
Dimension of Dreams

Blade Book 11

by Jeffrey Lord

Chapter One

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Richard Blade looked up at the forty-foot aluminum mast to the spinnaker fittings at the masthead. Then he looked forward to the big orange spinnaker, straining and pulled drum-tight by the rising wind.

And then he raised his voice to carry over the wind and shouted to be heard below in the cabin of the motorsailer, "Annie! Come on deck and take the wheel while I go forward and drop the spinnaker. It's getting on to blow."

A muffled acknowledgment floated out from behind the polished teak door. Then the door swung open and Lady Annette Pangborn popped out, mounting the steps to the cockpit with the poise and balance of a seasoned sailor. She was wearing a bikini that concealed only nominal portions of her tanned, fashion-model's body. She slipped gracefully into the padded helmsman's seat and took the chromed wheel from Blade. With a winch handle swinging in one hand he went forward along the heaving deck.

He didn't care much for having to drop the spinnaker. Its two thousand square feet of orange nylon almost gave the deep-keeled motorsailer the performance of a racing sloop. But the blue sky to the southwest was beginning to turn gray and the blue gray waters of the English Channel were beginning to heave up higher and higher in white-capped waves. The motorsailer was lurching and heaving in a way she had not done that morning when they left the French coast behind.

The oiled winch worked smoothly, but he had not expected it to do anything else. Everything aboard Annie's motorsailer was the result of abundant money and good judgment. She had inherited both from four generations of shipping magnates. If Annie ever married, Blade expected that she would do her best to send that same money and judgment on to another few generations. But the English Channel was as likely to turn to onion soup as Annie was to marry.

That was why he was aboard her motorsailer this spring day. Blade had all the assets needed to make him attractive to women. Good looks, an athletic body well over six feet tall, charm, apparent wealth, and (as those women who carried matters far enough discovered) abounding virility. There were always women around him, and among them were always a good many who could not help imagining themselves as Mrs. Blade.

Which was impossible. Richard Blade was not merely the imposing, middle-aged man-about-town he seemed. In reality he was the best secret agent the intelligence office MI6 had ever possessed. He had survived the better part of twenty years of the deadliest sort of fieldwork. And more than fieldwork.

What often seemed like half a lifetime ago, Britain's leading computer expert, Lord Leighton, had conducted an experiment directly linking a man's mind to his latest computer. That man had been Blade. With his combined qualities of mind and body, he had been the perfect—well, call it the perfect guinea pig.

And now he was still a guinea pig. The computer had hurled Blade straight into another dimension with a Dark Ages level of civilization. Only those qualities of mind and body that had led to his selection in the first place kept Blade alive to return to his own dimension. Those same qualities had kept him alive—at times by the narrowest of margins—during nine more trips into nine different dimensions, or at least nine different aspects of what Lord Leighton called Dimension X.

Project Dimension X had been launched the moment Blade returned from his first trip. The value to England of being able to penetrate and explore other dimensions and bring back their wealth or knowledge was obvious. Blade's superior, the man called J, who headed MI6, had reluctantly parted with his best agent. The prime minister himself had funneled generous support in money and trained people to the project. But the key man in the project was still Blade himself. He was still the only man in England able to travel into Dimension X and return alive and sane.

Obviously, either his luck or his endurance would run out sooner or later if they kept sending him back. Blade knew it and took it for granted. J also knew it and was horrified at the thought. Lord Leighton knew it and usually seemed quite indifferent. There was a subproject afoot to find other qualified candidates for trips into Dimension X, and both J and the prime minister had given it their blessing and their personal support. But so far it had produced nothing. Blade was still indispensable.

So he could not marry. Few women could tolerate having their husbands suddenly snatched away on mysterious errands for weeks or months at a time and unexpectedly returning scarred, tanned, and trimmed down. Blade would not ask those few women he could rely on to silently suffer such an existence. His other dimensional travels had already driven away Zoe, the woman he had come closest to marrying—would have married under other circumstances. He would not take the chance of that happening twice. So he sought out those women, like Annie, who were interested in fun, frolic, and freedom.

Now the spinnaker was down, bagged, dropped through the forward hatch, and stowed in the sail locker in the forepeak. The heaving of the motorsailer's deck subsided enough to make Blade's trip aft easier than his trip forward. With only the mainsail and the number-two jib up, the yacht rode easily through the chop.

Annie was holding her on course with no sign of effort when Blade dropped down into the cockpit and squatted beside the wheel. "Think we can make Folkestone with the spinnaker down?" he asked.

She frowned. "Not unless we want to make the approach after dark."

Blade shook his head.

She grinned and said, "You're as careful as if you'd been at sea for twenty years. Where did you ever learn the habit?"

Blade looked at Annie's windblown beauty and wondered how he would have answered that question if he had not been bound hand, foot, and tongue by the Official Secrets Act. Would he have to tell Annie about the pirates of Neral, whom he had fought both for and against, and about how he had learned seamanship from the sadistic she-pirate named Cayla and the tough old fighter Tuabir aboard the galleys of the pirate Brotherhood? And if he had decided to tell her about these things, could he have made her believe him? Perhaps not. Perhaps the Official Secrets Act had saved him more than once from being branded a madman. There was so much he had learned, so much he had seen, during his adventures. And so much of it would have seemed incredible even to Blade if he had not lived through it himself.

Suddenly a shout of surprise from Annie made him turn and look out across the whitecaps to where her slender arm was pointing. A larger patch of foam was spreading across the sea, breaking up on the fringes as the waves tossed it about. From its center rose a squat black tower, rising still higher as Blade watched, and then a long black hull lifted from beneath the foam and sliced through the waves. One of England's diminishing fleet of submarines was on the surface again, heading into Portsmouth after a long patrol in the depths of the Atlantic.

Blade watched tiny figures appear on the submarine's bridge, and then a patch of white that grew suddenly larger as the wind caught it and whipped it out stiff and brilliant in the sun—the white ensign of the Royal Navy. An impulse to follow what had once been tradition moved Blade. He reached for the halyard of the motorsailer's own flag and pulled gently, so that it dipped twice. Across the water there was a flurry of motion on the submarine's bridge. Blade realized he had caught them by surprise with the traditional gesture. Probably no one aboard the submarine, from the captain on down, had ever witnessed this act. But then the white ensign shivered and moved down and then up with stately grace. Blade smiled—the Royal Navy could usually come up punching.

Annie was watching him with a strange mixture of emotion in her eyes—half amusement, half something indefinable. She was part of a generation that tended to scoff at the kind of gesture Blade had just made. But she was also from a family whose fortunes had been founded in the great days of that now sadly shrunken Royal Navy. Her family home was filled with portraits, models, and books telling of those days and of sons who had "gone down to the sea in ships" flying that same white ensign—and sometimes not returned. She might smile at Blade's nostalgic gesture, but she would never ridicule him for it. And in an odd way she was moved by it.

Whatever combination of emotions he had aroused in her was still working that night, after they had dropped anchor in the sheltered mouth of a small creek and snugged the yacht safely down for the night. Blade was conscious of her brown eyes, more intent on him and wider than ever, as they sat in the cabin, baking the chill out of their bodies with the cabin heater and shoveling in soup, corned beef, and peaches out of cans from the galley lockers.

Champagne glowed in the light of the lanterns and bubbled in plastic cups as she poured it from a chilled bottle, then curled up on the leather-covered couch beside Blade. That couch was the one Annie called her passion pit. As she passed in front of the light, Blade saw the silhouette of her lithe figure through the thin yellow robe that was her only clothing.

She clicked cups with him and drained hers in a single long swallow, then put it on the floor and reached out one long-fingered hand to caress the hard, chiseled line of his jaw. The hand moved down along his neck and under the collar of his shirt, stroking the sinewy muscles of his shoulder. Blade turned, his lips crinkling in a smile, and reached out with his own large left hand to stroke in gentle but rapid succession her cheek, lips, jaw, neck, shoulder—and then the delicate curve of breast that thrust out the light fabric of the gown and the even more delicate bud of the nipple, visible in its center.

Normally she liked the long, slow warm-up, hands and lips roaming over each other's body, approaching inch by inch the final merging and the joy. But that night whatever emotions had her in their grip made her more urgent, more hungry, as though she had already been half-aroused before Blade's hand reached out to her.

She loosened the belt of the robe and let it fall open so that Blade's hands could slip down inside it easily and wander over her bare skin. Her breathing quickened as he cupped both breasts gently, his fingers playing a gentle rhythm on their curves while his palms pressed with steadily increasing force against the already rigid nipples. She shrugged the robe from her shoulders and stood up in a single flowing motion, there reached out once more toward Blade.

Blade pulled off his own clothes. By the time he was naked, he was fully aroused by the sight of Annie's body gleaming in the light, her blazing eyes and quick breathing, and her sinuous swaying. Now he shared her urgency, responding to it in the most natural way. His engorged member jutted rigidly before him as he turned to face her.

She flowed up against him, her long slim arms and legs winding around his, her firm breasts flattening against his chest. This aroused him still further, more than he would have believed possible. His hands traced a line down her spine and cupped her buttocks. She moaned softly and burrowed her face into the side of his neck, her mobile lips and darting tongue working from his earlobe down to his shoulder and then back again. It was his turn to make an incoherent sound. All the sensations of his body seemed to be flowing from that swollen and stiffened rod. He felt his throat drying out and his breath coming in irregular gasps that would have made it impossible for him to speak even if he had wanted to. But there was nothing to say, only to do.

He urged Annie back toward the couch again while his hands tightened their grip on her buttocks and her arms locked more and more tightly around his torso. Their bodies were pressed so hard together that he could feel the delicate curls of her pubic hair twining around his phallus, now pressed hard against her but not yet in her. Then it was her turn to force the pace. She momentarily slipped free from his arms to lie back on the couch, legs spread and raised, eyes open, fingers curling and uncurling in a series of beckoning gestures.

Blade responded to that beckoning and in a single abrupt gesture swung himself into position above her. He lowered himself slowly as she arched her body up toward him, and then he was in her. Her eyes and mouth opened still wider as he drove deep inside her, timing his thrusts with the arching of her body to bury himself deeper and deeper. Annie responded quickly and climaxed easily, but as far as she was concerned, that simply meant even more opportunities for delight at each bout. So Blade was as careful to pace himself with her as if she had taken half an hour to reach the boiling point.

Steadily he stroked, calling on all his endurance to hold himself back each time Annie heaved and writhed under him. Her sweat-glazed thighs locked still tighter around him, and her feet beat a tattoo on his back. Her mouth was continuously open, but only incoherent animal noises came from it—sobs and gasps and little screams as the spasms wrenched her body. Bit by bit Blade felt his endurance reaching its limits and his control slipping—as though he were boiling inside and about to burst. He fought to hold, held on through one more heave of Annie's thighs. Then with a choked sound no more human than Annie's gasps and moans, he poured himself into her so fiercely that it seemed as though he would drain away through his fiercely pumping organ and shrink away to nothing. Finally every part of him went limp except the massive arms that still held his weight off Annie. Her eyes were glazed as they looked up at him.

Gradually life and movement returned to both of them. He eased himself down on the floor with one arm still trailing across Annie's body. Both her hands were still locked over his arm. Gradually they sucked in enough air so that their chests no longer heaved like those of mountaineers struggling up a slope. Gradually their eyes met again, and Annie's expression of animal contentment gave way to her normal impish smile.

And gradually Blade realized that this night was the beginning of the end for them. They had pushed the sexual attraction and companionship that lay at the base of their relationship as far as it would go. Both would shy away from pushing things further, into marriage. It might take a few months, of course, because there was nothing bad pushing them apart, merely their own preferences. But there would eventually come a day when they would see each other at a party in London and do nothing more than smile and nod in greeting, then pass on, each with his own partner.

Chapter Two

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Lord Leighton's message caught up with Blade the next afternoon at the Sailor's Head Tavern in Folkestone. On all his Channel trips with Annie the eighteenth-century pub on the waterfront had been Blade's message drop. The pubkeeper, a retired Royal Navy petty officer, knew him well and could be trusted to keep his mouth shut about Blade's comings and goings. Besides a discreet landlord, the Sailor's Head also had good beer.

It was over a glass of that beer that Blade read the message. Simple, straightforward, familiar. As he read it, his senses seemed to sharpen until everything in the room seemed to have extra force and vividness—the smells of beer and tobacco and lemon-scented floor cleanser, the sounds of glasses clinking and darts plunking into the board at the back of the room, the stray gleams of watery sunlight wandering in through the windows and striking fire from the copper trays hanging above the bar.

He was going into Dimension X again, and this might be the last time he'd ever see any of these familiar English sights: So far he had always returned, often battered and bruised and lame, but there was always the possibility of something going wrong with either the computer or his own skills. He might be trapped; he might be killed. The lust for adventure was strong in him, but as he looked around the pub, it occurred to him that his Dimension X travels might be too much of a good thing. Then he paid his bill and went outside to where his MG was parked, his equipment already in it. Annie was on her way back to London, so there were no good-byes to be said before he fired up the engine and trundled the little sports car onto the motorway for London.

During his absence the cleaning lady had whirled through Blade's West End apartment like an orderly hurricane. All the carefully cultivated clutter of his bachelor life had been swept away and rearranged in appropriate places—or at least what Mrs. Griggs thought were appropriate places. Blade could not help laughing at the sight. The guerrilla warfare between bachelors and their cleaning ladies had been raging long before he was born and would be going on long after he was dead. Undoubtedly, it would go on until cleaning ladies became reconciled to clutter or bachelors became tidy—neither of which would happen this side of the Day of Judgment.

It was certainly more than silly to worry about Mrs. Griggs' peculiarities, when within another twenty-four hours he was going to—well, what was the correct word for moving into Dimension X? Lord Leighton himself was still trying to pin down the exact relationship of Dimension X to Home Dimension. Were the two dimensions completely parallel ... with only the state of Blade's brain and

therefore of his senses standing between them? Or were they merely parallel in some ways and divergent in others, each with some sort of independent continuity? Since their times could get out of phase, Blade suspected the latter. Lord Leighton also suspected the latter and had nearly had kittens about it more than once. However, he had also adjusted the computer so that Dimension X time and Home Dimension time stayed in phase.

In fact, Project Dimension X was developing all sorts of complications that not even Lord Leighton had anticipated the first time he plugged Blade's brain into what now seemed like a primitive and remote ancestor of the computer around which the project centered. There was a search for other suitable men who could survive the trip into Dimension X . . . a search so far unsuccessful, although J was making discreet inquiries of American intelligence agencies, the prime minister himself, the British intelligence services, and the armed forces. The stresses of passing into Dimension X were enormous, and once there, a man also had to have the wits, reflexes, and muscles to cope with an environment that might threaten him with anything from Stone Age ape-men to nonhumans from interstellar space.

One other man had passed into Dimension X, to be sure, and had even survived there—until he encountered Blade. But that one man had been Blade's Russian Doppelganger, a carefully trained and carefully chosen twin of Blade himself, created by the KGB. Now he lay dead in Sarma. Finding another twin for Blade among the ranks of the free world's trained soldiers and agents was improbable—and creating one was unacceptable. They would just have to keep on searching and hope for good luck.

There was also a project for finding a way of repeating trips into one dimension, so that it could be explored thoroughly. Now they could only fire Blade off more or less at random. Such a development would also mean that materials could be brought back from Dimension X in large quantities instead of tantalizingly meager samples that turned the scientists assigned to analyzing them green with envy. This had only been done once before, when they had been able to send Blade after his Russian twin into the strange intrigue-riddled world of Sarma. Lord Leighton in particular was consumed by a passion to send Blade back into the world of the Ice Dragons to resume contact with the alien Menel. The prime minister, however, was consumed with an equal passion not to go on pouring out money on Leighton's whims, money that would sooner or later have to be accounted for to Parliament. The Controlled-Return Subproject had finally gone through, but Leighton was predicting that at the present rate of nonprogress, ten years might go by before any major breakthroughs.

And there were other subprojects by the handful, all of them the result of bees that had buzzed into Lord Leighton's white-thatched bonnet some time in the past and given him ideas for new avenues to explore. Not surprisingly, this constant stream of requests for funds to underwrite Lord Leighton's new notions gave the prime minister screaming fits, and constant guerrilla warfare rumbled and muttered between the two men.

All this took place far above Blade's head, much to his relief, and did not affect his own role in the project one way or the other. Of course, if some other man thought equal to the trip turned up, he might have a rest—or possibly a partner. But for the time being, his part in each mission began when he presented himself at the Tower of London and descended to the underground complex to be prepared for his excursion. Which was fine with him—he was an adventurer by temperament. He found the dangers of Dimension X, which he could meet by his own resources of strength and skill, more tolerable than he would have ever found the strain of sitting where Leighton sat, where all his hopes and dreams would be more or less at the mercy of the whims of several million pounds' worth of electronic wizardry. Blade had never been very good at sitting and waiting. He had forced himself to have some tolerance for it; otherwise he wouldn't have lasted very long as an agent. But he knew that he would always be happier in the middle of the action. He would have a real problem of adjustment the day—a good many years off, the doctors told him—when declining physical powers would force him to the sidelines for good.

Blade spent the next twenty-four hours in no particularly useful way. He scrounged dinner, reducing the kitchen to chaos again. He dipped into books from his increasingly well stocked shelves, slept, and scrounged breakfast.

It was a damp, chilly morning, the kind that makes one wonder whether spring is real or just a story to encourage children, when Blade climbed into a taxi and gave the driver directions for the Tower of London. He took no equipment, because so far he had arrived in each new dimension naked as the day he was born. Now if Lord Leighton really wanted to do something useful, Blade thought, he could put his mind to work on a method for sending some gear through the computer. The computer had dropped Blade smack in the middle of battles more than once, and he would much rather have something besides his sheer strength and unarmed combat skills to rely on in a situation like that. A gun would be risky, of course. The current passing through his body might affect the cartridges. But a survival suit with built-in flotation and fragmentation protection, a couple of fighting knives, some emergency rations . . . Blade went on mentally listing the items for an ideal Dimension X survival kit and became so involved in the task that the driver had to announce their arrival at the tower three times before Blade heard him.

Neither Lord Leighton nor J was at the surface entrance to the complex. There was only the quartet of sober-garbed and even more sober-faced Special Branch men, who emerged from the shadows and took position around Blade as carefully as if he had been the crown jewels of England. Then they asked for his identity card. They would have done that even if they had recognized his face, and they probably did not. The Special Branch men who provided the above-ground security for the project served only a single one-year tour, then returned to regular duties, forever bound by the Official Secrets Act as tightly as Blade himself.

Blade wondered at times what impressions the security men or the scientific and technical experts on the staff might have formed about the project, impressions that might be dragged out of them by a sufficiently comprehensive interrogation. It might be a good idea to have one or two of the men interrogated, just to check. Unless J had already had that done? Blade grinned. He would have been very surprised if J hadn't already thought of the same thing. And if he had thought of it, he would have had it done. The head of MI6 had a reputation for covering all his bets. That reputation went back to his work in the First World War, long before Blade was even born. Blade knew that the old spymaster would leave nothing undone to guard the project. And also to guard Blade, whom he loved like the son he had never had.

When the elevator had dropped two hundred feet to the level of the complex and the heavy bronzed doors had slid noiselessly open, J was waiting for him. They walked through the long corridors, with the subdued lights gleaming on polished stone and metal, to the entrance of the computer rooms. There were sounds of human activity—voices, the clatter of a typewriter, the whine of a recording device—from behind the closed doors of the corridor, but there was not a living soul in the corridor itself. No human guards were needed down here. Each step of Blade's and J's progress, each passage through a door, was monitored by electronic devices that represented the latest in Ministry of Defense design. The devices never slept, never got tired, and could never be bribed or blackmailed, even if they might be jammed.

The computer rooms were a complex within a complex, a series of linked chambers hewn from the solid rock. But most of that rock was hidden behind the looming bulks of the computer consoles and auxiliary equipment. From the sullen gray faces of the computers, covered in a crackled plastic finish that made them look diseased, a fantasy of multicolored lights flickered and winked down at Blade. He found the computer rooms the only part of the whole underground establishment that really oppressed him, but he had never had to spend enough time there for them to really bother him.

Nor would he have to this time, either. Lord Leighton popped out the door to the central room. His eyes gleamed behind their thick glasses in a way that, Blade knew, meant the main computer was all ready to go.

"Good morning, good morning, Richard. I trust you're ready to go? The computer certainly is. I don't like to keep it on the line at maximum level for very long now. All these new attachments increase the current drain by over forty percent. One of these days Richard is going to find himself caught between Dimensions by nothing more exotic than a blown fuse. We've got to convince the PM that the supporting equipment for the power plant has to be replaced, and soon."

"No doubt," said J with an urbanity that Blade recognized as a hidden mischievous impulse to indulge in a little verbal fencing with Leighton. "But most of those new attachments were provided for your subprojects. If you hadn't insisted on installing them, there wouldn't be any problem. And the PM didn't balk at providing the money for that."

"Oh, quite. But if politicians had any scientific training, they'd logically realize one can't really install new equipment without providing for all the consequences. And the PM is a politician, for better or for worse." He, turned his hunched back on J and Blade, as if the term politician were a hitherto unutterable curse consigning the prime minister to the nether regions. Then he began the visual check of the master control panel, which he would never delegate to any subordinate.

"Well, Richard," said J with resignation in his voice, "I suppose his Lordship's right. Time to go." With a precise motion he thrust out a hand and strongly shook Blade's. Then he stepped back to the small recess beside the main control panel. There was a stool in it, which Lord Leighton had provided so he could sit and watch Blade flicker out of his Home Dimensional existence. Such a gesture from Lord Leighton assured Blade that the scientist possessed an actual, genuine, real heart, lurking somewhere behind that searingly brilliant intellect and the brusque, cynical, eccentric manner.

For himself, however, there was no softening or modification of the familiar routine. He went into the dressing room, stripped off his street clothes, and reappeared naked except for a loincloth and a head-to-toe covering of blackish cream intended to prevent electrical burns. Whether smearing himself with that foul-smelling gunk was really necessary he didn't know. But considering the amount of current that flashed through his body each time he was shifted into Dimension X, it was probably a reasonable precaution. He had no desire to wind up barbecued to a turn in the chair; that chair in its glass cubicle already looked rather too much like an electric chair.

He sat down in the chair, and Lord Leighton went to work, darting about the chair with his once white laboratory smock flapping and making him look like some energetic and untidy bird, attaching the gleaming cobra-headed electrodes all over Blade's body. The gnarled hands were amazingly steady and sure in their movements. In a few minutes Blade was sitting festooned with electrodes, and the multicolored wires leading from them like some abandoned building overgrown with vines and fantastic fungi. He found that his breathing had increased and that his stomach felt tight and cold. He forced himself to breathe more slowly and flexed as many of his muscles as he could to relieve the tension. Save the adrenaline for Dimension X, where you may really need it, you idiot! Then he turned his head to where Lord Leighton stood at the master panel and nodded. The gnarled right hand lifted in salutation, then came down, pulling the red master switch with it.

This time it happened with explosive suddenness. Lord Leighton whipped out of sight between one heartbeat and the next. The computer consoles charged in on him from all sides with a single gigantic lurch. For a second he felt like a man standing at a four-way rail crossing and watching runaway locomotives thunder toward him down all four tracks.

Then the hurtling gray bulks struck, and he dissolved into a fine mist that still retained sensation as the impact of the computers hurled it upward into the black sky. The mist coiled and dissipated as it rose but never lost sensation. He felt a deadly cold seep down from the sky and attack each separate microscopic particle that he had become, felt all sensations heightened by this new and terrible dispersal, which was spreading him across cosmic distances.

He rose farther, farther; the cold continued to envelop and chill him, and soon; he began to lose sensation in some of the more remote particles, as though they had fallen into ice water and been engulfed altogether in its numbing chill. His brain—was it functioning more slowly now that it was dispersed along with the rest of him?—tried to send out pulses to those remote particles. But they were dispersed and chilled beyond his ability to reach them. And he continued to spread across space with more and more of his particles being enveloped by the chill.

What had been his limbs were gone now; the chill was spreading inward. It no longer lay passively waiting for him to drift into it but reached out for his body and mind. He felt the cold gulp up half his body in an instant. It was a living and hungry thing now, seeking to devour him.

The rest of his body went in the next instant. Now only his mind remained, neither sending nor receiving messages. There was nothing sending or receiving out there in the blackness around him—only the cold, the hungry cold. It crept up on him still further; he felt a tangible pulse of icy wind. Then cold and complete blackness swallowed him, swallowed all sensation.

Chapter Three

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The pain in his head told Blade that consciousness was coming back to him. Then an equally sharp pain in his naked bottom made him yelp and leap to his feet in spite of his throbbing head. Looking down, he saw that he had landed on his rear in the middle of a large patch of thistlelike plants with springy, woody stems, thin purple leaves, and spectacularly long and pointed stickers. Under his feet was moss-grown stone; he lay down on it until the headache had vanished and his exploring fingers had removed all the prickers. Then he rose to his feet again and cautiously looked around him.

He realized that the moss-grown stone he had been lying on showed a pattern of cracks too regular to be natural, with great clumps of purple thistles growing out of them. Blade saw the stone stretching off in an unnaturally straight line on either side. It was flanked by trees set at roughly thirty-foot intervals and rising so high that Blade had to crane his neck up toward the graying sky to see their bushy tops. Their trunks were massive and at first glance appeared to be covered with green scales. Closer examination revealed a choking tangle of vines and weeds clinging to the bark. A chill breeze blew past, making Bade shiver and the glossy green leaves of the vines and the dull purple ones of the thistles dance.

Obviously, he had landed in the middle of a road. Or of what had been a road. Some of the thistles sprouting from the cracks between the blocks in the road were three feet high. More than one entire block had been heaved completely out of position by winter frosts, spring thaws, and the slow, steady work of the plants. No one had used this road or cared whether it was usable for many years.

But all roads tend to lead somewhere. From the way the light was rapidly fading from the sky, Blade guessed it was almost sundown. The chill already in the air suggested that the coming night would be uncomfortably cold for a naked man to spend in the open. Blade looked along the road and noticed that

to the right it sloped down and to the left it rose. In both cases it rapidly vanished into the twilight, but it seemed to Blade that going up made more sense than going down. At the very least, the higher he got the more he could see when morning came. He turned off to the left and set off up the road, eyes moving ceaselessly from side to side, looking for possible dangers and for anything that might be converted into a weapon to meet those dangers.

The climb up into the gathering darkness lasted so long that Blade was beginning to wonder if he was climbing a mountain. Then abruptly the row of trees on either side vanished, and the road divided and swung out on either side to form a circular drive. Directly ahead a flight of stairs—overgrown and crumbling like the road—led up to a vast sprawling house that seemed to cover the whole top of the hill. For a moment Blade's anticipation rose. Then it fell back again as he examined the house. He noted dead and living vines encrusting the once white walls, windows gaping like the eye sockets of a skull, and leaf-clogged gutters oozing dirty water. No one had come along the road for a long time, and no one had lived in this house or cared whether it was even livable for an equally long time. Whoever had raised the mansion there was long gone.

Behind the house the slope continued to rise. Blade walked around it along the circular drive, noting the fallen trees that were rotting amid the grass of what had once been a neatly kept lawn. Now it grew rank and dense, reaching Blade's knees.

Blade's mood grew sober as he surveyed the estate. He did not like this house, intact but as lifeless as the Great Pyramid, sitting there brooding on this dark hill. The mental association of abandoned houses filled with things dark and sinister was too deep for even Blade's trained mind to shake off. He had never seen a better haunted house.

He would not have liked it particularly even if he had never heard of haunted houses. Country mansions could easily be abandoned for legitimate reasons. But they could also be abandoned for more sinister ones—plagues, wars, the long, slow dying of a civilization that could no longer sustain them. The mansion was intact except for the damage inflicted by the years. That seemed to rule out war. Or did it? Chemicals, bacteria, hard radiation, or radioactive dust could leave a house intact and its inhabitants dying in agony. The house seemed to have been abandoned long enough for any CBR warfare agents to have lost their deadliness. But Blade would have been happier with a Geiger counter.

There was no point in standing in the darkness, staring at the house. It only suggested the state of the world he had fallen into, and it might be leading him completely astray. At the top of the hill he might see anything from a farm to an entire city. He stepped away from the house, took a final look at the empty windows, shivered at more than the rising wind, and strode off up the hill.

He pushed up the steadily steepening grade for more than a hundred yards, the grass now wet with dew swishing past his calves and the occasional thistle plant adding scars to his ankles to match the ones on his rear end. As the house slowly vanished in the darkness behind him, he made a mental note of his course. If all else failed, he could go back to the mansion and try to find as much shelter from the night wind as its dark and depressing interior might offer. He felt the ground beneath his feet leveling out, saw another row of trees looming up, and passed between two of them.

Now the ground sloped downward. He had a vague sense of a vast, empty space in front of him, from which the wind now moaned unbroken and uninterrupted. He was staring into the darkness, trying to make out something recognizable, when the clouds passing overhead suddenly flared silver at their rear edges. A full moon glowed in a sky full of stars, pouring an almost incandescent silver light over the land.

The land ahead did indeed slope down. It moved on past another row of trees, past two more

abandoned houses. Then it flowed out across miles of almost treeless plain to a broad river set deep in a high-walled gorge. On the far side of that river stood a city.

For a moment Blade wondered if the previous thought that he might see a city out there in the darkness was still working on his mind and making him see things. He focused all his attention on the city; it did not vanish. In fact, the neat rows of buildings stood out more clearly than before. Some rose only ten or twenty stories, others a quarter of a mile. Metal gleamed in the moonlight. One complex of thousand-foot towers, set in a close square, reflected the moonlight from walls of different vividly gleaming colors—red, gold, orange, silver. Other buildings were dome-shaped, rising up five hundred feet or more and showing their frames, gilded frames that seemed to drip liquid moonlight, through transparent outer shells.

All thought of returning to the decaying, empty mansion to spend the night vanished from Blade's mind as he stood absorbing the image of the city and what it meant. The city rising on the riverbank could only be the creation of an advanced society. Was this good? Not necessarily, he reminded himself. He thought of decadent Tharn, the strangely immortal Morphi, and the nonhuman Menel, with their superscience, which was exceeded only by their laziness. He could not even assume that this city would offer him safety. Bureaucrats could be as deadly foes as barbarian chiefs, and for a man who did not understand the rules they were enforcing, ten times as dangerous. You could not simply whip out a sword—assuming you had one—and decapitate each officious clerk. And the deserted mansion so close to the city suggested that the people were a cautious breed, preferring to huddle within their high walls and pursue their lives in safety. Such a people might well be inhospitable to strangers wandering naked out of the darkness.

But the rising wind was whipping at Blade's body and making him shiver, tough as he was. He started down the slope. This time he was alert not only for possible enemies and weapons, but for another road that might lead him to the city and save him an exhausting scramble across country.

He reached the bottom of the hill and scrambled over a pile of stones several feet high, which had no doubt once been a much higher wall. Now it was only a tumbled mass, overgrown with weeds, moss, and thistles. Again the spines pricked and jabbed at Blade, and insecurely settled stones shifted under his feet, throwing him sprawling several times. He was still more scarred, grazed, bruised, dusty, and bad-tempered by the time he pushed his way through a line of bushes on to another long-unused road.

As he felt moss-slick stones beneath his feet, the moon vanished behind another wall of cloud. But he knew that another left turn would take him toward the city, if not straight to it. He turned and strode along the road, pushing himself faster and faster as his eyes once again became adjusted to the darkness along the road. The chill wind made him hurry simply to keep warm.

For about two miles the road ran between a double row of the same huge trees he had seen on the estate. It curved gently to the left as it did so, and about halfway along, it became noticeably wider. At that point two side roads ran into it, and Blade thought he saw the dim bulks of other unlighted mansions sprawling across hilltops at the ends of both roads. Unlighted. Were they also untenanted, like the first one? Had they also been abandoned for years or even generations to the weather and the vegetation? It was a bad sign if they were. He must be within a mile of the river, practically in the suburbs of the city. What kind of people would let land within easy walking distance of their city slip untidily back into wilderness? A people who shut themselves in might make for an unpleasant encounter.

He toyed with the idea of turning aside into one of the mansions. If he found it deserted, he could spend the night there and approach the city in the morning. People anywhere were less likely to have a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy in broad daylight. But as he toyed with the idea, the road made a sharp bend, and he found himself turning onto a section that ran straight and level and nearly a hundred feet wide toward the river and the city.

It was as overgrown as all the previous stretches of road he had followed, and the bushes and grass on either side were wild and rank. Blade's heart sank. For the first time a gnawing suspicion about the city and its people crept into his mind. In a fleeting moment of moonlight he saw something gleaming amid the tangled thistles and rotting leaves that covered the roadway some fifty feet ahead. He ran forward and bent to look at it.

A human skeleton lay in the weeds, almost bare of flesh but still clothed in a kiltlike garment of green cloth and plastic sandals. Although faded and stained by weather and mold, the garments showed no signs of decay. Blade tried to rip off a sample of the kilt, but found it like trying to tear heavy canvas.

He looked down at the corpse again, then down the road toward the river and the city. He could see the towers looming in the darkness, even without the help of the moon. How long had the body been here? The clothing was undecayed; was it just incredibly tough, or had the body come here only recently? And if so, how? Blade wished once again that he had a weapon of some sort. Then it occurred to him that if his growing suspicions were correct, he probably would not need one. But it was with a slower and more cautious step that he moved forward into the darkness, looking about in all directions and also down at the road, searching for more skeletons. He was so intent on being alert against possible dangers that he was at the near end of the bridge that crossed the river almost before he realized it. He stopped and looked up across the river and toward the city.

As he did so, the moon once again came to his rescue. A ragged hole opened in the overcast and silver light flowed down, again breaking the darkness. Blade took a good look at the city in the moonlight and heaved a sigh of relief. His suspicions had been correct.

There would be no danger to fear from the inhabitants of the city. It had none. The cold light of the moon was pouring down on a city as lifeless and abandoned as the mansion on the hill.

Chapter Four

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There was no doubt about it—the city was dead. Blade surveyed it carefully, noting details. Broken windows stared emptily. One of the high walkways connecting two towers sagged in the middle. The bridge ahead of him was littered with debris—metal panels peeling off the high towers from bad weather, chunks of unidentifiable material resembling plastic, wheels, rods, and odd boxes that had perhaps once been part of vehicles. The inevitable purple thistles sprouted from the cracked pavement and sidewalks. Beyond the bridge the whole rank of buildings along the riverbank, nearly two miles of buildings that must have once risen ten and fifteen stories, lay in piles of rubble. Only an occasional hollow-eyed wall rose free.

Blade shook his head and frowned. Had the computer finally sent him into a dimension completely empty of human life? No, there was that skeleton on the road. And unless he was mistaken, there were other skeletons gleaming whitely amid the dark thistle leaves on the bridge. There were other people in this dimension—human, as far as he could tell from the skeletons. And he strongly suspected that the first skeleton had come to its final resting place long after the city had been abandoned. Was there some life still lurking in the ruins, or were the skeletons wanderers drifting in from somewhere else and dying by accident, starvation, or disease? Had the city been depopulated by a plague, a plague that perhaps still lingered in the ruins?

Blade strode out onto the bridge. At least out here on the broad roadway nothing could come at him unexpectedly. Halfway across, the moon vanished again, but not before he had spotted a long metal bar lying on the road. He picked it up and hefted it, testing its weight and balance. It weighed more than five pounds, and it was thicker at one end than at the other. He found after a few trial swings that he could handle it as an improvised mace. Not that improvised medieval weapons would help him very much if any people he ran into had weapons as advanced as their city. But if their civilization had collapsed and the survivors had descended into barbarism, he would be far from helpless. Feeling a little less like a mouse, though not yet like a lion—perhaps a fox—now he stalked forward again, using the mace to probe ahead in the darkness and test the footing. He had no desire to step through an unseen hole in the roadway and drop a hundred feet to the liver below.

He passed two more skeletons. Both were completely fleshless, but again their garments and footgear showed no signs of decay. In addition to the sandals and kilt, one of them wore a sleeveless tunic with a V neck and a large embroidered patch on the right side of the chest. Blade bent down to try to make out the patch, and as he did so, he caught sight of a fourth body, lying half-hidden in a particularly rank growth of thistles a few yards farther on.

This was a body, not a skeleton. In the darkness Blade could not tell for sure how long it had been there, but a quick sniff indicated no decay. He doubted it could be more than twenty-four hours old. This body was also clad in sandals, tunic, and kilt, but the tunic was encrusted with soot, sweat, and grease, as well as blood from the gaping wound in the man's side.

Blade sprang to his feet, hand gripping the mace and eyes probing along the bridge in both directions. Somebody did indeed live in the city—or at least prowled it and killed in it. He bent again to examine the body more closely.

It was the body of a man in his thirties, at a rough guess, but Blade knew that in the darkness all his guesses would be very rough indeed. The dead man wore a full beard, and his hair reached his shoulders. Both beard and hair were ragged and greasy. The man's skin was so coated with soot and grease that it was impossible to tell its color. He looked lean, like a track runner, but not emaciated. There was no sign of weapons or gear on or near him.

Now Blade realized that he would have no need to fear advanced weapons. Whoever the people living in the city or at least roaming about in it might be, they had sunk far into barbarism. Which did not make them less dangerous. Far from it. Primitive peoples were even more likely than civilized ones to believe that stranger equals enemy and react accordingly. He would have to approach even more cautiously. And finding anything worth bringing home in this dimension would be a matter of luck. He stood up and as he did so; he saw lights moving amid the ruins along the riverbank.

He counted five of them moving toward him in an irregularly spaced line across the ruins. They bobbed up and down as though their bearers were stumbling and lurching across the mounds of rubble. All shone with a flickering, yellowish glow that to Blade suggested hand-carried torches. He could not yet make out what or who carried them. But he did not wish to be detected prematurely. He lay flat on the roadway behind a thick clump of the thistles, gripped his mace, and waited.

In a minute four more torches joined the original five, two at either end of the line. The new arrivals appeared to be moving inward so that all nine would form a semicircle opening toward the river and the bridge. A moment later Blade saw movement among the piles of debris that spilled onto the far end of the bridge. Two more torches flared in the darkness, and then shrill screams rose in the wind, followed by savage howls of triumph.

What was happening up ahead might be perfectly right and proper, but Blade doubted it. In any case, he wasn't going to assume anything without taking a closer look. He rose from cover and sidled forward in a half-crouch, keeping low and hopefully invisible in the darkness until he was within fifty feet of the end of the bridge. In the area of yellow light thrown out on the rubble-strewn ground by the torches, he could see clearly what was happening.

There were eighteen men in the semicircle facing the river, nine of them holding torches and the other nine holding long pointed metal rods, spear-fashion. All eighteen had the dirty, shaggy look of the last body Blade had found. Some wore the full tunic-kilt outfit, some only the kilt, and a couple were barefoot and wore only ragged loincloths. All eighteen had their eyes turned inward, riveted on the five people in the middle of the semicircle, who seemed to be held there by fear-paralyzed limbs and the threat of the uplifted spears around them.

The five wore full tunics with embroidered patches, kilts with large pouches hanging from black metal link belts, and sandals. Two of them seemed to be women, judging by their long hair, and they also wore broad-rimmed hats. The three men were clean-shaven and short-haired. The clothes of all five were spotless except for dust they had picked up in their frantic scramble over the rubble in the flight from their pursuers. There was no sign of weapons on any of them. The hands they raised to their enemies, clasping and unclasping in agonies of fright, were empty and clean.

Before Blade could see more, the armed men in the semicircle made their move. The ones carrying torches jabbed them into crevices in the piles of rubble to keep them upright and burning. Then they drew efficient if clumsy-looking swords from cloth scabbards on their belts and advanced toward the cowering captives. The men with the spears hefted their weapons in both hands, holding them high with points slightly down, ready to either stab or throw. Blade began to wonder just how barbaric the bearded men were. They seemed to have developed fairly sophisticated tactics and weapon techniques.

One of the swordsmen was almost within striking distance of the five. The captives were looking at him like birds charmed by a snake. Blade wondered if they were drugged, feeble-minded, or just too frightened to defend themselves. Five people, even in such a situation, should have had some way of at least taking a few of their enemies with them. But these five were apparently going to sit there and let themselves be butchered like the proverbial stalled ox. Blade wondered if there was any point in trying to help people so obviously incapable of helping themselves.

Then the lead swordsman took the extra step needed to bring him within striking distance and swung his sword at the nearest of the five. Not with the edge but with the flat of the blade. The man tried to duck at the last split second, but he was too late. The flashing metal smashed into his head with a whunk clearly audible to Blade, and the man sprawled on the ground.

As if the first blow had been a signal, other swordsmen now leaped forward, their swords glinting in the torchlight. The other two men crumpled. Then the first swordsman reached down, grabbed one of the women by her hair, and jerked her to her feet. One of the others reached for her belt, hands fumbling at the clasp, and jerked it and her kilt off in one motion. There was suddenly a sour taste in Blade's mouth and stomach. He knew he wasn't going to crouch in the shadows and the thistles and watch mass rape no matter who the "good guys" might be. He began a stealthy creep forward as the men stripped the remaining garments from the woman and threw her to the ground. Blade knew he would not be able to do much beyond creating a diversion to enable the woman to get away. But that should be possible with surprise on his side.

But suddenly his chances of taking them by surprise vanished as the second woman broke from her trance, leaped to her feet, and dashed straight toward him. As she plunged out onto the bridge, she

caught sight of Blade flattening himself in the thistles. In an instant she stopped dead, let out a wild scream of terror, and before Blade could shout or move to stop her, she dashed to the edge of the bridge and threw herself off. The warriors, turning at the sound of the scream and staring at the woman, also caught sight of Blade. He saw two of them raise their spears as the leader, who had been about to fall on the first woman, sprang to his feet and turned toward the bridge.

Blade knew that his only chance now was to get to close quarters before the spearmen could turn him into a porcupine, then rely on his superior strength and skill. He sprang to his feet and charged straight at the leader, whirling his mace around his head so that it was a gilded blur in the torchlight, screaming at the top of his lungs. The leader took one tremendous leap backward, putting himself beyond the range of Blade's savage swing. One of the other men standing over the woman wasn't so lucky. Blade's mace smashed into his temple, and he flew through the air and landed six feet from where he took off. His companion swung his sword up in a flashing arc, but Blade knocked it out of his hand with one swing of the mace and smashed in his forehead on the return swing.

For a moment the other swordsmen backed off from Blade, and the spearmen had a clear shot at him. But the spearmen were unnerved by his size and ferocity and the speed with which he had killed two of the swordsmen. And his leaping, whirling figure made a poor target in the flickering torchlight. He felt spears dart past his body and legs and heard them bang metallically on the road. Then he bellowed, "Run, you fool!" to the nude woman on the ground. Without waiting to see whether she obeyed or even heard him, he charged the spearmen, mace still whirling in one hand, a sword snatched up from one of his victims now flashing in the other.

The first swordsman came at him, sword held low for a thrust. Blade smashed down the man's feeble guard with the mace, then sliced the man's numbed hand from its arm with the sword. A spearman followed, holding his spear sideways, like a quarterstaff, ready to block or strike. But he was not fast enough to deal with Blade, who thrust with his sword to bring the spear down, then struck overhead with the mace to shatter the man's collarbone.

Behind him Blade heard a voice bellow, "Break left, break right, pick them up!" and the semicircle of armed men disintegrated. Two men grabbed each of the victims on the ground and carried them off. It was not a rout, not a panic flight of broken and routed men, but an orderly retreat of trained men responding to orders. In minutes the fourteen surviving warriors and their victims had vanished as completely as if they had never existed. The only sign that anything unusual had disturbed the sleep of the empty city was the four dead bodies lying on the rubble. The woman was nowhere to be found; Blade hoped she had run away and had not been carried off by her attackers or been driven to follow her friend into the river.

Blade had no idea of where he could find a safe place in this city. There might not be any such thing if these marauders roamed freely all over it. Perhaps his wisest course was to leave the city entirely, abandoning it to the marauders for good. But his curiosity was aroused. Obviously, there were at least two kinds of people in the city, the marauders and their well-dressed opponents. The marauders seemed to be first-class well-disciplined fighters. Their victims had no more notion of how to fight than pigs have of computer programming. But if anybody represented a higher form of civilization around there, it was the victims. Possibly their civilization was no longer as advanced as it had been when the city was built, but it appeared to be more advanced than that of the marauders. And considerably more decadent, too, judging from their helplessness.

A sudden rumble of thunder reminded Blade that he was not doing himself any good by standing there in the open and the cold, exposed to chance spears and passing showers. He would have to get to shelter and then worry about finding answers to the mystery of the city.

But first, some clothing. Ignoring the blood, he began stripping the tunics and kilts from his victims and trying them on for size. He couldn't even get into the first two sets, but the third was a tolerable fit. Sandals on his feet completed the outfit, and a spear completed his weaponry. Then he scrambled up the rubble and began looking for a building that was reasonably intact. The darkness already seemed thicker than before, and it was becoming more difficult to make things out. Another rumble of thunder, louder than the first, indicated that the storm was moving in.

About three Home Dimension blocks away a relatively undamaged building rose a desolate twenty stories above the piled rubble at its base. It looked like the best prospect within easy reach, and time and weather were pressing. Blade began a lurching, scrambling advance toward the building, over the treacherous heaps of debris.

It was a long and bruising struggle across the wide expanse of wreckage along the riverbank, but finally Blade scrambled down the last slope into comparatively open street. The main door of the building was half-blocked by the spilled and heaped fragments of its former neighbors. But Blade scrambled in over the twisted metal and chunks of stone and plastic into what must have once been a lobby. A sudden flash of lightning sent light glaring in through the high windows fifty feet above ground level, lighting up an even higher vaulted ceiling, which was grimed with generations of dust. The glare also revealed the entrance to a flight of stairs leading downward. Blade was about to step past them and look for a flight upward; he had no desire to be trapped in a cellar by a band of the marauders. But as he passed the head of the stairs, he felt an unmistakable current of warm air flowing up out of the stairwell. In the dank lifeless chill of the building it was as unmistakable and as startling as a slap in the face.

Blade sniffed the air. No sign of smoke. Probably not the marauders, then. A fire large enough to produce that much heat would have been pouring out clouds of smoke. But he headed down the stairs, ready with sword and spear in his hands and mace in his belt.

The stairs went down three full flights, each of twenty broad stone steps. The steps were padded with accumulated dust that puffed up in clouds from under Blade's sandals and made him sneeze and cough in spite of his desperate efforts to keep quiet. The noise reverberated in the stairwell, filling the gaps between the thunderclaps that were now coming more and more frequently. As he descended farther, he became aware that the darkness was giving way to a faint but unmistakable pinkish light and that the air was definitely getting warmer. A moment later the spear he had been gently scraping along the right-hand wall thrust out into empty air. With both weapons ready and all senses keyed up to the limit, he slipped around the corner.

He was at one end of a vaulted corridor stretching into the pink-tinged gloom. The ceiling, covered with red tile, rose to three times Blade's height. Along the walls at intervals of forty-odd feet were circular recesses. As Blade stepped cautiously out into the corridor, he saw that in each recess was a featureless circular metal door about six feet in diameter.

The floor of the corridor was deeply coated with dust, but the air was so warm that Blade knew there must be a major heat source somewhere. An artificial heat source, almost certainly, and that meant civilized people. Did they all lurk underground and leave the surface to the marauding barbarians? Did these vaultlike metal doors lead to their living quarters? At any rate, there did not seem to be any immediate danger, so Blade felt safe enough to strip off his clothes and let the warmth bake the night's chill out of his naked body.

Suddenly a faint click floated down the corridor to Blade's ears, sounding as loud as an explosion in the dusty stillness of the corridor. Blade started and looked down the corridor—then hefted his weapons.

With a faint whispering of long-unused machinery, the door of one of the vaults was slowly swinging open.

Chapter Five

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Short of ducking back up the stairs, there was only one hiding place that Blade could see in the long corridor. Behind the opening door itself. He plunged down the corridor and dove behind the foot-thick disk of metal just as it swung fully open. Peering out from behind it, Blade saw a girl step out into the corridor.

She wore the customary sandals and kilt, in a green so dark that it looked almost black in the dim light. Her hair was unbound and flowed down her back, like a black waterfall. She was carrying her tunic over her arm and wore nothing above the waist except a silver-glinting chain around her slim throat. As she turned to survey the corridor, Blade could not help admiring the high, firm, youthful breasts and the trim, flat stomach. But she was a living representative of the people who presumably had built the city. He had to talk to her. Carefully laying his weapons down on the floor, he stepped out into the open, hands spread wide in a conciliatory gesture.

She started and her eyes went wide as she saw him, but she made no sound or any move to run. In fact, as her eyes went over him, there was a probing, even admiring look in them.

Then she smiled and said, "It is your Waking time, too? Where are you from?"

"My name is Blade. I am not from this basement ..." he gestured around the corridor, wondering if he had hit on the right word "... but from elsewhere."

Even with his automatic command of the local language (a gift from the computer and its alterations to his brain), even with this woman's apparently civilized background, this was not the time to explain how he had come from another dimension. Changing the subject, he asked, "What is your name?"

"Narlana," she answered. Then with a smile she said, "You must have already been moving about in Pura. Tell me, how is it now?"

Blade could not help hesitating. How could she not know what had happened to the city above her head? And if she did not know, how could he tell her that the city lay in ruins and that marauding bands of armed barbarians stalked through those ruins, preying on those of her people bold enough to venture out on to the surface?

Fortunately, he did not have to face the problem at once. Her mobile lips curved upward in a warm smile. "Never mind that for now. Come into my vault with me while I take my tests." Blade could not help observing that her manner had become noticeably friendlier once she had completed her inspection of his nude body. He decided against taking up his weapons; so far she had accepted him as one of her own people. But displaying his array of marauder weapons might make her change her mind. He followed her into the vault and helped her close the door behind them.

Moments after entering it, Blade knew that his hopes of finding an advanced civilization had been realized. Or at least an advanced technology, he corrected himself; the two were not necessarily the same.

The interior of the vault was about the same size as a large studio apartment. But the walls from the soft, fur-covered floor up to the low, blue-enameled ceiling were almost completely covered with a maze of tubing and cylindrical reservoirs and with squarish metal boxes in a variety of colors at irregular intervals. Some of the boxes had conspicuous dials and lights on their sides. In one corner stood something large. It looked like a mummy case and was mounted on a gimbaled pedestal to give it movement in three directions. There were controls set into the cover, and both halves were lined with maroon plush contoured into a shape very much like the girl's body.

Squarely in the center of the chamber stood an upright cylindrical chamber, apparently of glass, with a vertical section on one side that swung open on almost invisible hinges. The cylinder was filled with some sort of thick gaseous substance, Blade could see its green gray coils writhing and twisting as he watched. But it could hardly be any ordinary gas, for although the door to the cylinder stood wide open, not a single wisp seemed to be escaping into the vault. Blade thought he could see vague hints of dangling wires and straps inside, half-revealed by the eddying and flowing of the gas.

Meanwhile, Narlena had stripped off her clothes and climbed naked into the mummy case. She pressed one of the controls set in the cover, and the cover swung silently closed. For a moment Blade stared uncertainly at its featureless, silvery metal surface. Then a faint hissing filled the chamber. Blade saw a thinner, reddish gas being pumped into the mummy case through a transparent length of tubing. The hissing lasted for perhaps a minute.

Then the lights and dials on the metal boxes along the wall lit up, some of them flashing on and off, while needles wobbled and jerked across dials. Some sort of monitoring process was going on—Narlena's "tests." Obviously, both the mummy case and the boxes on the wall were part of it. Blade was reminded of films he had seen of medical data on astronauts in space.

The light show went on for perhaps another five minutes; then all the lights and dials went dark simultaneously. The hissing sound began again as the reddish gas was drawn back out of the mummy case through the same tube. The cover swung back, and Narlena stepped out into the vault, a contented look on her face. She sat down on the fur that covered the floor, folded herself gracefully into the lotus position, and looked up at Blade with curiosity, as well as admiration.

"Who are you, Blade?" Her voice was casual, with hardly more concern for his answer than a bus conductor saying, "Fare, please." One would have thought she was as accustomed to entertaining nude male guests as a Home Dimension hostess might be to having cocktail parties. No, that was not quite correct, thought Blade. Once again he noticed the look in her eyes as they strayed over his massive physique, more than occasionally focusing on his genitals. Obviously, Narlena was physically interested in him.

He decided to tell her the truth about himself. "I am not from your world at all, Narlena. I am from another dimension, and I came here because a computer was attached to my brain and altered it so that I can now see and sense your dimension and speak your language."

"A lakhyr was attached to your brain? Oh, that is wonderful! Then your people also must have the Dreams. You will be very much at home here in Pura." She seemed almost about to clap her hands for joy. Then her face fell. "But I do not know if there is an empty vault in working condition for you. Even if there is, I do not know how to set one for anybody but myself. We would have to find a vault master who can analyze any person and adjust a vault for him so that he can have the kind of Dreams he wants most of all. But there are not very many of the vault masters, and we would have to find one of them Waking. I am afraid you will have a long Waking. But there are things we can do during the Waking."

There was a mischievous glint in her eye as she said the last sentence.

Blade nodded absently. His mind was divided between relief at the casual way she had accepted his tale of coming from another dimension and mystification at her constant talk of Dreams and vaults and Waking. Obviously, these had some key role in her society—or in what her society had become. Although Blade had his suspicions, he wanted to learn more precisely what she was talking about.

He shook his head, as if in bewilderment—and he was not entirely faking the bewilderment, either. He said, "Narlana, in my dimension we do not have Dreams. I use the computer only to travel between dimensions. When I am at home, I am waking all the time, except when I am sleeping naturally." He wondered if that would make any sense to her. It hinged on the accuracy of his guesswork about the nature of Dreams and Waking.

Apparently his guess had been right. Narlana shook her head in sadness and said, "So you have nothing but the Little Dream that is written about in our old books? The ones that show the time before we discovered the real Dreams and how to have them all the time except when we Wake for our tests?"

Blade was beginning to have some vague glimmering of what Narlana was talking about. But her brief speech still sounded strange, as though every third word were in a language he did not understand. Continuing to look bewildered and mystified he said, "Narlana, I do not understand. You seem to be sorry for me and my people because we only have what you call the Little Dream. How is that different from the real Dream that you say your people have?"

Narlana's voice took on an indignant edge. "I do not just say my people have the real Dream—we do! For a hundred years and more, almost two hundred, in fact, we have had them whenever we wanted. Since the Wakers began taking over, a hundred years ago, we have all been Dreaming all the time except for when we also Wake to take our tests. It is the greatest achievement of our people." There was a note of defiance forced into that last sentence, which made Blade wonder if she really believed what she said.

He still did not entirely understand what she was saying, but now only one out of every four or five words was unintelligible, and the glimmerings of understanding were brightening. If by the Wakers she meant the roving marauders that now ruled the city above, he thought he had a fairly clear picture of what she was talking about. And also a picture of the catastrophe that had befallen her people, a catastrophe brought upon them by their own mastery of science.

But Narlana was looking at him again the way she had earlier, speculatively, curiously. Her eyes caressed him, and her body moved involuntarily with a gentle swaying motion. She—and how many other of her people?—still had a yearning to experience a physical reality during their Wakings. Endless years of Dreaming couldn't provide everything.

He grinned broadly at the thought. Narlana interpreted this as a welcoming grin. She rose from her lotus position in a single graceful motion, walked over to him, and stood looking down at him. Then she flowed down onto him. Her nimble fingers began stroking and caressing him, occasionally drifting downward toward his genitals.

Even if there had been any reason for Blade to hold back his arousal, he would have found it almost impossible to do so. Those small hands were maddeningly skilled and maddeningly arousing as they did their gentle dance along his neck, down his back, across his chest and stomach, and then between his legs. He became fully, massively erect.

Now his own hands began tracing their own pattern on her limber body. They traced each joint of her

spine under the petal-smooth skin of her back, cupped the firm buttocks, and wandered over the smooth, glistening thighs to the blue black pubic triangle, already turning damp as her arousal mounted in time with his. Then his hands moved upward, over the flat belly, and his palms rose up under the small, firm breasts, feeling the nipples harden into stiff little rods, hearing her moan, and seeing her bite her lip and begin a slow writhing. Still writhing, she lifted herself and lowered herself down onto his upstanding organ, enveloping it in her slick, almost dripping canal. She stiffened as he entered her and began a slow up-and-down motion, lifting herself slightly with her hands pressing down on his thighs.

Her movements were slow and steady at first, but they quickened as she pushed herself faster and faster toward climax. She could hardly have been more absorbed in her own pleasure if Blade had not been there at all. Her eyes were closed and only flickered open briefly when he put his arms around her and began using his muscular arms and shoulders to help her rise and fall. Her control slipped away. Her hands ceased their pushing and began a frantic and uncontrolled drumming on his skin.

She climaxed, jerking and writhing uncontrollably in rapid succession. Then she sagged in Blade's arms. No longer worried about his endurance or her satisfaction he kept raising and lowering her until his own fierce pulsing came.

His throat dry and chest heaving, he lowered the inert Narlena to the floor and lay down beside her for a moment. Then he opened the vault door, went out to retrieve his weapons, closed the door behind him, and lay back down. For the time being he had reached as much comfort and safety as he seemed likely to get in this dimension. Before going out again, he would have to get Narlena to fill in all the blank spaces in his picture of what had happened and was happening in the city of Pura. But he could do that just as well after they had slept. It was time for a Little Dream, he thought with a wry grin that stayed on his face as he dozed off.

Chapter Six

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Blade and Narlena slept snuggled against each other on the fur-covered floor of her vault. When they awoke, many hours later, Blade knew that in the city above it must be well into morning. But as much as he wished to see and explore Pura by daylight, he wished even more to explore the mystery of its people and their Dreams. Narlena was willing enough to talk, and Blade was more than willing to listen to the long answers she gave to his brief questions. In a surprisingly short time all the gaps were filled in, and he had a complete picture of the fate of Narlena's people, at least as she understood it. While they were talking, Narlena produced breakfast by pressing a button in what she called a food-maker and served the result. The soft, sweet, crumbly breadlike cake and the almost tasteless liquid were blatantly synthetic and depressingly dull.

Some five hundred years before, the people of Pura had discovered the basic art of stimulating the senses by using direct brain-computer links. Blade wondered if in the process of discovering this art and learning to control it, they had sent any unsuspecting subjects off into other dimensions. But they had learned to control the linkages bit by bit, and that had been the foundation for Pura's greatest—and last—achievement.

About two hundred years before, they had discovered the methods of recording and simulating specific sets of sensations. Soon it became possible to put these sensations together into complete stories, which were incredibly complex and totally realistic as long as one was hooked up. They could satisfy any possible or impossible fantasy that one could harbor in one's waking mind.

But even then Pura was not doomed. No matter how much of one's sleeping hours one spent Dreaming, one still had to spend a certain amount of time awake for eating, washing, exercising, and generally carrying out the necessary business of staying alive. Even those wealthy enough not to need jobs could not spend all their time Dreaming.

Then somebody invented the life-sustaining gas and all the life-support equipment that went with it. It became possible to spend years on end in the Dreams; the periods of Waking were reduced to only a few days to "test" one's body for signs of physical deterioration.

Within a few years everybody was working just enough to be able to spend the rest of the time Dreaming. A man would work six months, then go to a public Dream House, climb into a vault, and for the next six months be a wandering minstrel or knight from the city's ancient history or travel among the stars as one might in the far future. The only people who had to work all the time were the Dream-builders, who developed and recorded new Dreams, the vault masters who prepared the vaults, and the life-support technicians, who maintained and improved the machinery that kept the Dreamers alive and healthy.

Pura had been wealthy, and few if any had ever gone hungry or homeless. But nearly two-thirds of the city's population could scrape together enough money for only an occasional Dream session, no matter how hard they worked. They resented this. As the wealthy slipped more and more into their Dream worlds and cared less and less about running Pura, the poor became discontented, even violent. The security forces were enlarged, and their salaries were increased to handle this threat. But as soon as the security troops had enough money to become full-time Dreamers, the city was left to the gangs that were beginning to be known as Wakers.

Within a single generation Pura had sunk from a flourishing city to a decaying jungle, where men reduced almost to the level of wild animals stalked and slew each other and any Dreamers bold or curious enough to venture out into the real world. Health, transportation, and the food supply broke down—famine and epidemic raged unchecked.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to carry out any major project. Before it became completely impossible, however, the leaders of the Dreamers faced the crisis and came up with what they expected to be a solution. Build Dream vaults, one for each willing and interested person, with life-support equipment, recorded dreams, food, and power to last for centuries. Make the vaults so strong that nothing short of the weapons of the ancient and half-legendary War Period could damage or open them, and put them all over the city. Then each person could climb into his private vault and stay there until the Waker gangs in the city above ate each other up and it was safe to come out. The life-support equipment and power supply had become so reliable that one needed to Wake for one's tests only every twenty years or so.

Not all of the people who could afford private vaults and planned decades of Dreams went along with the scheme, of course. Some packed up as many of their possessions as they could carry and left the city. On foot or in the few vehicles still running, they headed for the south in search of new land and a chance to find a new and better city. These were the bravest of the Purans, but there were not many of them. Even those who did not spend most of their time in Dreams had long since become so completely urbanized that they were like fish out of water in the country beyond. That explained the abandoned villas and also the reaction of the woman, who had preferred suicide to flight across the bridge and out of the city.

Others among the wealthy tried to join the Wakers. Many of them were killed; the hatred of Wakers for

Dreamers was intense. But some had survived, and according to what Narlena had heard, their descendants were often among the leaders of the Wakers. Blade wondered if that was the explanation behind the discipline and skill of the Wakers he had seen in action on the bridge.

However, tens of thousands of Purans had elected to lock themselves in their Dream vaults with the automatic timing devices set to Wake them at intervals of twenty years until the chaos in Pura had died. They had entered their Dream worlds, confident that in one or at most two Dream cycles the city would be theirs again.

That had been nearly a century and five Dream cycles ago. Each time the Dreamers wandered, half-dazed, out of their vaults to see what had become of Pura, they found it still overrun by bands of Wakers. Worse, those gangs preyed on the Dreamers as viciously as ever, killing some, enslaving others, looting any vault they found open. Over the century, many thousands of Dreamers had been killed or enslaved. Each time their Waking came, there were fewer of them, and those bold enough to go out onto the surface were in greater danger than before. Eventually, Narlena said, swallowing, her face set hard and white as she spoke, the marconite crystals in the vaults would be exhausted and the life-support systems would fail. Then the Dreamers would have to awake to face the Wakers, or if they were lucky, die in their sleep.

"What is marconite?" Blade asked Narlena. That was something she hadn't mentioned before, but she made it sound vital to the survival of the Dreamers and their vaults.

"Your people do not have it?"

"Would I ask you if we did? What is it? You say that it comes in crystals?"

Instead of answering directly, she went over to one wall and opened a small orange panel. Behind the panel lay a small enamel-walled niche, lit by a bluish-tinged lamp that went on automatically as Narlena opened the panel. Blade could see that most of the niche was filled with four milky-white cylindrical capsules, about the size of beer bottles and made of something that looked like plastic with crystalline striations running through it. Each capsule stood on a metal base, and from the upper end of each one, two thick black wires ran back into the wall. Narlena pointed at the capsules and said, "That is the marconite for my vault. Each of the vaults started out with forty capsules. I change them each time I Wake."

Blade stared. He could not have kept his excitement concealed if he had wanted to. Those white crystalline capsules were the sole power source for everything in this vault for a period of twenty years! A method of energy storage—or perhaps energy generation?—that made the most far-out experimental notions in Home Dimension look like kindergarten toys. He recalled the submarine that he and Annie had seen surfacing in the channel. With half a dozen capsules of marconite crystals wired to its electric motors, it could achieve the same endurance as an atomic submarine at a fraction of the cost, space, and weight. But that was only the beginning of the possibilities that would be open to England if he could bring back a sample of marconite—and if England's scientists could find the secret of the marconite and a way of duplicating it. Energy supply was the stumbling block that had crushed all hopes of hurling English technology decades ahead to Dimension X technology. Sooner or later, however, one of Blade's samples would yield its secrets, and then Project Dimension X would have repaid its cost a hundred times over.

But Home Dimension's problems were in Home Dimension, and Blade was here in Narlena's Dream vault in a basement in Pura. He knew that if he did not want to face the alternatives of either fleeing into the countryside or living a hunted existence in the city, constantly on the watch for Waker bands, he was going to have to find more allies among the Dreamers. There would certainly be a good many of them up

and around, and more than usual this year, since a Dream cycle was ending. But could he get to them before the Wakers picked them off or they recoiled in horror from the spectacle of their ravaged city and retreated to their vaults? He would need Narlena's help for that. And how could he explain to this woman, who apparently saw the goal of life as longer and better Dreams, that her way of life was bringing her and her city to destruction? She—and hopefully others—recognized that there was danger. But did any of them recognize how great it was? If the Wakers ever began a systematic campaign to sweep up the Dreamers as fast as they crept out of their vaults, the Dreamers would be decimated long before the marconite ran out. Barbarism would plague Para for centuries to come, until the Wakers painfully pieced together and applied all the knowledge that had died with the Dreamers.

Blade was a hard, practical man of action, not a professional or even an amateur do-gooder. But ever since his stay in Royth and his efforts to save it from the pirates, he had been particularly aware of how much he might do for and learn from the people he traveled among. He was only one man, but he was an intelligent and well-trained one. More often than not he could see a people's crisis, from an angle that they themselves had not considered. Often he had some skill that they needed. So now he looked for occasions to help, as well as for things to learn or take.

Of course, it was inevitable that he would become deeply involved in whatever crisis was facing his hosts—and in the battle, murder, sudden death, and court intrigues that went along with them. And he had to watch his step not only to stay alive but also to make sure that he was really aiding the "better" side, if not a "good" one. This meant developing an ability to quickly size up crises affecting a whole society. Blade occasionally found ironic amusement in the fact that he seemed to have been turned by circumstances into an amateur sociologist. But he had always been willing to develop any skill that might help him in his work, however peculiar that skill might seem. He was a professional, had always been one, would always be one. Now he was going to apply those professional skills to the problem of awakening the Dreamers of Pura and permanently putting to sleep as many Wakers as possible. The situation in Pura, however, did not require that much in the way of analysis. A one-eyed man could have reached the same conclusions as Blade. The problem was that all the Purans seemed to be blind.

He turned to Narlena, ready to fire a few pointed questions at her, but found her wriggling toward him across the fur. Then she was on his lap, her arms going around his neck and her lips coming up to meet his. He bent to embrace her and support her. There would be time enough later for all the arguments he would need to convince her to help him. He wondered how many he would have to use.

Chapter Seven

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While drifting off to sleep after their lovemaking, Blade hit on what seemed a good way of showing Narlena what was happening to her city and her people: take her out into the city, through it, even out into the country if possible. The Dreamers who wandered around most freely during their Wakings apparently only went out at night. Did their long years in the vaults make them light-sensitive, or was it psychological? Did the darkness make it possible for them to continue living in a lesser sort of Dream world, even during their Waking? Perhaps. But it certainly made them easier prey for the night-prowling Wakers. Blade knew that if he could get just a few thousand—or possibly even a few hundred—of the Dreamers organized and willing to move by day, he would have a powerful force to hurl against the Wakers.

To move, and also to fight by day. Teaching them to fight would be an even knottier problem than persuading the Dreamers to give up their shelter of darkness. He had already asked Narlena why the

mobs of the poor had been able to make such rapid progress against the security troops. Didn't the security troops have much better weapons? Hardly, she had replied—there had been no wars in Pura for centuries. The art of making any weapons more advanced than clubs and swords and spears was gone, although there were books and tapes in the secret libraries of the scholars. And the people of Pura had hoped that with the weapons, the knowledge of war and violence had also vanished into history and legend. Blade laughed grimly at that. He had pointed out that people are quite willing to fight and quite able to kill if they think there is something worth fighting over—as the Wakers obviously did. Obviously, that point had never occurred to Narlena. Blade saw the smile vanish from her face and a thoughtful expression replace it.

But giving back to the Dreamers the ability to fight for their city was not the immediate problem. At the moment there was only one Dreamer who knew and trusted him, and he would have to work on her before she would help him seek out other Dreamers. With this before him, Blade drifted off to sleep.

After breakfast the next morning Blade checked his weapons while Narlena tried to find better clothes for him. None of hers would even remotely fit him; he was a foot taller than she and proportionately broader. Eventually he went out into the morning, not much better-dressed than he had been when he came into the cellar two nights before. He wore one of her kilts, sliced into two pieces and wrapped around his waist, as an improvised loincloth and two of her tunics roughly tied together as an equally improvised cloak. More strips cut from yet a third tunic bound his feet. Blade knew that he looked more like a stage beggar than a warrior, but at least this raggle-taggle outfit would help keep the wind out and the dust off.

When he reached the surface after clambering over the pile of rubble in front of the door to stand in the street, there was neither dust nor wind. The storm that had driven him into the shelter of Narlena's building had deposited the dust so, that the abandoned buildings and even the scattered and piled rubble had a fresh, clean look in the morning light. And the air in the street was as still as it had been in the cellar. A faint undertone of coolness told of a chilly night just ended and of one yet to come. Climbing the pile of rubble, Blade saw that all signs of the first night's battle were gone. Then he scrambled back down, reentered the building, and descended the stairs to Narlena's vault.

Narlena was still nude. She stretched catlike when she saw him and giggled at his appearance. "Anyone who sees you, you will not need to fight them. They will be laughing so hard, they will not be able to do anything to you."

"Possibly. But I prefer to rely on these." He hefted his spear and sword. "The Wakers are not just enemies in a Dream. They are real, and if we meet any we will need real weapons to kill them."

Narlena caught his use of the word "we." The gaiety vanished from her face and voice. "You want me to go out with you? In the daylight? Why?"

"To see the real world, Narlena. To see it and feel it, without being afraid of the Wakers. They sleep by day. You told me so yourself." He was speaking in short, simple sentences, keeping his voice low, as if he were trying to reassure a frightened child. And Narlena looked like one, that was for sure. She was pale; her lower lip trembling in spite of the efforts she was obviously making to control it, her hands clenched. The thought of being out in the real world under the light of day apparently frightened her more than the danger—even the near certainty of encountering Wakers by night.

"No," she said in a voice that was nearly a moan. "No. I can't. You—what are your people like, that they do not fear the light?"

"We do not Dream, Narlena. I have told you that before! Your people fear daylight only because you have all Dreamed so much that you have grown weak, weak and silly!" The anger in Blade's voice was not entirely feigned. He reached down, caught her by both arms, and jerked her to her feet. He snatched up her clothes with one hand, holding onto her with the other, and said, "You are going to come with me and look at your city in the daylight. Perhaps then you will see what has happened to it, what your Dreams have done to it!" He scooped her feet out from under her and lifted her in his arms as easily as he might have lifted a child, then strode out of the vault and toward the stairs to the surface.

Narlena lay passive and rigid in his arms as he climbed the stairs and scrambled over the rubble that lay piled across the door. Once outside and facing south, toward the bridge and the open country beyond, Blade lowered her to the ground and stood holding her with his arms crossed over her breasts. He held her tightly, keeping her facing toward the country her people had abandoned in favor of their Dreams.

For several minutes her eyes remained closed and her breathing so shallow that Blade began to wonder if the shock of being dragged out into the feared daylight had done her some real physical harm. Then her breathing grew stronger, and her eyes, after a few preliminary tentative blinks, opened and stared out across the rubble, the overgrown bridge, and the green hills to the blue sky above. He felt her shiver and tremble in his arms.

"There is so—so much to it," she said in a small, uncertain voice.

"What do you mean—so much? This is nothing unusual. I have seen days far more beautiful than this. (He certainly had. An April day at his Cornish cottage, with Zoe laughing beside him in the grass until he bent over and stopped her mobile red lips with a kiss that rapidly moved on to other things, with the scent of grass and lilacs, the distant rumble of the surf on the rocky foreshore . . .) Your Dreams must be very silly if they can't give you anything like this."

"They can't. They don't try to. They give you so much—so much. . . ."

Blade suspected that she was trying to say "more" but couldn't quite manage it. Instead she fell silent, then raised her head and began looking about her. Confident that she could stand by herself, Blade unclasped his arms from around her and stepped back a pace. He let her turn freely in all directions as her eyes roamed about the distant landscape, the sky with its drifting white clouds, and the city all around her. At that point he saw her turn pale again and tremble so hard that for a moment he thought she was going to collapse. Seeing her city in the glare of full daylight with no darkness to soften the harsh outlines of what it had become was something new for her.

She did not fall, but it was several minutes before the trembling stopped. Licking dry lips, she spoke. "What have the Wakers done to Pura?"

"This wasn't the Wakers, most of it," replied Blade. "Most of it was time—all the years when you and your people lay Dreaming in your vaults instead of using the Dreams the way my people would—to rest after finishing all the day's business. The Wakers would never have become so strong or so numerous if you Dreamers hadn't made the way so easy for them."

Narlena shuddered. The idea that her people—and even more, the Dreams, their proudest achievement—were responsible for this desolation was more than she could take in, at least at the rate Blade was throwing it at her. Blade saw this and decided to be quiet for a while, letting his first burst of words work in Narlena's mind. She was a product of her crippled and decadent culture. But Blade thought he detected a lively intelligence under that black hair. At least he was going to assume it was there until he was convinced otherwise. Silently he took her by the hand and led her up the street, away

from the bridge.

They wandered through Pura for several hours, feeling the warmth of the day increase as the sun rose higher and higher. It burned down from a cloudless sky into the windless canyons between the high towers and was reflected from their polished surfaces until it was almost oppressively warm in the streets below. Narlena did not appear to notice it; she still had something of the air of a sleepwalker about her.

They found no living people, either Wakers or Dreamers, but several skeletons of victims or comrades that the Wakers had not managed to carry away. Beside one of them lay a long, beautifully made knife, obviously looted from one of the vaults. Blade picked it up and handed it to Narlena. She took it without comment, but Blade noticed that as her fingers closed around the hilt, the trembling of her hands increased for a moment. Her people had cast away much of their capacity for violence even before they had secluded themselves in their vaults and had lost much of what remained during their century of Dreaming. Not that they were totally unfamiliar with violence—but with the Wakers ruling the night city, they knew it only as victims.

Blade saw a great deal of Pura that afternoon. Their wanderings took them in a wide sweep through the littered streets, past more of the high towers and smaller buildings. They also passed other structures that Blade would not have recognized if Narlena had not gradually shaken off her numbness enough to point out and describe them—or describe them as they had been.

"This was the House of Wisdom," said Narlena. She was pointing at a quartet of red-tinged domes, flaked and cracking, occupying most of a hundred-acre park, now as rank and overgrown as any meadow. One of the domes showed a black cavity where a section fifty feet high had fallen in or been knocked out.

Narlena took a couple of deep breaths and went on, "The House of Wisdom. Where our scholars lived, studied, did their experiments. Where they developed the Dreams and the vaults."

Blade made for a place where half the wall around the park had collapsed, but Narlena grabbed his arm.

"Don't go in there! See that white marking on the wall? That's a Waker gang badge!"

Blade looked to where she pointed, saw three white circles set in an equilateral triangle, staring back at him from the dingy stone. He nodded and stepped back. There was no point in barging into a Waker stronghold, alone except for Narlena. With a band of fifty armed Dreamers at his back it might be another matter—would be another matter, some day soon. Treading as lightly and as softly as he could until they were around a corner and out of sight, he led Narlena away.

When they were out of sight and earshot of anybody lurking in the domes of the House of Wisdom, he stopped and turned to the girl. "Did your scholars leave any of their records in the house before they went into their vaults?"

"Many of them didn't go into the vaults, Blade. Even when that was the only way they could be safe from the Wakers, many of them still stayed in the house. They were killed there, or they died of disease and starvation. There were not many of them in the vaults. It is said that even those who spent one or two cycles in the vaults eventually tried to return to the house. They were killed by Wakers, so there are possibly no scholars left."

"Why did they stay in the house, when they knew they were risking their lives?"

"They—I-I've heard stories. They thought they could find a way to fight the Wakers and stop the Dreamers and—oh, I don't know, don't ask me!" she wailed, then burst into tears.

Blade put his arms around her and held her while she shook and sobbed. Some of the people of Pura had apparently realized the disaster they had brought on their city. They had risked and eventually sacrificed their lives in a last-ditch effort to save it. An unsuccessful one, but it had proved they were not all as blind as Blade had begun to suspect. And even if the scholars themselves had died ...

"Do you know if they left any notes on what they had been doing in the house?"

Narlana jerked her head up and stared at Blade for a long time. Then she bit her quivering lower lip until it was still, and a frown spread over her delicate features, a frown that suggested to Blade she was making a serious effort to remember. Finally she shook her head.

"You don't know? Or they didn't leave any?"

"I don't know. Nobody I talked with during my Wakings has ever been into the house." She stopped for a moment, then said sadly, "Even if the scholars had left material there, wouldn't the Wakers have destroyed it by now?"

"They might have," Blade conceded, "but we can't be sure."

"No," said Narlena slowly. "We can't."

Blade felt like hugging her and cheering out loud. For the first time she was showing signs of interest in doing something about the situation in Pura. She certainly seemed to have adjusted at least partly to being out and about during the daylight that she and her fellow Dreamers had so rigidly shunned for so long.

During the afternoon they wandered on through the streets of Pura, their course taking them slowly back toward the river. They saw no more signs of Waker gang lairs. But they did find occasional abandoned weapons, which Blade collected, and scraps of clothing that had been lying out long enough for even the tough synthetic materials to show signs of wear.

About mid-afternoon they finally reached the river at a point several miles west of the bridge that Blade had used to first enter the city. Here there was another bridge across the rain-swollen river, carrying another rubble-strewn and weed-choked roadway out into the open countryside. And here for the first time in several hours, Narlena cringed and shivered. Blade made no effort to force her across the bridge or even to look across it. For a time he let her turn her head away and bury it against his broad chest. She had come this far already, bit by bit, carefully led by him but drawing to a great degree on her own inner resources. He was sure that she would go the rest of the way if he just gave her time. But they would not have too much time left for exploring the country if she did not nerve herself up for the crossing fairly quickly. The danger they would both be in if darkness caught them outside Narlena's vault was obvious.

But after only a few minutes Narlena forced her gaze back to the green tree-clad hills across the river and said in a pathetically small voice:

"I want to go across." A pointing hand indicated where when her strained voice failed her.

"You're sure?" said Blade, keeping the triumph out of his voice only by a terrific effort.

"I—there's been so much new today—I want to go on, I want to feel—I—" and her emotions simply outran her ability to express herself. Again Blade kept a grin off his face. Bit by bit Narlena was realizing that the Waking world had feelings, beauties, and qualities that no Dream could offer. She was still a long way from preferring the Waking world and even farther from being able to live in it and cope with all its sensations and dangers. But this was a start. Blade took her hand and at a brisk walk, led her out onto the bridge.

Several times during the crossing Narlena's fears flooded back into her mind, and she stopped, trembling, clutching Blade's hand, and sometimes looking desperately from the desolate city to the countryside ahead. Once she looked down into the rushing, murky blue green water of the river far below. That was the only moment when Blade took an extra firm grip on her arm. He remembered the woman fleeing from the battle who had preferred hurling herself to death in the river below to fleeing to at least a temporary safety in the darkened countryside beyond. But the moment passed, and she again began to put one foot slowly in front of another. Eventually they came to the hill on the far side of the river, climbed up it, and looked back down its slope to the river, the bridge, and Pura beyond.

To see the corpse of her city lying there naked in the daylight was almost too much for Narlena's precarious mental balance. Once again Blade saw her cringe, tremble, and cling to him, saw tears start from her wide staring eyes and her lips tremble. But it passed after a few minutes. Then she drew him gently but irresistibly behind a clump of flowering shrubs and then drew him down to the ground, onto the sun-warmed grass amid the hum of insects and the sweet-sour scent of the yellow flowers of the shrubs.

It was well on into twilight before the darkening sky and the insistent clamor of his own empty stomach made Blade sit bolt upright, then spring to his feet, and hastily rouse the sleeping Narlena. Night was moving in on Pura, and they had more than three miles to go before reaching the safety of her vault. It was time that they got started.

Blinking sleep from her eyes, Narlena rose to join him, and together they swung out along the crest of the hill, moving parallel to the river and keeping well south of it. Blade had no desire to cross the river any sooner than he had to and risk a meeting with Waker gangs prowling streets which they inevitably must know far better than Narlena or himself.

Although they moved at a pace fast enough to make Narlena pant, it was still almost dark before they reached the bridge. Blade looked across it into the darkened ruins and then down into the river rushing past under the bridge. If its current had not been so swift and its banks not a sheer drop of nearly a hundred feet on both sides, Blade would seriously have considered swimming the river. He did not like the idea of crossing a bridge that prowling Waker gangs could easily seal off. He himself would have had no objection to spending a night in the open countryside, but he doubted whether Narlena's mind or body could endure the experience.

As the moon rose and lit the visible face of the city, it showed nothing moving. With sword and spear held ready, Blade led the way out onto the bridge, half crouching as he stalked forward. Every few yards he dropped on his stomach to peer out from behind the tangled thistles toward the far end of the bridge and the piles of rubble beyond.

It took them many minutes to cross the bridge this way, minutes that rasped like files on even Blade's trained and tough nerves. It must have been far worse for Narlena. But though her face in the moonlight was white as flour, she kept moving steadily and made not a sound. Perhaps returning to Pura and feeling the cover of darkness over her again was easing her mind.

Finally they both lay on their stomachs behind a mass of thistles grown almost to the proportions of a

hedge, looking up at the ridge of debris that lay between them and the entrance to Narlena's building. They could not move at a rush across the hills and valleys of piled rubble. They would have to pick their way across it, clearly visible to anyone lurking in the shadows or watching from a high window. And they would be unable to move fast if attacked.

Blade took a deep breath and motioned forward. Up the slope they went as fast as their legs would carry them, then down into the first hollow and down on their stomachs for a momentary halt. Then on again—brief pushes forward, longer pauses lying in pools of shadow that should provide concealment, then on again. They could not move silently; chunks of rubble turned under their weight or came loose and went clattering down slopes.

Over the last crest now, and down the last slope, half-climbing, half-falling, down into the shadow of a massive slab of fallen wall precariously balanced at an angle. Stare out into the empty street, grip weapons, catch breath, get ready to make the final rush across the level street to the door of Narlena's building.

Blade turned to Narlena and murmured with teeth bared in a flickering grin, "Almost there, Narlena. If your people had known how to move like this by night, half the ones the Wakers got would still be alive and free."

She nodded. Then he motioned her forward again. They had just slipped from the shadow of the wall slab and were straightening up, ready for their run, when the sound of racing feet hit their ears from farther up the street. A second later a human figure burst from the shadows. It was a man in Dreamer clothing, sprinting toward them as though he were running for his life. He was. Hard on his heels came half a dozen Wakers.

Chapter Eight

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Blade waited long enough to get a clear look at the approaching Wakers, a brief few seconds that were enough for the Dreamer's frantically churning legs to carry him many yards closer. Then Blade plunged forward, passing the man at the edge of the rubble. He crashed into the Wakers before they could notice or prepare to meet the gigantic figure hurling itself at them out of the darkness.

Blade took out his first victim without using either sword or spear. He shot out one long leg, and his foot connected with the nearest Waker's kneecap. The man screamed and dropped to the ground. Blade leaped over his falling body into the gap his fall left in the advancing line. He swung the sword in one hand to decapitate the man on his right and thrust with the spear at the man on his left at the same time. The second man jumped back in time to escape with a graze on his side, but he could not save himself a second later from the sword. Blade whipped it around and brought it down in a slashing blow that took off the man's arm at the shoulder.

One dead, one dying, and one down in a matter of seconds. Two of the survivors were on his left, one on his right. Blade retreated a few steps until he could get a clear view of all three survivors. They showed no signs of either coming after him or of running. They were going to stand and fight. As he watched, they drew into a rough triangle, each facing outward in a different direction.

They lacked the precision Blade had seen in the first gang of Wakers. No doubt they were of a different gang, not as well trained. But that would not make them easy victims. Blade began sidling around the

triangle, keeping out of the range of a spear thrust or sword slash. He was afraid of a lucky spear cast and also of the fight going on and on until time or the noise it was making brought yet more Wakers on the scene. He spared a glance toward where he had left Narlena. She had flattened herself in the rubble again, and beside her was the fugitive Dreamer.

Watching Blade circling around their triangle without venturing to attack seemed to have given the Wakers more courage. They flourished their spears and made feints, faces, and obscene gestures with them, but they said nothing. Were they also afraid of other Wakers hearing the fight? If these men were outside their own gang's "territory," they might be so, and with good reason.

Time to end the fight. The triangle was not something Blade cared to try breaking by force. But his opponents could not come at him, either, without breaking up the triangle. How to get them to come at him? Blade shifted his grip on both sword and spear ever so slightly, feeling underfoot for a loose piece of rubble. Then he bore down hard on it until he felt it turn under his foot, exaggerated the stumble with a whiplike snap of his trained muscles, went down, hit the ground with a thud—and rolled hard to the right, straight into the legs of a Waker rushing out of the triangle, spear poised high to thrust down into Blade's chest. Blade took the man off his feet with a crash and a thump, leaped to his feet, and hurled his spear into a second man before either of the others could recover from their surprise. Then he spun around to slam the heel of his right foot hard into the fallen man's chest; the man fell back and lay still. The last Waker turned to run, but Blade caught him before he had gone ten feet. Desperately the man turned to fight, but he was no swordsman. Blade feinted at his thigh to bring his sword down; then he thrust hard at his stomach. The heavy, clumsy sword would be no good against a target smaller or less vulnerable than a man's stomach. But into that it plunged straight and deep. As Blade jerked the sword free, the man doubled over and sagged to the ground, blood gushing from the wound just above his greasy belt.

Blade retrieved his spear and used it to finish off the man with the smashed knee. Then he turned back toward where Narlena and the man had gone to cover. They were still there, crouched still farther back in the shadows under the slab. They were so motionless that if Blade had been a casual passerby, he might not have noticed them at all. He wiped his sword and spear clean on the ragged, scanty garments of his victims and walked toward Narlena and the new man.

Blade saw the man flinch and show signs of wanting to crawl out and run as he approached. He smiled. The Dreamer had just seen him cut down six Wakers single-handed. Now he saw him approaching steadily, smeared with sweat and the blood of his victims, loaded with weapons, and looking formidable and even terrifying. But Narlena grabbed the man by the arm and spoke urgently into his ear. Blade could not catch her words, but her tone was a reassuring one. The man nodded reluctantly, rose, and with Narlena came out to meet Blade. His hands were spread wide in the universal gesture of peace.

"My name is Erlik," he said nervously. "You are Blade, and Narlena says that you are from a world where all people are Wakers. Why do you help us, the Dreamers of Pura?" There was uncertainty and skepticism on his face as he looked at Blade.

Blade decided that right now was the time to start working on Erlik. "Because you need help," he replied bluntly. "In my home world, where all are indeed Wakers, those who want to live by robbery and violence find many other people to oppose them." Not always enough, he added to himself. But Erlik didn't need to know everything about Home Dimension.

"Here in Pura," Blade went on, "you have all made a mistake that only a few people in my world have made. You have run away from reality into your Dreams. None of you are left Waking, none of you are left to fight the robbers and killers. There has been no one to fight the Wakers for a hundred years. So your city has fallen apart and even you Dreamers are being killed off as you Wake and wander around."

Blade was not sure if he had put his argument in words that were too simple, since he had no idea whether Erlik was intelligent or well educated. But at least he had made the point he wanted to make with all the Dreamers—they had run away into their Dreams and left their city to die. And they would have to Wake and fight to get it back.

Instead of replying immediately, Erlik looked nervously about him, particularly up the dark street. Then he nodded slowly and said, "Blade, there is much I want to think about in what you say. It is like what some of the Scholars I met told me. But this is not the place to talk about it. May I ask for space in Narlena's vault tonight?" He looked from Narlena to Blade and back again. Blade recalled that a Dreamer's vault was an exceedingly private territory; even another Dreamer could enter only with its owner's formal permission. Blade nodded at the girl, and she faced Erlik and made the formal gesture of opening her vault to him—hands raised to each side of her head, palms inward, then moved outward until the arms were fully outstretched.

Meanwhile Blade was gathering up the weapons of the six dead Wakers and tying them in a bundle, which he then handed to Erlik. The man looked at the weapons and then at Blade. "Why do you want these?"

"To arm other Dreamers, so they can learn to fight and protect themselves." That was enough for the moment. Later he could mention his plans of a Dreamer army to carry the attack to the Wakers. "But as you said, we must not stand out here talking about such things." He led the way at a trot toward Narlena's building.

Once inside the vault, they piled the weapons in a corner, stripped off their dirty clothes, bathed, and ate as heartily as the bland food and drink permitted. Blade decided that one thing he was going to do if he wound up making a long stay in Pura was to teach the foodmakers to make something more palatable than the cake and drink. Either that or find edible plants and animals in the open countryside. The food in the vaults revealed as much as anything how completely the Purans had gotten into the habit of ignoring the real world.

When they had eaten, it was time for the talk with Erlik. Narlena sat on one side, silent for the most part. Occasionally she chimed in to confirm or amplify the comments and tales of one man or the other. Gradually Blade got Erlik's tale and gave the Dreamer his own.

Erlik had been in early middle age when the Dreamers retreated into their vaults. In terms of the lifespans of Purans, that meant something close to sixty. He had been training to be an interior decorator when all the professions and arts involved with improving the real world started dying out. But his family had been wealthy enough to purchase Dream vaults for all its surviving sons and daughters.

His father had not gone into the vaults, however. A widower and well into old age, Erlik's father was a man who might have been a scholar himself if he had not preferred the pleasures and responsibilities of a large family. The scholars, though not celibate, were forbidden to marry. And he had been friendly with many of the scholars who recognized his abilities. He had hosted many of their gatherings during the final years when the Dreamers were retreating into their vaults, the Waker gangs were growing steadily more ruthless, and Pura was beginning to fall apart.

The scholars had been sad and desperate men. They had realized long since that the Dreams would be the ruin of Pura and had been saying so for many years. But no one had listened to them. They loudly denounced those who fled into the Dream vaults and did their best to aid and encourage those who wanted to stand and fight. But the scholars were mostly men of intellect with small ability in practical matters. They were quite unable to cope with the savage street warfare that was becoming the rule in

Pura. Many of them retreated to the House of Wisdom and slaved night and day at finding methods of helping people to stay Waking. They even tried to find weapons to fight the Waker gangs. But little came of it. In the end those scholars who had not already been captured and tortured to death by the Wakers faced the same choice as the other Dreamers. They could flee into a countryside that already seemed an alien and terrible world or retreat into the Dream vaults and hope they might Wake in a generation or two to a city less mad.

The scholars were ill-equipped for survival outside Pura, but a surprising number of them joined the bands of emigrants headed south. Others had carefully packed up their notes and records and taken these with them into their vaults, planning to Dream quietly until the time came when they could come out and use their knowledge to rebuild Pura. Of course, they had been as thoroughly disappointed as all the other Dreamers.

What was worse, much of the accumulated knowledge of many centuries of Puran civilization had perished with the scholars the Wakers had caught and slaughtered. At the end of each Dream cycle the scholars were fewer in number, and Erlik knew personally at least seven who had died at the hands of the Wakers. The scholars were not yet extinct, but they were dying off fast. The other Purans might still have a chance to come out into a city cleared of Waker gangs. But without the scholars they would be hard put to rebuild their city or indeed do much of anything except drop into the same barbarous way of life as the Wakers.

Erlik, it was obvious, had no illusions about what was happening in Pura. Blade realized that the problem would be to overcome the man's fatalistic acceptance of the impending doom. Blade had the advantage of having just given a vivid, practical demonstration that the Waker gangs were not invincible. And Narlena was able to add that in daylight it was possible to move around not only without going mad, but even more important, without meeting Wakers. She and Blade had even gone across the Great West Bridge to the countryside beyond the city. They had found no Wakers, spent hours there, and returned safely to Pura, again meeting no Wakers until they were back across the river and in the city.

All during Narlena's account Erlik nodded his head slowly, the uncertainty and nervousness now almost gone from his face. It was also gone from his voice when he spoke.

"Blade," he said. "I do not really know who you are or what you are. If this were a thousand years ago, I would call you a god come down from the High Houses and taking the shape of a man. You say you are from another world—"

"Dimension."

"Dimension, then. The scholars have said that such exist. But the scholars spent much of their time talking about what only they believed existed, even when Pura was crumbling about their ears. So I do not know if what you say even can be true. But you certainly have shown that you know much that we must relearn if Pura is to be saved. You have taught them to Narlena. Can you teach them to me?" There was almost a yearning note in his voice.

Blade nodded. Erlik might not be willing to admit that Pura could be saved. Pessimism had been instilled too deeply in him by a hundred years of failure. But he was at least willing to learn new things in the hope that they might help save his city. For the moment Blade would be quite happy with that.

Erlík was Blade's first recruit after Narlena, but he was far from the last. Blade made rapid progress in the next few weeks and part of the reason for that was Erlík himself. The Pura had no more aptitude for fighting than most of his compatriots, but he was willing enough to learn. After he got himself in condition, he was strong, fast, and skilled enough so that he could defend himself from many of the Wakers and guard Blade's back during their night patrols in search of more Dreamers. The average Waker was not a very good fighter. Nor was there any reason why he should be. The Dreamers were usually helpless prey and too scared even to run the way Erlík had. Because the Wakers were always fighting among themselves, the Dreamers could often get away with their bungling and bumbling. Blade began to be a good deal more optimistic about the chances of a Dreamer fighting force against the Wakers.

In the meantime he and Erlík had the satisfaction of leaving one or two or even half a dozen Wakers dead each time they prowled through the dark streets of Pura. Although Erlík was a small, thin man, barely taller and heavier than Narlena, he seemed to expand and grow taller and stronger each time he stood over a dead Waker that he had killed.

But Erlík's greatest value to Blade was not his sword arm but his tongue and his quick brain. Both were more nimble than his sword arm would ever be if he lived a thousand years. Erlík did not preach Blade's views on the salvation of Pura with the fervor of a totally new convert. He wasn't one and couldn't have pretended to be one to save his life. That kind of honesty made Blade respect him even more. He held on to much of his skepticism and pessimism even while watching their strength grow and more and more Wakers fall dying in the streets.

His honest skepticism was the great secret of Erlík's success. The average Dreamer had been resigned to wait passively in his vault for Pura to collapse entirely about his ears or for the Waker gangs to eat each other up. He would have called anybody who went around joyfully promising the sure salvation of Pura a madman and would have ignored him completely. This was particularly true when the prophet was a man who said he was from another world, where all the people were Wakers. But the same average Dreamer was willing to listen to a fellow Dreamer talk about Blade's plans in tones of, "Well, I'm not sure myself that we can do any miracles. But let's give it a try. We can't be any worse off than we will be if we don't do anything at all. And we can at least kill off a lot of Wakers." That made a lot of people sit up and take notice and eventually join up. And the trail of dead Wakers Blade and Erlík left behind them was another convincing part of the argument.

In any case the Dreamers kept coming in. For good reasons, bad reasons, or no reason at all except that they wanted a little real-life excitement and feeling. Before a week was out, there were too many to be accommodated in Narlena's vault. Blade had to appoint some of the promising ones as subcommanders and have them each lead a group out to their own vaults.

Before two weeks had gone by, Blade had nearly sixty men and women scattered in half a dozen vaults on the south side of Pura. He and Erlík had trained a dozen men and three women in fighting of a sort, and Blade had gathered enough weapons from dead Wakers to arm twice as many.

The most welcome discovery among the recruits was a big barrel-chested man with a broken nose and a long scar across his left arm and shoulder. This man was named Yekran, and he was a former captain in the security troops. He not only knew how to fight; he actively enjoyed it. And he threw himself into training his fellow Dreamers with an enthusiasm that surprised and delighted Blade. Perhaps part of Yekran's enthusiasm came from guilt over his retreat to his vault. After all, he had been an officer in the force intended to protect Pura, yet he had run away like any ordinary citizen and let things fall apart. But

Blade did not really care much. Yekran was doing the work of three men within days after joining up. And killing Wakers was such a delight to him that within a week he had killed nearly as many as Blade had.

As the nights became slowly but definitely shorter, the hours for prowling the streets, rescuing Dreamers, and killing Wakers became fewer. Instead, Blade stepped up his training. Often he led as many as half the fighters from the different vaults on long trips deep into the city. They explored the ruins, noted buildings that might be rebuilt or at least defended, and got used to moving and working by day. Gradually the Dreamers' morbid fears of daylight vanished, and their reason took over, telling them what Blade had been saying from the beginning; if they learned to use the daylight before the Wakers did, they would have a deadly advantage over their enemies. Blade and Yekran both conjured up exciting visions of Dreamer fighters stealing undetected into the strongholds of sleeping Wakers while the noon sun beat down and slaughtering them right and left. Of course, the Dreamers would have only a few such easy victories before the Wakers also learned to fight by day, but Blade and Yekran thought it better not to mention that. And Blade hoped the Wakers might not take too well to daylight. They might possibly be more reluctant to change their century-old ways than were the more civilized Dreamers.

But Blade was still worried about that one Waker gang that had been trained to a polished weapon by their unknown leader. Blade had no doubt that they would adapt with deadly speed to fighting by day if they ever felt they had to. Before that day came, Blade knew he had to have his Dreamer fighters so numerous and well-trained that they could stand off even the best of the Wakers. Perhaps they could even take the offensive and force a pitched battle at a time and place of their own choosing. With the advantage of surprise the Dreamers might break the back of their most dangerous opponent.

But who were these people, and who under the heavens of every conceivable and inconceivable dimension was their leader? Yekran had no idea. Several of the recruits recognized Blade's description of the Waker gang that fought in well-coordinated pairs, but none of them could give him the faintest clue about where it came from or who led it. One thing stood out; the other Waker gangs seemed to have limited territories, but the trained one roamed freely all over the city.

Blade was not surprised. Such a gang would be able to march through the territories of other gangs and raid where it wanted to as easily as a fox prowling through a nest of field mice. And things would be just as one-sided if the gang came up against his Dreamers before he, Yekran, and Erlik had the chance to put several more months into recruiting and training. When he thought of that possibility, a cold sweat broke out all over him. He would pace up and down the vault like a caged animal, face working in frustration at the small amount of time he had to do so much. Then Narlena would come to him and caress him until he was calmer outside if not inside.

More weeks passed; the Dreamers now had over two hundred people and nearly fifty fighters, and the Waker gangs were becoming fewer and farther between. Blade doubted that the losses he and his followers had inflicted were enough to account for this. The word was out among the Wakers, no doubt. The darkness, for generations the time when they moved about and raided with impunity, had suddenly become deadly. Now it was infested with gangs of Dreamers that did not cower or flee but fought back and, turning the tables completely, hunted down the Wakers! Blade wondered if the Wakers were concerned about a mysterious new leader that the Dreamers had found! The Wakers at least had the advantage of knowing what Blade looked like. Would any of them be able to put two and two together?

As the activity of the Waker gangs declined, more and more of the Dream patrols drew a blank. They continued to bring in Dreamer recruits in ones, twos and half-dozens until there were enough to fill more

than forty vaults. But there were nights when not even a single wandering and bewildered Dreamer appeared. When that happened, Blade would inevitably lead his patrol into one of the regular hiding places and wait for daylight to spread across Pura and give them a safe return home.

The night had become unexpectedly chill and rainy toward the end of one of those useless patrols. The first gray light of a tentative dawn found Blade, Erlik, Narlena, and four other Dreamer fighters huddled on the tenth floor of a tower in the western section of Pura. The small windows had kept out much of the wind and rain. But the chill seeped through nevertheless. And the dampness in the air turned the dust on the floor to a thin layer of slimy mud that covered the tiles and smeared the clothing of the people squatting there and shivering.

Blade wondered, not for the first time, why he was here, doing what he was doing. For the marconite, of course—that might be worth more than everything else he had brought back from Dimension X put together. But that wasn't enough to explain why he was training and leading the Dreamers, risking his neck every day and night for them.

It wasn't that he had forgotten Home Dimension. On his early trips into Dimension X, he had. Then there had been a new Richard Blade who came out of the computer, a Richard Blade who barely remembered that there was a Home Dimension. Alterations in the computer had taken care of that. Now Blade not only remembered Home Dimension as he struggled to survive in Dimension X but had total recall of everything that happened to him there and took it back with him to Home Dimension.

Remembering Home Dimension didn't help. He still tended to get involved with the people he encountered, tended to hope that the computer would not snatch him back until he had finished whatever work he had set himself to do. Was that foolish sentimentality, something he would have to root out of himself? Maybe it was, but he clearly saw he couldn't do things any other way. He would just have to struggle along, getting sucked into every local problem that came along and hoping he was fast and smart enough to get out again.

All this deep thinking wasn't going to make him any warmer, drier, or less muscle-cramped, he reminded himself. He stood up and looked out the window. A watery dawn light was gradually washing away the darkness. Blade hoped that the sun would be out shortly, drying the streets and banishing the rest of the gloom from the city. In this shadowy morning light a few bold Wakers might continue their prowling beyond the normal time. Both he and his companions were chilled and weary after a long night of tramping through the pitch-black streets, slipping on wet rubble with clatters and crashes that made them clutch their weapons and would certainly have attracted any Wakers within earshot. He did not want to face a fight now on the way home.

He decided that if another week went by and the night patrols continued to draw a blank, it would be time to seek out and raid a Waker stronghold. He hoped this would not be throwing away the lives of his followers and their hard-won self-confidence. Right now they saw him as an almost super-human being and in spite of their occasional losses they were developing an almost arrogant belief in their own prowess. Yekran was the only one not so naive. He shook his head when he heard boastful talk of rooting the Wakers out of their lairs like the vermin they were.

The sullen gloom of the morning bothered Blade. It gave him the feeling that such an unusual light might hide more than it revealed. And what it hid might be unwelcome. The feeling was too vague for him to make anybody else believe it, almost too vague to be put into words, but it was there. And he would not ignore it. Those same vague forebodings had put him on the alert and saved his life three or four times during his career as an agent. Perhaps it had taken his brain this long to create these feelings of adjustment to Dimension X—certainly he had never felt this way during any of his previous trips.

It was time to move. His six companions were experienced soldiers by Dreamer standards. By now they all had swords and spears. They also had heavy sandals, and most had leggings to protect their shins and calves from grazes and scrapes on the rubble. They had gear pouches and water-bottles but no food, because the food machines' sweetish cake would not travel well. Another point to check—could the machines be readjusted to make something more durable? Dreamer patrols would soon be out for days on end and would need field rations. Blade sighed and shook his head. It seemed that every time he knocked one problem down, two more popped up.

The seven men moved out into the morning in two lines of three, one on each side of the street, with Blade himself taking the lead, spear in hand. He would have liked to head for the nearest Dreamer-held vault by the shortest route, but that route ran for a mile along a level street so broad that even the debris from collapsed buildings on either side had hardly narrowed it at all. By now even the newest Dreamer recruit understood why it was not wise to travel along a wide street where one stood out like a fly on a tabletop to anyone watching from above.

Blade brought up the rear while they crossed the avenue. Crouching behind a fallen slab of metal roofing, Blade watched the other six dash in succession across the open street, scramble up the ridge of debris on the far side, and vanish down the other side. To the north of the avenue lay a maze of smaller streets that offered a far more sheltered route than the avenue's hundred-foot expanse of stone.

The last of the six vanished, and now it was Blade's turn. He nearly fell on his face as his foot came down on a rainslick patch, but miraculously he kept his balance and charged across the street. Using hands and feet, he hurled himself at the twenty-foot slope of rubble. Loosened chunks toppled down into the street with nerve-racking crashes and thumps. He reached the crest, flung himself over it, then turned back to search the avenue in both directions. As his eyes swung to the left and east, he saw something moving furtively on the far side of the avenue.

Blade froze and fixed his eyes on the spot. But the pavement there lay deep in shadow, too deep for him to clearly make out what was moving. What else could it be but a Waker moving by day? One or many? Again he couldn't see, not even with his abnormally acute vision. But still less could he wait to find out. Time was suddenly precious. They would have to make their way east and into shelter before the Wakers could detect them and launch a full-scale hunt.

He scrambled down into the street. His haste should have told the six waiting below that something was wrong, even if he hadn't quickly explained the situation. Narlena paled, and the four recruits frantically tried to look in all directions at once.

Erlik, however, nodded in the same resigned way he usually did when he heard bad news. He said with a sigh, "Well, if they catch up with us it won't be as easy for them as it would have been back in the spring. We've given them a good run so far, and we'll give them another before we go down." Then he shrugged and turned away to take up his place at the end of the left-hand line.

Back in formation again the seven moved north two blocks and then turned right. Blade did not want to get too far north of the avenue. If all else failed, they could always try to reach it and then try outrunning any pursuing Wakers. Two forlorn hopes.

They moved forward in leap-frog fashion, hurrying down each block where buildings on either side rose high enough to block the view on either side. At each north-south street they halted to make sure that it was clear in both directions and then scurried across the street and on along the next block. Occasionally masses of rubble from collapsed buildings forced them into a noisy scrambling climb. Once they found

the decaying body of a Waker who, must have fallen while climbing a tower. Blade wondered if the man had been killed instantly or died slowly in the darkness.

Now they were perhaps halfway to their goal, the hunted looks of the six Dreamers were slowly beginning to ease. Then a swssssh sounded close overhead. Down from a building high above flashed an arrow, trailing a thick cloud of blue-green smoke. The arrow smacked into the street fifty feet ahead, and the smoke poured up in a thick column, rising steadily and greasily into the damp air. Even in the morning gloom it would be visible from a great distance.

Blade went cold inside. Instead of his finding the trained Waker gang, the gang had found him. There was at least one archer, with marker arrows that could give away their position and make both flight and concealment hopeless. Would the Wakers have other bowmen to pick off the patrol when they had been surrounded and trapped? Or would it come to a final, hand-to-hand clash of weapons in the streets of the dying city?

Blade waved the patrol forward. They followed at a run, up the block to the next corner, where they continued around to the right and headed south toward the avenue. The avenue offered their last hope for escape. They pounded down the block, hearing another arrow swssssh so high overhead and so far away that for a moment Blade hoped they had given the Bowman the slip. The corner was only fifty yards away now; beyond it only one more block to the avenue. Fifty yards, forty, thirty, twenty ...

And from both east and west Wakers poured into the intersection with a great pounding of feet and howling of war cries. Blade did not even need to look at them to know that they would form in pairs, one with a sword and one with a spear. In the next few seconds he put together more than twenty years of training and experience.

Instead of stopping dead, Blade kept on going, closing in to less than spear-throwing distance before the Wakers realized that he was still moving. He held his own spear out in front of him like a knight's lance as he crashed down into the ranks of the Wakers. His thrust was aimed at a tall, bearded man who appeared to be the leader. But the man jumped aside at the last possible split-second. The sharp spear point tore along his upper arm and sank deep into the chest of the man behind him. The man died so quickly that he did not even have the time to look surprised before the light went out of his eyes and he sagged downward, pulling the spear out of Blade's hands.

Seeing a gap open in the Waker line, the other Dreamers charged toward it. For a moment Blade was in as much danger of being trampled or speared by his companions as he was by the Wakers.

"Head for the avenue and run! Run!" he roared. But as the Dreamers tried to push on through the gap, Wakers came up on either side to close it. Two of the Dreamers went down, thrust through with spears. One of them rolled against Narlena's legs just as she gathered herself to sprint forward through the confusion, knocking her to the ground. In an instant four Wakers pounced on her, three pointing their spears down at her stomach while the fourth reversed his with a lightning snap and brought the butt end crashing down on her head. She went limp. Blade let out an animal roar and charged at the four men.

The one who had struck Narlena died before he could reverse his spear again. As he raised it across his chest like a quarterstaff, Blade's descending swordstroke chopped through the solid metal shaft, the man's collarbone, most of his ribs, and his heart. The blood spewed all over Blade's arms and hands so that he nearly lost his grip on his sword. He held on to it, batted a spear-point down with the flat of the blade, thrust the spearman through the neck, then kicked another swordsman in the stomach and sliced his head off as he crumpled.

As the space around Blade suddenly cleared, another clump of Wakers surged toward him, furiously dueling with Erlik and the other two surviving Dreamers. Before another attack could move against him, Blade charged at the new clump with the speed and ferocity of a springing tiger, hitting them with the same deadly suddenness.

With a spear he snatched from the ground, he hurled his two hundred plus pounds forward and tore the clump of Wakers apart like a rotten cabbage. The Wakers leaped aside in every direction and the two Dreamers broke free. Blade saw Erlik turn toward him, raising his bloody sword with a savage look in his eyes.

Before the man could start back into the fight, Blade yelled again, "Run, you fool! Run for your life!" He had the small joy of seeing Erlik turn away and sprint for the avenue as though monsters were at his heels, sword still waving in his hand. Then Blade turned back to the Wakers crowding around him.

They did not crowd too closely. Although he now panted for breath and his body glistened with sweat and the blood from half a dozen minor slashes and punctures, he could still lash out with deadly skill at anyone who approached too closely. Two more men went down, one dead with a spear in his stomach, the other dying with his hand hanging from a spouting wrist. Then the tall leader loomed up before Blade again. The other Wakers fanned out on either side to tighten the circle around Blade. Then the tall man dropped his hand and the Wakers rushed in.

Blade had only a few seconds to realize that they were approaching with their spears turned butt-end on and their swords swinging with the flat of the blades toward him. But he had no time to be surprised at this. There were too many of them. He knew he had destroyed one man's leg with a spear thrust to the thigh before a spear butt slammed down across the back of his skull. He went forward down onto his knees. He thought he thrust upward with his sword into another man's stomach before more blows on his head and shoulders drove him to the ground. And after that he knew he did nothing. He drifted down into blackness to the sound of the shouts of the Wakers all around him.

Chapter Ten

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Blade was becoming increasingly aware of several unpleasant sensations—he was regaining consciousness. His head ached abominably, his shoulders were bruised and swollen, the thongs bound tightly around wrists and ankles were cutting into the flesh, and his mouth was dry and sour. His nose was assaulted by a stench compounded of unwashed humanity, smoke, spoiled food, and the tantalizing scent of roasting meat. That made his mouth water. It also made him start with surprise. Did the Wakers roam into the countryside beyond Pura to hunt for their food? He stopped the questioning; his head was aching too badly to cope with the effort of thinking.

His vision was clearing now; he made out a too-familiar figure looming over him and looking grimly down at him. It was the leader of the Waker force that had tracked him down, as tall and lean as ever. He wore a rough bandage around the spear gouge in his upper arm and a thoroughly hostile expression on his bearded face.

"You wake. Good." The tone was curt and clipped. He sounded more like a man who regards speech as a waste of time than a man who uses short and simple words because he knows no other kind. Then he barked, "Water!" and from behind him a hunched figure in filthy rags shambled out and cringingly offered a bowl of water to Blade's lips. Blade looked at the slave, keeping his face expressionless with

considerable effort. If this was the way the Wakers treated their slaves, it was no wonder that the Dreamers feared Waker slavery almost more than death itself.

Blade drank the water, which was not much cleaner than the slave who brought it. In spite of its sour taste it refreshed him and helped clear his head. Now he was able to look beyond the man standing above him and take note of his surroundings. For the moment he was not thinking of escape, but every bit of information about where he was might come in handy when the time came.

It was twilight again; evening must have come. Ahead on either side of him, were dozens of Wakers busily carrying out the affairs of a tribal encampment preparing for night. The carcass of some animal turned on a spit over a wood fire that burned in a soot-blackened hearth built up with slabs of stone and metal roughly mortared together. Beside it a large pot of water simmered on another fire, and two slave women supervised by a Waker crone were dropping handfuls of leaves and bits of what looked like dried fruit into it. A whiff of the odors rising from the pot reached Blade's nose; spicy and sweetish at the same time.

Beyond the fires rose a vine-covered wall, still intact except for a few stones missing from the crest. Along the wall ran a wooden walkway raised ten feet above the ground on stout poles. In the shelter of the walkway were a dozen roughly made tents. There was a continuous coming and going around the tents—mostly men and women in the rags and filth of slaves. Armed men occasionally wandered out from the largest of the tents and over to one of the slave tents. Blade could hear snatches of song float from inside this tent; the words were indistinct but no doubt bawdy. Metallic bangings and scrapings of metal being worked came from another.

Twisting himself around slowly and painfully, the grit and pebbles on the ground clawing at his bare skin, Blade saw that the whole encampment lay within a square courtyard roughly a hundred feet on each side. Three sides were formed by walls with walkways running along them and broken only in one place by a massive wooden gate. The fourth side of the courtyard was the wall of one of the great towers. It reared up so high into the fading light that Blade could barely make out its blue-paneled top. Lights showed at some of the windows, flickering pale yellow lamps that suggested torches or oil lamps. Apparently the slaves lived in the open, along with the men who guarded them and the entrance to the camp. The rest of the gang lived in the greater comfort and shelter of the tower itself.

That was as far as Blade got with his observations before the tall man was back again, looming over him more closely and grimly than before. He drew a long, sharp knife from his belt. Blade tensed. He was ready to make a fight, but how much of a fight could he manage with both wrists and ankles bound?

Instead of driving the knife in, the man bent down, keeping well clear of Blade's reach as he did so, and slashed the thongs around Blade's ankles. A quick barked order and two men came over from the guard tent. They hauled Blade to his feet and held him upright while he stamped his swollen, numbed feet and felt the fiery prickles of returning feeling in them. Then one of the guards lifted his spear and prodded Blade gently in the small of the back with the point, gesturing toward the tower with the other hand. Blade nodded and stumbled forward.

Inside the darkness was almost tangible—and certainly pungent. There was only an occasional wavering spot of smoky yellow light, where torches burned in metal holders driven into the wall or standing on the floor. Under Blade's feet the floor seemed to be free of the ancient accumulation of dust he had noticed in nearly every other building in Pura.

They came to a staircase and started up it, the tall man leading and the two guards following behind Blade with their spears still pointed at his back. Up they went through the darkness for three flights,

passing doorways hung with patchwork curtains roughly splashed with incomprehensible badges of white paint. Finally they came to the fourth door, which was covered by a curtain of solid blue, with a single gigantic eye painted on it in white. Two guards stood in front of it.

"I bring the prisoner Blade before Krog," said the tall man. The guards nodded; one of them reached up and lifted the curtain aside. Blade's guards prodded him onward again as the tall man led the way through the arched doorway into the room beyond.

Blade had half-expected something the size of the interior of St. Patrick's Cathedral, a ceiling soaring out of sight into the gloom above and a floor the size of a football field. Instead the chamber was almost cozy, barely forty feet on a side, and lit almost as well as a Dreamer's vault. It was a moment before Blade recognized the color of the light and where it was coming from. Then he stared in frank amazement at the marconite capsule in the base of the heavy iron lamp that hung on a chain from the ceiling. He stared at the capsule and the bulbs wired to it, his mind working furiously to find some plausible explanation for this Waker gang using marconite. Then a sharp cough came from the end of the room. Blade immediately forgot about the marconite and turned his entire attention to the two people sitting on a bench there. Both were contemplating him as though he were a specimen under a microscope.

The girl—woman—drew his eye first. Which was she? It was hard to tell her age. From the slim, hard lines of her body and the proud jut of her small, firm breasts, he would have guessed her to be nineteen, perhaps twenty at most. She wore only a kilt and a dazzling array of knives that sparkled and glinted at her waist, wrists, and ankles. What seemed like fair skin was darkened by grease and dirt, as were the foamy curls of blonde hair covering her neat little head. Blade could see from even across the room an intentness and a calculating quality in the wide blue eyes—and a streak of savage cruelty that struck Blade with almost physical force and made him instantly alert. Here was a possible enemy, and a deadly dangerous one. Woman, definitely, not a girl. To call her a girl would be to risk making himself just a little bit less alert. He could not afford that with this woman.

A beautiful woman, also. And obviously interested in him, the way her eyes were roaming over his body. Nine times out of ten he had found a way to put that interest to some sort of use, but he had a feeling that this might be the tenth time. He jerked his attention away from the woman and turned to the man.

Here was a very different type. The young woman was obviously a barbarian; this man was just as obviously civilized or at least trying hard to look that way. The woman's father, Blade realized, noting the unmistakable facial resemblance. Like his daughter he was slender—the slenderness of a man who carries nothing but muscle and sinew on his bones—and blond. His hair was close-cropped and clean enough for Blade to make out the numerous strands of gray in it.

He wore a blue kilt and a dark red tunic. Both his garments and as much of his skin as Blade could see appeared to be a good deal cleaner than the average among the Wakers. He was clean-shaven which also set him apart from the generally hairy Wakers. He appeared to be unarmed, but why not, considering the arsenal his daughter was carrying? He was, however, wearing the first piece of jewelry that Blade had seen among the Wakers—a silvery medallion with a blue jewel in the center, carved in the form of an eye. It hung around his neck on a gold chain.

The old man raised his hand and beckoned the four men facing him forward to within ten feet of his throne. Then he waved the tall man aside so that he and Blade could see each other still more clearly.

Blade was already moving warily toward a favorable impression of this man. A closer look at him reinforced this impression. The man's face was scraped and red, suggesting that the fight to keep himself clean-shaven had been won at the cost of considerable pain. The man seemed to have created for himself

a small center of civilization among a mass of barbarians. Had he had much success in passing his notions on to his people? Blade didn't think so—except in training the fighting men. But in Dimension X, as in Home Dimension, new and better ways of fighting and killing were willingly learned by almost anybody.

The man crossed his arms on his chest and spoke. "You are Blade, the man from another world who has been helping the Dreamers and training them to fight." It was a statement, not a question, delivered in a quiet, calm voice with no hint of challenge in it. "I am Krog, the leader of the People of the Blue Eye. I have been looking for you for a long time, ever since one of my war patrols met you on the East Bridge. I have heard that you had just arrived in our world that night, only hours before. Is that so?"

Blade nodded.

"Then you learn very quickly and keep your head as well as being a strong and wise fighting man. The People of the Blue Eye need one like you. And my daughter Halda—" with a look in which Blade thought he saw a flash of weary distaste—"finds you pleasing. Will you join the People of the Blue Eye and become a war master equal to Drebin, here?" He raised a hand to indicate the tall man.

Before Krog could complete the gesture, Drebin jumped forward shaking both his fists almost in Krog's face. "If you make him my equal, Krog, I will kill first him and then you! The people will have a new leader. Your daughter Halda would not mind that much, I think." There was no mistaking the look he shot at Halda. And there was no mistaking the fact that she did not return it. This startled Drebin. He drew back a step, staring at the woman.

Krog's voice cut into the silence like a butcher's cleaver slicing meat. "Drebin. I wondered many times if you were a fool. Did you speak so seldom because you knew that if you talked a great deal, people would know you for a fool? I do now." Krog rose from his bench and made a quick flicking gesture of his right hand at Halda. She also rose, moving slowly off to the left, both hands held close to her body. Blade recognized the pattern. Two people who had trained together were taking position in case a third party attacked. Would Drebin—the fool—recognize this also?

He did not. A bull's roar erupted from him, followed by a bull's rush forward, straight at Krog. Then without stopping, Drebin sprang to the right in a single quick motion, apparently hoping to get onto Krog's flank before the leader could turn. Krog spun on one heel and met Drebin's flanking move with a quick one-two right foot into the side of Drebin's left knee, then both fists into the tall man's solar plexus. Drebin folded up like a pocketknife, let out a strangled choking gasp, and sat down on the floor. Krog stood over him, both fists poised and ready to strike, contempt in his eyes.

"As I said, Drebin, you are a fool. It would have saved me this whole unpleasant scene if I had been wise enough to realize that fact some time ago and dealt with you then. But you are popular with at least some of the fighters. And my daughter did once find you appealing. Why, I don't know," with a sour look at Halda.

Krog sat down again and continued to look at Drebin. "And you have served me well, carrying out my orders until now and being always quick to learn and teach what I wanted the people to know, at least about fighting. You are a good fighter. So I think that if you want to keep your place as the one war master of the people, you can fight for it."

Drebin looked at him, pain, anger, and bewilderment chasing each other across his dark bearded face.

"Yes," said Krog. "You can fight this man Blade. To the death. If you win and kill him, then you will still be War Master, whether or not Halda likes you. If he wins and kills you, then he will follow where you

have been. Everywhere." The innuendo was not lost on Drebin. He managed to glare at Krog with even more fury than he had done before. Halda, on the other hand, grinned openly at Blade.

"Hold it!" roared Blade in a voice so loud that he almost startled himself and sent echoes reverberating around the chamber. Krog jumped back a yard at a single bound and stared at Blade, hands raised. Halda drew a knife and held it ready to throw. Seeing that he had their attention, Blade continued.

"Why the devil should I help any of you damned bandits?" he snapped. "I threw in with the Dreamers because all I saw your people doing was killing and enslaving the Dreamers and looting the city. I haven't seen much of anything different since. Certainly not now. I want to help rebuild Pura, not go on destroying it the way you're doing."

At a sign from Krog, Halda vanished through the inner door of the chamber. The leader himself turned back to stare at Blade more intently than before. He seemed to be searching for something in Blade's face or words. For a moment Blade wondered what he could have done or said to draw such a reaction from Krog. But the Waker leader was obviously too complicated a man to make it possible to answer that question now. He would have to stay alive and wait for Krog to reveal himself bit by bit. But in order to stay alive, would he—?

From behind the curtain across the inner door came the sound of fists on flesh and a short shrill scream. Then the curtain burst open and Narlena tumbled through it to land with bruising force on the stone floor. She was nude, her hands were bound, and there was a small trickle of blood flowing across her ribs just below her left breast. Behind her came Halda, flourishing a dagger whose needle-sharp point was bright with fresh blood. Blade swallowed and looked at Narlena, who was half-unconscious with fright and pain. Then he looked back at Krog, who nodded.

"Of course," the Waker leader said. "You can always refuse to help up. But then you will see her—" with a jerk of his thumb at Narlena "—die before we kill you. I assure you that Halda will make her die very slowly. Well, Blade?"

Blade swallowed again. He had been in this kind of situation before, forced to bend before someone who held hostages. And because he had bent, both he and the hostages had survived, and the hostage-takers had not. He would try to do it again. As he looked at Krog, however, it occurred to him that it might be a little harder to manage things this time.

"All right, Krog," he said finally. "I will fight Drebin as you wish."

Chapter Eleven

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Krog was determined to be as even-handed in setting up the death duel between Drebin and Blade as possible. So he announced that it would take place in ten days. By that time Blade should have fully recovered from the assorted minor wounds he had collected since being captured. And Drebin would have largely recovered from the spear wound in his arm. Both would be at their best. Krog cheerfully informed them that no matter who won, he was looking forward to a magnificent spectacle. The People of the Blue Eye would talk about it for years afterward. Blade grimaced at this. He had fought in arenas before but had never learned to enjoy the process of risking his life for somebody else's bloodthirsty amusement.

And he would be risking his life in the fight with Drebin, no doubt about that. If it had been a matter of a straight fight with swords and spears, he could have relied on springing his own knowledge of unarmed combat on Drebin as a surprise—possibly a fatal one for the war master. But Drebin had shown in his attack on Krog that from somewhere he had picked up a respectable knowledge of unarmed combat himself. Not equal to Krog's, of course. The Waker leader had impressed Blade with the speed and skill of his hands and feet yet another thing about this complex man Blade wanted to explore. But Drebin looked good enough so that nothing Blade could do would be a complete surprise to him.

So there was no possibility of springing any surprises on Drebin. In that case what were his chances in the fight? Drebin was as tall as Blade, half a head taller than most of the other Wakers, but slimmer. It was a slimness like Krog's, though, of a frame layered with sinew and whipcord muscle. Blade knew he probably outweighed the man by a good twenty pounds, but that would be helpful only in a close grapple. If Drebin was as fast as he looked, getting him into such a grapple might be impossible, or if possible, too dangerous. Did Drebin's fighting style have any peculiarities? Blade wished he had had more of an opportunity to see the man in action. As it was, he could only hope that the ten days before the duel would give him that opportunity.

In the meantime, he had the freedom of the people's camp. He knew perfectly well that Narlena would pay in blood and agony for any attempt to escape or any hostile act, so he kept well clear of the wall and kept a close rein on his tongue and temper. But his eyes and ears were active every waking minute.

What he learned about the Wakers—or at least about the People of the Blue Eye—included much that he had only guessed at before and probably even a good many things that Krog would rather he had not learned. But tongues wagged freely in the camp. A fair number of the Waker fighters seemed to think anyone going up against War Master Drebin was a dead man. So why should they take the trouble of guarding their tongues with a man who would not live long enough to make any ill use of what he learned? To be considered a walking dead man is a good way to pick up information, although Blade had to admit that it was also more than a little hard on the nerves.

The People of the Blue Eye numbered five or six hundred, perhaps one tenth the total number of Wakers. Blade was agreeably surprised to learn that the Wakers were so few in number. He had not dared hope that they had killed each other off until the Dreamers might outnumber them as much as ten to one. And of the six hundred who could be called truly of the people—some three hundred slaves also served them—barely a third were trained and able to fight and raid.

It occurred to Blade that if the same ratio of fighters to total strength held among the other Waker gangs, there might be fewer than two thousand Waker fighting men in the whole of Pura. If one tenth of the fifty thousand surviving Dreamers in the vaults could be found awake and one tenth of these trained as fighters, it would mean a united striking force of four or five hundred men. That might be enough to strike such a blow at the disunited, mutually hostile, and largely untrained Waker gangs that their rule in Pura would be swept away and the city free to rise again.

The chances of the Dreamers might be even better than that, because there were usually several hundred able-bodied Wakers outside the city. These were the food-gatherers who hunted in the spreading forests to the north of Pura, fished in the forest streams, or gathered fruits and nuts. That was all the Wakers had to eat, except when they found a Dreamer vault open and were able to gorge themselves from the food machines.

So much for what the Wakers lived on. What they appeared to live for was carrying on the old quarrel with the Dreamers, killing or enslaving all those they found wandering about during their Waking periods. Occasionally they found vaults open and looted them. Very occasionally they would find a defective vault

and were able to break into it and murder the Dreamer in his gas-protected and Dream-soothed sleep. And frequently, almost continuously, they fought among themselves.

That was a tradition as long as fighting the Dreamers. In fact Blade soon realized that it was all that had kept the Wakers from rooting out the Dreamers to the last man, woman, and child. There was another side to the coin, of course; if the Wakers were not in the habit of killing off so many of their own people in gang wars, they might have had less need for slaves. Not likely, though; for some reason the majority of Waker babies were males, which meant a great surplus of free men over free women and a great need by the free men to seek other kinds of partners. A child born of a free Waker man and a slave Dreamer woman was therefore free from birth.

For territory, food, slaves, or only because it might be spring and the young men of a gang eager to try out their new swords, the Wakers fought. Dozens of them died in such fighting every month. That explained the majority of the bodies Blade had found in the streets. Sometimes two gangs, very rarely three or even four, would make a temporary alliance to squash a common opponent who had made himself intolerable by taking too many slaves or too much of the best forest hunting territory. But once the common enemy had given up—or as often happened, persuaded one of the allies to switch sides—the fighting went back to the usual petty squabbling.

Under Krog the People of the Blue Eyes were the first to even partly break out of that pattern. This was almost entirely due to his leadership. Although not everybody liked him—a good many fighters showed a naked preference for Drebin to be leader—nobody could or would deny his ability.

Krog was one of the free "mixtures"—father a Waker, mother a Dreamer slave. And there were hints of something out of the ordinary about his father or at least his father's ancestry. Hints that Blade put together with the stories of the Puran scholars who had joined the Wakers in the days when the city was dying. He suspected that Krog might be of Dreamer blood on both sides.

Krog had distinguished himself at a very young age as the swiftest and deadliest fighter of the People of the Blue Eye. By the time he was thirty he wore the title of war master. In those days the war master had not been the chief assistant to a single leader of the people. Instead he had been one of several equal members of the Council of Masters—war master, hunt master, slave master, camp master, and others.

Everybody of both sexes and all ages delighted in telling Blade the story of how Krog had changed that system and risen to supreme power. In fact, he heard ten times more about it than he could ever need to know or indeed could understand. It had been mostly Krog's nimble wits and nimble hands that had transformed all the other masters into allies or corpses and himself into supreme ruler of the People of the Blue Eye.

That had been ten years ago. Once in power, Krog had set out to make the People of the Blue Eye as strong among the Wakers as he himself was strong among the people. Half a dozen small wars and as many defeated and swallowed small gangs later, he had very nearly done this. Then he won over the People of the Green Tower into a close alliance. First he had defeated their war master in barehanded single combat; then he persuaded the other masters that two strong gangs combined could loot and kill the Dreamers more effectively. The two gangs had been allies now for three years, and the Green Towers had even begun to pick up and use some of Krog's military ideas.

The alliance was a frightening menace to all the other gangs, who had not failed to notice what Krog was doing or to hear of what he was planning to do in the future. They had tried upsetting his plans by warfare. But singly or even in pairs the other gangs were no match for the People of the Blue Eye. Krog had trained his people to a level of skill and discipline that had not been seen in Pura since the collapse of

the old security forces a century ago.

Now for the first time in the history of the Wakers no less than nine gangs were talking of an alliance to smash the Blue Eyes and the Green Towers and put an end to the menace that was Krog. Or at least so the rumors ran. The people were confident that there was no real danger, otherwise why would Krog risk a duel that might leave his old war master dead, with the new one of uncertain skill and loyalty? The people's faith in Krog's judgment was great. Only the hot-blooded fighters of Drebin's faction were likely to mutter sourly about all the occasions when Krog had passed up a good, bloody finish fight with a rival gang in favor of sitting down and running rings around them with that quick tongue of his.

All this, Blade realized, left him in an awkward position. He had to stay alive, and that meant killing Drebin and succeeding him as Krog's war master. But as war master of the People of the Blue Eye he would have to help Krog lead them in a general war against most of the other Waker gangs, a war in which the people would certainly be outnumbered. If they were defeated, Blade knew that he would most probably die and that Narlena would either be killed or enslaved again by the victors.

But if the people won, Krog would be much closer to realizing his plan of uniting the Wakers and ending the Dreamers once and for all. Blade would then have to lead the Wakers against the Dreamers as energetically as he led the Dreamers against the Wakers before his capture. He might think of sabotaging the Waker war effort, but that would do the Dreamers no good if they lacked the strength to take advantage of any Waker mistakes or delays. And if he was detected, he would most certainly die. Narlena would die with him, and both of them would most probably die very slowly.

It was a nasty position to be in. Blade could not see a way out of it. He still could not see a way out of it when the tenth day arrived, and with it his death-duel with War Master Drebin.

Chapter Twelve

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The day of the duel dawned half overcast, hot, and stifling. In the tower, where the few wandering breezes could not find their way through the narrow windows, it was like a Turkish bath. Blade was dripping with sweat before he had even risen from the leaf-filled cloth pallet that formed his bed. So were the two guards who brought him his breakfast—a mixture of ground nuts, bits of dubious meat, and a bowl of water.

He drank only some of the water and then asked one of the guards for his knife. The man looked at him with sullen suspicion. "You think I'm crazy?"

"No, I'm not planning to do anything to you or myself. I just want to shave."

"Shave?"

"Yes." Blade fingered his beard. "Cut my beard off, like Krog does. Understand me?"

If the guard did, he gave no sign of it. But after a moment he drew his knife from its sheath, placed it on the floor between him and Blade, and backed off several feet, hefting his spear as he did so. With the guards staring intently and warily at him, their spears aimed and ready, Blade scraped his cheeks and chin as well as the lack of soap and the dullness of the knife permitted. When he was finished, his face felt as if it had been sandpapered, but he felt he had made an important gesture, one that both Krog and the

People of the Blue Eye in general would recognize. Krog set himself apart from all the other Wakers Blade had met by shaving. So by shaving, Blade would be openly allying himself with Krog and whatever plans the leader might have. Blade called to the two guards and told them he was ready.

The courtyard was already packed with people by the time the two guards led him downstairs. All the free men and women of the People of the Blue Eye were there, as were the slaves who were sitting on the ground outside their tents under a guard of fighters with drawn swords. Even a sizable contingent of fighters from other gangs had appeared. They had to sit or stand on top of the wall in order to get any kind of view over the heads of the mob in the courtyard. All of them were wearing white armbands, indicating some sort of truce arrangement.

Blade was surprised at first that Krog would permit the other gangs to observe a death-duel that could easily give the impression of disunity and weakness among the people. Then he realized that this was a gesture of defiance on Krog's part. "I despise you so much," he seemed to be saying to the other gangs, "that I can afford to risk losing my war master in a duel, even though my war against you is close at hand. You are so weak and contemptible that I don't need to worry about any of the ordinary precautions when I prepare to fight you." Blade doubted that Krog actually was that arrogant inside, or at least hoped he wasn't. Otherwise Blade would be serving a madman if he won today. But he also appreciated the gesture.

A murmur broken by a few cheers rose behind Blade, and he turned to see Drebin emerging from the darkness of the building. The bandage was gone from around the man's arm, and only a pinkish line of scar tissue marked the dirty but well-muscled arm. Two attendants followed behind Drebin, one carrying his sword in an oiled-cloth scabbard and the other carrying three spears in a leather shoulder sling. Drebin himself wore only a very short kilt, with a knife on the belt, and leather wrist braces. As he stepped out into the courtyard, he postured and posed for a moment, rising first on one leg, then on the other. This drew a few more cheers. Apparently Drebin's unarmed combat skill was something well known to the audience.

There was a thirty-foot square marked out with white paint on the ground up against one of the walls. Drebin's attendants led him through the crowd to one side of it while Blade's guards led him to the other. Then the guards handed Blade the same weapons Drebin was carrying—knife, sword, and the three slung spears. Blade hefted spears and sword, testing their balance. There would be problems in using throwing spears in an arena closely hemmed in on three sides by a dense crowd. The People of the Blue Eye might not worry, but he would.

Then for a third time the murmuring broke out. This time there were a great many cheers, most of them sounding genuine and unforced, as Krog and Halda stepped out of the building. The crowd made a path for them as they strode toward the arena, looking neither to the right or left, radiating confidence that their mere presence would clear a path for them. Halda wore her usual display of steel, and today even Krog was armed with a light sword. Blade was sure that in Krog's hands one sword would be more than enough.

At the edge of the arena Krog stopped and looked from Blade to Drebin and back again, drew his sword, and raised it over his head. "The People of the Blue Eye are here met to see the duel between the War Master Drebin and the fighter Blade. The duel shall continue until one or the other be dead. The weapons of nature as well as of human working may be used. I shall be judge. Shall this be so, O people?"

"It shall be so!" came back in a roar from nearly a thousand throats. Even the slaves and onlookers from other gangs joined in to swell the uproar. Blade sensed a blood-lust in the crowd, a blood lust that was

already stirring them at the prospect of seeing a duel to the death. Except for Drebin's supporters they would probably not care in the least who won. If they showed any partisanship at all, it would most likely be for the one who offered them the best show. That might be a key to getting the crowd on his side, Blade thought. He made up his mind to give them the best show possible without risking his own neck in the process.

Drebin's mind was apparently working along much the same lines. He was prancing about like a stallion during the mating season, kicking up gravel with his bare feet, shooting his arms and legs out in straight swift strokes, and leaping half his own height into the air. The crowd was eating it up, cheering almost continuously. Blade stood silent, watching Drebin make an ass of himself, giving away clues to his speed, and wasting energy. Blade was not going to play the showman game in such a silly way. He would save his fireworks for the actual fight.

Eventually Drebin's cavorting was ended by a silent glare from Krog. The war master stood silent, watching Blade. Blade noted that his opponent showed no sign of hard breathing. Then Krog stepped forward into the middle of the arena, raised his voice, and called out to both fighters, "Are you ready?" They nodded. Krog stepped backward to the edge of the arena and raised his sword again. "When I drop my sword, the fight shall begin."

Blade stood flat-footed and outwardly unalert, but he was watching Drebin, like a cat watching a mouse. It would be a fine, showy trick for the war master to attempt a swift, clean kill in the first few seconds of the fight, like a fool's mate in chess. He would have to watch for this. Drebin showed no signs of tension either, but his eyes never left Blade.

Krog raised his sword until the point was aimed straight up at the gray sky and held it there. The murmurings in the crowd died away, and a silence filled the courtyard, hanging like something visible in the muggy air. Then with a snap of Krog's wiry arms, the sword came down.

Drebin moved forward but not in a senseless bull's rush this time. He had seen that Blade was too strong an opponent to make that safe. He came in at a slow sidling crouch, sword held low, well in front of him, a spear raised and held back of the other hand—he was ready for a quick throw. From the way Drebin held his sword, Blade realized that the war master knew how to thrust as well as slash—another trick that would not surprise the man, then. But would he be wise to all the tricks Blade might use? Time to find out.

Blade stalked forward in a crouch that was a mirror-image of Drebin's, his weapons held in identical positions. As he moved forward into the arena, Drebin began sidling to the right. He was trying to maneuver Blade around into a position where Blade could not throw his spear without risk of hitting the crowd if he missed. He himself would have nothing but bare wall to hit if he missed Blade.

Blade closed in, slowly at first. Then just as Drebin was about to throw, he covered the last six feet in a rush. In a criss-cross pattern his sword whipped up and smashed into Drebin's poised spear, knocking up the point and nearly smashing it out of his hand. At the same time Blade jabbed sharply downward with his spear at Drebin's sword arm. The man jerked his arm aside, dropping his guard long enough for Blade to aim a spear thrust at his neck. There was not room enough to bring the point up effectively, but the heavy spear shaft smacked hard into the side of Drebin's neck. Blade saw the man wince. Then he sprang clear. Drebin was too fast and strong to make it safe to stay at close quarters until he had taken a lot more punishment than a bruised neck.

Now it was Drebin's turn to attack, his weapons reversed. His spear jutted low and well out in front of him to thrust home like the ram of a galley. His sword hovered menacingly over his other shoulder, ready

to slash downward. Could Drebin switch a stroke with the blade-heavy Maker sword from a slash to a thrust in mid-flight?

Blade tightened his own defense and watched Drebin move the spear point, weaving a pattern in the air ahead of him. Blade ignored its gyrations and shifted position only enough to keep the war master from drawing an easy bead on him. Then with a whistle of air the sword flashed back and snapped forward with the full stretch of Drebin's arm, coming down in a stroke intended as a single spectacular blow to split Blade down the middle like a log of wood. With a lightning jerk of wrist and shoulder Blade swung his spear forward and sideways to intercept the slash, but not to meet a thrust. The thrust never developed. The sword came straight down on the spear shaft with a clang like a hammer on an anvil. Although the jar nearly numbed Blade's hand, he held onto the spear. At the same time he struck down Drebin's spear and rode in over it with the point of his sword, slashing the left side of the war master's kilt open without touching the skin. Drebin's breath hissed between his teeth as he inhaled sharply, and his face was grim as he backed hastily away. Blade noted that Drebin was prone to over-commit himself to a single line of attack.

So things went on—and on and on and on. Time seemed to stretch from minutes into half-hours, from half-hours into hours, and from hours into an endless, formless time. It seemed unnatural to Blade that twilight was not moving in upon the city, although he knew that it could hardly be more than three-quarters of an hour since he and Drebin had squared off against each other. Both were pouring with sweat in the humid air, and both were breathing hard. But neither showed signs of weakening, and neither had any visible wound.

Blade knew that he and Drebin were evenly matched. If he could not force some change in the pattern of the fight, it might really go on for hours until both were too exhausted to continue. Or perhaps only one of them—and Blade was not completely certain that he would be the one left on his feet. Drebin seemed as tireless as a machine.

Drebin must have reached the same conclusion at much the same time. His spear suddenly rose and flashed forward at Blade. It was aimed low so that if it missed, it would not go sailing into the crowd. Blade was not surprised; he sprang aside with no more than a grazed calf. But as he came down, he was off balance, and Drebin leaped forward and launched a spring kick at Blade's groin.

It almost connected. The hard-soled foot driven by the muscular leg with the whole weight of Drebin's powerful body jarred into Blade's hip bone only a few inches to the right of its target. Blade's efforts to regain his balance were shattered. But he still had his sword and spear. He swung inward with both of them. Again the distance was too close to bring the spearhead into play, but again the heavy metal shaft cracked into Drebin, this time just above the left shin. The sword came down and took a visible chunk out of the man's calf. Blood—the first in the fight—oozed out and mixed with the war master's glaze of sweat. Drebin backed clear, but now he was favoring his left leg and looking down at it.

Blade followed up his newly gained advantage in speed and went over to a continuous attack. Thrust and slash followed in eye-blurring succession. All his speed and strength went into each blow. He was not sparing his strength for the long haul any more. It was time to move in and finish while Drebin was slowed physically and upset psychologically. Most of the war master's victories had been gained without taking even a scratch. The weakened leg would be doing almost as much damage to his morale as to his fighting style.

But Drebin's defense held. As his blows clanged and crashed against Drebin's parries, Blade became aware of another sound in the background—the muttering of thunder, becoming rapidly louder. The sticky heat of the day was about to break in a thunderstorm. In a few more minutes he and Drebin would

be fighting it out in a pouring rain.

The war master was definitely on the defensive now. But though his leg made him less mobile, his iron arms still kept that defense solid enough to avoid any more wounds. Blade knew that it would be impossible to suck Drebin out of his defensive stance by any ruse as simpleminded as the one he had used on the Wakers when rescuing Erlik.

Suddenly Drebin gathered both legs under him and leaped a full yard backward, dropping his sword as he did so. Before even Blade's hair-trigger reflexes could react, his opponent had clamped both hands on his spear shaft in a quarterstaff grip. Then the war master sprang forward again, the spear whirling blurringly ahead of him like the propeller of an airplane. There was another anvil clang as it came down on Blade's thrusting sword, beating it down until its point nearly sank into the ground. Then the spear whipped up and over and came down, the butt end crashing across Blade's left shoulder.

Blade wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the crack of bone as the spear butt came down. He certainly felt his left arm go limp and numb. He let go of his spear. Drebin was trying a rush job now; he might be careless. But could Blade take advantage of that with an arm and shoulder out?

His muscles reacting almost independently, Blade threw himself backward. He raised the sword point high as he came down on his back, rolled and then snapped his sword arm outward to the right. Drebin instantly shifted his grip on the spear for a thrust and raised it high to ram the point down into Blade's stomach. Blade was still rolling back, almost into a half somersault, as the point snapped downward. In the split-second while the point was in mid-air, he rolled back again, both legs fully extended. Both feet slammed full force into Drebin's stomach, simultaneously twisting his upper body frantically to the left so that the descending spear point only gashed his side and then grated into the pebbly earth of the courtyard.

Drebin doubled up and sagged forward. As his head sank down, Blade lurched upright into a half crouch and brought the sword around in a slash at the man's neck. It was a clumsy slash, a feeble one, a poorly directed one. But it was the end of Drebin. Blade felt the crunch of bone as the sword chopped into the spine. The war master jerked like a gaffed fish, gave a gargling scream, fell forward onto his face, and lay still. Any more sounds he might have made were drowned by a cataclysmic roar of thunder directly overhead. Seconds later came pattering drops and then a deluge that pounded down the open courtyard like a waterfall.

Whatever their reaction to Blade's victory, the whole crowd—free people, slaves, visitors, and all—was much too busy with a mad scramble for shelter to do or say much about it. The fighters swung their spears like riot clubs, driving the slaves into their tents. The visitors plunged down from the walls and dashed away to seek shelter in other nearby buildings. The People of the Blue Eye stampeded for the door of the tower. Blade threw a quick glance over his shoulder toward the gate, but there were a dozen fighters already standing in front of it. Besides, how would he find Narlena and snatch her out of this mob scene? He let himself be swept through the door and up two flights of stairs before the torrent of people began to break up as they scattered to their own living chambers.

He leaned against the wall, lungs heaving as they tried to claw in a little air. Then he gently probed his swollen left shoulder, trying to restore a little life and feeling into it. He could see through a window down into the rain-lashed courtyard, now deserted except for the last few slaves scampering into their tents and the guards on post. Drebin's body still lay where it had fallen in the middle of the arena.

Blade's shoulder had just reached the point where he could move it without gasping at the pain, when he became aware of someone standing beside him. He turned slowly and saw Halda standing there. The

look in her eyes as she ran them over his body was even more unmistakable than before. She gave off the air of a she-wolf in heat who has just seen the old leader of the pack fall and presses close to the new leader, trying to wake a response in him.

She wore only her usual brief kilt, and her small, neat, bare breasts were almost brushing against Blade's side. But she did not awaken the response she wanted. For a moment Blade's right hand tightened into a fist to hammer her to the floor. Then reason took over and his fingers unclenched. He could not sign Narlena's death warrant by rejecting Halda. A satisfied Halda meant a safe Narlena, for the time being at least. And he had to be careful to gain time if he couldn't gain anything else.

So he did not resist when Halda pressed herself against him, lips burrowing into the side of his neck, and fingers running up and down over his bare chest. Then they moved urgently up under his kilt, and arousal came. Halda's eyes lit up, and she led him off down the hall toward her chamber. He was wearily confident that he could do as well by Halda as he needed to do.

Chapter Thirteen

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Halda seemed to find Blade more exciting with the blood and sweat from the duel still on his body than she would have otherwise. She was almost insatiable in her demands. But before Blade had exhausted his carefully rationed energies, she had had enough. She was still snuggled close against Blade when she fell asleep.

He looked down at her, and found her more vulnerable and defenseless than ever before. For a moment he could not help feeling a little sorry for her. She was obviously from a different mold than her father, and there must be regrettably little sympathy between them. Krog would be left to bear the burden of his dreams alone. Halda had to seek out what consolation and companionship she could manage in the company of robust barbarians such as the late, unlamented Drebin. If she was warped, it was not surprising.

Blade did not go on feeling sorry for Halda for more than a few brief minutes. He reminded himself that Halda wanted Narlena dead. Halda hated the Dreamer girl already and would hate her even more if she thought her to be a threat to the total possession of Blade. Blade doubted that Krog was much inclined to kill Narlena. He might be too humane, and certainly he would be too aware of Narlena's value as a hostage for Blade's good behavior to indulge his daughter's jealousy this way. Nor did Blade think Halda would go against her father's wishes and kill Narlena or have her killed on her own initiative.

But there was always the danger of Halda's convincing her father that Blade was plotting against him and that Narlena should be killed or at least tortured to punish Blade. Halda was quite capable of conjuring up such a story out of thin air. More important, Krog was almost certainly capable of believing it. The man had not lived and ruled as long as he had among the Wakers without developing a sharp nose for disloyalty and a strong and ruthless hand to crush it when it appeared. No, if Narlena was to be saved, Blade would not only have to go on satisfying Halda but to go on giving every sign of loyalty to Krog in his new position as war master to the People of the Blue Eye.

Fortunately the job was basically one of leading and training their fighting men. That was a job he knew by heart and could do well and even somewhat enjoy, no matter how peculiar the circumstances. It was certainly easy to work with the Waker fighters; under Krog and Debrin they were already fairly well trained in handling their personal weapons and in small-unit tactics. At least they were as well trained as

could be expected under the circumstances—Roman legionnaires they decidedly were not. But did this matter here in Pura, there was nothing to fight but other Wakers, for the most part more inept than they? Obviously not. And Blade was relieved that he did not have to teach any of the Waker fighters their military ABCs. He had not been that lucky with the Dreamers.

As he watched the Waker fighters going through their tactics or practicing long-range spear throwing, he wondered how Yekran and Erlik were doing with the Dreamers during his absence. He had no idea, because the People of the Blue Eye had virtually abandoned raiding since his capture. Instead, their fighters concentrated on the forthcoming war against the other Wakers. The skirmishing between the people and their rivals was becoming more and more intense. Krog was even preparing plans for defending the tower in case some of the other gangs should get together and try attacking first. But only a very few Dreamer prisoners had come in recently, and Blade had no opportunity to talk to them. Nor did he dare ask too strongly for the right to do so, for fear of giving Halda a pretext for denouncing him to her father and getting Narlena punished.

The ignorance was maddening. Had Erlik and Yekran been able to take advantage of this lull to recruit more freely among the wandering Dreamers and step up the training of those they had already enlisted? Or had they and their followers grown complacent, taking the lull to mean that the Wakers were already on the run? If they had assumed the latter, they had doomed the Dreamers as surely as if they had flooded each vault with poisoned gas. When Krog was ready, the People of the Blue Eye would march out, and they would win. After their victory Krog would certainly welcome all the defeated fighters who wished to join him. In a short time he would be able to hurl a force of many hundreds of fighting men against the Dreamers and sweep them away like dust in the wind if they had readied no more than the comparative handful of half-trained fighters Blade had given them.

And the possible consequences of such a Waker victory made Blade shudder. Every day, he watched fighters knock slaves out of their path with backhand blows; every night he lay in bed with Halda and listened to her bloody tales of battles, vengeance, and tortures. There were times when it seemed to him that both Narlena's death and his own would be preferable to continuing to aid these people. Then he reminded himself that the forthcoming war was certain to kill a great many Wakers—far more than the Dreamers could ever have put down in the same time and without any risk to the Dreamers either. And a victory for the People of the Blue Eye would at least be a victory for the one man among the Dreamers who seemed to have some notion of building rather than simply fighting and destroying. Krog's rule in Pura might just possibly be tolerable even to the Dreamers.

Blade did not realize the full depth of Krog's vision for the future until the night the leader invited him up to his private chamber for dinner. It was a frugal meal; Krog was the type of leader unwilling to live better than his followers. Blade's stomach was still muttering hungrily as he sat on the cushions that covered the floor and listened to Krog talk.

Krog rambled back and forth over his life and achievements and to what he hoped to do in the future. He told of his grandfather who had raised him. As Blade had suspected, the grandfather had been one of the Dreamers who threw in their lot with the Wakers when the time of Pura's fall came about. But he had not been a scholar. He had been something even more remarkable—an officer in the security troops. He had been very lucky to survive, considering that the security men were usually killed on sight. But he had survived and taught the grandson he raised his own realism, his own visions of a revived Pura, and the skills needed to survive in the hard, brutal world of the Waker gangs. By the time his grandfather died, Krog had learned much of what he later taught, including his unarmed combat skills and the value of training for the fighters.

The story of Krog's adult years Blade had already heard from at least two dozen different people among the gang. But it was fascinating to hear it told by Krog himself in the way he had seen it over a period of nearly thirty years, the fights and raids, the duels and deadly grapplings with rivals; the friends who had become disloyal or too powerful and so had also been eliminated; the suppression of the Council of Masters in favor of a single leader aided by the war masters, and finally the ten years as leader, not unchallenged, not undisputed, but certainly undeposed.

Gradually he had given the People of the Blue Eye reason to be loyal to him. Drebin had been the last man with enough ambition and enough of a following to be a danger to Krog's leadership. That was why he had arranged the duel. He had expected Blade to win, and if Blade won, Drebin would be dead with none of his followers able to point accusing fingers at Krog. There was a cheerfully cynical note in Krog's voice as he told this story. Now that Drebin was safely dead and the People of the Blue Eye had a new war master, Krog could move on to his great plans.

Some of these plans Blade had also heard more than twenty times in talking with the people. Obviously, Krog did not care in the least whether they were kept secret or not. But once again it made a difference to hear the story from the lips of the man who had conceived the whole notion of the war and what he would do with his victory.

The other Wakers could never stand against the alliance of the Blue Eyes and the Green Towers, even if by some miracle they all united to fight for their lives. Together the two gangs of the alliance numbered well over three hundred fighters. And they were the best three hundred out of all the Wakers, able to fight and certain to win against odds of three or four to one. Krog took victory for granted.

And then? Krog would indeed provide a warm welcome for any Waker who wished to abandon his defeated gang and bring himself, his skills, and weapons over to the alliance. Krog would bind these people loyally to him by generous rewards, to him personally, not to the alliance. And when the right time came, he would use these followers to wipe out the People of the Green Tower. He could not keep the alliance with them stable for long and still carry out his plans. Too many of the Green Towers were the barbaric sort of Wakers, interested in nothing but fighting, killing Dreamers, and looting vaults.

Not that Krog was necessarily against killing Dreamers and looting vaults, especially for food, clothing, gold and jewels, and the marconite crystals. With hundreds of trained fighters behind him, he could in fact do both on a vaster scale than had ever been done in Pura. But he did not want to and hoped he would not have to. Rather, he would threaten to break into thousands of vaults, looting them and killing their occupants. The Dreamers he captured would be frightened into going to where their fellows lay asleep and bringing them into Waking. Then they could be captured without chasing them all over the city or going to the trouble of actually breaking into the vaults.

"What will you do with all these slaves?" Blade asked at this point.

"I will not make them slaves," Krog replied, "unless they force me to do so. I would rather have them be loyal subjects like my fighters. The fighters will protect the Dreamers and teach them to defend themselves. The Dreamers will use the wealth and the machines in their vaults to help the people to a better life. They will teach the fighters how to use the machines themselves. And they will learn how to make more machines. Fighters will marry Dreamer women; Dreamer men will marry Waker women. I will even think of freeing all the Dreamer slaves we already have. In a generation we will be like one people. Each will have learned from the other, and there will be many machines. Then we can start rebuilding Pura." And when Krog said "rebuilding Pura," there was a distant, dreaming expression in his eyes. That expression told Blade more than any ten thousand words that Krog was sincere in what he

said. If the future of Pura had depended entirely on Krog's desire to see it rise again, Blade would have had no doubts at all about that future.

But Krog was only one man, and there were only a handful among the Wakers who understood and approved his plans. He stood like a rock in the middle of the sea. All around him that sea roared and hissed, a sea of simpleminded, blood-thirsty men and women with nothing behind them but generations of bloodshed, privation, and hatred for the Dreamers. They had almost found a leader in Drebin. They might easily find another one in Krog's own daughter. After weeks of sharing her bed, Blade knew that the young woman was a pure, bloody barbarian, even if an intelligent one. In the hour of their greatest victory could Krog control these people and keep them from slaughtering and looting far and wide? That would smash not only Krog's plans for rebuilding Pura but any possibility that the Dreamers could ever do so. Blade didn't think Krog could manage it. Moved as he was by the man's dreams, he came away from the chamber as determined as ever to derail the Wakers' plans.

He walked for a while in the cooler air of the courtyard to clear his head. The interior of any Waker-held building always reeked of soot, smoke, spoiled food, and masses of unwashed humanity. Even Krog's efforts and example had done little for the Blue Eyes. And what good were those efforts anyway, thought Blade sourly, when even his own daughter rejects them? That made him think of Halda, of how she was always waiting for him at this time of night, and how he must go in to her soon if she were not to become suspicious and resentful. He sighed and turned back into the building.

Halda was waiting for him in their private chamber as he came in. She lay sprawled in the pose she usually adopted. It was meant to tell him that her needs were urgent. There was no romance in her and seldom any sense of fun or play, only the rutting urge. But no woman as beautiful as she was—savagely beautiful—could hurl herself at him as she did without arousing a response.

He stripped off his tunic and kilt and lay down beside her on the sleeping cushions. She was still wearing her kilt and two of her knives, one on the right wrist and one on the left ankle. These she never took off, not even at the height of their lovemaking. Blade had often felt the flat coldness of the knives pressed against his skin as Halda's arms and legs locked around him as tightly as the jaws of a trap.

Her eyes flickered toward him as he lay down, but she made no movement. This would be one of the nights when it was up to him to do all the work. He rose on one elbow and bent his head down over her face, brushing his lips gently against hers. Then he pressed harder until he felt her mouth open under his and the hot little puffs of breath that told him she was responding. As he continued to kiss her, his free hand reached across her body and took her right nipple between thumb and forefinger, massaging it gently in a slow circular pattern that drew it up out of the firm breast into a firmer bud and drew out of Halda a soft hissing moan. Her breasts were exquisite, and exquisitely sensitive.

He prolonged the breast play until he could feel her body begin to writhe slowly back and forth of its own accord. He moved his mouth down into the fine-muscled hollow of her slim throat and nibbled and licked the firm flesh there. Now her own hands seemed to drift lightly over onto his body. They toyed with the hair on his chest, then crept downward to his genitals, teasing them upward and outward into a stiff, swollen rod. She was playing the same game she often did: trying to make him come prematurely. So far she had never succeeded, although she had pushed him terribly close more than once. She had skilled fingers and yet more skilled lips.

He replied by moving his own hands downward across her body to her navel, playing with that for a moment, and then leaping his fingers clear over her groin down to her knees. Slowly he brought his hands

back up along the inside of her thighs, plucking, caressing, and stroking to the mat of stiffly curled dark blonde hair over her mound, already damp from her arousal. It became damper still as Blade's fingers played around it, his palm cupped and pressed down with a slow pulse that quickened bit by bit as he felt her responding. The twistings of her body became wilder, her motions coming almost continuously.

At times she insisted on riding him. But tonight she was too far gone to rise away from his hands and swing herself into position. Her muscles bunched, and her thighs almost exploded apart as he levered himself over her and plunged down and in. She was as wet inside as outside; he slid in without the slightest resistance, plunging far deeper than he had intended for the first stroke. Then he raised himself so high that he almost withdrew. Halda's hips jerked as she tried to heave herself upward to keep Blade deep inside her. Blade dropped down again, plunging once more deep inside and settled into a steady stroke. He was moving fast, but he knew that his iron endurance would enable him to keep up for a long time, more than long enough to meet Halda's needs.

It was a hot and sticky night. The sweat soon ran down from Blade's body to mingle with Halda's. She was beyond awareness of what went on around her, almost beyond control of her body. It was heaving and jerking almost continuously as Blade drove himself in and out of her. Her arms and legs came up to curl tightly around his back and buttocks as she sought to pull him deeper and deeper into herself, sought to pull herself higher and higher on the thrusting phallus.

Her breath came in a continuous hiss, a low moaning from deep in her throat occasionally breaking through. Her head thrashed back and forth tossing the blonde curls about. Blade could feel more quickening in her movements. She climaxed with a great wrenching of her entire body, a convulsion that seemed to be as agonizing as it was joyful. Then his own spasm came, triggered by hers. He surged into her in a wild fierce spewing that seemed to drain every cell of his body down through his genitals into her.

Then, before he could make a further move, even to roll off her, a wild cry tore in through the window from the courtyard below.

"Attack! Attack! The Green Towers are attacking! Turn out, turn out!"

Chapter Fourteen

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If Blade had not moved before, he certainly moved now. He flung himself off Halda, off the cushions, and onto his feet in a single, blurringly swift motion, twisting about to locate his clothes and weapons. He put on his kilt, sandals, and weapons belt, not bothering with his tunic. Snatching up sword and spear, he plunged out the door toward the staircase without a word to Halda or a glance back at her. She could take care of herself. His job was down in the courtyard.

The stairs were already jammed with fighters when Blade reached them. Most were already fully armed, and there were no women or children running about, getting underfoot, or distracting the fighters' attention. Krog's and his planning and training for defense had produced some results. Had they produced enough?

He reached the bottom of the stairs and charged out the door, spotting the commander of the courtyard guards approach at a run. The man dashed up to Blade and bobbed his head in a quick salutation.

"Green Towers?" asked Blade. "How many?" He had adopted the clipped speech that was a badge of a

free Waker fighter.

"Don't know for sure," the man replied. "Alarm rocket just went up. Far-away patrols not back yet. Sent five men outside gate to help bring them back safe."

"Good." Blade nodded. "Take charge of the gate. I'll see to getting the men placed on the walls." The commander jerked his head again in acknowledgment and ran off toward the gate. Blade turned back to the tower.

Men were still pouring out of it at a dead run. Some of them were already clambering up the ladders onto the walkway along the inside of the courtyard wall. In the higher windows Blade saw several archers climbing out onto the ledges, bows and quivers in their hands. Then he saw Krog and Halda dash out of the door, both armed to the teeth. He ran to meet them.

Krog was as sparing with words now as any fighter. His eyes swept the courtyard and the soldiers hurrying about it like purposeful ants. He moved back to Blade and nodded. "Good work, Blade. They do as you taught them to do. We should be able to stand off this attack. I did not expect it from the Green Towers, though. They were our allies." He shook his head sadly.

"If they thought they could—" began Blade. But what he wanted to say about the Green Towers' thoughts was stamped into oblivion a split-second later by a tremendous uproar from outside the gate. Pounding feet, the grind and clang of weapons, conflicting war cries—"Krog!" "Green Tower!"—cries of rage and agony, the sound of men running or being hurled against the gate ... On top of the wall the Blue Eye fighters began to join in the shouting and point downward. One of them turned toward the little clump of leaders in the courtyard and bellowed;

"Green Towers! They're outside the gate. They're carrying lad—" A spear flashing up from below drove through his body from behind. He clutched the bloody spearhead protruding from his stomach, looked down at it as if wondering where it could have come from, and toppled forward and down off the walkway to the ground with a crunching thud. Blade saw several of the man's comrades launch their spears downward in retaliation. Screams rose from outside the walls as some of them found targets.

"Don't throw until you have a good target," Blade yelled up to the men on the wall. Spears were now arching over on all three sides as the attackers worked their way around the outside. Spears plunged down from the men on the wall, and arrows whirred from the archers in the tower windows. The Green Towers seemed to have no archers. A good thing, too; a few good bowmen could have picked off a good many men from the walkway.

The walkway was now fully manned. Blade shooed back the remaining fighters and the armed women who came out to join Halda inside the tower, telling them to block off the door. If the Green Towers did get swordsmen and spearmen into the courtyard, Blade wanted to make sure they couldn't charge straight into an undefended tower and slaughter women and children right and left.

Then a harsh, irregular rumbling sound rose above the battle's roar. The sickly yellow light of many torches began to glow over the top of the wall. Several shouts in unison came down from the walkway.

"They're bringing up a-a-a—" The watchers on the wall seemed to have no words for what they saw. Blade sprinted to the nearest ladder and swarmed up it onto the walkway. The men on either side of him cleared a space for him as he flattened himself against and wall and cautiously peered over the top.

Lumbering out of the street that led to the gate came a long cylinder mounted on four solid wheels. A

swarm of men and women in the garb of slaves tugged at it along the side and pushed at it from behind. Whips cracked as Green Tower fighters strode up and down beside it, lashing the bare backs of the slaves. Close behind it strode a number of Green Tower fighters, each pair carrying a long ladder.

Blade swore. Somewhere in the ranks of the Green Towers was a man with sufficient ingenuity to reinvent the battering ram. That long wheeled cylinder could be nothing else. With the mob of slaves pushing it, it would have the gate to the courtyard down in no time. At the same time other Green Towers would be trying to swarm up the scaling ladders and over the walls. The double-barreled attack would sweep the courtyard clear. The tower was not provisioned for a long siege. In a few days the Blue Eyes would be forced to accept slavery or a final fight against desperate odds. If they were going to win, they would have to win out here. He sprang down the ladder and ran across the courtyard.

Already the fighters on the walkway were shouting for more spears, and slaves and young boys were running out of the tower with bundles of them under their arms. Blade caught one of the boys as he sprinted back after delivering his load and shouted in his ear. "Run up and tell the archers to aim at the men pushing the thing on wheels. The Green Towers are going to use it to try to break down the gate." The boy turned pale at the thought and dashed off.

Blade turned to Halda and snapped, "Have the women and men fighters inside pile things on the stairway. If the Green Towers break through, we don't want them to have an easy climb up inside the tower." Halda's face was grim and set as she also ran off.

In the light pouring up from the torches outside the wall, Blade saw arrows flash down from the windows at the slave gang handling the ram. The shooting was good. A chorus of agonized howls rose from beyond the gate. Krog looked toward the gate and shook his head as he listened.

"I don't like killing slaves who are only doing what their masters tell them. I would not have it that way, in time."

Blade shrugged, trying to present a callousness that he did not feel. "If we can kill a few of them, the rest may just break and run or even escape." Krog nodded.

Arrows or not, the slaves at the ram must have gone right on pushing it into position. A minute later the gates shuddered under a tremendous impact that sent echoes rolling around the courtyard. Blade winced and made a quick check of his personal weapons. It looked as if there was going to be hand-to-hand fighting very shortly. That one impact alone had shaken the gate as though an avalanche had crashed against it.

Green Tower war cries suddenly sounded out louder than before. Heads and glinting spear points suddenly appeared over the top of the wall as the first assault parties came up the storming ladders. The defenders on the walkway flung themselves at this new threat, jabbing and throwing their spears. Blade saw one monstrous Blue Eye fighter swing two spears like clubs at two heads appearing one on each side of him. The heads disappeared. Then the man thrust the spears down over the wall and levered the scaling ladders backward. Resounding crashes and a chorus of screams and yells marked when they landed.

But there were too many men coming up the ladders for the defenders to meet. When the Blue Eyes exposed themselves to stab at the attackers and push down ladders, spears would flash up from the ground outside. Blue Eye fighters would crumple down onto the walkway or topple backward off it. One Green Tower man climbed over the wall where the fall of two defenders left a gap and started for the nearest ladder. But as he set foot on the top rung, Krog's tanned arm snapped forward. A spear hurled

with the accuracy of a rifle bullet drove through the man's chest and slammed him back against the wall.

Meanwhile the crashes and booms continued as the ram battered at the gate; so did the screams as the archers sent more arrows whistling down into the packed slaves wielding the ram. Which would break first, the will of the slaves or the gates to the courtyard? Blade sent a messenger up with orders for the archers to be ready to shift fire to the gate if it went down and to Halda to be ready to lead her fighters out.

The gates were grids of thick logs on massive wrought-iron hinges, an impressive creation for the Wakers, who preferred to scrounge from the ruins. But it was giving way under the pounding of the ram, giving way faster than the morale of the slaves pushing that ram. Blade saw the lashings that held the logs together begin to strain and fray. He heard them creak and groan as the resilience of the logs made them rebound from each stroke. Flecks of rust jumped from hinges and bolts as they shook under the impacts.

With a screech of tortured metal, one of the hinges popped completely free of the wall, dangling pathetically in a cloud of mortar dust. Soon the only thing holding the gates against the attackers would be the two massive log bars behind them and the fighters Blade was now assembling in the courtyard. Halda was among them, her face still set and grim. But now there was a blazing battle lust in her eyes. She seemed almost past caring whether the People of the Blue Eye won this fight or lost it, as long as there was a chance for her to get into it.

That chance came in almost the next second. Half a dozen Green Towers burst over the top of the wall, screaming at the top of their lungs. They swept two defenders who desperately tried to block them out of existence with flailing sword strokes. One of the attackers gyrated and pranced so wildly that he fell straight off the walkway onto the ground with a squashy thump. The others moved to cut off a section of walkway. Onto that now defenseless section poured a steady stream of Green Tower fighters, screaming, waving swords, hurling spears, leaping wildly down into the courtyard, or scrambling down the ladders.

Instantly the bowmen in the tower shifted to this new menace. They dropped the first two Green Towers to reach the ground in their tracks. Krog picked off a third man with another deadly spear cast. Then Blade moved in, sword carving a humming path through the air before him, straight at the men swarming off the ladders. Behind him came Halda and her fighters, all of them screaming like madmen and brandishing as many weapons as they had hands to hold.

The sudden counterattack brought Blade straight into the ranks of the attackers before they could react. The first three men in his path died as if they had been shoved against a whirling buzz saw; screams, the meaty sound of steel going through flesh and bone, blood everywhere, and then three bodies on the ground. Their comrades checked their rush and fanned out right and left to meet Halda's fighters in a series of death grapples.

Blade kept on into the center of the Green Towers. The continuous crash of his sword against their frantic parries sounded like half a dozen blacksmiths hard at work. He switched from slashes to thrusts in mid-stroke, always on the move, always pressing home the attack, never giving an inch but forcing the Green Towers back whole yards. Arms were lopped off, heads split, chests and stomachs ripped open by that deadly sword. One or two foolhardy types tried to scramble up the ladder, but Blade chopped one in half before he climbed the third rung. An arrow shrieking down from the tower dropped the other one just as he reached the walkway. Then from right and left Blue Eye fighters stormed along the walkway. The Green Tower ladders outside went crashing down in screams and splintering noises. Those Green Tower fighters who did not leap for safety down the outside of the wall died where they stood or else toppled off into the courtyard. The attack over the wall was broken. Blade ordered some

of Halda's fighters up the ladders to reinforce the walkway and turned back to the gates.

One hinge on either side had now pulled entirely free of the wall. The great central bolt screeched and twisted farther and farther out of shape each time the ram crashed home. In a few more minutes the gate would be held only by the bars. And one of those bars was already beginning to show the splintered white of a crack.

Halda and Krog now joined Blade with a dozen more fighters in their wake. The commander of the gate guard and his little band also joined them. The gate was doomed; the best tactic now was to hit the Green Towers hard the minute they poured through the broken gate. A minute that was fast approaching—both bars were now bending and splitting and giving off ominous cracking noises.

Suddenly the upper bar gave way entirely, falling into two pieces and both pieces crashing down into the courtyard. Instantly both gates sagged backward, shuddering as the ram jolted them again. They slipped steadily downward until they hung drunkenly on the lower bar at a forty-five degree angle to the ground. Shouts, cheers, incoherent raw-throated howls rose up from behind the gates as the Green Towers saw the way into the courtyard open before them. Blade snapped out orders, and the twenty fighters around him formed themselves into a solid block. Their spears bristled forward and to the sides like the quills of a porcupine. That formation would at least persuade the Green Towers not to try a mad rush as they came over the gates.

But the first figures to come over the gate were not Green Tower fighters. Instead the top of the gates was suddenly swarming with men and women, some of them bloody, most of them staggering with fatigue, as they lurched and scrambled forward. All of them wore the filthy garments of slaves.

"What the devil—?" Blade snarled at no one in particular, staring at the onrush of slaves.

Krog hefted his spear. "The Green Towers are driving the slaves ahead of their fighters, to force us to use up spears. We'd better—" but Blade clamped an iron hand down on the leader's arm as he raised it for a throw.

"No, wait—look!" Blade's arm shot out and his finger pointed at Green Tower fighters now scrambling up the ladder into the midst of the slaves. Their swords were flashing, and slaves were going down screaming and even bloodier than before to writhe and kick out their lives. Others clawed with bare hands and feet at the fighters. Blade's voice rose to a triumphant roar. "The Green Tower slaves are revolting against their masters. They're coming to us!" He raised arms and both weapons high over his head and bellowed, "Slaves! We of the Blue Eyes welcome you. To us, to us! Kill your masters and join us!"

The slaves heard him and began boiling down off the gates, hitting the ground at a run, sprinting toward the solid safety of the Blue Eye formation. The Green Tower fighters heard him too and screamed curses and threats. Spears began to whistle toward him. One struck down a fighter standing beside him. Krog heard him and nodded slowly with a frown on his lean face. And Halda heard him, and the glare he saw her aim at him would have boiled an egg in its shell.

But there was no time to argue with her. The slaves were dashing frantically for the protection the Blue Eyes seemed to offer. Blade desperately waved them on toward the greater shelter of the tower itself. The Green Tower fighters were hacking their way through the slaves and rapidly gathering into a formation of their own just inside the gates. As more and more of them clambered over the gates and the bodies of the slaves and joined the formation, it became clear that the Blue Eyes would be badly outnumbered. Blade swallowed and met Krog's gaze with his own.

"How well did you train these—allies?" he asked.

"Too well, I think," replied Krog with a sour grin. "Even so, with equal numbers, we win. But numbers won't be equal."

"Two to one against us already," said Blade curtly. "I'm damned if we'll wait until they've got it up to three to one." His gaze swept over the formation of Blue Eyes. His voice rose in a shout designed to be heard both by them and by their massing enemies. "Spears-out! Pairs-form!" A moment's pause while the Blue Eyes shifted into their fighting pairs as Krog had taught them to do. The Green Towers stared uneasily. Blade and Krog strode out in front of their fighters and together raised their voices in one shout:

"Charge!"

The Blue Eye fighters charged at such a pace that Blade and Krog had to move fast to avoid being trampled by their own men. They angled out to each flank as the formation rolled forward, waving their swords and yelling encouragement to their own men and threats at the Green Towers. The Green Towers flinched. They were already giving ground toward the gate when the charging line smashed into them ...

And over them, and through them, and around them. Spears snapped forward with machinelike precision into the first rank of Green Towers. They screamed and reeled back or went down. The Blue Eyes kept right on going over the writhing or still bodies, swords out and blurring in the air in front of them, second spears held high for a downward stab. A mighty roar of clashing metal and screaming men filled the courtyard. And on either flank Blade and Krog leaped, bellowed, struck, and slew.

The first man Blade ran at flinched away. He saved himself, but he opened a path. Blade plunged through that path, deep into the Green Tower ranks, whirling about like a lethal dervish in a continuous blur of motion. The second rank of Green Towers suddenly found themselves attacked not only by the enemy in front but by this bloodstained giant in their rear. Part of that line broke and scattered. Those with a clear path to the gate scampered for it, leaped up, and vanished into the night. Those who found Blade between them and safety mostly died. Then Blade turned toward the enemy's center.

Here were their best fighters, the men who would not run, who would die where they stood. And die they did, although there were moments when Blade was not sure that he wouldn't die with them. A spear thrust at his face gashed his cheek and missed his eye by a fraction of an inch, and the shock as his down-plunging sword met the metal spear shaft sent a jolt up his arm. But the arm gave first, and the spear dropped down. Blade ran his own spear in through the opening into the man's throat.

Another opponent sprang into the place of the fallen man. This was a fighter nearly as large as Blade himself, armed with a two-handed sword that flashed and whirled like a berserk windmill. It chopped clean through Blade's spear shaft and missed Blade's arm by a hair. But in that split second Blade lunged in under the reach of the huge sword. The swordsman could not shorten his reach enough, and so he died with Blade's knife rammed up under his ribs into his heart.

As the man fell away to one side, a spear flashed so closely past Blade's head that he felt the whuff of disturbed air in his hair. He looked along the line of flight and saw Halda, her arm dropping down from throwing position. On her face was a look of disgust. Quickly Blade swung aside so she would not know that he had seen her. That spear had been aimed at him. If it had hit him, Halda would have told her father that she had been aiming at the swordsman and only hit Blade by accident. Whether or not Krog would have believed his daughter would have meant nothing to a dead man. Was Halda moving toward open hostility? He would have to walk carefully after the battle. A bold or foolhardy Green Tower broke

from the enemy line to challenge Blade. His mind and body snapped back to the business at hand, and soon the man went down.

Eventually the battle came to an end. The Green Tower fighters who had not dashed off into the darkness or knelt and been bound as prisoners lay dead or dying on the ground. Counting those who lay dead in the courtyard with those who lay dead outside the walls, the Green Towers had lost more than two-thirds of their fighting men. By death or by desertion they had also lost many more than a hundred slaves. But there had been far too many Blue Eye losses as well.

"We must put off moving against the other gangs for a time," said Krog, shaking a head made hideous by the caked blood from a cut scalp. The fight over, some of his normal eloquence was coming back. "The Green Towers are no longer a menace. But some of the other gangs may think they have done us so much damage that we can now safely be attacked and defeated. We have many weeks of work ahead of us before we can take the offensive again."

Blade nodded wearily. He wanted only to sit or lie down, wash the sweat, blood, and filth from his body, and sleep for as many hours as possible. He did not care whether Halda shared his bed or not, obviously she would now be looking for any possible opportunity to put him out of the way without her father's knowledge. There would be a great risk in associating with her. But there would be a greater danger to both himself and Narlena in rejecting her. He would have to plod on as before, seeking to take advantage of this delay in Krog's plans. He only hoped the Dreamers would do the same.

At least this battle had been a good night's work for the Dreamers. Blade doubted that Krog would have appreciated being told that. The battle had cost the Wakers close to two hundred fighting men. Not one Dreamer had raised a finger to bring this about, let alone a sword. Yet as he looked at the crumpled bodies and silently counted them, he had to force himself to call this slaughter a victory for anybody. He shook his head. Was it just that he was tired, or was he beginning to get tired of the endless fighting that seemed to be the rule in Dimension X?

Chapter Fifteen

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Blade had no time to wish that he was in a dimension of pacifists and philosophers. After a good night's sleep and a good meal he found that there was too much to do to get the People of the Blue Eye back on their feet and ready for the next round. There was several days' work alone in disposing of the dead of both sides, caring for the wounded, repairing the damaged gates, making and storing new weapons for future battles. Patrols went out to scour the streets and keep an eye on the enemy. If the Green Towers were too busy licking their wounds to keep a proper watch, Krog had plans for leading a surprise attack on their camp some night. Other patrols roamed other parts of the city, watching for activity by other gangs—and by the Dreamers.

By casually questioning men who returned from patrols into Dreamer territory, Blade heard that Dreamer fighters seemed to be more numerous than ever before. Some parts of Dreamer territory where Waker gangs had previously been able to roam unmolested were no longer safe by day or night. There were even reports of the Dreamers building a fort in the southern part of the city. The Dreamers were apparently aware of the shortage of time, in spite of the recent self-inflicted slaughter among the Wakers. Were they still working hard to make themselves strong? Were they working hard enough? Could they work hard enough? Blade did not know. He also knew that he could do nothing to make the Dreamers work faster and harder. Besides, he had other worries.

Krog had considered at length the problem of what was to be done with the hundred-odd Green Tower slaves who had fled from their masters during the battle. Four days after the battle he announced that all Green Tower slaves who had come to the Blue Eyes of their own free will would become free men and women of the people. The men would be trained as fighters. The women would learn the arts and skills of free women. War Master Blade was to have special charge of the ex-slaves to see that their instruction was proper and their treatment good.

Blade admired the humanity of Krog's decision. But he felt that the Blue Eye leader had not thought through his decision well enough before announcing it. Most of the slaves were broken in body and spirit by years of brutality from their former masters. It would be many more years before they could learn either the skills or the pride of freemen. So it would be a long time before they would add to the Blue Eyes' depleted strength. The Blue Eyes' fighters and free women, who had dreamed of the pleasure and labor that could be wrung from this horde of new slaves, were disappointed. Disappointed and angry. Blade did not expect that it would be an easy job to keep the ex-slaves from being mistreated. Nor did he expect to be a popular figure for doing so. A week after Krog had led the People of the Blue Eye to the greatest victory in all their history, there was greater and more bitter muttering against his leadership than there had been in the past five years.

Blade liked even less the fact that Halda was at the heart of much of this muttering. And at the heart of her reasons was her distrust of him. She saw him elevated to the position of protector of a hundred new members of the gang. For her that was seeing him elevated in power and influence to her own level, or even above it. If he won the loyalty of that hundred, he would be an invincible rival for Krog's successor if battle or disease should carry her father off. Blade knew that Halda was quite right. But he had no intention of slacking off in the job which Krog had given him. Now he not only had responsibilities to Narlena but responsibilities to the hundred poor wretches who had fled to the Blue Eyes for safety.

Those new responsibilities brought him an immense amount of new work. More often than not he returned to his chamber at night too exhausted to do anything but drop down beside Halda and fall directly to sleep. Whether she resented this or not, he was not sure. He suspected she did, but between fatigue and his growing revulsion for her, he could not have done anything else.

Along with the extra work came something far more welcome—extra freedom of movement. Before the battle Krog had been just sufficiently uncertain of Blade's loyalty to assign him a pair of guards. Now these were removed. The Blue Eyes were too short of fighting men to spare any watch-dogging for a man who had proved his loyalty to the gang as completely as even the suspicious Krog could expect. Blade was no longer half a leader, half a prisoner. He was Krog's trusted right hand, and he could give orders with Krog's voice and do what he pleased.

Among the things Blade decided to do with his newfound freedom was to see Narlena. Nevertheless, such an undertaking needed careful planning. There was no longer Krog's distrust to worry about. But there was certainly Halda's. Eventually the day came when Narlena was out on a slave working party a few streets west of the courtyard. It was Krog's idea to start cleaning up some of the nearby buildings and enclose them with a wall.

As Blade passed by, sword swinging at his hip, Narlena moaned and began staggering about and holding her stomach. The two fighters guarding the slaves moved toward her with expressions on their faces that Blade didn't like at all. He strode forward and raised his hand and voice together.

"Hold! That is the slave Narlena, is it not?"

The guards nodded.

"She is of particular value to Halda. The lady would not be pleased if anything happened to her. I will take her back to the tower myself." He reached out his hand and Narlena lurched toward and up against him. Half-carrying her as she staggered along, he retreated out of sight around the corner of the nearest building.

Once Blade was sure that the guards were out of both sight and earshot, he nodded to Narlena. She straightened as much as her gaunt and weary body would allow and looked into Blade's face as if she could not believe it was real. One hand, small to begin with and now thin and grimed from many weeks of heavy labor, came up and stroked his cheek. He let his hand rest lightly on her hair, cut close now and caked with filth and sweat, and said, "You are doing well, Narlena." The lightness was in his voice, not his heart. He wasn't sure that she wouldn't break down if he showed too much sympathy. And they had too much to talk about in the short time he could spend taking her back to the courtyard.

She bit her lip for a moment to stop its trembling and then replied with an equally forced lightness, "Not as well as you are, Blade." Then her face froze as cold and hard as a glacier. "I want to stay alive so that I can kill Halda someday!" The flare in her eyes was savage.

Blade nodded. An incredible change had come over this Dreamer girl during her captivity to make her say such a thing. She was no longer weak or interested in keeping life at a distance. She was no longer a Dreamer, at least not a Dreamer of the kind that had fled to their vaults a century before.

"Good," he said. "But first you are going to have to escape and warn Yekran and Erlik of Krog's plans. Do you know the way back to your vault from here?"

"Yes. But I cannot escape now. If I escape when you are taking me back to the tower, Halda and even Krog will suspect you and kill you. They—"

"They will not kill me. I am too important to Krog's plans. And he—"

"He can do nothing if Halda chooses to strike silently and by surprise. She keeps silence before you because you can understand her and be warned by what she might say. But the slaves are only animals to her. She says things about you in front of them, dreadful things. Not in front of me, but the other slaves talk and I hear them."

Again Blade nodded, but reluctantly. The idea of passing up a perfect chance for Narlena's escape simply to avoid risk to himself was revolting. But how great was the risk? He remembered that "accidental" spear during the battle and had to admit that Narlena might be right.

"All right," he said finally. "But you must remember that I cannot get away until you do. Halda will have you tortured to death otherwise. You must escape as soon as you possibly can. I will have one of the new people bring you extra food and water, so that you will get some of your strength back."

"Yes," she said in a small voice. "Do that. But be careful. Please." And she put her arms around him. He held her for a minute. Then he told her to act sick again. Once more staggering as though she could barely stand in spite of Blade's support, they made their way down the streets to the gate and the courtyard. The gate guards waved them in without stopping, for they recognized Blade. But as they crossed the courtyard Blade looked up and saw Halda's face appear in a window on the third floor. Even from a distance it was easy to detect the suspicion and hostility that spread across her face. Blade knew that he had now offered the challenge to Halda. It was now a race between Narlena's escaping and

Halda's taking up that challenge.

Blade spent the next week in a continuous fever of worry and anticipation; worry that Halda would strike, anticipation of finding a moment for Narlena's escape. Three of the women he trusted most among the new people were given the job of sneaking extra food to Narlena. Even from a distance he saw that she was losing some of the wild-animal gauntness of the slaves. He did his own work with more energy and enthusiasm than ever. Krog would have no cause for suspicion and discontent, and he himself would have every excuse for collapsing limply into bed at night. As the days passed without a word or a move from Halda, Blade began to wonder, then hope, and finally suspect that she might allow what he was doing for Narlena to pass unnoticed. Perhaps she no longer cared.

Another damp, hot night that seemed to be all too common during the Puran summer had settled over the city. Lightning flared dimly in the clouds to the north, promising rain and silhouetting the towers of the dead city. Blade was fighting to keep from yawning as Krog rambled on about his visions of the future of the People of the Blue Eye. Not that Krog's visions were so dull or so unpleasant. But Blade had heard them all before. At the end of a long day of training the new fighters every muscle and nerve in his body was crying plaintively for rest.

His muscles and nerves snapped fully alert as the curtains of the chamber whipped open. Halda and four fighters Blade recognized as members of her faction burst into the chamber. Each pair of fighters was carrying a woman bound hand and foot. Blade recognized one of the ex-slaves who had been feeding Narlena and then with a cold chill of fear in his stomach, Narlena herself.

Halda's hand chopped downward like a sword blade. The fighters dropped their burdens facedown on the floor. Blade heard the girl whimper in pain. Narlena was silent even when Halda kicked her in the ribs where she lay. Then Halda stepped forward toward her father and glowered at him.

"Father, this slave has been getting extra food—and the other slave has been bringing it—"

"She is not a slave but a free woman of the People of the Blue Eye," snapped Krog. "Release her at once." His hand was on his sword hilt, and so was Blade's. For a moment Halda seemed ready to launch herself at her own father, with the four fighters at her back taking on Blade. The tension in the room hung like a smelly fog. Then the moment passed, and Halda and the fighters stepped aside as Krog went over to the woman, cut her bonds, and raised her to her feet. He left Narlena lying where she had fallen. Then he turned to Halda. "Now, daughter, what do you wish to tell me?"

Halda took a deep breath to get her temper firmly under control. Then she said in the clipped tones of a fighter, "The woman was bringing food to Narlena. She said that Blade had asked her to do it. She did it because of his good treatment of the ones who were slaves." Even now Halda balked at calling the woman one of the People.

"Did you do this, Blade?" asked Krog without raising his voice.

"I did," Blade replied, keeping his voice at exactly the same calm level. "It seemed to me that Halda was ordering Narlena deliberately starved. I did not wish to provoke a quarrel between you and your daughter by complaining of it to you. I decided to see that Narlena got the food she needed this way." He looked at Krog's face, hoping to see belief but not really expecting it. This story was the best he could think up. But he hardly expected it to be good enough to fool Krog.

It did not. The skepticism Blade feared appeared on the leader's face, and he stood in a frowning silence for a while. Finally he said, "Blade, the Dreamer slaves are no concern of yours. I have said this before. Why did you concern yourself with this one?"

Before Blade could reply, Halda broke in, her voice shrill with anger. "I say it was because he plans to escape and wanted to get this girl out before he did, so that she could not be punished. He cared for her when they were Dreamers together, and he cares for her still. Ask her!"

Krog's frown deepened. "Blade, is this true? No, you wouldn't tell the truth, I think. We will have to get it out of the slave." He bent down and grasped Narlena by the hair, pulling her head up so that he could look into her face. Blade saw that her lip was trickling blood. "Narlena—" he was using her name at least—"—did you and the war master have plans to escape together?"

"No, Master. Why should we?" Narlena was giving a perfect impression of honest bewilderment at a preposterous accusation.

Krog let Narlena's head drop back to the floor. "We shall have to question her. Halda, you are most expert at this. Go and get what you will need, and be quick about it!" Blade was very slightly relieved to see an expression of distaste on Krog's face. Only enough, however, to keep him from vomiting on the spot or killing both Krog and Halda and making a desperate run for it. Krog's humanity had its limits. When it was a question of finding out about a threat to his power, he would do anything to anybody. Blade knew that "anybody" included himself. Or at least it certainly would include himself if Narlena broke under the torture.

Halda tore out of the room at a dead run and was back so quickly that she had obviously run both ways. In her arms was a sickening collection of gleaming instruments whose purpose was unmistakable. She dropped them with a clatter on the floor in clear view of Narlena and knelt down and began rummaging through them. The naked blood-lust in her face kept on threatening Blade's control of both his stomach and temper.

He turned to Krog. "Am I needed for this, Krog? I still have things to do elsewhere this evening."

Krog looked at him for a moment in silence, and Blade's nerves tightened. Had he said too much, confirmed Krog's suspicions? Would Krog's next words be an order to the guards to seize him? If they were, there was going to be a great deal of blood on the floor of this chamber in a short time. None of it would be Narlena's if he could help it.

Krog shook his head slowly. "Stay here, Blade. You have not seen what happens to a person who betrays me. I think it is time you did so." From the granite-hard set of the leader's jaw Blade knew that any further protests or comments by him would be useless and dangerous.

At a barked order from Halda the guards moved to cut Narlena's bonds and flipped her over on her back. Halda knelt down beside the girl, knife in hand, and with a quick slash that took no care to avoid the skin, slashed through her kilt and jerked it away. This left Narlena nude with a thin line oozing red along the front of her left thigh.

"Hold her," snapped Halda, and the four guards moved again, each one seizing hold of one of Narlena's limbs and spread-eagling her on the floor. They pulled so hard that Narlena's contorted face told Blade that her arms and legs were almost being yanked out of their sockets. He swallowed, reminding himself that it was also important—even if a great deal easier—for him to keep a straight face and give no hints of his feelings that Krog or Halda could pounce on. He was ten times more nervous now than he had

been before the battle in the courtyard. And this time there would be no chance to work off the strain by fast action.

Halda knelt beside Narlena again, this time with a large needle glinting in one hand. She held it up in front of her victim's eyes, moved it back and forth over Narlena's body and suddenly jabbed. Narlena gasped, and Blade saw her eyes close briefly as the needle went in. It came out wet with blood.

"Well, slave, are you going to tell me why Blade was sending you food now?" Halda's voice was unsteady. She was obviously aroused.

"I told you already," said Narlena in a small voice. "Liar," said Halda coldly. then in a shriek, "Liar!" The needle jabbed in again. This time Narlena screamed.

Halda was relentless with her instruments—the needle, for what seemed like hours, until Narlena's body was covered with little spots of blood as though she had been attacked by a swarm of leeches; other needles, thrust deep under her fingernails and toenails; pincers and hot irons; something Blade was never able to remember clearly that Halda clamped over Narlena's groin, making her writhe and heave so that it took all the strength of the four sweating guards to hold her down. She did not scream because she had long since lost her voice. Only a rasping, hissing sound came out of her raw throat.

Blade's own throat was as dry as dust, too. But he knew that his stomach would rebel against even a mug of water. Only by keeping his hands clamped across his chest was he able to keep them from moving toward the hilt of his sword.

Krog's face showed no expression during all the torture, although his eyes occasionally flickered in Blade's direction. Each time that happened, Blade managed to meet Krog's gaze with an unflinching, expressionless face. It became an effort after a while. Blade was not sure how much longer he could keep himself under control when Halda finally stood up, her body glazed with sweat and her eyes as dull as if she herself had been tortured. She shook her head.

"Either the slave is telling the truth or she will die before she betrays Blade. There is nothing more I can do." She turned to the guards. "Take the slave back to the slave quarters." The four hefted Narlena and went out. Halda lingered for a moment behind them, turning to Blade with eyes still filled with hatred and distrust as well as the glaze of fatigue. "Why, Blade, why? What could she give you that I could not, that so great a bond could grow up between you? Why?" The last why was almost a scream. Gasping, her breasts heaving, she stumbled out through the curtain leaving Krog and Blade alone.

Krog's expression now changed for the first time in hours. A slow thin smile spread across his face. Blade wished he could return that smile. Krog said quietly, "Much of this I did because if I had refused it, Halda would have gone among her faction. She would have said I was getting soft, that I was giving in to you like a weak old man. And then her faction might have made great trouble for both of us. And for Narlena as well." He paused. "And some of it I did because I was not sure what you were doing. I did suspect disloyalty. I advise you not to make me suspect it again." He nodded in dismissal. Blade went out.

Chapter Sixteen

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In spite of the punishment she had taken, Narlena healed more quickly than Blade would have believed

possible or had dared hope. This was thoroughly good news, for it meant they could make their escape sooner.

It had to be "their" escape now. Blade's original idea had been to get Narlena out and then stay behind long enough to cover her tracks before making his own escape. That was no longer in the cards. Blade didn't know exactly how suspicious Krog was, and he certainly didn't want to find out the hard way. He and Narlena would have to succeed or fail together.

Besides, time was becoming more important than Blade had expected. The former slaves were coming along well in their training; so well in fact that Krog's ambitions were coming to the fore again. The week after Narlena's torture Krog called Blade aside during a training session and asked him if he thought the People of the Blue Eye were ready to take the offensive again.

Blade had expected this question, but it was still a disagreeable one to answer. If he urged Krog to wait, he might once more be arousing the man's suspicions. If Krog placed him under guard again, it would be more difficult to manage an escape. But if he assured Krog that the people were fit for combat and ready to hurl themselves once more against their enemies, Krog might take this as a signal to launch his long-awaited attack on the Dreamers. And the Dreamers needed time badly.

"Well, Krog," Blade said slowly, "some of the new fighters are ready for anything. But most of them will need more time before they will be as good as the original people. Remember, they were starved and weak many of them, before they joined us. It takes a long time to make a half-starved man strong enough to swing a sword for hours on end or tramp all right through the streets of Pura. We do not want to wear them out and use them up the way their former masters did."

Krog nodded, but Blade did not like the skeptical look in the man's eyes. "So. If we should take the offensive in the next few weeks, it would be mostly with the old fighters—you might call them my fighters?"

Blade nodded reluctantly. He suspected a trap lying somewhere in Krog's words. But he had no idea where it might be found.

"While your fighters go right on training, getting better, stronger, more loyal to you. Certainly, certainly." Krog nodded again, and this time there was no mistaking the glint of ironic amusement in the man's eyes. "Blade, I think what you want is to play a very old game. I learned to recognize it when I was only so high." He held his hand about three feet off the ground. "If I play with you, soon your fighters will outnumber mine. Then you can pick up the leadership of the People of the Blue Eye as easily as a child picking up a stone lying in the street. No, Blade, I will not play. And I think you had better be very careful if you want to go on being my War Master. I cannot find anyone as able as you are. But I can find people who will not play games with me."

And that was that. For a moment Blade was almost tempted to throw caution to the winds and rely on his own speed and strength to enable him to kill Krog, snatch Narlena from the slave quarters, and make a run for it. Then the moment of madness passed. He realized that Krog had told him no more than the truth: he was going to have to be very careful. If he lost his post as war master, he would lose his freedom of movement and almost all chance of escape. But if he kept his mouth shut and his eyes open, sooner or later a chance would appear and he could at least snatch at it. There could no longer be an escape carefully planned for weeks in advance. But one improvised on the spur of the moment might work just as well. And even if it didn't, he had no other choice.

So he apologized to Krog and agreed that if the leader thought it was proper, the new fighters could

certainly be included in the next offensive. The ironic amusement disappeared from Krog's face, and he returned to a straightforward discussion of plans. Among those plans was the attack on the Dreamers. Krog mentioned no specific time for it—a small consolation. Then he dismissed Blade, who went back to his work.

The next morning when Blade began his rounds he found that Krog had assigned no less than four guards to "escort" him—two from Krog's faction and two from Halda's. Apparently father and daughter could at least cooperate in keeping an eye on Blade. Blade was not worried, though. He mentally noted the four guards as yet another obstacle in the path of making a fast getaway when the time came. Then he went about his business as if they had been invisible and inaudible, except when he chose to snap orders at them. He would be damned ten times over before he would give Krog or Halda the satisfaction of even thinking that they had cowed or intimidated him.

The days settled back down into a routine of training, inspecting fighters and weapons, discussions with Krog and Halda, and patrols of the area around the tower with mixed squads of new and old fighters. On those patrols Blade was particularly alert. He had seen Narlena go out on working parties even before all her cuts and bruises were healed. If he should meet her somewhere out there in the maze of streets surrounding the tower . . . well, he still went armed.

Finally a summer afternoon came without a cloud in the sky. There was even a brisk wind blowing over the city and blowing away the normal mugginess of its summer climate. Up on top of a ten-story building the wind was even brisker than it had been down on the street level. Blade stepped cautiously up to the crumbling parapet and looked out over the city. The wind blew away the sweat he had worked up in the climb from the street below. Behind him stood the four guards, expressionless and silent. After many days of alternately ignoring and browbeating them, they had given up trying to do anything except stay with Blade or at least in sight of him. That was exactly the way Blade wanted it. The more apathetic the guards, the better for him when the time came to move.

His eyes drifted downward—and he started violently. His hand clenched the parapet so hard that a piece of the rotten stone jerked loose and toppled over the edge. He watched it plunge down a hundred feet and more to land in the street with a faint distant crash. It missed the working party of slaves winding past below by only a few feet. There were about twenty of the slaves, guarded by a half-dozen fighters. Among the slaves, hobbling along halfway down the line, was Narlena.

Trying to keep his excitement from showing either on his face or in his voice, Blade turned around and said to the guards, "Let's go back down. I want to talk to the guards of that working party." He led the way to the stairs without another word, and the guards followed him in equal silence.

Going down the murky, dust-clogged stairs, it was hard enough to keep from breaking into a run. He reached the street and broke out into the sunlight again to see Narlena less than a hundred feet away. There was nothing between them now except the guards of the working party. He forced his feet to stay at a walk. A fast walk, though, one that soon brought him up with the rear of the working party. Now Narlena was only twenty feet away.

His own four watchdogs were behind him. Two guards were at the rear of the party, and two more were in the middle just ahead of Narlena. Ten of the twelve fighters on hand were in a position to move against him quickly. Long odds, but surprise would be on his side. The problem would come once they had broken free—if enough guards were still on their feet, they might wolf-pack him and Narlena, making it extremely difficult for them to make a run for it. And they could not hide and wait for dark—not when

Krog would turn out every man and woman to find them. Only one hope—get out, fast!

They were approaching an intersection. The street running off to the left would take them west, to the edge of the city. Once out in the country, there would be more room to run, hide, eventually circle back across the river, and come into Dreamer territory from the south. The intersection moved closer—fifty feet away, now twenty, now—

Blade lunged forward, sword flashing free of its scabbard, into the back of the guard in front of him in a single sweeping motion. Blade was halfway to Narlena before the falling guard hit the ground, before any of the four guards behind him could do anything more than stare and gape.

Narlena turned toward him as he dashed up to her. He slapped her hard on the rear and pointed down the street. "Run!" he yelled, and swung his sword at the guard on his right as the man rushed at him with spear held high and ready. The sword clanged down off the spear shaft and laid open the man's stomach. He screamed and reeled back, clutching at his blood-spurting midriff. Blade sprang through the line of slaves, dragging Narlena behind him. He chopped down the left-hand guard before the stunned and bemused man could raise his sword. Then he shouted again, this time to all the slaves. "Run! Flee! The People of the Blue Eye are doomed. I go to bring vengeance on them. Vengeance!"

The roaring voice jotted the slaves into action. Blade saw the four at the head of the line lunge at the two lead guards, clawing at the spears as they rose to stab downward. A slave screamed as one spear ran through his stomach, but both guards went down under the clawing hands and kicking feet. A second later Blade heard screaming. He waited no longer; the street lay open before him and Narlena. He pointed west and broke into a run.

A spear whistled past him as they ran. Another skipped off the rocks many feet to one side of them. Then there was nothing but the wind in their ears and the pounding of their own feet on the rubble-strewn streets. The sounds of a savage little battle faded behind them—the slaves and the guards were fighting each other to the death. They would delay the pursuit.

On they ran. Now there was silence behind them and only the empty city lying before them, its buildings steadily dwindling as they moved west. Narlena was keeping up far better than Blade had expected. The hope of freedom and revenge seemed to be pumping super-human strength into her thin, battered limbs. Only the tightness in her face revealed the effort she was making.

Blade's memories of maps and patrols told him that they had about three miles to cover before reaching open country. They were nearing the end of the second mile before Narlena started to flag and slow. Her breath was coming in tortured gasps as she thrashed her arms about wildly. Blade led her off the street and into a building that offered shade from the sun. She collapsed in the dust and lay still. Without the convulsive heaving of her chest Blade would have thought her dead or dying. After a few minutes she sat up and gasped, "Is there any water?"

Blade shook his head. "I couldn't bring any with me. That would have made the guards suspicious."

She nodded wearily. "At least those guards won't bother anybody any more. I kept telling the slaves that they could drag the guards down by sheer weight of numbers any time they wanted to do it. They finally believed me."

"You were responsible for that?" Blade let his surprise show openly in his voice.

"Why not?" she said matter-of-factly. "I have learned much while I was a slave. I am a Dreamer no

longer. I will never be one again, even when we go back to the other Dreamers and lead them to kill every Waker in Pura." Her jaw tightened as she said that. Blade reached out and took her hand.

He sat there holding it silently until Narlena shook herself and said, "Blade, I think I can run again." He helped her to her feet. They went out into the street again, looking cautiously about them for signs of approaching pursuers. For a moment Blade considered climbing to the top of the nearest tall building to get a better view to the east. Then he decided against it. The time it would take might give the pursuit a chance to organize, even to catch up. Getting caught in a building would be the end of them.

They set off to the west again. Now they moved at a steady lope that Blade knew he could keep up for hours and Narlena could manage as far as the edge of the city. Among the buildings were occasional patches of rank grass that had once been parks. Scarecrow trees stood tossing their branches in the stiffening breeze.

Soon they reached the streets where the purple thistles were growing in hedgelike masses from cracks where slabs of pavement many feet square had been heaved upward. The gutters were thick with mud, debris, and dead leaves. Some of the more ruined buildings were completely overgrown by moss, grass, thistles, and even small trees until there was practically nothing to show that a building had once stood there. Finally, there were no more buildings on either side: They slowed their pace to a walk as they passed through the five-century-old arch that marked the western edge of the city.

Beyond the arch lay the open country, green, rankly overgrown where it had once been tamed. The only signs that men had once lived there were the road running west and the occasional villas which dotted the hills and valleys. Stairs ran up to the top of the vine-sheathed arch. This time Blade climbed up it to take a long and careful look back toward the city. He did not expect to see any pursuers. He and Narlena would have a considerable head start on any force the People of the Blue Eye could send out. And the other Waker gangs still had little desire to move about in the daytime.

He saw nothing moving, nothing anywhere in all that wilderness of stone, although he strained his eyes to the limit. But from the top of a tower visible far to the east streamed a long coiling plume of dark blue smoke—the general alarm signal of the People of the Blue Eye. If the pursuit was not yet in sight, it was certainly being organized. Time to move on again.

Blade and Narlena scrambled down the dusty stairs of the arch and headed west along the main road for another half mile. Then they turned south, toward the river. Their path led along a private road leading up to one of the villas and beyond them across the wooded hills. They slipped through the shadows under the trees for half an hour, then reached a sunlit patch of long grass, completely concealed on all sides by tall trees. Best of all, a small, clear stream flowed out from under the roots of one of the trees. Blade climbed another tree and once more checked their rear. Once more he was relieved to neither see nor hear any signs of pursuit.

Here they were well out of sight, and except for the woodcutters and hunters, there were few among the Wakers with much tracking skill in open country. Before Krog could bring his hunters down from the north, Blade and Narlena could easily be safely back in Dreamer territory.

They drank. Blade felt the water pouring down his throat, sluicing away the caked dust from the long run, and restoring life to his aching limbs. Then with Narlena curled beside him, he lay down and slept.

When they awoke, twilight had drenched the forest. They drank deeply again, stretched their cramped, chilled limbs, and moved on again. After half an hour they came out of the forest into open rolling countryside, within a mile of the river.

Toward the east Pura was sinking quietly into shadow—silent, dark, and apparently lifeless. Above the towers the first stars were coming out in the purple sky. Blade handed Narlena one of his knives, drew his sword, and led the way to the river.

Although the country south to the river was almost treeless, their pace was far from easygoing. The hedges that the villa owners had cultivated and kept carefully pruned in the days of Pura's glory had run wild and grown almost to the height of the trees. Vines wound their way in all directions, heavy with overripe berries that poured a sickly sweet odor into the evening air and squashed to slippery, sticky pulp underfoot. Everywhere the purple thistle grew, rank and tangled, clawing at their bare legs with its multitude of thorns. Blade tried to avoid the thistle patches as much as possible, but sometimes there was no way around them, nothing to do but to hack a way through with his sword. By the time they were halfway to the river, both his legs and Narlena's looked and felt as if they had been lashed with barbed wire.

Their goal was a bridge that had once carried a high road running from north to south, a few miles west of the city. If the Wakers had blocked it off, however, Blade planned to swing still farther west until the walls of the gorge dropped down into level country. Then they could easily swim or ford the river. But he hoped they could use the bridge. The faster he got back to the Dreamers and warned them of Krog's plans, the happier Blade would be.

They slipped down the last few hundred yards toward the riverbank as cautiously as if they had been stalking a Waker gang amid the ruins of Pura. In the gathering darkness Blade could see Narlena only as a shadowy form. But the sureness of her step as she moved along beside him was a vivid contrast to the cringing and trembling girl he had led out into the open country for the first time so many weeks ago.

A hundred yards from the entrance to the bridge Blade stopped and motioned Narlena down flat on the ground. Then, sword held ready, he stalked forward. He groped for a firm and silent footing at each step, senses on hair-trigger alert, suspicious of any sign of a hostile presence. If Krog's men were lying in ambush, he could at least give Narlena a chance to make her way into the safety of the darkness and then west and across the river. Step by step now, with longer and longer intervals between steps, the bridge twenty yards away . . .

A sudden eye-searing glare of light as a dozen blue-white beams leaped out of the darkness and pinned him to the spot. Blade's sword leaped high in an instant, and he whirled around, his dazzled eyes trying to make out behind the glare what sort of enemy he faced. Who in Pura could turn night into day like this?

All but one of the lights died, and out of the suddenly returning darkness came a familiar voice. Unbelievable, perhaps, here and now, but unmistakable.

"Blade! Welcome back!"

"Yekran! Is that really you?"

The brawny figure of the Dreamer fighter loomed out of the darkness. Two thick solid arms reached up and clapped Blade on the back.

"Of course it's me, you idiot. Is Narlena—?"

"Still alive and well, and with me."

Blade turned his head toward the darkness behind him and shouted, "Narlana, it's Yekran and some other Dreamer fighters. Come on!"

He turned back to Yekran on legs shaky with the release of tension and shook his head. "All right, Yekran, I believe you. But what the devil are you people doing out here?"

"That's a long story. Let's be on our way home, and I'll tell you on the way. We don't wait around out here even now."

Chapter Seventeen

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As the Dreamer patrol swung along the south bank of the river at a pace that would have done credit to Waker fighters, Yekran told Blade of what had been going on among the Dreamers. Part of the story Blade had already guessed. The simple fact that a Dreamer patrol was operating many miles from home and several miles out in the open country beyond Pura made it clear that the Dreamers had gained much skill and self-confidence since he had been captured. They were no longer afraid of the open countryside but could move about it with confidence and pride.

But there was a great deal more that Blade did not understand—starting with the glaring lights that had sprung at him out of the darkness. Yekran was surprised at Blade's lack of understanding.

"Surely in your home world where you are all Wakers, you must often need to travel about after dark? Do you not use such things? We took a glow-bulb and put it on the end of a long stick. On the other end of the stick we put a cylinder of marconite. Then we connected the marconite to the bulb with wires. Now we can carry daylight with us wherever we go. I do not think the Wakers will like that."

"You haven't used the lights on them before?" asked Blade.

"No. This night was the first time we tried them out. We wanted to wait until we had many of them. That way they would be a surprise to the Wakers when we first used them in battle."

Blade nodded and grinned. Yekran had accidentally hit on one of the basic rules for using secret weapons: don't spring them on the enemy in penny packets. Hit him hard with a lot of them at once.

But there was more. The vaults were opening by the score each night now, and more than a hundred Dreamers were coming in each week. There were now more than a thousand of them in the enclave that Yekran's fighting bands had made safe from the Wakers. Nearly five hundred of them were old enough to be trained as fighters, and nearly two hundred had already been trained. The rest could at least throw spears and stones down from the walls that had been built around the enclave. The walls were made of rubble, dragged into place and piled up by the muscles and bare hands of men and women who realized that their city might rise again. It covered a square two blocks on a side near Narlana's vault.

"You gave us that hope, Blade," said Yekran in a voice full of emotion. "Perhaps there was only a little that we needed to do to save Pura. But we did not think that we could do even that much until you came to our world and showed us that it could be done. Without you this work would never have been started."

Blade was silent. In light of all that the Dreamers had done since he had been captured, he had begun to

wonder if they had really needed him. Had he been wasting his time and risking his life here in Pura without any need to do so? But in light of Yekran's tribute he felt slightly embarrassed.

He swallowed and said with as much lightness as he could, "Perhaps. But if I led, you and your people certainly followed me at a run!" He shook his head.

"What else have you done while I was with the Wakers?"

There were numerous tales of large and small fights, sometimes against such unlikely odds that even the Dreamers' better discipline could not bring them victory but mostly success or at least a draw. There were more peaceful achievements, also. There had been trips into the forests south of the river to bring back wood for the fortifications and new buildings and to hunt fresh meat and fish. The food machines were still working and producing most of the Dreamers' food. But many of them were developing a taste for fresh meat.

"Just like the Wakers," said Blade with a grin.

Yekran's face froze for a moment; then he nodded and broke into a grin, too. "Just like the Wakers, yes."

The Dreamers now knew a good deal about the habits of the Wakers from the large number of Waker prisoners in the enclave. There had been much talk of making them slaves, the way the Wakers had done with the Dreamers. Those Dreamers who themselves had been Waker slaves were particularly set on vengeance. What did Blade think should be done with them?

"I think they ought to be treated well. Given work, yes. They should not be allowed to wander about where they could betray us, but they should not be made slaves. There should be no more slavery in Pura."

"Perhaps," said Yekran. The idea was new to him but apparently not completely unpalatable. "But what about the Dreamers who were once slaves? They hate the Wakers in a way even I cannot believe."

"Tell them this. If the Wakers know they will be made slaves when the Dreamers rule Pura again, they will fight desperately. It will be a longer and harder battle to win Pura back. But if they know that they can surrender and live fairly well even under the Dreamers, they will not fight so hard."

"That makes sense," said Yekran, nodding.

"It does," said Blade. "There is a Waker leader, the one we were all so worried about, named Krog. He has very much the same idea about treating his Dreamer prisoners." Blade quickly told Yekran about Krog, his abilities, and his plans for Pura.

When Blade had finished, Yekran's face was grim. "That man Krog is even more dangerous than we had thought."

"Yes. You and the other Dreamers should not get the idea that there is only a little more to be done before Pura is free again. If I know Krog, he is going to attack you with every fighter from his own gang and as many other gangs as he can persuade to join him. I think he will be able to persuade a good many. They see you getting stronger each day, and they must realize that soon you will be strong enough to attack and destroy them. They will try to destroy you before you become too strong, and that will mean the biggest battle Pura has ever seen."

Yekran nodded again. Then he was silent for quite a long time. As they were turning north again toward the Great East Bridge, which led toward the enclave by the most direct route, he grinned and spoke. "A big attack may be bad news for them more than for us. We can wait for them to come to us and kill them from behind our walls, the way you say the People of the Blue Eye did with the People of the Green Tower. We will not have to go running all over the city after them. And when they come, we will have some surprises for them."

"The lights?"

"The lights, yes, and other things also."

"What kind of other things?"

"We found a scholar named Malud—"

"I thought all the scholars were dead."

"Most of them are, but not all. Malud certainly is not. He was one of the scholars who was working on how to fight the Wakers when he decided to retreat to his vault. He has a great many ideas on new weapons. We have already built some, in fact. You will see them when we reach the enclave."

All the streets leading into the enclave were blocked off by walls of piled rubble ten feet high, reinforced with tree trunks and metal bars. Only in two places were there gates, massively built of wood and rubble, but with heavy steel doors, which had been taken from vaults and hung on new hinges. The amount of work that had gone into fortifying the enclave was incredible. The job would have been completely impossible if it were not for the peculiar architecture of Puran buildings—they had no windows on the first five or six floors except on sides facing enclosed courtyards. Thus it had not been necessary to block off all the lower windows as well as the streets.

Inside the enclave many of the buildings had been cleaned up. They served as living quarters, storage for food, firewood, and weapons, observation posts, and workshops where the marconite lights and the "other things" Yekran had mentioned were being made. There was a continuous bustle of activity with many of the people Blade saw seemingly moving at a dead run. Even after a century of Dreams, Purans could apparently work like demons when necessary.

But not all of the people Blade saw were moving at a run, nor was all the activity warlike. As he explored the enclave, he surprised couples—young and some not so young—sitting in the shadow of the wall or the recess of a window, arms around each other. The Dreamers were discovering some of the interesting things about real life again.

In the workshops, however, all was furious activity. It was there that Blade found the promised surprises, and there were quite a few of them. Bows, for one thing—both crossbows and longbows. The longbows were made of wood from the forests, small and crude. But they would not be ineffective with their bowstrings of woven hair and their arrows fitted with metal vanes and tips. The crossbows, on the other hand, were all metal. Some of their parts Blade recognized as parts of the life-support systems from the vaults. He asked Malud, the scholar and chief weapons designer, about this.

Malud was surprised at the question. "Why should we not use the metal from the vaults for our weapons?" he asked. "If we are no longer going to spend all our time in the Dream vaults, we do not need so many of them."

He said it as though he were explaining to a child why the sun rose or the rain fell. But Blade had to turn away to keep from bursting out a great roar of triumphant laughter in the scholar's face. So the Dream vaults were being cannibalized for weaponry? The Dreamers were coming along faster than he could have hoped in his wildest moments of optimism. In fact, it was almost wrong to call them Dreamers any more. Or for that matter, to use the term "Wakers" either. The battle for Pura was no longer between Dreamers and Wakers. It was a fight to determine the future of the city, a fight between two strong groups of—Purans. Nothing more.

There were the bows. There were the drawings of battering rams. These looked much like the one the Green Towers had used in their attack. There were scaling ladders three and four stories high. And there were siege engines—not just drawings, but catapults and large ballistae that could throw two hundred pound stones several blocks. These machines squatted on the roofs of half the buildings on the outer edges of the enclave. Their crews slept just below, and tons of rock had been laboriously hauled up the stairs and piled ready for use as ammunition.

There was more than stones for them to throw. Malud, Yekran, and Erlik almost glowed with pride as they showed Blade the fireballs. These were large masses of dried thistle stalks woven or tied together and then dipped in a solution of marconite dissolved in one of the chemicals from the life-support systems. A pinch of marconite added to the chemical would make it easy to ignite and almost impossible to approach or put out, so fiercely did it burn. "We have not tried these out either," said Yekran with a savage grin. "But we shall be happy to do so when the right time comes."

Only a week later the right time came. Krog attacked.

Chapter Eighteen

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The attack came by night, but it was no surprise to Blade or the Dreamers. Blade had done his best to make sure that it wouldn't be. There were watchers on top of every building on the outer edges of the enclave and patrols roaming through the streets that led to the Waker towers. The patrols spotted the advance guard of the Wakers when they were still miles away and sent messengers dashing up nearby towers with marconite lights to signal the news to the enclave.

Blade was asleep when Yekran pounded on the door of his chamber. But he awoke almost instantly when the man burst in with a savage grin on his face. "They are coming, Blade, they are coming. The word just came from the sentinels."

Blade stood up, drew a blanket over the half-asleep Narlana, and began pulling on his clothes. "How many?"

"Many hundreds, perhaps a thousand." Yekran almost licked his lips. "They are all coming at us together. Krog must have done what you said he would do—form an alliance with all the gangs against us."

"Yes," said Blade shortly. "And if he has, we are in more danger than you seem to think. They will outnumber us four or five to one in fighters. And most of the gangs do not care about Krog's plan for rebuilding Pura. They only want to kill and enslave Dreamers and loot vaults. If they break into the enclave, it will be a bloody mess!"

"Then we shall make sure that they do not break in," replied Yekran calmly. "Shall we go up to the roof?"

Blade nodded, kissed Narlena, and then followed Yekran out of the chamber. He shook his head irritably. He wished that Krog had attacked at some other time. The Dreamers in the enclave were so over-confident of their new fighting skills and weapons that they might become careless. And when fighting Krog, you could not afford to be careless. Up on the roof they searched the city spread out below them in the darkness. There was only a quarter moon, and it often slipped behind wandering clouds. Faint blue lights from other towers to the north flickered in the blackness—the Dreamer sentinels on distant roofs were signaling the advance of the Waker army. Blade leaned over the heavy metal railing and stared north along the dark streets looking for any sign of the Wakers.

Then he saw it—a ghost-faint flicker of movement along the edges of a wide street half a mile to the north. He waited, eyes fixed on that spot, until a momentary glimmer of moonlight showed a dark mass flowing forward across the street. Unmistakably the moonlight sparked off polished metal.

"I see one column," he said to Yekran. "Crossing Rona Avenue"

"Good," said Yekran. "The watchers reported three, though."

"One of them will certainly come along the riverbank," said Blade. "They will want to cut us off from retreating into the open country. They won't want to let a thousand slaves get away."

Yekran's jaw hardened. "We don't want to retreat. We want to stay here and kill those—" His voice trailed off. Apparently he couldn't think of a word nasty enough to describe the Wakers. They stood in silence for five minutes. A sentinel in a tower overlooking the riverbank signaled that one of the columns was on the move there. A few minutes later the third column also came into sight. It was moving in on the east side of the enclave with scouts out in front.

"The east column will be Krog's, almost certainly," said Blade. "I don't think any of the other gangs know anything about throwing out scouts, unless Krog taught them."

"I would like to meet this man Krog," said Yekran slowly. "I hope we do not have to kill him." Then, briskly, "Well, Blade, I think we know where they are now. Let us go down."

Below, at street level, the frantic bustle and confusion of the first alert was fading as people reached their stations and peered into the darkness. About half the trained fighters and two thirds of the partly trained ones were manning the walls. Blade had the rest organized into a reserve that he could move to wherever the attack was strongest. Everybody who was too young, too old, or too weak to fight had other jobs—carrying water and extra weapons to the fighters, carrying away the dead and wounded. Except for the Waker prisoners, who were locked up in vaults, everybody in the enclave had something to do. The Wakers would be attacking a whole people, not just the fighters. Blade hoped that fact would give the Dreamers the edge they needed—especially with the new weapons. He hoped those weapons worked as well in battle as they had in the tests.

Time crept on. Blade wondered if the Wakers were going to delay their attack until daylight. He doubted that Krog could have persuaded all the other gangs to fight by day. But if he had, things would go badly for the Dreamers. The new weapons would lose half their terror value in daylight.

A figure came out of the darkness and up to Blade. "A message from the commander of the war

machines, Captain Blade. The column on the riverbank is within range now. Can we open fire?" The man wore an expression like a small boy asking if he can open his Christmas presents.

Blade shook his head. "Wait until the eastern column is within range. Then concentrate on them." The man nodded and dashed off.

The People of the Blue Eye would be hardest to scare with the new weapons. But they would also be the most dangerous if they got over the walls. The farther away they could be hit, the better.

The eastern column must have been at very close range when the messenger arrived. Only minutes later one of the catapults went twonggg. Blade dimly saw something soar through the air and drop down out of sight. He could clearly hear the crash as the stone landed, and he thought he heard faint screams and shouts. He swore to himself in frustration. Up on the roofs he could see but not command; down here he could command but not see. He realized he was in the same maddening situation as every general in history who has wanted to see what was going on.

The siege machines went on firing, and the stones went on crashing down into the streets to the east. The fireballs were being saved for a surprise at close range. Blade heard no more screams from the east, however. If the People of the Blue Eye were out there, Krog had probably ordered them to scatter. A minute later another messenger ran up, confirming Blade's suspicions. The eastern column had disappeared, but the other two were still moving in.

Blade grinned. Possibly Krog was going to play the same game he had accused Blade of wishing to play with him. He would get his rivals' fighters killed off and spare his own by delaying his own attack and letting the others go in first. Then Narlena ran up with a message. The column from the riverbank was in sight and coming up the street fast.

"All right," Blade said to Yekran. "You take the northern side. I'm going down to the south."

They shook hands, and he followed Narlena off along the street, first walking, then loping, then tearing through the darkness at a run. Ahead of them loomed the wall at the south end of the street, its top and rear face crowded with Dreamer fighters. They ran past the catapult standing in the street, waved to its crew, ran through the aid squads standing ready behind the fighters, and reached the wall. The fighters manning it turned to greet Blade. As they did so, an ear-splitting chorus of war yells and screams shot up from the street beyond. Blade heard the swelling sound of running feet and clashing weapons moving rapidly toward the wall.

The men with the fireballs in the upper windows didn't wait for orders. Neither did the catapult crew. Two windows lit up with a searing blue-white glare. The two centers of the glare arched out into mid-air, dropping toward the street, trailing twenty-foot streamers of flame, and spitting out sparks like a Roman candle. At the same time the catapult hurled a hundred pound bag of jagged stone and metal fragments clean over the heads of the men on the wall, straight into the oncoming enemy. A very different kind of screaming and yelling now rose from beyond the wall. Blade dashed forward and scrambled up the wall just as the catapult let fly again. He and Narlena flattened themselves on the stones as another bag sailed overhead and crashed into the street.

Looking over the top of the wall, they could see the street beyond lit up by the fireballs. Both of them lay in the street, still sputtering, hissing savagely, and flaring up every few seconds. Men lay writhing and screaming on the pavement or ran howling away, hair and beard trailing smoke and flame. Some of them stumbled and fell over the mangled dead or the dying who had been struck down by the flying debris. As Blade watched, a third bag of fragments smashed down into the street, spewing pieces in all directions,

cutting down more of the running men. The entire head of the attack column seemed to have vanished in less than a minute. But farther down the street Blade could see hundreds more fighters, still brandishing their weapons, still howling threats and war cries. They would attack again.

They did. This time there were three times as many as there had been the first time—moving even faster. Blade could hear their commanders yelling at them to spread out. But trying to get untrained Wakers to change their normal fighting habits in the middle of a battle was hopeless. They came on in the same dense mass as before. More fireballs plunged down into it; more men screamed and shrieked as the flames seared and blinded them. More shots crashed down in the street, solid stones as well as bags of fragments smashing men to the ground, reducing them to pulp before they could even scream. The charge lost half its men as it came down the street.

But the other half was driven by a thirst for revenge and by dreams of loot and prisoners. They kept on coming, charging through the flames, through the flying stones, through the arrows that whistled by their ears and sank into their bodies, over the corpses of their comrades, up to the wall like a wave.

The Dreamers on top of the wall flinched and gave way. For a terrifying moment Blade was alone on top of the wall, Wakers boiling around him so thickly that neither he nor they could lift a weapon. He grabbed the nearest Waker with his bare hands and jerked the man's neck back until he heard it snap. Then he lifted the body and threw it down into the men still climbing up the wall. His sword swung out in a lethal curve, carving chests, stomachs, and faces in a single sweep.

"Come on back up here, you bastards!" he roared at the top of his lungs. "We've got to hold the wall."

The sight and sound of Blade jerked the retreating Dreamers to a stop and turned them into a solid mass. As the Wakers poured down the inside of the wall, stumbling, falling, and yelling like fiends, they ran into the Dreamers coming back. The crash as the two forces ran head-on into each other at full speed echoed in the street and nearly deafened Blade. But he was too busy slashing his way through the enemy close at hand to pay much attention to what was going on behind him.

Stones began to crash down from windows high above as the people up there joined in the fight. They were falling wildly onto both sides alike.

Blade opened his mouth to bellow, "Stop it!" to the fools at the windows. As he did so, a stone plummeted down and bounced off the back of his skull. It was like being hit with a hammer. He staggered as sparks and flame exploded in his head. He nearly went down. A Waker saw him reel and sprang forward, sword raised. But the man kept on going forward, down onto his knees, down onto the top of the wall as a Dreamer leaped up behind him and ran a spear through him. Half-stunned, Blade suddenly realized that he was surrounded by Dreamers, Narlena among them, all around him. Not Wakers! The Wakers were either leaping down the outside of the wall and taking to their heels or kneeling and begging for mercy.

Not all of them received it. The Dreamers' blood was boiling, and more than a few of them went charging straight off into the darkness in pursuit of the fleeing Wakers before Blade could stop them. He cursed them half-incoherently as they dashed past him; they might be running into a trap. Then somebody stuck the spout of a water jug into his mouth. The water poured down his dry throat, and his head began to clear.

As he looked around him, he began to wonder whether there could be enough Wakers left from the attacking column to provide the trap he had feared. He didn't even want to guess at the number of Waker bodies lying in the street on either side of the wall or on the slopes of the wall itself. Not much

under two hundred, certainly. And he could only see about a dozen Dreamer bodies. There must be more, but even if there were two or three times as many, it was still a solid victory. The riverbank column wasn't going to be in shape for another attack for a long time.

He looked down the street to the south and saw the sharp, jagged movements of a battle there. The Dreamer pursuers and the freeing Wakers were fighting it out. The catapult fired again. This time a fireball soared all the way down the street into the middle of the fight. The fight broke apart amid screams and shouts. A moment later there was nothing alive in the street except a dozen or so Dreamers drifting back to the wall, herding as many Waker prisoners ahead of them.

Blade would have liked to stay and greet them. But he had heard nothing of how the Dreamers were doing against the other two Waker attacks, and he had to know. The battle for Pura could still very easily be lost. Calling to Narlena, he strode away up the street, holding his throbbing head as still as he could.

Chapter Nineteen

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Blade and Narlena turned into the street leading back to the center of the enclave and increased their pace to a trot. Suddenly Blade heard running feet approaching, and another messenger dashed up to him.

The man was panting so hard that at first he could not speak. Finally he gasped, "Captain Blade, the other two columns are both in sight but neither is attacking. Captain Yekran wants to know if he should lead the reserves out to attack them."

"No, damn it, tell that id—" Before he could get any further, the dull pain in his head suddenly flared into something savage and pounding. He winced and staggered and would have fallen if Narlena and the messenger had not grabbed him and held him upright.

After a moment the pain faded back to a dull ache, but he could feel the veins in his temples pulsing unnaturally. Lord Leighton was trying to bring him home. The computer had reached out across dimensions for him, for his brain. For the first time in several trips it had missed its first thrust. But it would be trying again, and sooner rather than later it would drag him back to Home Dimension. And damn it, he didn't want to go now! All his work in Pura had been leading up to this battle, and now he might be snatched away in the middle of it and have to leave the overconfident Yekran in command.

The messenger was still holding onto him, staring up into his face, with wide eyes. "Are you feeling all right, Captain Blade?"

"Well enough for the moment. Go to Yekran at once. Tell him that he should not take anybody outside the walls unless I tell him. Anybody." He slapped the messenger lightly on the shoulder. "Run!" The messenger shot off into the darkness even faster than he had come. Blade and Narlena followed more slowly.

They came up through the center of the enclave where the reserves had already heard of the rout of the southern attack. The fighters swarmed around Blade, pounding him on the back, pumping his hand, cheering loud enough to make his head ache even more. Seeing the Dreamers cheering and capering about as if the battle had already been won didn't improve Blade's already short temper. He was on the verge of bursting out furiously at the people around him when suddenly the blue-white light of the marconite lamps poured down the street from the north. A moment later the unmistakable roar of another

battle followed the light. Messengers came pelting down the street, yelling, "Attack! Attack! All along the northern side. They're on the wall!"

Before Blade could move or speak, the entire reserve force was on the move, pouring north like stampeding cattle. The rush nearly swept Blade and Narlena off their feet. Blade waved his arms, struck at people with the flat of his sword, shouted at them to halt, roared threats, and roared curses that would have blistered their ears as thoroughly as any fireball if they had ever been heard over the uproar. He might as well have saved his breath. Most of the reserves kept on at a dead run to the north side of the enclave. As they came pelting up, Blade grabbed Narlena by the arm and dragged her to one side. Then he sprang up on a pile of stones to get a view over the heads of the crowd.

Some of the Wakers here had bows. Arrows were whistling in both directions; Blade saw little swirls in the crowd of reserves as men went down. He sprang down from the pile and pushed his way forward, using his hands, elbows, and voice on the staring, milling crowd. Eventually he got through and up onto the wall.

There were more Wakers here than there had been in the southern attack, but they were not rushing in. Not now, at least. A litter of mangled and charred bodies in the street before the wall showed where they had tried it once. Now they were holding well back at the end of the street, too far for accurate shooting by the catapults, too spread out to make a good target for the fireballs. Blade frowned. Were the Wakers here too demoralized from a single repulse to make another attack? Or were they waiting. And if so, what for?

Yekran spoke from behind him, and Blade spun around. "What's going on here?"

"They came in once and lost about fifty men. We used the lights, and that was a great surprise for them. After that, they went back to the end of the street. They seem to be waiting there for something."

So Yekran had noticed it, too.

His sober voice showed it was bothering him.

"You're right," said Blade. "But we can't do anything about them now. Let's get those damned reserves back where they belong, now! They can't do a thing standing around here like that and gaping."

Yekran nodded and sprang down into the crowd. Blade heard his voice rising loud and clear and profane. A moment later the reserves began to break up and drift back south.

And a moment after that, from the east, came a single great burst of sound. Hundreds of voices were all shouting the same name at once.

"Krog!"

The terrible cry seemed to paralyze every man and woman in sight. Except Blade. He bounded down the wall, ignoring the pains the violent motion sent shooting through his head. Yekran too was already on the move, heading toward the east-west street at a dead run. Blade bulled a path through the reserves and caught Yekran as they both turned into the street. Then they halted.

Streaming toward them came a mob of Dreamer fighters, fleeing in a mad panic from what was behind them. Blade recalled that Erlik had been in command here but could not see him in the confusion. The wall itself was alive with Wakers shouting "Krog!" and "Blue Eye!" at the top of their lungs and pouring

forward. The Dreamers on the roofs continued to hurl down stones, fireballs, and arrows, but the People of the Blue Eye ignored them. And the wall was abandoned! With the wall abandoned, there was nothing to stop Krog's fighters from storming straight into the heart of the enclave.

Blade whirled on Yekran. "Back to the north side. Send all the trained fighters from the reserve down here. Then get ready for another attack from the north. They're trying to hit us from two directions at once."

Yekran vanished at a run. Blade whirled around and faced the fleeing Dreamers, drawing his sword and whirling it high over his head. His voice roared out, louder than even the war cries of the oncoming Wakers.

"Stop and fight, you damned cowards! Do you want to be slaves? Do you want to see Pura in ruins forever? What kind of fools are you?"

Some of the Dreamers, ignored him and pelted right on past him as if he had not been there. But others jerked to a stop as if Blade had thrown a rope around their necks. They turned and stared at him.

"Yes, you!" he bellowed. "Stop and help me, you idiots. We can still win this battle. We can still win Pura!"

Whether they understood his words or only his tone, more of them stopped. Blade pointed back toward the oncoming Wakers and waved his sword again. "Come on, then!" He ran toward the enemy, and a dozen men followed him.

Blade had never been more certain in all his adventures that he was rushing to his death. But even a few minutes delay in the rush of Krog's fighters . . . He stopped worrying about possibilities and fixed his attention on the oncoming Wakers. They had slowed from a run to a fast walk. But in the excitement of being inside the enclave with victory in sight, their discipline was going. They were coming on in a formation as ragged as that of any other Waker gang, fighting pairs scattering and breaking up. Blade saw Halda just behind the front rank, waving her arms and yelling at the fighters. Everyone seemed to be having trouble with discipline.

Blade pulled his little band to a stop just outside accurate spear-throwing range. At the sight of them the Wakers stopped and started pulling their formation into some sort of order. Good. That meant a little delay right there. Then Halda sprang out in front of the line, bloodstained and filthy but so magnificently alive that for a moment Blade almost found himself admiring her.

"Blade," she shouted. "Why are you fighting for these stupid cowards? Come back to the People of the Blue Eye and help my father rule Pura!"

"Do you want that, Halda, or do you just want me to come back so you can stick a knife in my ribs while I sleep? Maybe you're afraid of fighting me here? You'd rather torture more helpless women?"

Halda screamed in raw, incoherent rage, and for a moment she could not say a word.

Blade stepped forward a few feet and shouted, "Let Krog himself come out and tell me this! Then maybe I'll believe it!"

Blade licked his dry lips. He had already delayed the Waker charge by several minutes. If Krog came out, exposed himself . . .

A familiar slim figure pushed his way through the front rank of the Wakers and stood facing Blade, hands planted on his hips. He threw his head back and shouted, "Blade, my daughter speaks with my voice. Come over to us now, and live. Stay where you are, and die!"

Blade nodded. This was going to be delicate. If the Dreamers thought he was really betraying them, one of them might put a spear in his back as he walked toward Krog. But he didn't dare say anything to them.

Slowly he moved forward, a step at a time, arms spread wide, hands empty, sword well-sheathed. Behind him he heard the Dreamers mutter and swear and spit on the pavement. "Who's a coward now?" one of them snarled. He heard a rasp of metal and took another step. He expected to feel a spear tearing through him before he took the next one.

He didn't. There was less than a hundred feet between the Dreamers and the Wakers, but Blade had walked ten miles with less strain and tension. Soon Krog seemed close enough to touch. Meanwhile the thunder of the battle to the north continued. Blade licked his lips. Time, time. Where were those damned reserves he had told Yekran to bring? If this didn't work ...

Krog took a step forward until the two men were only a yard apart. Blade held himself completely motionless, giving no sign of his tension. Krog took another step forward—and Blade moved.

Flat-footed, with no build-up, he launched a kick at Krog's kneecap. The man reacted while the kick was in midair, but he jumped sideways, not backward. He was still in range when Blade launched himself forward. One arm beat down Krog's guard by sheer brute force and the other fist crunched into the side of the man's head. Krog would have gone flying into the air if Blade hadn't grabbed him by the collar of his tunic. Before Blade could make another move; Halda's voice shrieked, "Kill him!" and a building seemed to fall on Blade.

The Wakers did not dare use their weapons while Blade held Krog, for fear of slashing their own leader to pieces along with Blade. For a moment Blade held the unconscious man up as a shield, then half a dozen pair of hands clawed at both of them and snatched Krog away. Blade drew his own sword and had it up in time to ward off a whistling slash. A backhand cut opened one man's neck, a blow to the groin dropped another. Several more went down from wounds inflicted by their comrades. The Wakers were too closely packed to safely swing their weapons the way they were doing. That was all that kept Blade alive, that and his own lightning speed and tremendous strength.

He thrust and slashed and parried in a lethal sequence, constantly changing, murderously unpredictable. He forgot about Krog, forgot about the battle to the north. He forgot about the Dreamers standing by and watching him die; forgot about them so completely he didn't even resent their standing by. Gradually he cleared a space about himself; gradually the men he cut down piled up about his feet or crawled away. Gradually he backed toward the wall so that at least he could protect his back. He took minor wounds, and the blood oozed down over his body until he looked like some nightmarish monster.

The knowledge that he was going to die was stronger than before. He was running out of breath, running out of strength. He fought in deadly silence now. Halda joined his opponents, and her light sword was as quick as a snake's tongue, darting in and out and sometimes leaving red where it fell. Was she just playing with him?

A roar erupted from behind him, a solid thunder of running feet, battle cries, and cheers. The faces around him suddenly turned and stared. Blade bowled a man over by sheer impact and planted his back firmly against the wall. Then an arm lunged up from below and seized his kilt.

Even as he stamped downward with his foot, he knew that this was the end. He was off balance, and Halda was rushing in, sword poised. He twisted frantically. Her thrust at his chest missed, but he knew that his throat was wide open. Then a scream rose above the uproar ...

"She's mine!"

... and the meaty chunk of a spear sank into flesh. Blade twisted again, staring at Halda, watching the sword that had been ready to end his life drop to the pavement with a clang. Both Halda's hands went up to jerk futilely at the spear transfixing her body. Her eyes stayed open for a moment, staring at Blade, then drifted shut as she joined the other bodies on the ground.

Not quite sure if he was sane or not, Blade stood and stared as Narlena and Yekran charged past him, screaming wildly, while a hundred or more Dreamers ran behind them in a solid mass. The charge struck the Blue Eyes like a battering ram hitting a gate. Once again there was a crash that nearly deafened Blade. For a moment the two fighting masses surged back and forth, clawing at each other. The shock of seeing both Krog and Halda go down struck the Blue Eyes, and their discipline and training broke. One more surge forward by the Dreamers and the Blue Eyes were fleeing madly down the street. Arrows, jeers, and a few overly bold Dreamers followed them. Blade was relieved to see Yekran dash after them and bring them back. He also noticed that a good number of the Blue Eyes were surrendering—and recognized many of them as former slaves he had trained himself.

The numbness of battle was gone now. Instead Blade seemed to be feeling everything, sensing everything, more intensely than before. Narlena seemed more lovely than any woman he had ever known as she stepped toward him, looking down at Halda's body.

"I said I would live at least until I killed her," Narlena said quietly. "And I—look, there's Krog!"

Blade's eyes followed her pointing hand. The Waker leader was groaning and struggling to sit up. Narlena drew her knife and looked inquiringly at Blade. Blade shook his head, walked over to the man, and knelt beside him. He felt neither fear nor hatred toward Krog. In fact, he felt as if he were above all human emotion.

Krog's eyes flickered open, looked up into Blade's, and found no expression there. "Do you hear me, Krog?"

"Yes."

"Will you take your gang and all the other Wakers and go far to the north, away from Pura?"

Krog was silent.

"If you agree, I will take your people prisoner when I catch them. If not, they will all die, and then you will."

"All right. We will leave Pura." With a faint smile he said, "I do not know if the Dreamers deserve to have the city, Blade. But I know that you do."

Blade rose. He had to fight to realize that he had actually not captured all the surviving Wakers and driven them out of Pura. He found himself facing Yekran, noticing a long bloody slash across the man's muscular chest and the quiet joy in his eyes.

"We should have come sooner," Yekran said. "But on the north side they just kept coming and coming. I remembered what you once told me about splitting one's forces. So I kept everybody there until the attacks stopped. We used everything we had, and killed more than half of them."

More than half. How many was that, exactly? Blade didn't know. But he knew as if he had seen it engraved on a wall in front of him that the power of the Wakers was broken. They would have to follow Krog north—follow him, or die in Pura. The Dreamers—no, the Purans—would see to that.

But there were still things to be done. His brain was working with unnatural clarity, and he knew it.

"Yekran, give me a light."

"A light?"

"Yes, of course." Why couldn't the idiot see as clearly as he what needed to be done? "Some of the Wakers may be hiding in the buildings. Patrols have to go in after them, bring them out. Give me a light and half a dozen men, and I'll start."

Yekran handed him one of the marconite lights but shook his head as he did so. "Blade, you are wounded and tired. And you have already saved us three times this night. You should lie down and rest."

The word seemed to echo in Blade's mind for a moment—rest, rest, REST—the last echo flaring sharp, agonizing pain in his head. He staggered but kept his face expressionless. Another near-miss by the computer.

"Afterwards, Yekran, afterwards." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked slowly toward the nearest building. The strength seemed to be draining from his legs, but perhaps if he walked very slowly—?

His path took him toward the wall and toward a body lying about fifty feet behind it. A familiar body, among all the strangers. Erlik. The little man who had doubted that Pura could be saved. And he had died helping to save it. His sword was still clutched in his hand, and three Waker bodies lying near him told how well he had learned what Blade had taught. Blade kept on walking, holding the light tightly in both hands.

The pain came again, pulsing harder and harder, increasing steadily as the computer's grasp on his brain tightened. The wall of the building ahead seemed to fade from purple to lavender to white. Then it was transparent, and then it was gone entirely. A great flood of golden light poured out. Blade kept walking past where the wall had been, feeling nothing now, seeing only the golden light. It grew brighter until it was almost blinding him. At the same time a hot wind seemed to be blowing on him from all directions. A strange heat. It did not burn, did not take his breath away. It matched the light though. The light itself was still getting brighter and brighter.

Blade closed his eyes and let the heat envelop him bit by bit until all sensation faded away.

Chapter Twenty

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In the west-bound train Richard Blade unfolded the newspaper, re-read the article in the society column, and grinned. Now that it was no longer a surprise, he could savor the amusing quality of it even more.

Annie was getting married—Annie, the wild and free. Had she simply been having a final fling with him on that cruise? Possibly, since she must have met the fellow she was marrying before that. But Annie must not have been planning to marry him at the time; Blade doubted that she would have sailed with him without telling him about the other man. She was much too honest to play games.

However, that was a rather fruitless line of speculation. What was down in black and white in the paper was very simple. Lady Annette Cecile Pangborn, second daughter of the Earl of -, had announced her engagement (Nobody announced anything for Annie!) to Commander Edward Francis Martin, R.N., currently commissioned on HMS Devastation. Place and date and the other inevitable social details followed.

So Annie was going to marry the C.O. of the Royal Navy's latest thing in nuclear submarines. All things considered, it was a good match—or at least it sounded like one. A Royal Navy officer, particularly one who had qualified for a plum assignment like command of Devastation, would be likely to have the kind of mind Annie would respect. She might even be completely faithful to Commander Martin for as much as five or six years.

For a moment Blade wondered what Commander Martin would say if he learned about marconite and what it might do for submarine design. If the scientists sweating over it now could crack the secrets of the marconite, by the time Martin had put up his fourth stripe, the nuclear submarine might be as obsolete as the battleship. Blade was very glad that it was the scientists who were tearing their hair out over the lamp he had been clutching when he materialized in the computer room. It looked like a long job, one that he wouldn't have for the Crown Jewels of the realm.

In fact, life generally looked very good at this point. After a week of debriefing, interrogation, and all the usual tests—the idea behind some of them apparently being to make him sick if he wasn't already—he was on leave. A summer month in the Cornish cottage would get the knots out of his system. The only minor fly in the ointment was that the MG was in the shop for a new transmission; so he was taking the train down and then renting a car. But he could think of nothing sillier than to complain about that after surviving yet another Dimension X trip. And a remarkably satisfactory one, too. He had done good work for the people there, survived a half dozen battles with no more than comparatively minor wounds, and come back with a major find.

J was happy about that, certainly—particularly the fact that for once he had come back from Dimension X without being maimed, mauled, and mangled half to death. Blade had arrived that way several times before, and he had to admit that it hadn't done much for his own health or peace of mind. It hadn't done much for J's peace of mind either, so Blade was glad to have spared the old man the worry this time.

J was also being spared another common problem. The mission had been simple, straightforward, and it had not, by some miracle, suggested to Lord Leighton six or even two new avenues of research to explore at further expense and further danger to Blade. Even the old scientist had to admit that it would have been nice, no doubt, to have a sample of the life-sustaining gas from the vaults; but they would have to make do with the marconite. Not that Lord Leighton, sour expression or not, was really dissatisfied with the marconite—but he was a perfectionist. He wanted everything to be exactly right, and in that search for perfection he had at times said "Hang the expense!" or "Hang Blade's safety!" The first had brought him into head-on collisions with the Prime Minister, the second with J. But this time Lord Leighton was on good terms with everybody.

A month at the cottage. Then he was going out to the Mediterranean for a few weeks of diving off Smyrna with an underwater archaeologist friend. That wasn't entirely a vacation—his friend was going to teach him the basics of underwater searching for relics. Then if he ever landed in a dimension where all the interesting things were fifty feet underwater, he could dive for them. It was another possibly useful skill he wanted to have—another string to his professional bow—although it would be a damned sight more useful if Leighton could figure out how to send a few accessories through the computer! Such as a face mask and swim fins, for example.

Well, Leighton was working as hard at that as he could manage with all the other subprojects to keep going. Sooner or later he would make a breakthrough. Meanwhile there was another three hours of train ride to get through, and that was a depressing thought! Blade had never liked riding as a passenger, except in an airplane. He bent over to rummage in his briefcase for a book.

He was so busy rummaging that he did not notice the train slow, come to a stop, and the trainman pass along the corridor bawling out the name of a station. What he did notice, a minute later, was that somebody was standing in the door of his compartment. He looked up.

About five feet five and all of it nicely curved as far as he could see inside a well-tailored green suit. Blue eyes, so dark they were almost purple, hair the color and consistency of corn silk. He smiled.

"Excuse me," she said, "is this compartment six A?"

"Yes," said Blade. "You've come to the right place. Here, let me help you with that suitcase." He caught up her brown leather traveling bag and swung it one-handed up into the overhead rack. He sat down, trying not to look at her too obviously.

"My name is Richard Blade," he said. "What's yours?"

"Christine Pohler," she said. There was just a faint trace of an accent. German? Quietly he picked up the book he had pulled out of his briefcase and slipped it back where it had come from. He no longer needed it. This train trip was not going to be nearly as boring as he had expected.