old Sir David, for that matter. This could make all the difference in their lives—they may have a chance now."

He knew. Just as she would know, no matter how many men she had been with. And that was the end of it. He could never seek her out, nor she him. He felt no real sadness. He had come back from hell to find a bit of immortality bestowed on him. Who could quarrel with that?

The taxi moved on. J watched Blade carefully. Odd, but never before had he noticed that Blade, upon occasion, could look smug.