
The Golden Steed

Blade Book 13

by Jeffrey Lord

CHAPTER ONE

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The ringing of the telephone broke Richard Blade's sleep. As always, he was awake in an instant. In his profession those who were slow to awake didn't last long. He reached one long tanned arm out of bed and picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Crawford here." That was his cover name when traveling abroad on personal business. He was no longer an active field agent for the secret intelligence agency MI6. But here certainly must be people who remembered that a "Richard Blade" had been one of MI6's top agents for nearly twenty years. In those years he had done a good deal to give many people scores and grudges against him. If his name showed up nakedly on a Riviera hotel register, some of those people might be tempted to try settling those scores. And Blade preferred to take his holidays without interruptions or excitement. He got more than enough excitement on his new job.

"Ah, Francis," came the familiar paternal voice on the other end of the line. Fuzzed and distorted as it was by the long-distance line from London, J's voice was unmistakable. The old spymaster had been Blade's chief in MI6, and was in an odd sort of way still his chief. "How are you? Riviera agreeing with you?"

"Very much, sir."

"Have anything doing that you can't break off?"

"Nothing in particular, sir." That was approximately true. There had been an American girl, on her way to Oxford. But she couldn't be called particular. Decidedly not. There was an impressive number of hours in that young lady's bedroom log, Blade was sure. "Has business suddenly picked up?"

"Not worth mentioning. But his lordship wants to call a conference on the twelfth to discuss one of the new lines. Number Nineteen, I think he said."

"Very good, sir. I'll be there in plenty of time."

The line went dead. Blade put the receiver back in place and lay back in the bed. Like his identity, his profession was concealed while he was abroad behind a cover story and a code. But there were reasons

for concealing his profession that went beyond his personal safety.

There was no single word to describe Blade's profession, a profession unknown to the public—or so he and J both devoutly hoped. And Blade doubted if there ever would be a word. How can you describe a man whose job it is to travel into alternate dimensions—not quite on alternate Thursdays, but much the same way a deep-sea sailor goes on a long voyage? Blade didn't know. All he knew was that he was the best man in the world today for that job. And he enjoyed it. He had an adventurous temperament, but he had managed to be born in a century when there were few professions that offered that much chance for adventurers. He knew that he was very lucky.

His luck had begun the day that England's most brilliant and eccentric scientist, Lord Leighton, had decided to make an experiment. The experiment consisted of linking a man's brain directly into an advanced computer—or at least what had been an advanced computer then. Compared to what Lord Leighton used now, that first computer was hardly more than a child's toy. Leighton's goal was to radically increase the powers of both the human and the electronic intelligences, each taking strength from the other.

A good idea. Blade rather hoped that one day the original experiment could be carried out successfully. But things had not turned out as the scientist planned. Blade had awakened in a strange, barbaric world in which savage tribes and the votaries of even more savage religions roamed about and warred on one another. Thanks to his training, his muscles, his quick reflexes, and his quicker wits, he had survived and somehow been snatched back to Lord Leighton's laboratory.

Immediately Lord Leighton's original project went aglimmering for here was something ten times as important. The existence of alternate dimensions—Dimension X—had frequently been theorized. Now it had been proved. And now it seemed possible to travel at will into those dimensions, explore them, discover their resources of knowledge and raw materials, bring wealth back to England. It was a discovery of enormous national importance.

So Project Dimension X was born. Lord Leighton's fertile brain created successively more sophisticated computers. The prime minister's authority and political skills produced money and turned aside awkward questions—at least so far. J traveled about on a hundred odd items of needed business. And Blade himself went into Dimension X—twelve times now—explored, wandered about, and helped the people he found there. All twelve times he had arrived in Dimension X naked as the day he was born, and all twelve times he had survived and even flourished by his trained mind and athlete's body.

But perhaps this time would be different. "Number Nineteen" was the code for one of the innumerable subprojects the whole Dimension X business had spawned. Blade had become wearier and wearier of having to contrive even the most basic clothes and weapons when he arrived in a new dimension. After his return from his last trip, he had taken the matter up with Lord Leighton. He had pointed out, among other things, that he was relying too much on luck to keep sending him into these violent worlds stark naked. It was time to start seeing about sending a survival kit through the computer with him. J, who loved Blade like a son, had supported him.

Lord Leighton was used to having his weakness for subprojects criticized. He ignored these criticisms, of course, and plowed ahead. But now both Blade and J were actually urging him to go off on a new tangent. It was commonly believed that the scientist had a smaller version of one of his own computers in place of a heart, but Blade knew this wasn't quite correct. Still, Leighton must have been gratified, because he had gone straight to work on developing the survival kit. And he must have worked like a beaver, if the survival kit was ready so quickly. It had been barely a month since Blade returned from his last Dimension X trip to the warrior people of Zunga.

After breakfast the next morning, Blade checked out of the hotel and drove his rented Renault back into Cannes . There was a flight leaving for Paris at 10:15, and with a good deal of scurrying he just caught it. From Paris , another flight took him on to London . The airport bus trundled him into the city through a dreary late autumn afternoon, gray skies hanging low and threatening rain, fog, or a combination of the two. It was a relief to finally reach his own apartment, unpack his bags, and improvise a dinner.

Then there was a note for his charlady. She would probably wonder why he was dashing off again just after getting back from southern France . But she would wonder privately and quietly. She was not bound by the Official Secrets Act, of course, but MI6 had done a quick and quiet check on her before they let him hire her. The report had come back: the perfectly respectable widow of a sergeant in the Coldstream Guards, anything but a gossip.

There were times when Blade could work up a mood of blazing resentment against all the secrecy that surrounded his life. The Official Secrets Act had smashed his engagement, would probably keep him a bachelor until he retired, and had elbowed its way into his life in all sorts of little ways.

Eventually he went to bed because he couldn't think of anything better to do. When there was another trip into Dimension X coming up, he found it hard to concentrate on anything else. Home Dimension, his apartment with its books and bottles, even the women who shared his bed for a night or a week, all came to seem insubstantial and fleeting.

The heart of Project Dimension X was Lord Leighton's underground complex, two hundred feet below the Tower of London . It included offices, laboratories, a small but well-equipped hospital where Blade was examined and interviewed after each return, and the gigantic computer itself. Guarded on the surface by a squad of Special Branch men and down below by the latest electronic gear, the complex represented an investment approaching ten million pounds.

Ten million pounds, almost every penny of it out of the British taxpayer's pocket, as the prime minister kept reminding Lord Leighton. And as the P.M. commented even more frequently, what had that investment produced? Blade brought something back from every trip, of course. From Zunga he had returned with a ruby the size of a man's fist on a gold chain around his neck. From the land of the Ice Dragons he had returned with the knowledge that somewhere else in the universe there was a non-human intelligent race. But all the wealth, all the knowledge, was in little bits and pieces. There was nothing that the P.M. could show to an inquisitive Parliament to justify those millions of pounds—not yet. As the taxi carried him toward the Tower, Blade was saying to himself, "Perhaps this is the moment of the breakthrough." He had said it to himself the last half-dozen times, and he had been disappointed the last half-dozen times. But sooner or later luck would run his way—and the Project's, and England 's.

Unless it ran out for him? That was possible. He was the only man in the Free World who had gone into Dimension X and returned alive and sane. And there were more times than he cared to remember when he had come closer than he liked to think to not coming back. The prime minister and J had both been sweating blood for the better part of two years on a project to find other men capable of going where Blade had gone. So far all they had was a mass of statistics and not a single man who could make the trip with any real prospect of coming back alive and sane. If they had turned up anyone else, Blade knew he would not be in the taxi on his way to the Tower and the thirteenth trip into Dimension X. Thirteenth? He couldn't help wondering if there would be any notable change in his luck this time.

The morning rush had faded away, and the taxi driver slipped quickly and neatly through London 's traffic

to the Tower. The handful of sightseers who had braved the weather paid no attention to Blade as he climbed out of the taxi and paid his fare. Nor did they pay any attention to the Special Branch men who stepped quietly up to Blade and took him in tow. The Special Branch men were trained to look inconspicuous. This time Blade found their expressionless faces, voices, and even suits getting on his nerves. He realized that he must be tenser than usual, if something so familiar could suddenly start bothering him.

The edginess vanished when the elevator door closed behind him and the elevator car began its two-hundred-foot plunge to the level of the complex. And it turned to cheerful calm when that door opened and he saw J standing in the corridor to greet him. The man's lined civil servant's face creased all over in the wide welcoming smile it always showed when Blade appeared. Who was that ancient Greek who went around in a barrel looking for ten honest men? Blade remembered very little of his classics. Diogenes—yes, that was the one. Well, if Diogenes showed up in England today, he could find at least one honest man in J. A bit surprising, perhaps, considering J's forty years as a spy and a spymaster. Those weren't the world's most honest professions. But it was always the man himself who counted.

And what about Lord Leighton? came an impish question from the back of Blade's mind. What would be the best word to describe the old scientist? Looking for the answer to that question kept Blade's mind busy all the way down the corridor from the elevator to Lord Leighton's office. He still hadn't found an answer when he and J entered the office.

Lord Leighton rose from behind his paper-heaped desk as they entered. His briskness gave no clue to his hunchback, to his polio-twisted legs that yet managed to get him around with surprising speed, nor to his eighty-odd years. His dark eyes threw a sharp, searching look at Blade. Blade felt, not for the first time, that Lord Leighton could probe a man's mind and body with one of those glances. He knew it was a ridiculous idea, but he could never quite get rid of it. He respected Lord Leighton—in fact, he was in awe of some of the man's achievements. But there was no denying the gnome like little scientist intimidated him as much as some of the monsters and human enemies he had encountered in Dimension X.

"Good morning, Richard," said Leighton briskly. "I suppose J's given you the word on Number Nineteen?"

Blade nodded.

"Well, then." Leighton jabbed a button set in his desk. "Pendleton, bring in the survival kit." He turned back to Blade. "J's probably been telling you how he stormed and threatened and thundered at me to give Nineteen a Red One Priority. Nonsense. It's a damned good idea. After all, you're the only one we've got to send off into Dimension X. The only arrow in our quiver, you might say. Nobody else shows any signs of measuring up, at least not yet. So what else is there to do, but try equipping you a little better?" Blade and J exchanged half-amused glances. Lord Leighton had his little vanities, and one of them was his image as a hard, tough, unemotional pure scientist—which both Blade and J knew was nonsense.

At this point there was a knock on the door. "Come in," shouted Leighton. The door opened and two of the laboratory technicians came in, lugging between them a large wooden crate. Blade noted the size of the box somewhat skeptically.

"What did you make for me? A suit of armor?"

Leighton grinned. "Not at all, my boy. Just a few basic necessities."

Lord Leighton's idea of "a few basic necessities" turned out to resemble the equipment of a Himalayan climber. Boots, an insulated suit, three all-purpose knives, a sleeping bag, a hundred feet of light rope, a week's emergency rations, a canteen—the list went on and on. Looking at the growing pile on the floor, Blade was struck by two things. One was Lord Leighton's generous notions of what one man could carry. The other was that everything except the knives was made of natural materials.

The scientist frowned. "Do you think there's too much here?"

"For a hiking trip in rough country, no. I've handled a sixty-pound pack in the Alps with no trouble at all. But I wasn't trying to move fast there. And I certainly wasn't planning on doing any fighting."

J nodded. "Richard's right. You'll have the poor chap loaded down like a World War I infantryman." J, Blade recalled, had been just that, so the old man should know what he was talking about.

"Very well," said Leighton with a smile that seemed almost sheepish. "We didn't have time to get a security clearance for a survival expert. So I read up on backpacking and made up the kit myself. I was largely—ah—guessing." For Lord Leighton to admit to "guessing" was equivalent to most men's admitting they had robbed the Bank of England. Again J and Blade exchanged grins.

"As for the natural materials," Leighton went on, "that's a little less a matter of guesswork. We looked for some common factor in all the items you've managed to bring back from Dimension X, and found it. All of them are very stable chemically, even under the extreme conditions of an inter-dimensional transfer. Natural materials tend to have that same quality, while some of the more common synthetics don't. That's why everything is natural except the knives, and we couldn't very well send you off with wooden knives, could we?"

Blade grinned and shook his head, then got down on his knees and began selecting items out of the pile on the floor. Eventually he picked out the clothing, the emergency rations and canteen, the knives—definitely the knives—the rope, and a light haversack to carry them all. Everything Lord Leighton had put in on the White Knight's principle of guarding against the bites of sharks was discarded. By the time he had finished, the load was down to less than thirty pounds, and Lord Leighton was beginning to fidget.

"Are you ready, Richard?"

"Any time you are, sir."

"Good." Leighton pressed the desk button again. "Initiate main sequence and prepare the transfer chamber." Then he rose and led the way out into the corridor.

Nothing had changed in the main computer room. The computer consoles still loomed gigantic above the men passing among them. They seemed to crowd out against the walls and up against the roof of the underground chamber. Their sullen gray crackled finish was still as immaculate as ever. Leighton was an unashamed fanatic about cleanliness.

Finally they reached the innermost chamber. Here the rubber-padded chair stood in its glass booth. It was waiting for Blade to sit down in it and be hurled, hopefully equipment and all, into Dimension X.

This time, however, there was a change in the long-established routine of preparing Blade for his trip. He still went into the changing room, still stripped naked, still smeared himself all over with a black

foul-smelling grease to prevent electrical burns. He still pulled on a loincloth. But when he stepped out of the changing room, Leighton was waiting for him with a complex harness of leather straps. It was somewhat like the webbing harness blade had used during his military service, and he had no trouble getting it on. When he had done so, Leighton attached the haversack to the chest strap and hooked the boots on the belt. Then he stepped back and surveyed his work.

"You see," the scientist said to J, "we can't risk any irregularities in the electrical field that surrounds Richard as he transfers. So we have to make sure that he stays in the center of the field, and that his gear doesn't interfere with placing the electrodes. Otherwise we might wind up putting only part of him part way into Dimension X. I think that would be rather awkward." J grimaced at the idea. That was one of the long-standing nightmares, shared by everybody who knew what the project was really about. There too luck had been running in their favor—so far. "Or we might not get his equipment through. And what's the good of that?"

Blade sat down in the chair. The weight of the sack on his chest was unfamiliar, and he felt it dragging him forward. But he managed to lean back and relax as Leighton went into the next part of the routine—attaching the cobra-headed electrodes all over Blade's body. The sack made no difference there. Leighton deftly inserted half a dozen electrodes in under it, and two in under each of the boots.

The process of attaching the electrodes seemed to take longer this time. Was Leighton trying to compensate for the extra matter to be sent through the computer by increasing the density of the electrodes? It was an interesting technical point, but not one that particularly interested Blade now. As the actual moment of the transfer approached, his mind as usual was entirely focused on that transfer and what might be waiting for him in Dimension X.

That unknown would never lose its power to excite him. Dimension X was the ultimate gift to a man of Blade's adventuresome disposition. It was never the same on two successive trips. There was a sub-project working to remedy that, and Blade had to admit it was a useful one. How could one properly explore or exploit Dimension X on a hit-or-miss basis? But there were times when he selfishly hoped that the sub-project would never succeed. The idea of a regular commuter run between Home Dimension and Dimension X didn't appeal to him.

While these thoughts were running through Blade's mind, Lord Leighton was scuttling about, making the final checks. At last he stationed himself at the main console, hand poised over the red master switch. He turned to Blade. He did not ask the question out loud this time, but it was plain on his wrinkled face.

Blade nodded. "Ready and waiting, sir."

Leighton's gnarled hand seemed to drift down to the switch, then snap it down in a single sharp motion. As the switch came down, so did total darkness. Silent, chilling, stifling, it blotted out the computer room, Lord Leighton, and J in a single instant.

In the next instant the darkness lifted, and Blade was alone in the center of an enormous silver sphere. A translucent silver though—outside he could see flowing and swooping green and blue shapes. Only shapes—nothing he could recognize. Vaguely he felt that he did not want to get a closer look at them.

Then they faded slowly, as the sphere around him gradually became opaque. Not only was it becoming opaque but it was contracting in on him. And it was beginning to spin. The faster it spun, the faster it contracted. The curving surface rushed in on him from all sides, reached him, folded itself around the contours of his body, writhing and jerking as it did so. Its touch was sterile, cold, and dry. It began to tighten, and kept on tightening until Blade felt his vision dimming and his breath coming with difficulty. His

vision faded still further, and the silver began to turn dark. Blue, gray, black. It was gone, everything around him was gone. Then a sudden chill, and air rushing past him. A smashing blow that seemed to split his head apart. Then a sudden plunge into a new blackness.

CHAPTER TWO

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As consciousness slowly returned, Blade realized that he felt considerably worse than usual. His head felt as if somebody had tried to split it open with an axe, and he felt bruised and scraped and gouged all over. He opened his eyes, but closed them again as sunlight stabbed into his eyes, making him wince and his head throb even more. Finally the pain in his head faded away enough so that he tried opening his eyes again.

Two things struck him immediately. First, that battered feeling was nothing imaginary. His body was covered with welts and scrapes and a thick layer of dirt and dust. Blood had clotted black in several open cuts—fortunately small ones. Second, he was as naked as he had ever been. Not even the loincloth had made the trip. Somewhere between Home Dimension and where he was now, he and his survival kit had parted company.

"Damn it," he said wearily, and lurched to his feet. His head spun and whirled, and he nearly fell flat on his face. Hastily he sat down again, and from a sitting position surveyed his surroundings.

He was on the edge of a dense patch of stout wiry bushes with pale green leaves and smooth black bark. Directly behind him a near-vertical cliff shot up thirty feet, with more of the bushes crowning it. He must have landed on top of the cliff, gone over the edge, and dropped the whole thirty feet into the second patch of bushes below. That was a much narrower escape than he liked to think about. If it hadn't been for the bushes at the bottom—well, a thirty-foot drop onto hard ground laced with rocks could easily have broken his skull or his back. Or it could have merely disabled him, and left him to die slowly of thirst and starvation. As it was, he felt as if he had been worked over by half a dozen men armed with clubs. He stood up and experimentally flexed his limbs. Everything seemed to be in working order. But the effort sent fresh pains shooting through his head. He sat down again and continued his survey.

Ahead of him, the ground dropped away in a rocky forty-five degree slope. At the end of that slope, more than a mile away and nearly half that far below him, a valley floor spread out. Part of it was bare rock and gravel, with a dry river-bed slashing through it. The rest was covered with patches of scrubby bushes and stunted trees. Above the valley floor, steep slopes of jagged blue-gray rock sloped upward to even more jagged ridge lines. Beyond those ridge lines, even higher peaks rose dark against the blue sky except where their tops shone with snow caps. In the blazing sunlight and the clear air, Blade could follow the course of the valley for several miles as it wound away into the distance.

One of his missions as an agent had taken Blade to Iran, so he recognized the type of terrain. He was well up in the foothills of a mountain range, and except for flash floods from melting snow in the spring, rugged, hot by day and cold by night. An ugly, lonely place for a naked man to survive by himself. And a place where a broken leg would have been a death sentence.

Blade put the gloomy might-have-beens behind him and stood up. Down in the valley, the trees would at least provide some shelter from the winds that could easily scour these high, exposed slopes. His eyes roamed over the slope, picking out the easiest route. Then he bent down and snapped a branch from one

of the bushes behind him. It would be useless as a weapon. But it might serve to probe the slope ahead of him for loose rocks. The pain in his head had subsided to a dull ache. He picked the first few yards of his path, and started down.

Thousands of centuries of dry baking heat and freezing cold had done their work on the rock, splitting and cracking it insanely and making it treacherous footing. More than once Blade's probing staff sent apparently secure rocks the size of his head leaping out of place and down the slope. And once an entire slab of rock, ten feet on a side, moved under his foot as his weight came down on it. He had just time to jerk himself backward and cling to the firmer rock above. The slab went grinding and crashing down in a cloud of dust, dislodging more and more rocks as it went, until a small avalanche finally crashed down onto the valley floor.

Being even more careful now, Blade continued downward. He guessed it took him another half hour to reach the valley floor. But after that it was only a few minutes' brisk jogging to reach the first clump of trees. He pulled a branch loose and used some of the leaves to wipe the caked dust and grit from his body, while he chewed on other leaves to get some moisture from them. That might help keep him alive for an extra day or two, but he knew he had to find water soon. He decided to wait until evening, and then move down the valley by night in search of water. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but sleep.

Blade had a mental alarm clock that he could set more or less at will. When it woke him, the blazing sun was well down in the sky. The few wisps of cloud in the west were turning into long streamers of red and gold flame as the sun sank through them. Under the trees the shadows were deeper and longer, and there was a chill creeping into the air. It was time to move on. Blade reached up and broke off a heavier branch to give himself a better staff. With this swinging in his right hand, he headed for the riverbed. It offered the easiest walking, and there might be water lurking in the soil below it.

Blade was halfway to the river when screams sounded through the twilight. First a snarling yowl, with something feline in it. Then an unmistakably human scream of surprise, terror, and agony. And finally the shrill, panic-stricken neighing of a horse, followed by a flurry of hooves. The hoofbeats were approaching rapidly. Blade flattened himself behind a tree and stared off in the direction of the noises. He thought he heard a low rumbling snarl off somewhere in the trees.

Then the hoofbeats rose to a climax, bushes smashed, and a horse burst out of the trees into the open. Blade stared at it. There was nothing unusual about its size and shape. It looked more like an Arabian than anything else. But the color made Blade stare and keep staring. The horse was a pale golden color, not the gold of a palomino but a lighter shade, with a mane and tail that shone like burnished silver. It was breathtakingly beautiful as it burst out into the sunset glow. It wore a bridle and saddle with saddlebags slung on either side. The dangling stirrups and the metal fittings of the bridle were silver, and the saddle was rich maroon leather. Blood smeared across the saddle suggested the fate of the rider.

This was all Blade could see of the horse as it raced past him. It was moving so fast that its momentum carried it over the edge of the riverbed before it could get set to jump. Blade heard it neigh again in panic as it lost its balance and tumbled down the side in a scrabbling of hooves. As he heard it hit the bottom, he also heard something else—the soft padding of approaching feet. Then two eyes glowed in the shadows under the trees. Slowly, slowly, like a cat stalking a bird, a huge leopard slipped out into the open.

Blade knew that he had no weapon to give him any chance against the big cat. It was a monster that must have weighed nearly as much as Blade did, and it had speed and agility and tearing claws and teeth. But he was damned if he was going to let it stalk and kill the golden horse. With the horse under him,

Blade's chances of survival would increase ten times.

The leopard was moving away from Blade now, slipping along the edge of the riverbed, growling as it went. Blade wet his finger and held it up to test the wind. He was downwind of the leopard. If he moved fast and quietly . . .

Crouching low, he slipped out from behind the trees, heading toward the edge of the riverbed and the spot where he had last seen the horse. Once he flattened himself on the ground and froze as the leopard stopped to look about. But it was too intent on stalking the horse to spare much attention for anything else. Crawling inch by inch on his belly, Blade reached the edge and looked over.

Fifty feet farther along, the horse was backed against the far side of the riverbed. It was trembling and there was foam dripping from its mouth, but it no longer seemed panic-stricken. It looked as though it were waiting, alert and ready to fight the leopard. This was a horse with the kind of spirit Blade liked. But more interesting than the horse were the weapons he saw slung from the saddle—a yard-long recurve bow and a six-foot lance. But he could see no quiver of arrows. Blade shook his head. He would much rather take the bow if he could and put an arrow into the leopard. But it looked as if he was going to have to try snatching the lance, then wait for the leopard to close in.

As cautiously as the leopard itself, Blade began stalking the horse, crawling along the slope of the riverbed just below the edge. It took him five minutes to cover half the distance. He was beginning to wonder if the leopard had given up and gone off to seek easier prey. Then he heard the same unmistakable rumbling growl from farther down the bank, and saw the horse flinch.

He kept moving, even more cautiously than before. If the horse fled now, he would be left alone with the leopard, with no weapon and no prospect of getting any. He kept on, until the horse seemed almost close enough to touch. But he could see the leopard crouching on the bank above, just as close. This was going to be delicate. Now he could not afford to startle either of the animals.

Suddenly the leopard gave a louder growl than before. The horse reared, lashing out with its front hooves as if it saw the leopard there in front of it. As it came down on all fours, Blade saw its hind legs dig in. It was getting set to bolt. He had to make his move now.

He sprang to his feet and hurled himself down the bank, nearly losing his footing and sprawling on the hard-packed gravel at the bottom. He kept his legs under him with tremendous effort, reached the horse as it reared up again, and snatched the lance from its leather case.

As the lance came free, a growl came from behind him, turning into a scream. The horse bolted with a neigh and a spray of gravel. The leopard soared into the air as steel-spring muscles hurled it out from the bank, arching high as though it were trying to fly. In midair it seemed to catch sight of Blade, took its attention off the horse for a split-second, and landed on the gravel instead of on the horse's back. For a few seconds it seemed confused and crouched motionless instead of lunging in pursuit of the horse. In those seconds Blade lunged forward himself, the lance stabbing downward. The needle-pointed steel head drove into the leopard's back, just behind the shoulder blades.

It reared up with a scream of rage and pain, forepaws flailing the air. It was so strong that for a moment Blade thought it was going to pull itself free of the lance and turn on him. It twisted and jerked from side to side, until Blade began to wonder if the lance shaft were going to snap. Then it reared up one final time, gave a scream that ended in a gurgle, and collapsed on the ground.

Blade pulled the lance out and hastily stepped back, waiting for any more signs of life. The leopard lay

motionless. Blade picked up a stone and threw it at the leopard's head. It still did not move. With a sigh of relief he turned to look for the horse. He did not expect to find it anywhere in sight. A horse like that could be a mile away in the time it had taken him to kill the leopard.

But surprisingly the golden horse was standing barely a hundred yards away, head up, staring back at Blade and the dead leopard. As Blade watched it, the horse neighed again and began trotting toward him, head still raised. Somehow the horse seemed to know that the leopard was dead and that this tall man standing over the leopard's body was a friend.

The horse came straight up to Blade and nuzzled at him, warm wet breath blowing in his face. Blade ran his fingers through the shimmering silver mane and down across the well-muscled arched neck.

"Think you need some company, don't you? Well, so do I." He went on in this vein for some time, keeping his voice low and soothing and paying more attention to his tone than to his words. Gradually the trembling faded away, and the horse thrust its head at Blade until he could grasp the bridle. The horse tugged at the bridle for a moment, then let Blade lead it over to the bank and up to level ground.

The horse was carrying a quiver on the side that had been turned away from him. But there were no arrows left in it. However, Blade had the lance, and in the saddlebags there were flint and steel, a good stout hunting knife, two large skin bags of water, and several packets of hard bread and dried meat. His own survival kit might not have survived the trip into Dimension X, but luck seemed to have provided him with an almost equally good one, and a horse as well.

But there was that human scream he had heard. The horse's master might be—must be—back there in the trees. Blade knew he would have to look for the man and try to help him before he did anything else. He swung himself into the saddle, feeling the horse flinch at first but then become calm. Then he dug in his heels and urged it up to a walk. Even in the fast-fading light, the horse's hoofprints left a clear trail on the ground. Blade did not have to follow the trail very far. Less than a hundred yards back into the shadowy woods, he saw a dark object sprawled on the ground.

Blade dismounted, tethered the horse to a bush, and knelt to examine the body. The man was dead, his throat savaged by the leopard and his head twisted at an unnatural angle by his fall to the ground. Above the bloody, gapping wound, his face was dark, with a wiry black beard and bristling black mustache. A conical helmet with a mail hood attached had fallen off, revealing close-cropped black hair.

The man's clothes gave few clues as to his rank or profession, but suggested that he was from a people more accustomed to walking than riding. His trousers were tight and his boots obviously designed for rough country, with spiked soles and low heels. A broad leather belt with a silver buckle supported a heavy silk purse and a sword in a jeweled scabbard. Blade drew the sword and examined it. It was not a horseman's sword, not with that heavy straight blade. For a weaker man, it might even be a two-handed sword. The hilt ended in a gold eagle's head with jeweled eyes and an enameled crest. It was not a ceremonial sword, either. The nicks in the edge and the scars on the blade told of much use. The purse contained a handful of gold coins—and a small fortune in jewels, mostly sapphires.

There was a mystery piling up here. Blade didn't understand all of it, and those parts he understood he didn't particularly like. That the man had been knocked off his horse and killed by the leopard was obvious. But before that? Why should a man, apparently of high rank, be riding alone up this desolate valley, far from any signs of civilization? Why the empty quiver, and why the freshly battered sword? Those were the parts Blade particularly disliked. It suggested a recent fight, and then a flight from those the man had fought. The same people might still be around, possibly on the trail of the dead man. They might be many miles off, they might be only a few hundred yards away, invisible in the trees and the

darkness.

Blade did not know which guess was correct, or even which one was likely. But he knew that he was not going to go blundering about in the darkness. There might not be much he could do to defend himself if the unknown enemies came upon him out of the darkness. But he could at least avoid wandering into any ambushes.

He quietly untied the horse and led it into a thicker patch of trees, then tethered it again to a low branch. Then he dragged the rider's body into the same patch, and stripped it of its cloak. He wrapped the cloak around himself and backed out of the grove, brushing away the tracks as best he could with a broken branch. He moved fifty yards up the valley before he found another small grove dense enough to hide him. Crawling under the bushes, belay down and wrapped himself up in the cloak.

He had done what he could. The horse was tethered where any enemies coming up the valley would have to pass it. If it scented them, he could rely on it to give the alarm. And then he could trust to his sword, the knife, and his own fighting skill to give him a chance.

As for the rest, he wished he had more water and something warmer than the dead man's cloak to keep out the increasing chill of the night. But he and the horse would just have to be sparing with water. And he had slept adequately, if not comfortably, in worse weather with less clothing than he had now. He would just have to manage, as was usual in Dimension X. With an odd feeling that he had come home to his proper place, Blade drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

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Blade awoke as the first pale light of dawn hit the hills and the valley. He was stiff with cold, cramped and aching from his curled position. There were bruises on his bruises where stones had dug into his already-battered skin, and every muscle and joint screamed in protest as he rose to his feet. But there had been no sign of any enemy during the night, and a thorough check of his surroundings showed no signs of any now. He had lasted through the night, and now that it was day he could mount and ride out of this desolate valley.

The horse was still tethered safely where he had left it. The body of its late master still lay at its feet. Rigor mortis had set in, and Blade had a struggle stripping trousers, boots, and belt from the rigid limbs and trunk.

When he had stripped the body of everything but the slashed and blood-caked tunic, he stopped to consider whether or not to bury it. Logic and training told him not to waste time. But they could not persuade him to simply leave the man lying stiff and naked to the sky and the carrion birds that he could see already hovering overhead. Finally he carried the body over to the edge of the riverbed, slid it down the slope, then piled rocks on top of it until it was well covered. Let the scavengers try prying the rocks off! He returned to the horse, swung himself up into the saddle, and urged it down the valley.

From the position of the sun, he knew the valley ran roughly east and west. He wanted to go east, toward the invisible but hopefully not-too-distant end of the valley. And then? The simplest solution would be to seek out the dead man's people, with the weapons and purse serving as his introduction.

Too simple a solution, unfortunately. The man's own people might be many hundreds of miles away. He

and his horse both looked as if they had been on the road for a long time. And there were those unknown attackers. They had not appeared during the night, but that did not prove they were not lurking in the next grove of trees along the river bank.

So as Blade rode down the valley, he kept in the open, well away from the river bank and hopefully out of accurate bowshot from the trees. He rode slowly, with his eyes scanning the landscape. Once again there was no point in riding fast, dumb, and happy into an ambush.

It was about seven miles to the foot of the valley, downhill all the way. At a slow cautious walk, it took him nearly two hour's. Several times he spotted signs of the trail the golden horse and its rider must have made coming up, the valley the night before. But there was never any sign of any other men or horses, and no sign of any fight. Not even so much as an arrow stuck into a tree.

As Blade descended into the valley, the air grew unmistakably warmer. The trees were taller here, less gnarled by a constant struggle against drought and wind. The underbrush was also thicker. Blade did not particularly like this. The thicker the vegetation, the more opportunities for men to lie in ambush. Several times he dismounted and scouted ahead on foot, sword drawn and ready. Once his scouting turned up a small spring flowing out from a crack in the rocks. He refilled his water bags there, and let the horse drink as much as it wanted.

The sun was rising higher, and so were the walls of the valley. They now rose almost vertically for a thousand feet, seamed and rugged blue-gray rock with a thin fringe of vegetation high above. The valley floor was in shadow so deep it was almost twilight. The course of the valley kept twisting and winding like a snake's trail.

Eventually the cliffs on either side began to shrink. Looking ahead, Blade could see level country not far ahead. The trees grew not merely in groves but in small forests. He thought he could even see the blue flash of a river running through the greenery.

Now a new danger was coming up. Perhaps the dead man's pursuers had not dared enter the valley. But that didn't prove they had gone off. As Blade reached the last point where the valley walls provided concealment, he dismounted, tethered the horse, and made a scouting trip on foot.

Compared with the grim valley he was leaving, this new land was teeming with life. Snakes wriggled and small animals scurried out from his path as he stalked through the bushes. Birds chattered and screamed in the treetops, and he mentally cursed them. They could easily give the alarm to anyone waiting for him. In places, thick creepers and vines had wound themselves around the trunks of several trees, knitting the whole grove into an impenetrable mass.

There was indeed a river flowing down through this new valley. Blade scouted nearly a mile to its bank, and looked down through the berry-hung bushes growing along the edge into the water. It was a sluggish stream, so shallow that it would hardly have floated more than a child's toy boat. But it was a guide he could follow. Small riverbeds led to larger ones, and larger ones to great ones. And in this type of country, there would be men along the rivers if they were anyplace.

Blade was beginning to wonder about that. For all that he had seen or heard to the contrary, the late rider of the golden horse might be the only man in this whole dimension. And he might have been fighting and fleeing from ghosts. That of course was impossible, but so far there hadn't been any reason to believe otherwise.

Then as he made his way back to the golden horse, he caught sight of a cluster of small birds perched on

the lower branches of a bush. They were twittering and squabbling over something, and Blade saw that that something was a pile of horse droppings—a pile much too neat to be natural. Somebody had been very careful to clean it up and slip it under the bush, hopefully out of sight. Somebody who had passed this way not much earlier than last night. The droppings were drying, but still fresh.

There was no sign of a trail around the bush, but Blade didn't expect any. The ground here was hard enough to resist footprints in most places. And whoever had passed through here would have been careful to avoid any of the softer patches. He returned to his horse and rode out again.

The sun was now high and burning hotly down from a clear sky. Once again Blade kept out in the open as much as possible, eyes ceaselessly probing the landscape on all sides, ready to urge his horse to a gallop. He tried to keep the river in sight as much as possible, but before long the vegetation became so thick that the faint blue glimmer vanished. He reined in his horse, considering whether to risk getting closer to the trees in order to keep the river in sight. The birds seemed to have gone to sleep in the heat of the day, and there was silence all over the land. It was broken only by the gentle breathing of the golden horse.

Suddenly it was broken by a horse's neighing.

Blade froze in the saddle, and his right arm snaked down and jerked the sword free. His head swiveled from side to side, eyes raking the countryside more intently than before. His ears aided his eyes. If that neigh would only come again!

It came again, twice, three times. Other horses echoed the first one, forming a chorus. Blade heard human voices raised in unmistakable anger, cutting into the horses' noise. He could place the sounds now. They were coming from his left, toward the river.

Blade dug his heels into the golden horse's flanks. It leaped forward, working up from a walk to a trot to canter in seconds. As it hit a full gallop, Blade risked a look behind him. There was a continuous boil of motion inside the greenery, and sunlight flashing off metal. Then the bushes parted, and men on horseback started pouring out, some of them still only half in the saddle. For the moment, Blade didn't spend any more time looking at them. He bent low in the saddle and urged the golden horse along.

The wind whistled in his ears and the pounding of the horse's hooves on the hard earth jarred up through his body. He still kept to the open spaces. The horse could move faster there, and he saw no point in trying to lose the men pursuing him. This would be their country. They would know it better than he did. It would be a question of outrunning them. Fortunately the golden horse was fresh and looked strong. He hoped it would be stronger and faster than the horses behind it.

After a time he risked another look behind him. There were at least twenty horsemen in the group after him. They were all riding at a gallop, but the first half-dozen or so were slowly pulling out in front of their comrades. And they were closing the gap on Blade.

As they came closer, he saw that these horsemen were of a different people than the dead rider of the golden horse. They were clean-shaven and apparently bald under flat wool hats, square-bodied and short-limbed. They carried no bows at all, but swords and lances like Blade's. One man in the lead group was whirling a sling around his head. Blade ducked as it sent a stone whistling past him, much too close for comfort. Their clothes were clearly those of horsemen—baggy trousers, loose tunics, riding boots with spurs.

Blade urged his own horse on to a greater speed. The gap between him and the leading pursuers

widened, but they were still close. And then the first half-dozen horsemen began to drop back. Four more pulled out of the mass and began moving up into the lead. They were going to wolfpack him, Blade realized. They could keep rotating the lead, with only a few of their horses having to go flat out at any one time. But they could force the golden horse to keep moving at full speed without a break. No matter how great its endurance, Blade knew it couldn't stand that.

He had thrust his sword back into its scabbard when he broke into a gallop. Now he drew it again, keeping a grip on the reins with his left hand. His eyes scanned the country ahead, looking for a good spot to turn and fight. If he could wipe out one of the groups, it might make the others a little more cautious.

A hundred yards ahead a rocky outcropping jutted from the valley wall, reaching almost to the edge of the trees. Between the rock and the trees was a space barely fifty feet wide. That was as narrow a passage as he was likely to find.

As the golden horse thundered through the gap, Blade pulled its head around to the right. It swung in along the outcropping, invisible to the men thundering up behind it. Almost at the foot of the cliff, Blade pulled the horse back around to the left, in a complete half-circle. He raised his sword as the horse thundered back toward the gap, picking up speed on the slight downslope,

He came down like a whirlwind on the four leaders almost before they saw him, certainly before they could react. His sword slashed downward, shearing completely through one man's neck. The spouting blood drenched his horse, and it panicked, rearing up and blundering into the horse beside it. The second rider yelled in pain as his leg was caught between the two horses. Then he yelled again as Blade chopped him in half.

The golden horse reared. Blade had guessed right. It was a trained warhorse. Its iron-shod hooves crashed into the ribs of a third man's horse. The other horse stopped so suddenly, its rider kept right on going, over its head and on to the ground with a thud. The fourth man drew rein, turned, and headed back for the safety of his comrades. Blade dug his heels in and the golden horse was off again.

Two were dead, one down, and one scared off. But there were still fifteen-odd left, and they showed no sign of giving up the pursuit. More stones whistled past Blade's head. More of the enemy were now using slings. All of the stones seemed to be aimed at him. By crouching low and bobbing and weaving in the saddle, he escaped with only a graze or two. He wondered why they didn't aim at the golden horse, a target far larger and more vulnerable than he was. One stone breaking a leg, and they would have him cold. Perhaps there was some taboo against killing a horse?

The pursuit went on. Blade's brief counterattack had made his pursuers more cautious. The advance group was now hanging further back than before. But this cut both ways. They could not suddenly put on a spurt and overwhelm Blade. But he could not suddenly stop and turn on them. It was down to a straight endurance race, with all the odds in favor of the men behind him.

They covered several more miles before Blade felt the golden horse begin to falter. Its flanks were going in and out like a bellows, foam was thick on its muzzle, and its breath sounded in his ears above the pounding of its hooves. He turned and threw yet another look back at his pursuers. There were five in the lead group now, and their leader was pointing at the golden horse and gesticulating wildly to his followers. Blade would have given a good deal to know what the man was saying. Two more sling shots whizzed past him, one smacking his arm hard enough to leave a red welt.

Then suddenly all five men behind him were spurring their horses on even faster than before. The gap

closed rapidly. As they saw it do so, the other horsemen began to cheer and spur their horses on also.

Blade's mouth set in a hard line, and he licked his dust-coated lips. They would be up with him within minutes and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. The golden horse was almost spent. It was a miracle that it had not fallen in its tracks long before this. It was flesh and blood, not a machine.

And when the pursuers came up with him, there was nothing he could do to save himself, either. There were fifteen of them, and he could kill only so many before going down. It looked as if on this thirteenth trip his luck was finally going to run out. Well, he could at least turn and face them, take some of them with him, and not give them an easy shot at his exposed back.

He clenched his left fist and reined the horse in abruptly. It had strength left to rear and neigh in protest, hooves flailing the air, mouth open. The sudden halt brought the men behind Blade up with him before they could rein in their own horses. They shot past him at nearly full speed, too busy sawing frantically at the reins to have a chance to get their swords out. But Blade's sword was already out, and the sun flashed from the steel as it whistled out in a deadly arc.

If the man after him had qualms about killing his horse, Blade had no qualms about killing theirs. His first stroke smashed down across the muzzle of the leader's horse. The horse went down, sending its rider crashing onto the ground. Before he could rise, one of his followers, rode full-tilt over him. His screams of pain and terror were drowned out by the thunder of hooves. As the second man's horse reared, pawing the air with blood-spattered hooves, Blade swung his sword. It came down on the man's right arm, and the arm jumped into the air and fell to the ground, trailing blood. The man screamed and toppled off the other side of his panic-stricken horse.

Another man rode at Blade and this one had his sword out. Blade struck overhand, and his longer arm and greater strength did the job. The descending sword smashed through the other man's guard and split his face apart like a melon. Blade let the momentum of the heavy sword carry it down and around and back up again. It was up in time to guard against a sideways slash from a fourth man. Blade replied with a similar slash. The man jerked his body sideways and for a moment lost control of his horse. It crashed into Blade's, the shock nearly unseating both riders. But it was the enemy horseman whose sword went flying from his grip. And it was Blade who brought his sword down on the man's head, slicing through the hat as though it were paper, deep into the skull.

The remaining horsemen had now come up, and milled around Blade. The pile of dead or dying man and horses on the blood-spattered ground was enough to keep them from approaching too closely. And they were too closely packed for anyone to wind up a sling for a proper throw. Blade watched them and their wary, cautious expressions with rising hopes. For some reason these people did not dare to simply ride in slashing, to cut him and his horse into pieces by sheer weight of numbers.

But he was still surprised when one of them hailed him. The rolling, clicking gutturals the man was using were as comprehensible to Blade as English. That was no surprise. By now he was used to the computer altering his brain as it sent him into each new Dimension, so that he understood the new language at once. It was the fact of his being hailed at all that surprised him.

"Hail, rider of the Golden Steed," the man said. "You are not Chief Nurash. We see this now. We have no quarrel with you. Give us the Golden Steed, and you shall be free to go."

"Indeed, I am not Chief Nurash," said Blade sharply. "But the Golden Steed is mine. It has already cost you eight men to get this close to me. It will cost you more before I die. And you will not get the Golden Steed even then." He drew his knife and held it to the side of the horse's neck. "I will kill it before I let

you have it."

The horsemen glared at him, and there were muttered curses and remarks.

"Better it die than the Pendari get it."

"But what about our treaty with ..."

"Shut up, you fool! How do you know this man isn't Pendar himself?"

"He doesn't look like one and..."

"Doesn't look like one, you son of a she-pig? Why ..." The man insulted raised his sword and turned his glare from Blade to his comrades.

"Stop squabbling like old women at a well," snarled the man who had spoken first. Then he turned back to Blade. "We will give you one of our horses, and food and water and clothing, if you will give up the Golden Steed to us alive."

"I have food and water and clothing enough," said Blade. "When I have killed you all, I will have even more, and I can walk to wherever I want to go. I am not like you people, so short-legged and hunchbacked that I can go nowhere without a horse under me." Half a dozen swords flew up at that taunt. The leader barked an order, but there was a tense moment before his men obeyed and the swords came down.

For a moment, Blade wondered if he was throwing away a chance for life. But he doubted it, doubted it very much. There was no good reason for these people to let him live after he had given them what they wanted—the Golden Steed. And once he dismounted, they could kill him easily, with no risk to themselves. More important, with no risk to the golden horse. He and the Golden Steed would go together, or not at all.

The leader's face was grim as he looked at Blade, and his hand was tight on his sword. Blade's own face was just as hard. He looked back, not only at the leader, but at the circle of horsemen around him. He was looking for a weak spot or a gap in that line. If he could charge them and break through ... But the golden horse had no strength left for another run. His best bet was to stay here and let them come at him. As long as they didn't dare injure the Golden Steed, he had an advantage.

The leader looked to the right and the left and saw the others in the circle meet his eyes. Eleven swords rose, while eleven mouths opened to shout war cries.

Then Blade heard the thunder of hooves in the distance, and a harsh, brazen horn call. A moment later he heard something else—the swelling whistle and whine of a flight of arrows. And then the arrows arrived.

Two took the leader in the chest, hitting him so hard that he sailed backward off his horse. He seemed to hang suspended in the air for a moment, the mouth that had been open to shout a war cry still open in a shout of surprise and pain. Then he crashed to the ground, kicked twice, and lay still.

Two of his men went down in the same flight of arrows, and a horse jumped and screamed. The circle around Blade held for only one more moment as though the surviving horsemen were too paralyzed to move. In that moment Blade urged the Golden Steed forward. He was heading toward the side of the

circle away from the arrows. The oncoming men might be friendly, but that didn't mean he wanted to ride straight into their arms.

The weary golden horse didn't have time or space to build up much speed. It was barely moving at a walk when it reached the circle. For a moment Blade had a sick fear that he was going to be a sitting target.

But then fear hit the enemy horsemen, and they dug in their spurs and bolted. Blade's sword flashed right, then left, and two horsemen sagged out of their saddles. Blinded with fear, they never saw or knew what hit them. Another looked back at Blade and the archers, just in time to get an arrow from the second flight in his throat. He gurgled and clawed at the arrow for a moment, then his horse dashed headlong under a tree. A low-hanging branch swept him out of his saddle and spilled him to the ground. He lay there writhing and choking, until another arrow put an end to his struggles.

A moment later the approaching hoofbeats swelled to a thunder, and a dozen horsemen came pouring past Blade. He had a brief glimpse of small lean men on similarly small and lean horses. Each had a strung bow in his hands, and was controlling his horse even at a full gallop with his knees. They swept past in a cloud of dust. As they did so, Blade saw the bows bend and then snap straight a third time, and another flight of arrows winged off, black against the sunlit sky. Distant screams of men and horses told of more arrows finding their targets.

The horse archers did not slow or slacken their pace until they were almost out of sight. As they pounded away into the distance, Blade saw some of them sling their bows on their backs and break out lances. Each time they passed the body of an enemy lying on the ground, two or three would stop and jab the lances into him several times. Finally they all stopped, then turned and rode back toward Blade.

Blade had dismounted by this time. There was no point to imposing his two hundred pounds of muscle and bone on the exhausted horse any longer. If the horse archers proved hostile, he would have no more chance of escaping on horseback than on foot. Not with his mount exhausted. Not with the new enemies armed with bows that could pick him off like a duck on the wing fifty yards away. And they might not be hostile. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" wasn't always something one could rely on. But it was at least a reasonable starting point.

The horsemen rode toward him in a wide half-circle. Their lances were still in their hands, but the points were aimed up at the sky. They slowed from a canter to a trot, from a trot to a walk, then stopped altogether about ten yards from Blade. They were all staring at him and at the Golden Steed with a look in their eyes Blade couldn't quite analyze or explain. It was not hostility, but it certainly wasn't friendliness either. Blade swallowed. Were they waiting for him to make the first move? He spread his hands, palms outwards in the universal peace sign.

As if that had been a signal, all fourteen men sprang down from their horses. Then as one man, they fell face down on the ground, hands strewn out toward Blade. A low murmuring rose into the air, a pair of chanted phrases.

"The Pendarnoth has come. The Golden Steed has come. The Pendarnoth has come. The Golden Steed has come. The Pendarnoth has come ... "

CHAPTER FOUR

It took Blade a little while to realize that these men were worshiping him as a god or holy man. During that time he stood motionless, hands still outspread in the peace gesture. He suspected there must be an idiotic gape of astonishment on his face. However, his mental reflexes were nearly as fast as his physical ones. If it had been otherwise, Blade would long since have been dead many times over. So he was a god, was he? He had played the role before, in more than one Dimension. It had much to recommend it: good working conditions, set your own hours, all sorts of fringe benefits—he quickly shut off the whimsical line of thinking.

He let the chanting go on for a little while longer, then lowered his hands and opened his mouth. "Warriors! Rise and speak! The Golden Steed is indeed come, and the Pendarnoth with it. But you shall honor them on your feet, not on your bellies." He hadn't the remotest notion of who or what he was supposed to be, but these few sentences had the right ring to them. Rule One for being a god: If you can't say the right thing, say everything you do say as impressively as possible—then people won't notice any mistakes you might make.

The tone and the words broke through the men's awe. One by one they rose to their knees. Most of them were still staring at Blade. Finally, one man rose to his feet and came forward, both hands held together in front of him as if in prayer. But his head was not bowed, and the black eyes in the lean face were surveying Blade without fear.

"Were there any more of the Rojags besides those we slew here, Pendarnoth?"

The Rojags, Blade gathered, were the horsemen who had been pursuing him. "There were some who may be alive back that way." He pointed.

"How far?"

"I do not know exactly." Was that the wrong answer? Was the Pendarnoth supposed to be omniscient? "About ten minutes back that way—" he pointed,—"at a gallop. I was in a great hurry."

For the first time the man smiled. "That I can well believe." He turned to his men. "Up, up on your feet, all of you. The Pendarnoth himself has said it—honor him on your feet like warriors, not on your bellies like snakes or bugs. The Pendarnoth said he left some of the Rojags perhaps not dead back about four or five miles to the west. Six of you go back, find them, and kill them. None among the Rojags must know that the Pendarnoth has come, that the Golden Steed has come."

Reluctantly, six of the men rose to their feet, mounted, and trotted off in a precise line. The officer turned back to Blade. "Pendarnoth, it will be simpler if you know my name. I am Guroth, a captain in the guards of King Nefus of Pendar. Rumors had come to Vilesh, the royal city of Pendar, that the Golden Steed had been seen, that the Pendarnoth had been seen. I was ordered to take my men north into the land of the Rojags. I was ordered to see if there was any truth in these rumors and, if so, how much. It seems there was complete and utter truth. It was beyond my dreams and deserving to be the first of all Pendar to hail the Pendarnoth." There was awe in his voice as he said that, and for a moment he seemed about to go down on his knees again. But he conquered the impulse and went on.

"We saw the dust cloud from a long way off, and knew that it must be Rojags. They do not use the bow, so we can usually beat them. I decided to attack. If we took prisoners, I could perhaps find out more about the rumors from them. As we came closer, I saw that the Rojags were chasing somebody. Then I recognized the Golden Steed. It was a terrible moment for me. How could we shoot at the Rojags without danger to the Golden Steed and to you? But my men are good archers, and we killed the

Rojags."

"You did well, Captain Guroth," said Blade. The officer seemed to want to be praised, so why not oblige him? "But I also have a name. It is Richard Blade."

"A strange name," said Guroth. "But it does not matter how strange it is, for you will not be called by it among the Pendari. It is written in the Book of the Nine Prophets that he who comes to Pendar riding the Golden Steed will be the Pendarnoth, the Father of Pendar."

"So be it," said Blade. He wondered if he should ask for a copy of the book whose prophecies he had accidentally fulfilled. It might give him a few clues as to how to act. He disliked flying blind in something where his life might be the price of a single mistake.

But Guroth was continuing. "How did you come to ride the Golden Steed, Oh Pendarnoth? The rumors spoke of a man called Nurash, a war chief of the mountain tribes to the north even of the Rojags. Do you know him, or at least of him?"

That question forced Blade into some exceedingly fast thinking. How much could he admit safely? Finally he said slowly, "I have heard of this man called Nurash also. But I have never met him, spoken to him, or even seen him. He is as much a name to me as he is to you. I have heard tales that he is dead, slain by wild animals or the Rojags."

"Indeed," said Guroth. "Perhaps the gods saw he was not worthy and sent the animals or Rojags to destroy him. They can do such things."

"No one doubts this," said Blade. "But I heard of him as a brave man and a warrior. If he is dead, I grieve, for there are few such."

"There is no denying that," said Guroth with a sigh.

Now the men who had gone to track down the remaining Rojags were coming back. Blade found himself almost holding his breath as they approached. The Rojags who had attacked him were almost certainly of the same band that had attacked Chief Nurash. Suppose one of them talked before he died, talked of a fight with another man who had ridden the Golden Steed before Blade? Guroth's wits seemed too sharp for him to let such a story pass. His awe of the Pendarnoth would not keep him from asking pointed questions. In fact, it would make him ask those questions, even of Blade. And if he did not get the answers he wanted? Blade knew that the fate of a man posing as a long-awaited religious figure could be hard indeed. He wondered if the local gods demanded human sacrifices, and if so by what method?

But for the moment at least there was nothing to fear. The six horsemen returned to declare all the Rojags dead—nothing else. Guroth turned to Blade and said, "O Pendarnoth, it seems to me proper now that we ride for Vilesh. King Nefus will want to behold you and do you proper honor. So will the High Councilor and all the nobles and warriors and people of Pendar. This is a great moment for all of us. We are truly beloved of the gods. Now, though all the soldiers of Lanyr come against us, we shall prevail." Guroth swung himself lightly into the saddle and motioned Blade to do the same.

The Pendari moved out slowly, holding their pace to the gentle jog that was all Blade would ask of the weary Golden Steed. After three hours they stopped by the river to refill their water bottle and lunch on dried meat and flat hard bread. The Pendari warriors would not permit Blade to do a thing for himself. They waited on him hand and foot, filling his water bottles, sharpening his battered sword, pressing clean clothes on him, handing the food to him and all but shoving it into his mouth. Blade felt like a goose being

fattened for the slaughter. He could not help wondering in fact if the destined duty of the Pendarnoth was to be sacrificed after he had performed his other duties. What those duties were, he still didn't have the faintest idea. Guroth would no doubt tell him, but it might not be wise to ask the captain too many questions where the other warriors could overhear. Guroth seemed an intelligent enough man not to be surprised that the destined savior of the Pendari knew not the first thing about them or their problems. The other warriors might not be so wise.

Blade's chance came when they had made camp for the night. They pushed on until well after dark in an effort to get clear of Rojag land, and it took them an hour after that to make camp. By the time dinner was over, the fires blazing orange in the darkness, and the sentries posted, the only thing Blade was ready for was sleep. But Guroth had apparently decided to take one of the first watches himself. This gave Blade a perfect opportunity to ask the necessary questions.

He rose to his feet and strode past the fire, out to where the captain was pacing back and forth, hand on his sword hilt, eyes ceaselessly flicking from side to side. The captain made the hands-together greeting to Blade.

"Hail, oh Pendarnoth. It is said that the Pendarnoth shall have ten times the strength of a man. Is this true of you? You do not seem tired."

Blade laughed. "Am I supposed to have the strength of ten in everything, Guroth?"

The officer smiled. "In everything, so the stories, say. But the stories are not part of the Book of the Nine Prophets. I do not think people will expect that you have the strength of ten. Although there may be women who hope so, and will even try to find out."

"I will worry about that when it happens," said Blade with a grin. Then his voice and expression sobered. "No, Guroth, I am only a man who has been called to this honor by the gods after many years of being nothing but a traveler and a warrior. I have traveled far and I have tried to be a good warrior. But I do not know if all I have learned of men and war will be enough to make me worthy of being Pendarnoth."

Guroth looked hard at Blade. Blade's words seemed to have surprised him, or at least to have been something he was not expecting. There was on his face the unmistakable look of a man weighing his words with care before saying them. Blade was the Pendarnoth, who would have great and terrible power among the Pendari as soon as they arrived. But he was also a man. He might have human weaknesses that would make it unsafe to tell him things he could use against the Pendari. Blade knew that if Guroth decided to be cautious and closed-mouthed, there was nothing he could do except submit graciously—and keep his ears open even wider.

Finally Guroth shook his head slowly. "I am glad you have confessed this to me, for I am of the party of King Nefus. Do not admit ignorance or any other weakness before one of the High Councilor's party. They will perhaps doubt that you are the destined Pendarnoth. Even if they do not doubt it themselves, they will spread rumors that you are not. Such rumors will weaken the Pendari in the face of the Lanyri. And if they neither doubt nor spread rumors, they will at least try to take advantage of your ignorance. They will try to 'tell the truth' about the affairs of Pendar."

"And that means they will try to win me over to their party?"

"They will. I see you understand how such factions work."

"I have seen a good many such, and survived them all."

More than I can ever admit to you or anyone else, Blade added mentally. Aloud he said, "How am I supposed to know who is of the High Councilor's party?"

"Some of them will be obvious, the moment you see Klerus, the High Councilor. As for the rest, I will do my best to warn you."

That was an opening that Blade had not expected. Now he took prompt advantage of it.

"Yes, Guroth. You say you will warn me. But why should I trust you any more than the High Councilor Klerus? What do you wish for Pendar, and what does he wish? As you say, I am a stranger here."

This time there was no mistaking the look of surprise on Guroth's face. It was a long minute before the captain recovered from that surprise enough to continue. His words came out even more slowly and reluctantly than before, at least at first.

"I will swear by all the gods and prophets of the Pendari that I speak the truth. And I will also swear by anything you hold sacred, for I understand that our gods may not be yours and therefore mean nothing to you yet.

"But if that is so, I urge you to conceal it. Klerus the High Councilor gets much of his support from the priests, who do not understand what he truly wants. They are most of them good and simple men, who only see in Klerus a man who would have the old ways of worship enforced and those lax in them punished severely. They will be watching you like an eagle watching a lamb on the earth far below, watching for any sign of disrespect to what they cherish. And if they find such, they will tell Klerus, and he will use it against you."

"Thank you," said Blade with elaborate sarcasm. "I am grateful to you for telling me so much that I did not ask about. You are generous. But you have not told me why I should join your party."

"The king's party," said Guroth, with the first sign of irritation he had shown.

"Very well, call it the king's party," said Blade calmly. "But why should I choose either the king's party or the High Councilor's? What does the High Councilor want to do that you and the king oppose? I must have an answer to that, Guroth. If I do not have one soon, you will not have a Pendarnoth. I will mount the Golden Steed and ride away to some land where people will give me straight answers and not use me as a toy in their own games." There was an edge in his voice as he said the last sentences.

For a moment, Guroth's jaw set hard, and Blade wondered if the captain was going to lose his temper. Then the Pendari officer's mood seemed to change in a split-second. A thin smile spread across his lean brown face.

"You are a suspicious man. It is not going to make dealing with you easy for me. But it will not make it easier for Klerus to deal with you either. You have certainly learned a great deal in those travels and wars of yours."

"I would not be alive today to become the Pendarnoth if I had not."

"I can imagine. Someday when we have time you must tell me of your adventures. But that day will be a long time off, I fear." Guroth clasped his hands behind his back and looked straight into Blade's eyes. "Let us agree. I will tell you what I know of the state of things in Pendar, and how I see them. But I will

not ask that you do more than listen to what I will say now. When you get to Vilesh, you can listen in the same way to the High Councilor or whoever he sends to tell you his story. And you may also look about you and see for yourself what is going on."

"I would do that, Guroth, whether you let me do so or not. The only way you could keep me from doing so would be to kill me here and now."

Guroth went pale at the idea. "I do not know what would be the fate reserved for the man who slew one who might be the Pendarnoth. I do not wish to find out. Besides, I think I would have a hard time killing you, and no small chance of being killed myself."

Blade nodded. "You would. But you are a wise and, I think, an honest man, so you will never have to try. What you propose is a good agreement, and I will follow it." He thrust out his hand and clasped Guroth's.

"Very well," said the captain. His voice was lighter, as though a great load had been lifted from his mind. "I will give you the tale as quickly as possible."

"King Nefus is a boy of eleven. He shows much intelligence and courage, but for all this he is still a child. And a king cannot rule in Pendar until he is eighteen. So for seven more years the real rulers of Pendar will be the Council of Regents. Nefus has a sister, the Princess Harima, who is nine years older than he. But she has no power and can have none under our laws and customs."

"Such laws and customs about women are not always wise," put in Blade.

"You may speak the truth," admitted Guroth. "But it is the law in Pendar, and has been so for centuries. Not even the Pendarnoth could hope to challenge it. At least not without arousing the wrath of the priests."

"And that would be playing into the hands of the High Councilor Klerus, no doubt. Tell me about this man."

"He is an eunuch. The High Councilor is always an eunuch, so he may have no family to which he can pass on his wealth and power. Thus he is not tempted to take bribes or develop great and corrupt ambitions, for there are none to benefit from these except himself."

"That is indeed a wise custom," said Blade. "But I have learned that it does not always work."

"It has not worked in this case. Klerus is ambitious beyond reason, and cares little that there can be no sons to inherit what he wins. He would rule in Pendar. He would rule in his own right if that were possible, but even in his ambition he knows that cannot be. So he seeks now to rule as the viceroy of the Lanyri."

"You have mentioned the Lanyri several times. Who are they?"

"They rule a mighty empire on the shores of the Western Ocean, a month's march to the west of Pendar. It is said by travelers who have been among them that they give an orderly rule to those who submit. But it is not a just rule. It is a rule according to Lanyri laws alone. Those who are not of Lanyri blood, or who have not foresworn their native laws and customs and kissed the Lanyri's feet, have no hope of justice under their rule. Their land goes to Lanyri overlords, their women droop at Lanyri looms or become the concubines of Lanyri nobles. Someday the people they have robbed and killed will rise against them and

end their empire. But in the meantime they are like wild animals that roam about in a village, striking down all who cannot fight back."

Blade nodded. Guroth was getting a little off the track. "And they now wish to move east, to bring Pendar under their rule?"

"Yes. They did not wish it at first. Their army is strong and good, but all of its men fight on foot, with swords and heavy armor. They think horsemen are weak and archers cowards, so they have few of these. And so they find it hard to face our mounted archers.

"They know that well. Pendar has great amounts of gold, which to the Lanyri is something precious. I do not understand why, but that is their custom. A hundred years ago, in the reign of King Korfin IV, they demanded that we give them as much gold each year as half a thousand strong horses could carry. We refused. It is our gold. So they sent an army to invade our land, 'teach us a lesson,' and carry away all that gold and much more besides by force. We met that army with all our horsemen in a great battle and defeated it. Their general we captured and killed, and the Lanyri have held us in respect ever since that day." Guroth's face lit up as he told his story of Pendar's past glories.

Then it sobered as he came to the present. "But then four years ago King Nefus succeeded to the throne of Pendar. Klerus became High Councilor and ruler of Pendar in all but name. I do not know whether he was ambitious before, but he certainly became so then. It is in the minds and hearts of many people that he has had dealings with the Lanyri. He has promised to betray Pendar by dividing and dispersing our army. Then the Lanyri will invade and march upon Vilesh. They have mighty siege machines that will break down its walls within a few days. Then the soldiers will pour in and burn and kill and rape until there is nothing left alive or standing in the whole city. Vilesh is the heart of Pendar. When that heart stops beating, Pendar will die, and of all its people, only the dead will be free of Lanyri rule."

"A terrible fate for a brave people," said Blade. He was not entirely feigning the outrage in his voice. On the other hand, what could Klerus say in his defense if given the chance? And how did the Pendar look in the eyes of the Lanyri? This was going to be a matter of open eyes and ears and a closed mouth for many weeks to come yet. Aloud he said, "If Klerus is such a great villain, why have the people who know of his villainy not gone to the other councilors and spoken to them of it?"

Guroth smiled. "You do indeed know little of the way of things among the mighty in Pendar. At least a third of the councilors are in Klerus' pocket. He leads them on with dreams of sharing the spoils from the ruins of their own land. And another third he has won to silence, if not support, by bribes, threats, and the like. Only a handful remain true to the interests of Pendar and the Royal House."

Blade was about to speak but Guroth held up a hand. "And if you are about to ask why not speak to the king—we have thought of that. We have lain awake nights thinking of ways to do that, and prayed to all the gods of Pendar to show us a way to make the king listen.

"But Nefus is a child, an orphan. The High Councilor is the closest thing to a father he has now, or will ever have again. Klerus loses no opportunity to show the boy how much his 'Uncle Klerus' loves and respects him, humors him." Guroth spread his hands in disgust.

"We have found no way to sow the seeds of doubt in the boy's mind. The Princess Harima believes us and works with us as much as she can, but she has no power and little influence. We have even thought of assassinating Klerus, but Nefus would never forgive us for that. He would let loose the archers of the Council upon us, and the archers are headed by one of Klerus' most loyal supporters. We would be signing our own death warrants and almost certainly be unleashing civil war in Pendar. And civil war

would give the Lanyri just as good a chance as Klerus' treachery."

Guroth fell silent, weary in body, voice, and spirit. He stared off into the darkness as Blade considered his own reply. His path was obvious if Guroth was telling the whole truth. But of that he could not be sure. There was nothing to do but wait and watch until he could be sure.

"You have spoken well, Guroth. You have kept your promise. Now I shall keep mine. Klerus' dreams of having the Pendarnoth in his pocket will be just that—dreams. This I swear by my honor as a warrior, the thing most sacred to me."

They shook hands and together they walked back to their tent.

CHAPTER FIVE

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They rode long and hard the next day, but this time they ended their ride well before dark in a Pendari village of a hundred-odd mud and stone huts. Guroth's men rode past the village's goats and gaunt cattle and its straggling fields of grain, stopping outside a palisade of sharpened posts interlaced with thorny branches. Naked children and scrawny chickens scattered in all directions as Guroth sprang down to the ground and strode over to the gate. He raised his lance and pounded on the gate.

"Open, toilers. Open, my brothers. I, Guroth, bring the Pendarnoth among you."

If he had set the village on fire, he could not have produced a greater commotion. A stunned silence gave way in seconds to a furious babble of voices. Prayers, questions, and cries rose and mingled in a total pandemonium. Then the gate flew open so fast it nearly knocked Guroth off his feet. The villagers began to pour out, and from the other direction, the men in the fields who had been watching the flocks and herds also came running. In a few minutes people were massed 400 strong and ten ranks deep around Blade. Men, women, and children alike were raising their hands to him, praying to him, invoking his name, begging to be allowed to touch him or the Golden Steed. If Guroth had not ordered his men to dismount and lock lances in a circle around Blade, the Pendarnoth might have been pulled out of the saddle by his enthusiastic worshipers.

Half-deafened by the villagers' cries and pleas and half-stifled by their unwashed mass, Blade could not help grinning. Guroth had wanted to make a dramatic entrance into Pendari territory. He had succeeded. Indeed, he had succeeded better than he could have hoped, if nearly starting a riot among people in the grip of religious hysteria could be called "success." How was Guroth going to get out of this one? From the expression on the captain's face, he hadn't the faintest idea.

Eventually the uproar died down because people simply lost their voices. More than a few fainted in the crush, and Blade could only hope that none of them would be trampled to death. Finally, with no more than fifty people talking at once, Blade thought he could make himself heard.

"Hail, people of Pendar. What is this village?"

"Lio, oh Father," came many voices at once.

"People of Lio, I, Pendarnoth, Father of the Pendari, Rider of the Golden Steed—"

"He proclaims himself, he proclaims himself!" came in a chorus of gasps and screams, as everybody seemed to find their voices again. Several more people fainted. Blade sighed wearily, and once again settled down to wait for a lull in the uproar.

It came as throats once again became raw from shouting. "Let me speak, oh people of Lio. Let it be written of this day, that the people of the village of Lio were the first to greet the Pendarnoth as he entered the land of the Pendari. But let the people of Lio do honor also to Captain Guroth and his men, who brought me here safely through the land of the Rojags. The Rojags indeed would have slain me and taken the Golden Steed if Guroth and his men had not been mighty warriors."

Now the cheers were mixed with cries of horror. The hands reached out again to clap Guroth and his men on the backs and shoulders. For a moment the crowd surged in against them, and it looked as if the circle was going to collapse and all order with it.

But the crowd ran down again before that happened, and this time they stayed run down. Guroth's men were able to push and shove until they had gained themselves a little breathing room. And Blade was able to speak to the villagers without raising his voice to a bellow.

"People of Lio, for all this we thank you. But we have ridden fast and far, and the day has been hot. We will thank you more for food and water for us and our horses, and for a place to rest." He did not add "in peace and quiet," although he was tempted.

The crowd did not immediately break up, but it did move aside to form a path to the gate. While his men retrieved their horses, Guroth took the bridle of the Golden Steed and led it and Blade toward the gate.

As they passed into the narrow main street of the village, Blade saw a slim dark-haired figure peering intently at him from a shadowy passage between two houses. He pointed her out and asked Guroth, "Who is that girl? She was not among the other people, was she?"

"She would not be, oh Pendarnoth," said one of the villagers. "She has Rojag blood, thanks to her mother's whorish habits. She is—"

"You lie, you fat pig," the girl screamed. "My mother was a better woman than your wife or daughters will ever be. What happened to her was not her fault. And even if it was, what about me?"

The villager growled angrily, then snapped, "Get out of here, you whore's daughter! You profane the sight of the Pendarnoth."

"Whore's daughter?" the girl screamed. She snatched up a large dry turd from the alley and flung it at the villager. Her aim was good. He let out a bellow of rage and jerked out a knife. He would have leaped to slash at the girl if Blade had not brought down a hand and grabbed the back of his collar.

"There will be no brawling in Lio this day, my friend. And no killing of girls in my sight ever. I have fought Rojag warriors, but I have no quarrel with their women and children. Remember that, and put the knife away before I come down from the Golden Steed and break your arm." He twisted the collar tight until the man's face went purple and his eyes bulged. "Do you understand?" The man nodded, and Blade let him go. Then he looked at the girl and said, "Approach me. What is your name?"

"Curana, if it pleases the Pendarnoth." The girl stepped into the light. Seen more clearly, she was definitely attractive. Although her brown skin was dirty and her blue-black hair tangled like a thicket, there was a gracefully curved body under the black robe she wore. The bare feet were slim, and long-toed.

The eyes—Blade suddenly realized that he was staring at the girl more intently than he had intended. Mutterings were rising from the villagers behind him. Guroth was looking down at the ground.

Blade realized that this was not the time to do a thorough job on the prejudices of the people of Lio. He reached down and let Curana hold his hand for a moment, then raised it in farewell. "Go in peace, Curana. And let none do her harm in my sight or hearing, people of Lio." He nodded to Guroth, who raised his head and led the Golden Steed on into the village.

Although the villagers were packed like sardines into their houses, they would have emptied half the houses in the village for the Pendarnoth and his escort if asked. As it was, Blade asked only for one house for his escort and another for himself. The villagers obliged, not only providing Blade with a house to himself, but cleaning every nook and cranny of its one room. He suspected he was still sharing it with a horde of bugs, but he wasn't inclined to worry about that. Nor was he inclined to complain about the half-raw meat and the more than half-burned bread they gave him for dinner. In this village there could be little food to spare. There was enough to fill his stomach, and after that he was able to curl up in the smelly sheepskins and drift off to sleep.

He was awakened by a faint scratching in the room. It was no louder a sound than a mouse might have made, but it was too regular for any animal. Instantly awake, he silently drew his knife from beneath the sheepskin and stiffened, waiting. The scratching went on. It seemed to be moving in a circle around him, from right to left. He risked moving his head slightly, enough to be able to look off to one side.

The room was almost totally black, for it had no windows and the door was closed. But a tiny bit of light crept through a hole in the roof over the hearthstone. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Blade could see in that faint light a human figure crouching almost within arm's reach. It was small but shapeless, and its back was turned to him. An inch at a time, Blade slid toward it.

Blade was almost within reach of the figure when it suddenly rose to a standing position. Blade froze, waiting to see if it would turn around, poising himself to move fast. The figure's shoulders heaved, and it began to turn.

Blade moved also. A mighty thrust of his powerful arms sent him rolling toward the figure, while at the same time his legs kicked out, hurling the sheepskins away from him. He crashed into the figure like a log rolling down a hillside, knocking it to the ground. Before it could move or do more than gasp faintly, he was kneeling above it. Both its hands were clasped tightly in his own left hand, while his right hand held the knife at its throat. The wrists he was holding felt slim and delicate.

Then he started as he recognized the face looking up at him out of a black hood. It was the girl Curana. Her eyes were wide, but he could see neither surprise nor fear in them. In fact, her lips were curled in a faint smile. Her voice was low and calm as she spoke.

"Pendarnoth, I have come to you, for it is said that you have the strength of ten men in all things."

Blade found it hard to keep from laughing out loud. Instead of an assassin, the lurking figure was only the local pariah curious about the alleged superhuman sexual prowess of the Pendarnoth. He released her hands and sat up. He tried to make his voice severe.

"Why did you come sneaking around here like a thief, Curana? That was not a wise thing to do around a warrior. There are some who would have stabbed first ..." He showed her the knife—"... and asked questions of the corpse. And how did you get past the guard Guroth placed outside the door of this hut?"

"Is that what you call that man who was sprawled on the ground outside the door? He was asleep and snoring so that one could hear him three streets off. A child could have made its way past him. And I am no child. I am a woman." She reached down for the hem of her robe and with a swift motion, drew it over her head and threw it on the floor. "I am a woman," she repeated.

Blade hardly needed her to tell him that. His own eyes told him the same thing. The slimness he had suspected was there, but there were firm conical breasts and well-fleshed hips he had not suspected. And he was responding to them. Unmistakably, undeniably, he was responding. And Curana was noticing this response. The faint smile on her face was now a grin.

"You are not ten times as big as a man," she said gleefully. "Does that mean anything?"

"It means nothing that you need worry about," said Blade. He could not help finding both the situation and Curana amusing. He wondered if indeed there would be many women curious to see if the Pendarnoth's prowess was as the stories predicted. He hoped there would not be too many. If there were, he would find it hard to retain the prowess of one man, let alone ten.

But that was nothing to worry about now. He had been sleeping naked. There were no clothes to strip off before he reached out and put his hands on Curana's shoulders. The tips of his long fingers almost met across the back of her neck, under her hair. She had somehow managed to clean and comb it. It felt silky and straight in his fingers, no longer tangled and stiff with dirt.

Her eyes closed and her mouth opened as she felt his touch. He felt her body stiffen slightly, and a thought struck him. Was this girl possibly a virgin? It seemed improbable, or was it? The girl was a pariah in Lio. What man of the village would have her? So she had come to the Pendarnoth? He would soon find out.

She slowly raised her hands, placing her fingers gently, tentatively, around his erect organ. Those fingers of hers were not skilled, but their softness and their delicacy were having the usual effect. Blade noticed Curana's lips curling tentatively, as if they wanted to join her fingers. But there was a tension in her body that said she wanted to hold back as much as she wanted to push forward.

He knelt down in front of her and took his hands from behind her neck, moving them down her body. He stroked her throat as he would have stroked a cat under the chin. Again her eyes closed and her mouth opened. It opened wider and a little moan came out as his hands moved down and closed on her breasts. They were firm and proud beneath his hands, but seemingly as lifeless as the breasts of a statue. Then he felt them move as her breathing deepened, and the nipples stiffened into delicately firm points against his palms. He kept his hands moving around and around, up and down on her breasts, until her breathing was hissing and moaning almost continuously in her throat. Her head was thrown far back now, and her hair streamed down her back.

His hands left her breasts and moved with lightly playing fingers down her body. For a little while they were around her waist, stroking the small of her back. Then they slipped back around and inwards, playing in the curly black triangle between her thighs. His touch was light at first, as if he had been playing with soap bubbles. Then he stroked harder and faster. She arched her body and clutched at him, her hands roaming wildly over chest, arms, stomach, and groin. She was pulling at his organ now, as if she wanted to pull it inside her.

In spite of her urgency, he was slow and careful when he pressed her down on the furs and entered her. She was indeed a virgin, as the slight resistance he met proved. But it was only slight, and there was only a little gasp from her as he broke through and entered more deeply. Soon there were other gasps and

moans, coming faster and faster as he speeded up his thrusts.

She was moist and warm and incredibly tight and snug as he pushed deeper and deeper. He felt himself beginning to have to fight for control. For the moment he won the fight, and his strokes kept on. Gradually her body began to writhe and jerk, rolling gently from side to side with him still deep inside her. The rhythm of her motions increased, her legs tightened around his waist, her hands clawed at his back until he felt blood flow. Then she gave a choking cry and arched her body until Blade wondered that her spine didn't snap. He felt a fierce and terrible contraction of muscles gripping him, and it was all that he could do not to answer her spasm with his own.

But though he might not be able to show ten times the power of a normal man, he could not let her pass with a single spasm her first time. His endurance kept him going, until she heaved and writhed a second time, then a third. Then his own body arched and his breath came out in a terrible groan, and his arms and legs seemed to lose their strength as he poured himself into her.

His arms and legs went so limp, in fact, that he very nearly fell down on top of her with his full weight. But he managed to avoid that embarrassment, and rolled heavily away from her onto the furs. He was breathing as heavily as she was, and for the moment he wanted only to lie quietly and relax.

But Curana was still moving, slowly reaching one hand toward Blade while she reached the other under the furs. Did she want more? Blade hoped she wouldn't be disappointed if he couldn't manage more right now.

Then the hand that was under the furs came out. It came out in a single swift motion, almost faster than Blade's eyes could follow. Clutched tightly in that hand was Blade's knife. It gleamed dully in the faint light as it darted toward Blade's exposed chest. He knew in a second that he could ward it off easily if he brought up a hand to block it. He was far stronger than Curana. But all the strength seemed to have gone out of his body.

Then the knife stopped its point only inches from Blade's skin. For a moment it hung there, as if frozen in midair. Then it began to waver as Curana began to shake and tremble all over. Blade saw her eyes close tight, and tears ooze out from under her long lashes. Then her hand jerked away, and the knife went flying into a corner of the room. It landed with a faint clatter as Curana collapsed onto Blade's chest, sobbing hysterically.

Before Blade could move to either console her or even get out from under her, voices rose outside and fists began pounding on the door.

"Come out of there, you murdering whore, or we'll—!"

Blade recognized Guroth's voice, and stood up. "Nobody's murdering anybody!" he bellowed. His voice brought a sudden silence, except for Curana's sobbing.

"Are you all right, Oh Pendarnoth?" came Guroth's voice again.

"Of course I'm all right," snapped Blade. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"The Rojag bitch drugged the guard, Oh Pendarnoth. Is she in there with you?"

"Yes, but—" Blade couldn't say any more before all the Pendari outside set their shoulders against the door and pushed. There was a squeal of twisted metal and a cracking of wood. The door flew open so

suddenly that half the Pendari fell sprawling on the floor. But Guroth came leaping over the sprawled bodies of his men, grabbed Curana by the hair, and jerked out his sword. He set it to her throat and his arm muscles tensed as he prepared to drive it into her flesh.

"Stop!" roared Blade. He took one long stride across the room and a hand like iron pincers clamped down on Guroth's wrist. The Pendari captain gasped and his sword dropped to the floor. Blade gently shoved him back into a corner and picked up the sword.

"Now," he said sharply, "what's going on here? Why were you going to kill that poor girl? What has she done?"

Guroth was rubbing his wrist as he answered. "I said she gave the guard outside your door some drugged milk."

Blade nodded and looked from Guroth to Curana. "Is this true, Curana? You said the guard was sleeping."

"I—oh yes, I drugged him, but—" Her sobs broke through her words.

"Is the guard alive?" Blade asked Guroth.

"Yes, but—"

"Just go on with your story, Captain." Blade's tone was short and commanding.

"Then she came in here. She was going to kill you, Pendarnoth. She must be in the pay of the Rojags. She must be."

"Guroth, I do not like having people killed for what they 'must' have been going to do. You—"

"But you are the Pendarnoth!" exploded Guroth. "To think of killing you—"

"What is all this talk of killing me?" said Blade acidly. "Curana and I were doing what is natural to a man and a woman when they are alone together and find each other desirable. That was all. And while I may not have the force of ten men, I do not think she was unhappy with her choice. Nor was I with mine. So let us have no more talk of killing, Guroth."

"But she drugged the guard. She must have. . ."

"The next time you say 'must,' Guroth, I am going to tell King Nefus that you are a hot-tempered man whose presence I find displeasing. Do you want that?"

Guroth's throat suddenly seemed to be blocked by something. He made a choking noise and shook his head.

"Very well. Now take yourself and your men out and leave us alone." Bowing deeply, Guroth backed out. His barked orders brought his men to their feet and took them out the door after him.

When the door was safely shut and Blade was sure that none of the Pendari were lingering to eavesdrop, he turned to Curana. She had fainted, apparently with relief. Blade sprinkled water from the water jug on her face and rubbed her wrists until she revived. Then he sat down in front of her and said

quietly, "Now, Curana, you know perfectly well that you were trying to kill me. Guroth need not know it, or why, but I want to know. If you tell me who you are and why you wanted to kill me—and why you didn't—I won't let anything happen to you." He hoped he could keep that promise.

"I was going to kill you," she admitted in a small voice. "I ... the Rojas chiefs told me to do it. They ..."
She fell silent, then began again. "They want to help the Lanyri. The Lanyri have promised them Pendari territory and gold and slaves. They want to kill you and take the Golden Steed and put their own Pen—Pend—P—"

"Pendarnoth," Blade supplied.

Curana nodded. "So I was supposed to kill you. But after ... what we did ... I ... I couldn't. We were so good together I couldn't." And she burst into tears again. Blade held her gently until the sobbing subsided, then put a hand under her chin and raised her head until he could look into her eyes.

"Curana," he said, making his voice gentle and severe at the same time. "Do you want to go back to the Rojag people?"

She very nearly bust into tears again, but managed enough self-control not to. Then she shook her head. "Not now. I have failed. They would have me staked out in the sun over an ant's nest until the ants ate the flesh off my bones. I cannot go back to them now."

Blade nodded. "Then I will take you with me to Vilesh." She gasped but he held up his hand to quiet her. "I will take you to Vilesh, and I will ask the Princess Harima to take you into her service and protect you. I have heard that she is a good mistress." He knew not one single thing about the Princess Harima other than her age and her loyalties. But at this point he would say almost anything to ease this poor girl's mind. "Are you willing to go? Remember, in Vilesh you will be far from the Rojags. And you will have not only Harima's protection, but mine as well. I think as Pendarnoth I will be something of an important person, so that should help."

Curana found the spirit to giggle faintly at his description of the Pendarnoth as "something of an important person." Then she was silent for a while, apparently turning the idea over in her mind. Finally she nodded. "I will go with you to Vilesh, Pendarnoth. But will you be able to protect me from that Captain Guroth? He wanted to kill me. I know it."

Blade nodded. "He did. But if his soldier is all right tomorrow morning, I will be able to handle him. He respects me not only as the Pendarnoth, but as a warrior. And now I think it is time for you to stop worrying about tomorrow and get some sleep." Curana nodded again, lay down, and by some miracle was asleep within a few minutes.

Blade wished he could follow his own advice, but for a long time sleep eluded him. Had he made the right decision, saddling himself with this girl who might still be in the pay of the Pendari's enemies? He only knew that there didn't seem to be any alternative. Guroth would kill her quickly, the Rojag chiefs slowly and painfully. And the villagers? If they learned what their half-Rojag pariah had tried to do to the Pendarnoth, what they would do to her was an ugly thought. Taking Curana to Vilesh was the only way to save her life. And saving an innocent girl's life wasn't a bad way to start off a career as a messiah, in any Dimension. That thought brought Blade enough peace of mind so that he shortly drifted off to sleep himself.

CHAPTER SIX

Guroth swore the air blue the next morning when Blade told him that Curana was riding to Vilesh with them. At least he swore until Blade fixed him with a cold look. "Captain Guroth. I told you last night that Curana did nothing against me. Are you suggesting I have lied?"

That brought Guroth to a screeching halt. Or rather, a gulping halt. He sat in his saddle, mouth opening and shutting as though he were gasping for air, hands frozen on the reins. Then he said, "No, Pendarnoth. I only wonder what you see in the girl."

"She is an innocent victim of those plots and counterplots you have tried to explain to me," said Blade. "That is enough for me. I will protect her and ones like her whenever I can."

"You are merciful, Pendarnoth. I hope you are wise enough to know that there are times not to be merciful. The prophecies said the Pendarnoth would come bearing a sword of wrath for the enemies of the Pendari. When are you going to fulfill that part of the prophecy?"

"When I meet an enemy of the Pendari," said Blade shortly. "And that has not happened yet." He turned decisively on his heel and strode away.

The trip to Vilesh took them five more days, although they moved south as fast as their horses would carry them. Blade would have liked to slow the pace to accommodate Curana, but did not ask it of Guroth. Asking for any more concessions for Curana might weaken his authority with Guroth. And quick-tempered as he might be, Guroth was an able and essentially fair-minded man, an ally Blade could not spare now. In fact, Guroth was the only ally Blade had for the moment. It might be different after they reached Vilesh.

The towers of Vilesh rose out of the plain in late afternoon of the fifth day. For the past few days they had been traveling across semi-arid country, with only sparse patches of grass and even sparser flocks of sheep and goats to break the monotony. But Vilesh lay on a major river, and the waters of that river flowed through a complex network of irrigation canals to water the fields that fed Vilesh. For many miles around the yellow-brown walls of the city, the land was green and lush. The red-tiled roofs of solid whitewashed cottages stood out in vivid contrast in the sparkling clear air.

The city itself sprawled across five hills. Its walls rose and fell for miles as they made their way up and down the slopes. Beyond the high walls, the towers of palaces and temples rose, some of them gilded, others shining in a dozen different colors. All of them were flying banners, and tall plumes of yellow smoke rose from the tops of some of them.

"They seem to be expecting us," Blade said to Guroth.

"They are indeed, Pendarnoth," said the captain. He had apparently forgiven Blade for his sharpness in Lio. "I sent one of my men on ahead last night with the news that the Pendarnoth has come. There will be a festival such as there has never been in the whole history of Vilesh. If any work gets done today, it will be a miracle."

He looked at Blade. "You said you have been a soldier. Have you ever been a general, and returned to a great city after winning a great victory?"

"More or less," said Blade. "I take it that today it will be much like that in Vilesh."

"Indeed. The people will be half-mad with joy. The Pendarnoth has come, a thousand years of prophecy fulfilled, and their safety ensured. I wish by all the gods that I could bring myself to such a simple faith. But I cannot. Klerus and the Lanyri are too formidable to be met by any Father of the Pendari, unless he also has the wisdom and warcraft of a great leader. And whether you have those, I do not know."

"You could not expect to, Guroth," said Blade. "You have not known me long enough. Know me longer, and I think you will find that I have some of these talents you speak of."

"I hope so," said Guroth. "With all my heart, I hope so." He broke off suddenly and pointed toward Vilesh. Blade looked that way and saw a cloud of yellow dust moving out from the gate nearest them. "An escort is coming out to bring us in."

Blade looked back to see how Curana and the other soldiers looked. The soldiers looked no better than men who had been riding for weeks could look—dirty, sunburnt even darker than usual, and tired. But Guroth obviously wasn't worried about their appearance, so there was no point in Blade's worrying about it either.

Curana was another matter. She had never been on a horse in her life before they left the village. But by sheer willpower she had managed to stay in the saddle and keep pace with the rest of the party. What it had cost her in physical strain was written in the lines carved deep in her thin, dusty face. And how much it had cost her inside to force herself onward, away from her native village, enduring the coldness and the taunts of the soldiers, only she knew. At least Guroth had held his men somewhat in check, and said nothing to her himself. He hoped the gamble he was taking for the girl's safety would be a winner.

The dust cloud was approaching rapidly, and Blade began to see glinting metal and fast-moving dark shapes at its base. There seemed to be at least a hundred horsemen in the approaching party, all riding hell-for-leather. Pennons fluttered from lances held rigidly upright. They did not slow down until they were almost up with Blade's party. Then a horn blared out loud and harsh, and a hundred gloved hands jerked on a hundred sets of reins. In a tremendous uproar of hooves, neighings, and jangling harnesses, the escort came to a stop. Its leader looked behind him to see that his men were in good order, then rode out toward Blade.

As the man approached, Blade could see that gold must indeed be abundant among the Pendari. All the metal fittings of the horse's harness shone with the dull yellow gleam of dust-covered gold. So did the high-crowned helmet on the officer's head, the chain of rank around his lean neck with its prominent Adam's apple, the hilt of his sword, and the tip of his lance. Between them the officer and his horse must have been carrying a small fortune in gold. Blade had vivid memories of what gold was worth in Home Dimension these days. He could understand the Lanyri desire to get their hands on the gold of the Pendari.

The officer raised his clasped hands and bowed his head. Blade noticed, however, that his dark eyes never left his face during the bow—except when they shifted quickly to Guroth.

Then the officer raised his head, lowered his hands, and said, "I am Threstar, High Captain of the Archers of the Council of Regents. In the name of King Nefus and of the Council of Regents, I hail you, Pendarnoth, and bid you welcome to Vilesh."

"I am honored by the greetings of the King of Pendar," said Blade smoothly. He waited just long enough

for Threstar's mouth to harden into a thin line. Then he added in the same tone, "And the greetings of the Council of Regents." Threstar's face smoothed out. Blade noted that Guroth had not missed this little exchange.

Without further words to Blade, Threstar began barking orders. His hundred horsemen formed up in a double line on either side of Blade. Guroth also snapped out his share of orders, and the men of the patrol fell back to let Blade ride in solitary splendor. Then Threstar's hand chopped down like an axe, the horns blew again, and the whole procession moved out.

They returned to Vilesh at a trot, not at a gallop, but the hundred horses on either side of him kicked up a cloud of dust that made Blade cough and blink nonetheless. The dust could not, however, conceal the people lining the road. Some stood in awe-struck silence, others cheered and waved and shouted, "Hail to the Pendarnoth!" while still others threw flowers. Some found there was not enough room along the road itself, so they scrambled up on fences, the roofs of cottages, even the branches of trees.

It got worse as they approached the walls of the city. Now people clung to trees by the hundreds, holding banners embroidered in gold and silver out over the road. Blade had to keep his head low to avoid being hit in the face by the heavy cloths. The flowers poured down like a hailstorm, until there were blossoms sticking in Blade's hair and clothing and the horse's mane.

There was a moment of darkness, coolness, and comparative quiet as they rode through the gateway in the thick walls of the city. Then it all began again—the cheers, the cries, the crowds pressing so close that the escort on either side had to wheel their horses inward to keep from riding people down. Sometimes they had to stop entirely, as small children sprinted across the street in front of them. Blade saw Threstar's face in one of those moments. It was the face of a man who would much prefer to have spurred his horse ahead and trampled the child into a bloody paste on the stones of the street. But he was holding himself in today, for today was the coming of the Pendarnoth and no ill omen must be allowed to spoil it. One of the advantages of being a messiah, thought Blade. With luck you can put everybody around you on their good behavior—even the natural storm-trooper types like Threstar.

They rode down the street from the gate for quite a while. Occasionally Blade twisted his head around to look back at Guroth and the others—especially Curana. In this mob scene it would be easy for something to happen to her "accidentally." But each time he looked back, she was still in her saddle. Her face was strained and pale under the coating of dust, but she held herself as erect as any of the soldiers around her.

After what couldn't have been more than a few minutes but seemed like an hour, the whole procession rode out into a gigantic square. It seemed the better part of a mile on a side, and except for a narrow lane kept open by a double line of mounted archers, it was packed with people. Every living soul in Vilesh seemed to have come out to greet the Pendarnoth. There were great-grandfathers who had to be carried on litters, and there were newborn infants in their mothers' arms.

Once again only a part of the mob was cheering, while others stood in reverent silence. But the cheers from even that part were enough to make a constant deafening roar in Blade's ears. For the first time, he saw Curana cringe as the sound beat at them. And not only the sound. A quarter of a million people standing packed under even a westering sun were not too sweet to the nose.

At the far side of the square another wall rose, this one dazzling white. Beyond it Blade could see the heavily gilded roofs of a number of elegant buildings. A palace? Probably. Directly ahead, at the far end of the passage through the crowd, stood a gateway, intricately carved and still more dazzlingly gilded. The gates were swung open and a small group of richly dressed figures stood in front of them. They were

flanked by more archers in gilded armor.

As the procession approached the gate, Blade could make out the figures more clearly: a dozen men with gray in their hair, wearing shimmering gold and red robes; an enormously fat man in solid red, standing at their head. That must be the Council of Regents and the High Councilor Klerus. A much smaller and slimmer figure, dressed in gold from head to foot, stood beside Klerus. A crown of gold set with rubies shone on his small head. King Nefus, beyond any doubt. And another slim figure, slightly taller, dressed in white, standing well behind the others. Princess Harima?

The archers on either side of the royal party put trumpets to their lips, and more harsh metallic blasts rolled across the square. The trumpeters kept on blowing until Blade wondered how they could have any breath left. The cheers died away, and an awe-struck silence floated down over the crowd like a fog. Threstar reined in his horse, jumped down to the ground, and took the bridle of the Golden Steed. His face impassive, he led Blade and his mount up to the royal party, stopping only ten feet away from Klerus.

Blade suddenly realized he hadn't the foggiest notion of what he was going to say. Hopefully this wasn't an occasions for speeches. But if he had to say anything, he would have to rely on saying it as impressively, and as briefly, as possible. The crowd seemed half ready to fall down on their faces anyway, so they weren't going to be picking holes in his choice of words or delivery.

Threstar knelt to the boy who was King Nefus, and then to the High Councilor Klerus. Even if he hadn't been told that Klerus was a eunuch, Blade would have recognized it now. The man's immense physical bulk and high pitched voice were unmistakable.

Threstar wasted no words. After kneeling, he merely raised his right hand and pointed at Blade. "The Pendarnoth has come, Oh King." Klerus, the entire Council, and the Princess Harima all joined him in kneeling to Blade. Only the king himself remained standing. Behind him Blade heard a silence fall over the crowd as people by the thousands went down on their knees or even on their faces. But he did not dare turn this time and look at Curana.

Instead, he sat on his horse and let the silence spread around him, until it seemed that the whole square was holding its breath waiting to hear him speak. He took a deep breath and spoke.

"King Nefus, I am the Pendarnoth, the Father of the Pendari, the man who rides the Golden Steed. I have come as it was predicted in your Book of the Nine Prophets. I have looked upon the Pendari and I have found them a worthy people." Blade fell silent, and realized that he couldn't have said much more if he had to. His throat was dry and there was a hollow cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

But he didn't need to say anything more, because King Nefus cried out in a clear, boyish voice, "Hail to the Pendarnoth, all people. Hail!" Klerus screamed it out; Threstar echoed him—and then the entire packed square burst into a continuous roar of "Hail to the Pendarnoth!"

The Golden Steed neighed and shuddered nervously as the cheers of a quarter of a million people thundered around it. Blade held the reins tightly and stroked its mane, afraid for a moment that it was going to rear or even bolt. That would be a fine spectacle—the long-awaited Golden Steed running away with the Pendarnoth, scattering the royal party like bowling pins.

How long the cheers and cries lasted Blade had no idea. Beyond a certain point his ears simply wouldn't accept any more sound. Finally he became aware that the noise was ebbing, and that King Nefus was looking up at him. The king's face was indeed that of a boy, thin and brown and large-eyed. But as he

looked up at Blade, there was an intensity and a seriousness in his expression that was definitely not that of a boy.

Blade smiled as he looked down at the king. "Your Majesty, I have come before your people. They have seen me, and I have seen them. There is much more that can be done and must be done. But it need not be done here and now, with all the people of this mighty city standing in the sun. Let them return to their homes in peace, let them wish me well, and let me be found a fit and proper place to live. Can this be done, Your Majesty?"

Nefus turned to the High Councilor. "I think we can do these things for the Pendarnoth, can we not, Councilor?"

Klerus nodded his massive head. "We can, Your Majesty."

"Then let these things be done," said the king, his voice ringing out with a sudden unexpected strength in the stillness. Then the trumpeters snapped their trumpets up to their lips and shattered the silence with more harsh blasts. Threstar and the other officers began bawling, "Return to your homes and rejoice, Oh people! The Pendarnoth and the king give you leave to go."

Blade saw stirrings and boilings in the crowd as people began to turn and try to make their way toward the edges of the square. But he did not have time to see much more than that. Threstar again took the Golden Steed by the bridle, and strode forward through the palace gates. Blade risked a look behind him, and saw Guroth urging his horse forward, leading his patrol and Curana after Blade.

He was off to a good start, at least. But a good start would only be a small part of the battle he would be fighting here. What would be the next part? He rather hoped it would be a talk with Klerus. He did not particularly want to make any moves until he had had a chance to size up the High Councilor.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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The royal palace of Pendar covered as much land as a not-too-small town and housed hardly fewer people. Every one of the scores of notables had his personal staff of servants, ranging from the hundreds who waited on the king down to the two or three attached to each officer. Then there were cooks, stewards, bath attendants, more than a thousand foot archers and an equal number of horsemen—the list went on and on.

The palace was equal to housing them all. It took Threstar better than half an hour to lead Blade from the gate of the palace to the room—actually the suite of rooms—that had been reserved for him. Round and round they went, through endless corridors whose floors were inlaid with multi-colored marble polished to a high gloss. They passed entire galleries of statues plated in gold, separated by gold and silver screens, illuminated by oil lamps hanging in gilded, chandeliers. When Threstar and the dozen guards with him finally ushered Blade into his suite, Blade's mind was beginning to reel. He had also noticed one thing about the palace as important as its display of wealth—it was obviously not designed for defense. Once an enemy got inside the walls—high and strong, but far from impregnable—there was nothing but the fighting prowess of the palace guards to keep it from being overrun. The Pendari had lived in peace at home for too long, whatever their prowess in the field. Was the defense of the city being similarly neglected? That was a question Blade knew he wanted answered as soon as possible.

But for the time being, there was nothing for him to do but explore his new quarters. The five rooms came equipped with every luxury imaginable, including some he hadn't expected.

Female companionship, for one thing. He discovered that when he opened the gilded bronze door to the bedroom, and heard the sound of scurrying footsteps inside, followed by a chorus of soft giggling. In spite of the giggling, he had his sword out when he came through the door. Once inside, he quickly slammed the door behind him and set his back against the stone wall. He stared across the floor, covered in thick furs and sheepskins dyed red and orange, to the enormous canopied bed.

Three heads in a neat row peered at him over the thick blue quilt. Three fresh young faces, each crowned with hair of a different, color—from right to left it was coal-black, brown, and blonde. Three sets of eyes were regarding him steadily, with curiosity rather than with fear.

"Well," he said. It seemed as good an opening remark as any. Apparently the Pendarnoth was not expected to live a life of monastic self-denial. That was a welcome development. Blade was a man of robust and extensive appetites. The life of a monk would have ill-suited him, even in return for worship and adoration.

"Hail, Oh Pendarnoth," the three girls said in chorus. But somehow the words lacked the note of reverence that Blade had always heard in them before. He looked back at the girls' expressions. No, no reverence here. But then why should there be? These girls were obviously here to minister to the man, not to the religious figure.

And also to spy, he suddenly realized. There was one thing a man like Klerus would be sure to do with any man he did not know. Probably with those he knew also—universal distrust was the basic law of palace politics in every land in every Dimension. He would contrive to place spies in that man's chambers—particularly in his bedchamber. To catch a man at his most unguarded moments, the moments best for catching the careless word or slipping a dagger into an unprotected back. Klerus was not wasting any time, it seemed.

Blade walked over to the bed and sat down on the foot of it. All three girls sat up. They were entirely naked, but this didn't bother them in the least. The blonde, who had the fullest figure, even arched her back and raised her arms to make her breasts stand out more conspicuously (although they didn't really need that kind of assistance). Blade grinned.

"I am happy to meet all three of you," he said. "I am indeed the Pendarnoth, but I was once a warrior and a traveler named Richard Blade. You may call me by that name at the right time. I am sure you all will know when that time is." They giggled again at the innuendo. Then he stretched his arms high over his head and grinned again. "I am happy to see you here. But I have fought battles and ridden for many long days. At the moment I want most of all things in Vilesh not three beautiful girls, or even one beautiful girl, but a hot bath."

The girls giggled again. The blonde pointed to a cord hanging from the corner of the canopy and said, "Pull on that cord, and it will summon the servants."

Blade pulled the cord. A perfect swarm of servants of both sexes materialized so fast that he wondered if they had sprouted from the walls and floor. They led him into another room where a gilded copper basin decorated with bird shapes stood in the center of the floor. Relays of men brought in steaming buckets of hot water and emptied them into the tub until it was full to the brim. Meanwhile the girls were stripping off Blade's travel-grimed clothes. The three were still stark naked, but obviously gave the matter no thought.

The heat of the water seemed to seep through Blade's flesh into his bones, draining the tension and fatigue out of him. Meanwhile, the three girls climbed into the tub around Blade and went industriously to work on him with soap and sponges. The heavily perfumed soap matched the luxury of everything else in the palace, and Blade decided he would relax and enjoy it as long as he stayed in this Dimension.

Or at least as long as he stayed in the palace, he reminded himself. He was not sure of what his duties as Pendarnoth were. He wasn't even sure if the term "duties" made any sense applied to him. He didn't know whether he was to be permanently on exhibition in the palace, as decorative and about as useful to Pendar as one of those gilded statues in the galleries. It was possible. Nobody he had seen or spoken to here showed any signs of even knowing that there was a Lanyri threat, let alone worrying about it. Was Guroth lying?

Perhaps. That was all he could say until he had talked to Klerus. The High Councilor would at least give him a little more to go on, although hardly the whole truth. In the meantime, there were a few things he could do himself.

The bath was over. The other servants drained the tub down a pipe in the corner of the room and left. The three girls stood around him, toweling him dry, combing his hair (every bit of it), and rubbing him with scented oils. He was going to smell like a bloody perfume shop if this kept up.

They were showing signs of wanting to lead him into the bedroom now—playful tugs on his ear, playful caresses of his genitals. Finally he picked the blonde up under one arm and the black haired girl under the other and carried them into the bedroom. He dumped them squealing on the bed, returned; picked up the brunette, and did the same with her. All three lay on their backs on the bed, arms over their heads, looking up at him expectantly.

He stood over them, yawned, and stretched. "Girls," he said, "you have heard the stories, no doubt, that the Pendarnoth will have the strength of ten men."

Two of them giggled, the blonde girl nodded and said, "We have. Is it just a story—or are we going to find out?"

"Not tonight, little ones. As I told you, there is much of the man in me, and that man has fought hard and ridden far. Tonight I doubt if I would have the strength of one man. I would need the strength of at least three to do all of you justice. And I will not do you less than justice by picking out one of you. As a matter of fact, I couldn't make a choice among you if I had to. Each of you is as beautiful as the others." That was true. They were beautiful in different ways, but there was very little to choose among when you got right down to it.

Then he noticed something that brought him abruptly to the alert. The gaiety and lightness had vanished from all three girls' faces, and in its place was unmistakable tension, even fear. The girls weren't playing now. Something had genuinely frightened them.

He looked at the blonde. She seemed to be the spokeswoman for the three, or at least the one with the readiest tongue. "What is it, girl? Have I frightened you? Has my face suddenly turned green or something, so that you think suddenly I'm not a man at all?"

The joke fell flat. The blonde's blue eyes were wide as she stared up at him. Her voice shook slightly as she spoke. "Please. You can't—you mustn't—you won't send us away. Please."

"Why not?" He half-suspected the reason, but he wanted to be sure.

"The c-c-chamberlain will think you—you didn't like us. And if a man doesn't like us—if we can't p-p-please him—"

"The chamberlain beats you?"

Surprise showed in all three sets of eyes. "How did you know?"

"I told you, I have traveled far. It is a custom in many lands." A vile and ugly custom, he added mentally. Perhaps he might use some of his influence as Pendarnoth to get it changed around here? But that was for the future. For now the girls had given him an opening he badly needed.

"I understand. But I will tell Klerus himself why I did not take any of you. I will tell him the same things I have told you. I think he will understand. And I am sure that the High Councilor of the Council of Regents can tell a mere chamberlain of the palace not to beat three innocent girls."

He got the reaction he was looking for. All three of the girl's started at the Klerus' name as though they had been stung or whipped. All three went even paler than before. The brunette actually burst into tears. The blonde tried to calm her by patting her on the shoulder. But Blade noticed the second girl's hand was shaking as she did so. He waited until all three of them seemed a little calmer, then said, "What is the matter now? Don't you think Klerus can keep the chamberlain from beating you?"

"Please, Pendarnoth," said the blonde. "Don't speak to Klerus. He is ... he distrusts everybody. If you told him about us, he would become suspicious. And when he becomes suspicious of somebody, worse can happen to them than just a beating. A beating is nothing."

So Klerus distrusted everybody. Was that really anything Blade couldn't have guessed about a palace politician, good or bad? Probably not. But it was useful to have some confirmation. And he owed the girls something for that.

"All right," he said. "I will not speak to Klerus. The three of you may spend the night here and share my dinner and my bed. But as I said, I want to do justice to you when I have my full strength. So you will go in the morning, and I will tell the chamberlain a magnificent tale. I will describe you as women of such qualities as most can only dream of having. I think that will keep the whips away from your backs."

The girls knelt before him and would have literally kissed his feet if he had not patted them lightly on the heads. "Rise up, girls. This is not the way to salute a man. Now, do I ring that same bell for dinner, or what?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

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The girls slipped out of bed and away in the gray light of morning, with many goodbye kisses and tearful thanks to Blade. They left a good feeling behind them, the feeling of having three more people in this marble and gold monstrosity who thought well of him. Well enough to warn him of danger? That remained to be seen. What the devil, it remained to be seen if there even was any danger.

Breakfast arrived soon afterward. Like the dinner, it was so generous that Blade could almost believe

they were fattening him to serve as a sacrificial animal. Steaming hot stew in a golden bowl, a basket of hot flat bread, fresh fruit, cheese, sour milk with solid lumps of cream floating in it, and a green cordial with a half-lemon, half-mint flavor. He was just draining the last of the cordial from its golden cup when the main door of his suite flew open. Two servants in red livery darted in, knelt down, and bawled out in chorus, "Klerus, High Councilor of Pendar!"

It was as well that Klerus arrived after breakfast rather than before or during. The sight of the High Councilor close up would have been enough to take away Blade's appetite. Sallow oily skin, vast paunch, bald head, black eyes set so deep in rolls of fat they were almost invisible, jowls so flabby they hung down over his gold embroidered collar—there was nothing about Klerus that wasn't at least faintly revolting. But Blade also noticed other things. Klerus carried his weight well, with a dignity that seemed to imply that the slim were lacking rather than that he was in excess. And those ugly little eyes that fixed Blade with a cold, calculating stare made him at once alert and ready for the clash of wits.

Klerus began by asking the usual polite questions about Blade's health, food, sleep, and the like. Blade's replies were equally formal and polite. It was like the first few exchanges of a fencing bout. Each was seeking to discover the other's style, his distinctive strengths and weaknesses.

Finally Klerus tugged at the third of his four chins and smiled at Blade. It was a crocodile's smile. "I have heard that you found the girls pleasing last night."

Blade nodded. "I did."

"I am surprised you found the energy after your travels."

"Lord Councilor, surely you have been around men of affairs too long to be surprised at this." That was intended to score a point and it succeeded. Klerus' chins quivered, and his jaw set hard for a moment. He did not like that oblique reference to his status as a eunuch.

But Klerus regained his poise within seconds. "I am surprised at very few things, oh Pendarnoth. I am not even surprised at the appearance of a long-awaited legend in Pendar at the very moment when the Lanyri are preparing an invasion."

It was Blade's turn to be caught off balance, but he managed to conceal it just as well as Klerus had. He decided not to admit having been told about the Lanyri threat. That would have had Klerus asking questions about Guroth in a moment. Blade remembered what the girls had said about dangers to anyone Klerus came to suspect of anything.

"The Lanyri—they are the people of the empire to the west, the ones who fight on foot?"

"They are. They are coming with a mighty army. It will be impossible for the Pendari to resist it, whatever pride they take in their horse archers." That was a much blunter statement than Blade had expected. Did this mean Klerus was sufficiently desperate to try to enlist his aid without any preliminary feelers? Blade found that hard to believe.

Nor did it prove to be true. After that one specific statement, Klerus wandered off into a rambling lecture on the history of the Kingdom of Pendar. It went on for many minutes, with the Lanyri appearing occasionally around the fringes. It was only when he came to talking of the first Lanyri invasion that Klerus again spoke more plainly and directly.

"The Lanyri rule is strong and harsh but it is just. If a people submit peacefully, they soon come to share

in the might of the Lanyri empire. But if they resist, and are defeated . . ."

"Are they always defeated?" put in Blade.

"Always. The Lanyri infantry is invincible."

Blade could have mentioned things he had heard to the contrary. But once again he balked at involving Guroth—yet. "So they are defeated. And then what?"

Klerus spread his damp, pudgy hands. "They are overrun, and all who resist perish. But those who surrender in good time are spared. They may even come to rise to great heights under Lanyri rule. Penniless, wandering warriors have become kings or the ministers of kings under the rule of the Lanyri."

Klerus could hardly have been more frank if he had given Blade an illuminated scroll with his proposition written on it. Join me, betray Pendar, and I will make you my right-hand man to rule over the ruins. Join those fools who would resist the invincible Lanyri, and perish with them.

Guroth, it seemed, was right. Perhaps not entirely. Perhaps there were fine details the captain hadn't understood. But if ever a man had the air of wanting support in treason, it was Klerus. Obviously he took Blade for a "penniless, wandering warrior" who had found an opportunity to pass himself off as the long-awaited Pendarnoth. Klerus was determined to show him that there was a better horse to ride to glory and wealth than the Golden Steed. Perhaps Klerus didn't even believe in the Pendarnoth or the Golden Steed? That might be worth finding out.

"The word 'Pendarnoth' means 'Father of the Pendari,' " said Blade. He spoke as he might have to a small child, deliberately seeking to be offensive. "I do not know what kind of father I would be, if I helped bring my 'children' into slavery."

Klerus' face froze as hard as something that fat and flabby could do. "Do you truly believe in the gods' aid to men?" He said that in a tone that implied only a simpleton could do so.

Blade shrugged. "I have been a warrior all my life, Klerus. Not a philosopher, and certainly not a politician. I have learned not to ask questions that none can answer. And I have learned that a good sharp sword can cut off all sorts of arguments." His eyes met Klerus'. Blade was trying to look open and frank and honest without being too obvious about it. If he could strike just the right note, he would be far along the way to convincing Klerus that he was indeed a simpleton. In the eyes of men like Klerus, only simpletons were honest. Wise men were always ready for a little treachery.

Klerus shrugged in his turn. For a moment Blade thought the High Councilor was going to indulge himself in some parting remark. But he managed to restrain himself, raised his hands in the prayer gesture, and went out.

That was the start of his relations with Klerus, although Blade wasn't quite sure how he would describe it. He had managed to avoid giving Klerus any promises of support, that was certain. He had also managed to avoid an open clash with the High Councilor. At least he hoped so, since that was even more important. Possibly he had even convinced Klerus that the Pendarnoth was a simpleton who could be ignored.

He decided to stop worrying about Klerus for the moment. The next thing to do would be to find out how much freedom of movement he had. Was he confined to his rooms, for all practical purposes a prisoner in a gilded cell? Did he have the run of the palace? Or could he roam all over Pendar, assuming

he wanted to?

Chests inlaid with ivory and gilded bronze held a wide selection of rich clothing. Much of it was silk, and nearly all of it was so heavily embroidered with gold thread and lace that the underlying color was almost invisible. Where there was metal, it too was gold or gilded. But at least he was able to pick up some practical weapons. A curved double-edged sword three feet long went into a scabbard on his belt, and a straight foot-long dagger into a wrist sheath.

Now that he was dressed and armed to standards that satisfied him, should he summon a servant to guide him through the palace? Better not. It would be impossible to tell whether or not a servant was a spy for Klerus—or for Klerus' opponents. Without touching the bell cord, he went to the door to the corridor and opened it.

Several servants who happened to be passing by promptly fell on their faces as Blade appeared. He grimaced. It was going to be rather hard to walk around the palace freely if everybody promptly fell on the floor when they saw him. Was this perhaps a way of keeping him in his room? He stepped out into the corridor and looked down at the servants:

"Rise, my friends. I am neither a god nor a king. The way to honor me is on your feet, not on your bellies."

One of the men raised his head a little and murmured, "The priests have told us that the Pendarnoth shall be worshiped in this fashion. It is not fit that the eyes of those not cleansed shall look upon the face of the Pendarnoth."

Blade nodded. "And by whom is one cleansed?"

"By the priests, O Pendarnoth."

"And all the servants who wait upon me in my chambers are thus cleansed, I suppose?"

The man swallowed. Blade realized he was pushing the man toward ticklish ground. But for the moment he had to go on pushing. This was too important to let slip by. He repeated his question, putting a note of command in his voice. The man turned pale, and Blade saw beads of sweat break out on his brown face. Finally he licked his lips and said, "Yes. They are chosen—from the worthiest only."

Blade's lips curled in a thin smile. There was only one more question to ask, the crucial one. "And who chooses the worthiest, my friend?" The man gasped and Blade saw his jaw clamp tight, as though he were facing torture. Perhaps he was—or at least the danger of it. Blade decided not to push things farther. Instead he merely smiled again and said, "I think I know who does the choosing. The High Councilor Klerus keeps his hand in everything, doesn't he?"

The man started violently. For a moment Blade thought he was actually going to be sick with fright. The look on the man's face spoke as loudly and clearly as any words could have done. Forgetting any possible fear of the priests, he leaped to his feet and vanished down the corridor at a dead run. The other men and women hesitated a second, then did the same. Blade was left standing alone in the empty corridor.

Part of the situation was now as clear to Blade as if it had been engraved in gold on the floor at his feet. Klerus (who else?) was determined to surround him with spies and limit his movements as much as possible. However, that might well be something that any veteran of palace politics would see fit to do.

What bothered him more was the obvious mortal terror Klerus inspired in the servants. There was something ugly about that.

Should he go back or go on? Damn it, if he went back he would have given the first victory to Klerus! He wasn't going to do that, no matter how many servants he inconvenienced. He turned to the left and strode away down the corridor.

Most of the servants had obviously been briefed by the priests or perhaps by Klerus. They went down on their faces or at least knelt with their eyes on the floor as Blade passed. He made no effort to argue with them. The first encounter had taught him that was futile.

The palace seemed to be a complete maze inside, with corridors branching off for no apparent reason at the oddest points. With no one to guide him and no one to bar his path, Blade wandered freely for what seemed like hours. In the process, he built up a fairly good notion of what lay where in the palace. Although the servants did not dare look upon his face, neither did they dare refuse to answer his questions about where he was or what lay behind a particular door.

Twice he was respectfully but firmly turned back, both times by squads of oversized men armed to the teeth. Once he was told the king's chambers lay beyond the guarded door. The other time, where the men appeared to be eunuchs, it was the Princess Harima's chambers they were guarding. Blade noted both locations and moved on without argument.

Eventually he came out through a high-arched portico into a garden. A garden? It was more like a park. It seemed to stretch away in a beautiful confusion of trees and shrubs and grass for hundreds of yards. Gravel walks wound in and out among the greenery and the occasional splashes of color that told of flower beds.

Blade strode out into the sunlight and wandered about the garden, without any particular goal in mind. Mostly he simply wanted to see whether there was going to be any uproar over the Pendarnoth's prowling freely about the palace.

In time he found himself approaching a white marble bench that stood in the middle of a roughly circular clearing. This was a good place. He didn't want to sit down anywhere somebody might be able to sneak up on him without being seen. But here there were thirty feet of open grass on all sides. He sat down on the bench.

He had barely stretched out his legs when he heard the sound of footsteps approach on the other side of the bushes to his left. He rose quietly, and silently drew his sword. The footsteps continued as far as the end of the bushes, stopped, and then continued again. A slim figure dressed in white came around the end of the bushes. It was Princess Harima, with two serving women.

Blade thrust his sword back into its scabbard and smiled. But his thoughts were not as pleasant as the expression on his face. Had chance brought the princess here at this time, or something more?

The princess pressed her hands together and bowed her head gracefully. "Greetings, oh Pendarnoth. I heard that you were walking in the gardens, and I wished to talk to you without all the people of Vilesh looking on. Were you expecting an enemy? Your sword was out."

"I did not know whether to expect an enemy or a friend, princess. And I have been a warrior long, enough so that when I do not know who is coming I make ready to greet him—properly."

"I see." Harima smiled. "How long have you been a warrior?"

"Nearly twenty years." He did not add any other details. He did not want to encourage the princess to ask about his life before he found the Golden Steed. He had the impression of a sharp intelligence that might leap on any slips he made and use them to his harm.

Harima was beautiful as well as intelligent. It was not a picture-book beauty. She was a trifle too sharp-featured for that, and her high-arched nose just a little too large. But the wide dark eyes and the full mobile red lips were set in a proud pale face framed by glistening dark hair caught up beneath a silver diadem. And the most critical opinion could not have found fault with Harima's figure. The white gown she wore only hinted at what lay beneath, but to Blade's eyes those hints were sufficient—and exciting. Steady down, he told himself. Wait for her to show interest, if there's going to be any.

The princess motioned her ladies back toward the bushes. She sat down on the bench and with a graceful wave of a long-fingered hand beckoned to Blade. Blade noticed that in contrast to the usual display of gold or gilded jewelry among the Pendari, Harima wore only a single ring on each hand and a pair of earrings.

"Come and sit down, Blade," she said. Her voice held a hint of laughter.

"Is it proper that I should, princess?"

"Is anything improper for the Pendarnoth? No, you are right in asking. Of all the men in Pendar, you and my brother are the only ones who might sit so with nothing improper." The laughter in her voice was more than a hint now.

Blade sat down on the bench but left a safe yard or so between them. "Asking questions like that is part of the caution I have learned, princess. One does not live as a warrior for twenty years without learning caution. In fact, any man will live longer if he learns caution, not just warriors." The last words were not an accident. If Harima wanted to take them as a reference to the present situation in Pendar, she was welcome to do so.

Harima smiled again and was about to speak again when footsteps suddenly thudded behind the bushes. Then the bushes themselves crackled and shook, and the serving women screamed. Six armed men with drawn swords suddenly burst through the bushes into the clearing.

CHAPTER NINE

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Blade's sword was in his hand so fast it seemed to have jumped there like a living thing. He whirled, trying to get between Princess Harima and the six men. The princess was not screaming. She was backing away, a step at a time. One hand plunged into a purse at her belt and came out with a small jeweled dagger. A dainty lady's weapon, ill-suited for serious combat, but her spirit earned Blade's admiration.

The men ignored both the princess and her servants and formed a circle around Blade. He jerked his wrist to draw his dagger from its sheath, and stared at his opponents. He recognized none of them. It would have been too much to hope that he would after only two days in the palace.

Very well, he would have to assume this was a real move against him. And there was only one way to reply to such a move. His eyes flicked from right to left, meeting the eyes of each of the six men in turn. Then he took a long step forward, until he was within striking range of one of the men. Again Blade stared hard at the man. For a few seconds the man tried to hold Blade's gaze, then his eyes flickered away. As they did so, Blade struck.

His sword was a whistling blur in the air as it came down. It smashed into his opponent's sword, driving it down so hard the point sank into the ground. Before the man could move to free his sword, Blade's lightning speed took him forward another step. His dagger rose, flashed, thrust home into the man's chest so hard that it almost jammed between his ribs. The air went out of the man's lungs with a whistle. Blood spewed from his mouth as he crumpled to the ground. Blade jerked his dagger free and leaped over the falling man, whirling as he landed to face the other five.

As if the death of the first man had tripped a spring in their legs, all five men charged at Blade together. He twisted sideways as the first sword whistled down past his chest. His dagger drove down into the hand holding the sword. The man screamed and his bloody fingers opened, letting the sword fall. Blade sent a backhand slash whistling at the man's head, and saw his throat gape as the razor-sharp edge crossed it. The dying man reeled backward into the middle of his companions, confusing and tangling them still further.

Two down, four to go, and time for another few steps backward. Blade gained the distance he needed in a single leap, turned again, and flourished his sword and dagger. He made the air hum as he wove a pattern with them, deliberately trying to dazzle his opponents. He had taken his measure of them. These were not first-class swordsmen by any stretch of the imagination. Were they acting on their own against the Pendarnoth? Or had they been hired? If they had been hired, were they simply the best that their employer could get? Or—a possibility with all sorts of implications—were they supposed to fail?

But facing four armed men was no time to be thinking about why they were facing you. Blade took another step backward, sword and dagger still dancing. The four men followed him, matching him step for step. Were they afraid to close now? Then he'd have to take the fight to them.

He sidled to the left, saw them shift to meet him, moved right, saw them match that movement also. He repeated the sequence, and again they matched him. Good. He had them set up now, at least psychologically. And in close combat, working on your opponent's mind was half the battle.

Suddenly he lunged straight forward, guarding with the sword and striking with the dagger. The sudden lunge and the uplifted sword caught the four men off guard. Their swords came up to meet a blow that Blade would never strike, and their eyes went with the swords. The man second from the right never saw the dagger that flashed out of nowhere and drove into his stomach. The light went out of his eyes and the life out of his body before he could see Blade pulling the dagger back. It came up to the guard position, and now the sword came in. Blade feinted at one man's sword arm and at another's head, then slashed down to cut a third man's thigh. Blade let the weight of the sword take it down and around. When it came up, a twist of the wrist sent it into a man's stomach. The fourth victim dropped his sword and clapped his hands over the gaping wound in his belly as he reeled back out of range.

Only two left now, and both of them looked distinctly on edge. But they said nothing to Blade, only moved out on either side of him and began sidling in, step by step. Blade realized at once that these last two were either better or at least more careful fighters than the four he had put down. He decided the first thing to do was lead them away from the princess.

He made a half-hearted rush at one, saw him back away, but saw the other moving in on the flank.

Blade repeated his feint with the other man. Again the partner moved in. Blade went through the sequence twice more, then decided against doing it a third time. These men might be smart enough to catch on and catch him. Besides, they were now well clear of the princess. He decided to end the whole affair.

Instead of moving at one of the men, he moved toward the space between them. They in turn moved to close that gap. As they stepped toward each other, Blade shifted left in three leaps. All three took him only seconds. Before the two men could turn or separate, Blade had moved in on the one on the left. A flurry of slashes and parries made both swords ring like bells, then the man's sword flew into the air, his severed hand with it. He stared for a moment at his spouting wrist, then for another moment at Blade. Then he turned and ran. His companion waited for a second, but Blade took one step more toward him and he too ran.

Neither got far, though. They vanished behind the bushes, their feet thudding hard on the grass as they ran. Then the sound stopped. A moment's silence, and a hideous gurgling scream echoed through the grove. It was followed by a second one, rawer, harsher, as though the man were burning out the lining of his throat in his death agony. Then silence. No, not quite silence. Listening carefully, Blade could make out the not-too-distant murmur of voices. He did not return his sword to its scabbard or his dagger to its sheath. Instead he stood, arms crossed on his chest and both weapons held point upward, ready and waiting.

Footsteps sounded again, from the direction where the last two assassins had died so horribly. Many footsteps. Blade dropped into a defensive stance, sword ready, dagger guarding. The footsteps grew louder.

Then around the corner of the bushes came the High Councilor Klerus himself. Following him was what at first seemed to Blade like an entire regiment of archers. Actually there were only about thirty, but they seemed to fill the clearing as they formed a circle around Blade. He noticed that all of them had their swords drawn and their bows strung, with full quivers slung on their backs. For a moment he felt more tension and more danger in the air than he had felt when surrounded by the six assassins.

Then Klerus broke that tension. "Pendarnoth! My lady princess! What-what villainy has been happening here?"

The princess stepped forward and was about to speak, but Blade shook his head slightly at her. Her mouth opened and stayed open, but no words came out. Then she returned his nod.

"Murder is what's been happening, Klerus," said Blade shortly. "Six men came into the clearing with swords and tried to kill me."

Klerus' eyes took in the four men lying on the grass. Two were dead; two were still moaning feebly. He made a chopping motion with his hand, and an archer stepped over to each one. Two sword cuts and there were two more dead bodies on the ground. Watching Klerus' face as the last two assassins died, Blade saw something flicker in the man's eyes. Satisfaction? Relief? He didn't know. He only knew he still had to stay on the alert.

Klerus shook his head. There was horror and amazement written all over his fat face. Horror and amazement—or at least a good imitation of them. "This is altogether abominable. That anyone would try to slay the Pendarnoth here in the very palace itself! It is beyond anything I would have believed possible. I must implore your forgiveness, oh Pendarnoth."

Klerus went on in this same vein for quite a while. He sounded utterly sincere. If Blade hadn't had his little interview with Klerus earlier in the morning, he might even have started believing the man. As it was, he listened with a secretly skeptical ear. And he noticed the Princess Harima was listening in much the same fashion. In fact, she was making no effort to conceal her skepticism. Hardly surprising, considering how much of Klerus she must have heard over the years.

Eventually Klerus ran out of either words of horror and protest or the breath to say them. He was silent for a long moment, breathing deeply and looking hard at Blade. Then he said, "Pendarnoth, this cannot be allowed to happen again. The villains who launched this effort may still be around. You must have a guard. I will see that one is chosen for you. Only the best archers of the palace troops will serve."

"Are you going to have them cleansed by the priests, so that they do not have to fall on the ground when they see me? I have enough trouble moving about the palace as it is, with this ritual of honor to the Pendarnoth. I would hate to see such imposed on my personal guards."

"Do you find the rituals of honor to you displeasing, Pendarnoth?" said Klerus. Blade noticed that the High Councilor's tone was both humble and probing at the same time.

"They are fit and proper, Klerus. But the archers can hardly guard me very well on their bellies like snakes. They must be able to stand on their feet like soldiers."

"Very true, oh Pendarnoth. Your wisdom is that of a warrior of long experience indeed." Blade almost winced at the sickening sweetness of the eunuch's tone. "The guards will be cleansed as you wish. I shall choose—"

"No, Klerus, I shall choose," said Blade. There was more of an edge in his voice than he had intended. It brought Klerus to a sudden stop, rather like running into a brick wall might have done. The High Councilor stared at Blade again, his mouth opening and shutting several times. For once he seemed at a loss for words. Blade took the chance to continue.

"I shall choose, Klerus. If I can be attacked in the very gardens of the palace, those who wish me ill clearly have some way to get into it. Perhaps they have corrupted certain of the palace officers. Consider that in your plans for my safety.

"But I do not know whom to trust, whom to shun, here in Pendar. There are only fourteen men in all Pendar that I myself, would trust with my life."

Klerus had recovered his voice if not his poise. "These are—?"

"Captain Guroth and the soldiers who brought me in from the mountains of the Rojags. I can trust them absolutely. If they had wished me ill, they had a hundred chances to slay me on the road to Vilesh, with no man the wiser and no warning for me. I was totally at their mercy. Yet they so honored the Pendarnoth that they brought me here swiftly and faithfully, as good and honorable warriors should. They are my choice for a personal guard."

At this bald declaration Klerus lost his voice again. It was several moments before he recovered it. During those moments there was a thin smile on Blade's face and a furious churning in his mind.

He had suspected Klerus of setting up the assassination attempt, but it had been suspicion only. Now he was sure. The High Councilor had come on the scene with surprising speed, and with a remarkably large force of guards. He had killed the surviving assassins in cold blood—to prevent their talking? And now

the mask was off. All Klerus' years of experience in palace intrigues couldn't keep the naked frustration and fury from showing on his face.

Blade decided to drive the knife in a little deeper. It was by chance, not choice, that the quarrel with Klerus had come into the open so fast. But as long as it was in the open, there was no point in not making his position as strong as possible.

He turned to Princess Harima. "My lady princess, would you not consider it reasonable that I have about me men of my own choice, men I can trust even with my life?"

Harima nodded gracefully.

"Then I ask that you bear witness to my words before King Nefus and the Council of Regents. It is my wish. And hear it also, soldiers of Pendar. It is my wish." He bit off the last four words one by one, as though he were chopping pieces out of an iron bar. He took a savage pleasure in seeing the soldiers start and shudder as he addressed them. That would set up a nice conflict in their minds. Did they owe reverence to the sacred will and person of the Pendarnoth? Or obedience to the High Councilor who would have them flogged or slain if they went against him? Blade did not much care what answer they came up with. He had sown a little more confusion in the ranks of Klerus' forces, and that was enough.

Klerus was still pale, but movements of his thick-fleshed throat showed he was trying to speak. Then the color returned to his face, and a sly look to his black eyes. He looked from Blade to the princess and back to Blade. Then he grinned, although there was something of the smile on the face of the tiger about that grin.

"Very well, oh Pendarnoth. Your wishes are my command. Captain Guroth and his men shall be your guards. Shall I also send you Curana, rather than send her to the barracks?"

It was Blade's turn to lose his calm. "Send the girl to the barracks? Why?" His voice was an angry bark.

Klerus shrugged. "What else can one do with a stray half-Rojag girl from a northern village? She has nothing worthwhile about her except her body. But I'm sure you know that. Well?"

Blade nodded. "Send her to me by all means. And if she's been harmed—" He left the threat unfinished. Klerus nodded gravely and bowed as deeply as his potbelly permitted. There was a mocking note in that bow that Blade could not miss. Then he turned on his heel and snapped orders to the soldiers.

Only then did Blade turn to look at Harima. She was staring at him with wide eyes and a mouth drawn into a thin tight line. Her face had gone pale, and a large tear glistened in the corner of each eye. "You—" she gasped, but failed to find a word nasty enough. "You—that dirty little girl—I—oh gods!" She burst into tears, turned, and vanished at a run.

Alone except for the bodies, Blade let his breath and strain out in a long burst of cursing. Oh, Klerus had set him up beautifully! The man's gift for intrigue hadn't deserted him, not by any means. He must have known or guessed how Harima regarded Blade. After that baiting, the trap was simple. And Blade had taken that bait like any fat, dumb, happy fish. Jealous women were bad enough, but jealous princesses were even worse.

CHAPTER TEN

Somewhat to Blade's surprise, Klerus kept his promise. Blade had half-expected Princess Harima to swear in a fit of jealousy that he had never requested Guroth or anyone like him as a personal guard. Perhaps she was not quite willing to indulge her jealousy when the only person to benefit would be the High Councilor Klerus.

In any case, Guroth and ten of the soldiers of Guroth's patrol showed up at Blade's suite about dinner time. Curana was with them. To Blade's even greater surprise, Klerus had been telling the truth about her not being harmed. Nothing worse had happened to her than being locked up in a small room off the kitchens. For her own protection, the guards had said.

"Is this true, Pendarnoth?" she said. "You swore I would be protected in the palace."

"I did so swear and you will be protected with all the power I and the palace staff have." There was no point in having her worry about what Klerus might be planning. "There may be Rojag agents in the castle. Who else would have made the attempt on my life?" Blade's eyes met Guroth's. Both men knew perfectly well the answer to that question. "But I doubt if there are any other enemies in the palace that you have to fear." This was definitely not the time to mention Princess Harima's jealousy to Curana.

After a night spent with Curana snuggled like a kitten against him, Blade was summoned before King Nefus. This time he put on the most luxurious clothes the chests in his room offered, and he ordered his guards to look their best. This set off a mighty flurry of boot-polishing, clothesbrushing, shaving, washing, and the like. This went on for so long that Blade began to be afraid they were all going to be late for the audience. But Guroth stormed and swore and urged his men on, and at last led them into the audience chamber behind Blade on time to the minute.

Seen close up and at leisure, the boy-king impressed Blade even more than he had at the first meeting. Nefus' face had the form of a boy's, but there was definitely the seriousness of a man in it. The eyes in particular bothered Blade. He could not doubt that they had seen too many things no eleven-year-old boy should have to see. Nefus had a throne, but in return he had lost his childhood. It did not look like an exchange he enjoyed. Blade recalled that he had once read of Alexander the Great astounding Persian ambassadors by asking adult questions in his boy's voice. Blade was not astounded, but he was impressed. Nefus would be a good, perhaps even a great king—if he lived long enough.

"Do you have everything you need to be happy?" asked Nefus.

"I do, Your Majesty," replied Blade.

"I am happy to hear that. It is a great blessing to the Pendari to have the Pendarnoth among us. Particularly now. Have you heard that the armies of the Lanyri are massing on our western border?"

"No, Your Majesty, I have not." That seemed to be the expected answer, but it was not an entirely honest one. Guroth had many friends among the Royal Scouts. What those friends told him, he told Blade. "Are they in great strength?"

"Very great. They are bringing great machines with them, to knock down the walls of Vilesh and our other cities. There are even reports that the Rojags are going to ride with them against us."

"That would be bad." "Bad" was an understatement. If the Lanyri had an adequate cavalry force, even one provided by none-too-reliable allies, they would be much more formidable.

"It would be terrible, Pendarnoth." There was more than a boy's emotions in the word "terrible." "You have been a warrior in many lands. Can you think of some new way of fighting, to drive away the Lanyri or destroy them?"

"I have been thinking much on that same question, Your Majesty. But I have not thought of anything yet. It is difficult to do so when I have not seen the Lanyri armies fighting. When I have done that, I will be able to know their weak points and advise you better."

"I am happy to hear that. When the Lanyri advance, will you join the patrols that are watching them? That way you can see the Lanyri long before they come to the heart of Pendar."

"That will be a great help to me, Your Majesty."

"Good. My Lord Councilor, give orders that it be done so." Klerus bowed deeply. Nefus rose and raised his hands in reverence to Blade, then turned and strode out. The audience was over.

Klerus led Blade back to his suite through an unfamiliar part of the palace. It was a series of dank, airless, half-lit rooms off a long, low corridor that seemed to be partly underground. Clangings told of forges and splashing noises suggested laundries or baths.

Beyond this service area of the palace, the corridor branched. Klerus led the way down the left-hand branch, so low that Blade had to bend his head to keep from scraping the ceiling. The corridor soon ended in a massive bronze door. It had no trace of gilding but many traces of smoke and something that looked like dried blood.

"The disciplinary chambers," said Klerus in an expressionless voice. "Those of the palace staff who are disobedient or dirty are brought down here and dealt with properly. King Nefus and Princess Harima have their own trained men to administer discipline as well." Klerus knocked three times on the door, and it squealed open.

As it did, a woman's scream floated out through it. Blade stiffened, but followed Klerus inside. The chamber was even more dimly lit than the corridor outside, but there was enough light for Blade to see what was going on. A young woman was spread-eagled, naked and face down on a wooden table, held by massive iron clamps on her wrists and ankles. Over her stood a burly man, naked except for a leather loincloth and a badge on a brass chain around his bull neck. As Blade watched, he drew a long branding iron from a charcoal brazier and pressed the red-hot end to the back of the girl's neck. She screamed again, jerking and heaving as much as the tight clamps would let her. Blade saw other smoldering patches on her bare skin where the iron had been pressed into it. Blood was oozing from her wrists and ankles where she had fought against the clamps.

Something about the girl struck Blade as familiar. He walked around the table and stared down at her sweating, pain-wracked face. It was the blonde girl from the trio that he had found in his bed the first day. He saw from the look in her eyes that she recognized him also, but pain had made her incoherent. She could only moan and then scream again as the iron pressed into her flesh.

Blade raised his eyes from the girl to the man torturing her. He did not recognize him, although his gross outlines and hairless face indicated the man was probably a eunuch. But Blade did recognize the badge bouncing on the man's heaving, sooty chest. It was the green falcon badge of Princess Harima's personal household.

Blade would not give Klerus the satisfaction of showing his feelings on his face. He would not even bother looking at the High Councilor to see his smug and triumphant look. Blade did not need to look to know that such an expression was there. Knowing Klerus, what other expression could he be wearing? But there was no way Blade could beat down the cold sick feeling inside. Was Harima carrying her jealousy into the open now, even against the Pendarnoth?

The next few days offered no answer to that question. What distinguished them more was the beginning of a minor guerrilla war against Blade, in which he recognized the hand of Klerus much more than that of Harima. Meals arrived late, cold, or sometimes not at all. The properly consecrated servants suddenly became sick, and the suite remained uncleaned until they "recovered." A crew of masons began work in the corridor leading to Blade's suite. What they were doing besides making a tremendous uproar and choking clouds of dust Blade could never figure out. But the masons were all uncleansed, so Blade had the choice between staying in his suite or bringing work to a halt every time he went out. He chose the latter. But it was obvious that Klerus considered Blade's distaste for the rituals of reverence to the Pendarnoth a weak point. A weak point, moreover, that he was determined to exploit to the fullest.

Meanwhile reports of the massing Lanyri armies flowed in. It was obvious that some of the reports of their strength were exaggerated. Were they accidentally exaggerated by jittery observers or deliberately exaggerated to make people jittery? That was certainly what was happening, whether anyone intended it or not. Or at least the people in the palace were getting jittery. Blade had no idea what the people in Vilesh or beyond in the country were saying. If Guroth was telling the truth, at least the soldiers were not frightened. Their great-grandfathers had smashed one Lanyri army. They would smash this one quite as thoroughly. Blade hoped he could contrive to make the soldiers' hopes come true.

The High Councilor was obviously getting more and more nervous about Blade's possible influence. He began sniping at Blade's personal guard, trying to whittle down their number or at least strain their loyalty. Once a well-aimed tile plummeted down from a roof and struck one of the soldiers on the head. He died that night of a fractured skull. After that the soldiers offered to take turns tasting Blade's food before he ate it. Blade tried to keep that a secret to protect the soldiers, but it was no use. Two days later one of the soldiers died in agony after drinking some wine intended for Blade.

Blade's personal guard was now down to nine men, including Guroth. If it shrank much further, Klerus would be back, insisting that Blade accept a strong guard of men free of any suspicion of Rojag sympathies. Since these men would be even freer of any suspicion of disloyalty to Klerus, Blade did not welcome the prospect. In particular, he did not welcome the prospect of riding out onto a battlefield with men at his back he could not trust.

The palace troops were now doing mounted drill and archery practice by night, with Blade often looking on. He was returning through the gardens from such a drill session one night, when a noise from above made him look up. The night was moonless, but clear. Enough light came from the stars and leaked out through the narrow windows of the palace to show Blade two crouching figures making their way across the roof. They seemed to be heading toward the wing of the palace where his suite was located. And he was almost certain they were carrying a long dark object between them.

He did not know whether they had seen him or not. He froze until they were out of sight, then stalked through the garden to the door, keeping under cover as much as possible. Once inside, he broke into a run, ignoring the scattered servants throwing themselves to the floor as he passed. He tore up the stairs to the door of his suite. The two soldiers on duty outside snapped to attention as he charged up. Their eyes widened at the expression on his face.

"Stay extra alert tonight," Blade snapped. "There's something peculiar going on." They nodded and

began sweeping the long corridor with their eyes. Blade opened the door and went on into the suite, shouting to the other guards. They poured out of their quarters at a run, those who had been asleep pulling on their swords and boots as they came.

As the noise they made died away, Blade thought he heard a sound from outside. It was a single soft thump, as though something heavy but well-padded had been dropped from a height. It seemed to come from the balcony outside his bedroom. He motioned the other guards back, except for Guroth, drew his sword, and stalked into the bedroom.

The double doors leading to the balcony were closed and locked from the inside. It made the bedroom a good deal less comfortable by shutting out most of the fresh air. But it also made it a good deal safer from stray arrows and stray assassins.

Blade pressed his ear against the door, listening for the slightest sound. But the silence outside was total. He inserted his key in the well-oiled lock. It opened with a faint click. With a crash, Blade kicked the left-hand door open and sprang out onto the balcony.

He almost stumbled over something long and dark lying at his feet. A body, wrapped in a blanket, its head hooded, and a long rope around its neck. Blade knelt, untied the rope, and pulled back the hood. Then in a single quick motion he jerked the blanket aside and stared down at what lay revealed.

Curana. Naked, dead, with the signs of prolonged and horrible torture all over her body and on her contorted and blackened face. Driven into her body just below the left breast was a long dagger—a dagger with the green falcon badge on the handle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Guroth flinched at the expression on Blade's face. Blade's fists and jaw clenched, and he felt the blood pounding at his temples. He knew that he was only a moment away from an explosion of rage that would send him charging down the hall to Harima's chambers, a dagger in his hand, ready for her throat.

The moment passed, and so did his murderous rage. As his head and his vision cleared, he realized that an open quarrel between him and Harima would only serve Klerus. Curana was dead. Nothing he could do to Harima would bring the girl back. She had been caught up in the mill of things so big that she could never have understood them, and she had been ground to bits.

And suppose Harima was not guilty of Curana's murder? Daggers can be planted easily—in the bodies of dead girls. Particularly by somebody with the craft and resources of Klerus. He certainly would not balk at a murder if it would sow more trouble between Blade and Harima. Certainly not the murder of somebody like Curana.

But Harima was jealous of Curana. That had been obvious that day in the garden. Fiercely jealous, and perhaps not only of Curana. There was the blonde girl who had been tortured and branded. Harima's jealousy was not one of Klerus' tricks. It was real, perhaps murderously real. Harima might have done it. Blade couldn't put that possibility out of his mind.

And because he couldn't put aside the possibility, he knew he couldn't wait until morning to settle the affair. He owed Curana that much. He would indeed make his way to Harima's chambers, carrying a

dagger, but he would not put it to her throat. Not at once, at any rate, and he hoped not at all. He would ask her some very pointed questions first.

His rage had cooled down now into a deadly grimness that did not keep him from thinking clearly and fast. The princess' quarters were heavily guarded. Entering them by night would in itself be a neat trick, and a warning to Harima. But doing it through the wholesale slaughter of her guards would not help matters. He would have to reach the princess without killing anyone. That meant using his unarmed combat skills, although he would take sword and dagger just in case. Klerus' men might intervene, and "accidentally" kill the Pendarnoth before they recognized him. No doubt Klerus would have the men who made the "mistake" killed in their turn. But that would do little for Pendar and nothing for Blade.

Blade picked up Curana's hood. A moment's work with his knife and it had two satisfactory eye holes. It was a tight fit, but it would conceal his face well enough. Then he went to the chests and picked out the plainest robe in them, a long gray affair. With mask and robe it would be hard to recognize him as the Pendarnoth. And there were enough men and women in the palace who prowled the darkened corridors in disguise so that one more would not attract much attention. Another clandestine love affair, those who met him would think.

He checked sword and dagger and turned to Guroth. "I am going to the Princess Harima's quarters. There are some questions I must ask her."

Guroth nodded. "I thought as much. But I am certain this murder is Klerus' work."

"I am not. Harima is a jealous woman, jealous as only one so young can be."

The captain nodded reluctantly. "You are right, oh Pendarnoth. But I cannot let you go and slay the princess. My oath and my honor and my soul forbid it." His hand moved toward his sword.

"All may rest in peace," said Blade. "I swear by the Holy Guardian of Pendar that I shall do the Princess Harima no harm in her body. And her soul I shall leave to the vengeance of the gods if vengeance is called for. That is all I will swear, Guroth."

Guroth realized that there was no alternative to accepting Blade's words except fighting him on the spot. And the second was out of the question. He bowed his head and sighed wearily as Blade strode out the door.

Blade moved swiftly toward Harima's chambers. Although the oil lamps were mostly out now and the corridors sunk in gloom, they were not yet deserted. Several times he flattened himself into alcoves as servants or others on private business passed him. Once he rounded a corner and came face to face with two servants carrying a freshly varnished sedan chair. But his disguise held. The servants merely bobbed their heads in a casual gesture of deference and passed on without stopping or slowing.

It did not take him long to get within sight of the door to Harima's chambers. But the two eunuchs with swords were on guard as usual, and there was no cover in the corridor except the dim light. In that dim light both eunuchs looked about eight feet tall. Blade waited until he had made sure that one of them was carrying a set of keys. Beyond that he would have to gamble that one of those keys would open the chamber door. Then he shrugged off his cloak to free his limbs for fighting and slipped around the corner.

In the dimness his silent, stalking approach brought him halfway to the door before the eunuchs saw him. As their heads swung toward him and their eyes widened, Blade leaped forward, his snapping fists up into striking position. He struck low to take the first man in the stomach, then smashed him across the jaw

as he folded. The guard went down with his sword only halfway out of its scabbard.

But in the time it took Blade to polish off the first guard, the second one succeeded in drawing his sword. He came at Blade, the sword whistling around in a deadly arc that would have taken off Blade's head if he hadn't ducked. He kept on ducking, then rammed both fists upward. One connected squarely with the elbow of the man's sword arm. Blade felt bone smash under his fist and saw the sword falter and sag. His other fist came up squarely under the man's chin, so fast and hard that if it had been a spear point, it would have gone straight up into the man's brain. The guard crumpled and went down so fast that Blade had to jump aside to keep from being knocked down by the falling body.

As the second guard sank to the floor, Blade flattened himself against the wall, listening intently. He had been as fast and as silent as he could, but had he been fast and silent enough? Apparently he had. As far as he could see or hear, nobody moved, nobody spoke. He took the gilded keys from the guard's belt and began trying them on the jeweled lock of the gold and ivory-inlaid door. The third one worked.

Blade slipped through the door and closed it behind him. Inside was another corridor, darker than the one outside and just as deserted. But here the stone floor was covered ankle-deep in a soft rug and the walls were hung with pastel-colored tapestries. An unmistakable scent of perfume hung in the air.

His footsteps utterly silent on the thick rug, Blade moved down the hall, keeping as close to the wall as possible. Each time he came to a door, he would pause and put his ear against it, listening for some sound to indicate what lay within. More silence greeted him. Apparently everybody in Harima's household except the guards on duty had gone to bed.

Then as he knelt to listen by the fifth door he heard someone take the handle inside. He spun about, flattened himself against the wall, and froze, barely breathing. The door opened and another eunuch in servant's livery came out.

Blade was on him before he could take two steps down the corridor. His hand clamped hard over the eunuch's mouth to stifle any outcry. One leg hooked his feet out from under him, dropping him to the floor. The eunuch stared up at Blade, his eyes wide and staring with stark terror.

"Where is the Princess Harima's room?" whispered Blade. He made his voice sound as fierce as he could without raising it. The man's mouth opened and shut a couple of times and sweat broke out on his face. "Where?"

"Far end of the hall. Red ... jewels ... please ..."

Blade applied a pressure hold to the side of the eunuch's neck and saw him slump into unconsciousness. The Blade rose and headed down the hall.

At the far end stood a red-enameled double door set with emeralds in the green falcon design. But in an alcove by it stood two more armed eunuchs.

Blade swore under his breath. But there was nothing to do but try to take these two also. Silent as a tiger stalking its prey, he moved toward them.

But these eunuchs were more alert than the ones in the outer corridor. They caught sight of Blade and sprang wide apart. Their swords flew clear with a hiss of steel, then they were coming at him.

Blade's reflexes and training saved him by only the slightest of margins from being sliced into half a dozen

pieces. He dropped to the floor, rolled aside as one sword came down, and shot his left foot into the first man's stomach. The kick took the breath out of the man and jolted him back against the wall.

Now the second man's sword was slicing toward Blade and again Blade rolled and started to get to his feet. But this time he was a fraction of a second slow, and the tip of the sword laid his shoulder open. With blood streaming down his arm, Blade jumped to his feet and aimed a kick at the guard's knee. The guard was fast on his feet though. The kick struck only a glancing blow that slowed him without stopping him. Another sword stroke whistled within inches of Blade's head. This time the guard was slow in recovering and getting his sword back up. Before he could back out of range, Blade stepped in under the sword swing and threw a one-two punch into his opponent's stomach. The guard folded. Before he hit the rug, Blade whirled to meet the first guard.

He was still on his feet, gasping for air, trying to get enough into his lungs to shout an alarm. The man's mouth was open for that shout when Blade's fist snapped into the side of his head. He thudded to the carpet.

As if the sound of the guard hitting the floor had been a signal, the door slid open. From the perfumed darkness inside a face stared out at Blade. Small, sharp-featured, pale, framed in dark hair. A scanty white night-robe embroidered in gold. Princess Harima.

Before he could think about it, Blade was through the door. His hands went up and clutched at Harima's bare shoulders so hard that his fingernails almost broke the skin.

"Did you kill Curana, princess? I must know this, Harima. I must know what kind of people I must join if I must oppose Klerus. Speak, my lady princess, if you value your life." Harima stared at him, eyes wide with terror and mouth open with soundless pleading.

Then from beyond Harima in the shadows a clear boy's treble voice spoke. The words came out calmly and slowly. "Release my sister, Pendarnoth. She is innocent of Curana's death, though not innocent of jealousy. It is to your honor that you wish the truth about Curana's death. I will give it to you. But my sister had nothing to do with it. This I swear by my honor and by all the gods of Pendar and the spirits of those who have ruled here before me."

Blade raised his eyes and looked over Harima's shoulder. In the dim light beyond, with a knife raised in his left hand, stood King Nefus.

CHAPTER TWELVE

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The spectacle of the eleven-year-old king standing with a knife in his small hand ready to defend his sister brought Blade to a sudden halt. He realized he had been closer to losing control of himself than he wanted to think about. He had come with the intention of being cold and calm, as he spoke to Harima. Instead, the fights with the guards and the long stalk through the darkness had tightened his nerves and swelled his anger.

Now he felt the anger subsiding or at least cooling. His voice was level as he said, "I will believe you for now because I must, Your Majesty. But it would be wise for you to make me believe it of my own free will. There must be trust between us before we can plan anything against Klerus."

The king swallowed, and for a moment Blade thought he saw tears in the boy's eyes. Then the king said with a tremor in his voice, "Then you do want to help us fight Klerus? You really do?"

If Nefus had grown a second head Blade could hardly have been more surprised. It was a moment before he could speak in a normal tone of voice. "I had heard much to suggest that Your Majesty did not wish to fight the High Councilor Klerus. It is said that—I hope you will not take offense if I speak frankly."

"I will be angry if you do not speak frankly, Pendarnoth. Say what you want to say."

"I have heard that you honor Klerus because when your father died he was like a father to you. That you are blind to his faults and to his plans to betray Pendar to the Lanyri. And that you and your sister are at odds over this. She does not like Klerus at all."

The king's dignity fell apart as he began to laugh, and Harima with him. They laughed until their laughter infected Blade also, and he laughed with them until all three ran out of breath. The laughter drove away the last of his anger and suspicion. He found it impossible to believe that King Nefus could be telling anything but the truth, either about Klerus or about Curana's murder.

Nefus finally wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes and said with a smile, "I am happy to know that you have heard this sort of thing. It proves the act my sister and I have been playing for two years is convincing. Did you hear the story from one of Klerus' enemies?"

Blade nodded and explained, briefly. Nefus smiled. "The act is very convincing when it has even the people who hate Klerus and the Lanyri worrying about me. Well, I ask that you tell Guroth that I and my sister honor him for his loyalty. We will see it properly rewarded some day."

Blade nodded. "That will make him very happy. But before you can reward him, you must first keep your throne."

Harima sighed. "Pendarnoth, we have thought much of how that might be done. But Klerus is king in all but name through his power in the Council of Regents. Nothing we have thought of would be accepted by the Council."

"I believe you, my lady princess. But before you did not have a Pendarnoth, let alone one who was on your side. I believe I see a way that my position can help you. Perhaps it can even bring you victory."

"Pendarnoth, if you can give us victory over Klerus and the Lanyri, you will deserve a new name. 'Pendarstrin,' Savior of the Pendari."

"Let us worry about the Lanyri afterwards. You have a good army, and that may well be enough to repel the invasion. I can help you there also. But first, let us deal with Klerus."

Blade quickly outlined his plan. It was appropriate that the Pendarnoth should have a large guard of his own, wasn't it? Particularly when he was going to be riding to war before long. The priests would certainly agree with this if asked—and they should be asked, secretly of course.

So Nefus should propose to the council that such a guard be organized. If the proposal had the blessing of the priests, not even Klerus would dare oppose it.

And then Nefus would appoint Guroth High Captain of the Pendarnoth's Guard. Guroth had a long list

of officers and men he knew to be loyal to the king and Pendar. No doubt the king and Harima had lists of their own? Both nodded at that. These loyal officers and men should be gathered together in the Pendarnoth's Guard. This would create a strong force of absolutely loyal soldiers, and under the authority of the Pendarnoth himself, it would be even stronger, since it was sacrilege to fight against the Pendarnoth.

"And then?" asked Nefus.

Blade paused and took a deep breath. If Nefus balked at the next step, he would have to start all over again. "Then we arrest Klerus, search his papers, and question his servants for the evidence of his treason, and execute him." For once Blade was not treating the king as an adult. As he spoke, his voice held the tone of an uncle warning a favorite nephew. He hoped it would work, or at least that Nefus would not resent it.

Apparently the boy-king did not. Perhaps he was used to having the High Councilor talk to him that way. In any case he frowned at Blade's words, but not with irritation. He seemed to be puzzling over a new and difficult problem that he had never met before. Then he sighed and spoke.

"I do not want to do such a thing. There is some truth to the stories about Klerus and me. He was good to me when my father died and I became king. That was a terrible time for me."

"I can imagine, Your Majesty. But Klerus was doing that sort of thing simply to increase his own power and influence."

"How can you know that, Pendarnoth?" said Nefus sharply.

Blade realized that in his eagerness to persuade the king he had said a little too much.

"I am sorry, Your Majesty. You are right. I do not know what Klerus was like years ago. But I know what he is like now. And so do you."

"I do. And I know that we must do what you suggest. Now I must return to my own chambers before I am discovered here. How did you get into my sister's chambers, Pendarnoth?" Blade explained his dealings with the guards and saw Nefus frown. "I shall send some of my own eunuchs to take away the guards you attacked. Even if somebody has discovered the bodies, if they are gone by the time Klerus arrives, he will not be able to prove anything. He will only be suspicious, and he is suspicious already. But you will not have to hit my sister's guards on the head again. There is a secret passage that leads directly to her chambers. She will show you how to use it." Nefus raised his hands in reverence to Blade, and Blade in turn bowed. Then the king rose on tiptoe to kiss his sister on the cheek, turned, and vanished through a curtained doorway. His small slippered feet made so little noise on the carpeted floor that he seemed to have been spirited away.

Blade turned to Princess Harima, and saw that she was shaking all over, as if she were chilled. "My lady princess, are you all right?"

"Oh yes," she said with a laugh. "It's just—just that I'm so happy. Can you imagine what it was like for so long, alone, helpless, waiting for Klerus to strike, knowing that he would strike when he was ready. We were so lonely."

"I can imagine it," said Blade, but he was not really listening to her words. There seemed to be almost an edge of hysteria in Harima's voice, even though she was obviously trying to control it. Then before he

could move, she stepped forward and threw her arms around him. Her lips came up to meet his, wet, clinging, and desperate, while her tongue slipped into his mouth and writhed there. A man blind, deaf, and dumb could have sensed the urgency pulsing in Harima's body. And Blade was none of these, but a healthy vigorous man with strong appetites and few inhibitions.

He felt his own body responding to hers as she pressed against him, and his own breath speeding up. His hands went to the back of her neck and stroked the fine hair there. A little moan came from her.

Then suddenly she twisted out of his grasp and backed off two steps. She stood facing him, her body still quivering, but her eyes cast down and her face pale. "Pendarnoth, I—I ... I am virgin. I ... you ..." Tears sparkled in the corners of her dark eyes as she closed them.

Blade understood. She was a virgin and although she wanted him badly, she was frightened as well as passionate—in fact, frightened of being passionate. He would have to be very gentle with her—or reject her entirely. No, that second course might easily sour the relationship between them, a relationship Blade wanted to build and if possible build on.

He stepped forward until he could reach out and cup Harima's small firmly pointed chin in his right hand. At the same time he was unknotting the silken cords at the throat of her robe. As the cords came undone, Harima quickly hunched her shoulders and crossed her hands across her breasts to keep the robe from slipping down from her body.

Blade now knelt before Harima, running his hands gently up and down her spine. She shivered again, but the fear and strain were fading from her eyes. As his hands played over her buttocks, firm tight curves under the thin silk of the robe, he heard her moan again. She bent down until her cheek was resting on top of his head. Then she slowly drew his head against her breasts.

He felt them under the robe, small gracefully curved cones, not full but flawlessly proportioned. He could even guess that the nipples were large—and he could be certain that they were rising and hardening as she felt him against her.

Gently he reached for her hands and pulled her arms away from her body. As she straightened up, the robe fell from her shoulders and slid to the floor. She made no effort to cover herself now, but stood with her arms outstretched and her eyes fixed on his face. She seemed to be waiting for a judgment of her body to show in his eyes.

The dim light of the room softened any angularities in Harima's naked body. Slender neck, rounded shoulders, breasts as Blade had felt them, with large dark nipples standing up in hard little cones. A slender waist with the belly curving gracefully down toward the blue-black mat of hair between the graceful thighs. A slim body, spare of flesh, but beautiful on its own terms. Blade no longer had any doubts of that—or of his own increasing, response to the sight of it.

Quickly he stripped off his own clothes and stood naked before Harima. Her eyes inevitably fixed on his massive organ, and he could see her shiver again as she saw its size. "You—you are—huge, Pendarnoth. Are you—?"

"I am not like ten ordinary men," said Blade with a laugh. "I am a man and do what a man does. But I know enough of what I am doing." He motioned toward the rug. "Lie down, Harima. And do not be afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all." He spoke soothingly, caressingly, speaking to both the woman and the child in Harima.

She flowed gracefully down onto the rug and he lay down beside her and pulled her to him. He did nothing at first but let his hands play over her body, touching lightly here, pressing harder there. He spent a long time on her breasts and a long time stroking and fingering her pubic area, until he felt her body beginning to move of its own will. He heard her moaning and hard breathing, saw her eyes close, then quickly lifted himself up and let himself down into her.

She was indeed a virgin, and she gave a rasping scream as he penetrated. He did not go in deeply at first, for he had promised to be gentle. He waited until he felt her legs come up of their own accord to lock around his body before thrusting with his full great strength. Even then he paced himself, holding back to the limits of his endurance until he reached those limits, and in a series of fierce pulses poured himself into her.

He had not brought her to climax this time, but this did not bother him. That was not always possible with a virgin. But there was a smile on her face as she lay back on the cushions and used her robe to wipe the sweat from her body. It was a smile of triumphant discovery. So Blade was not at all surprised when within a few minutes she reached out again. Her hands closed around his organ, now limp and exhausted but not for long. Her fingers were gentle, delicate, and surprisingly skilled. Soon he was fully aroused again.

This time she welcomed him into her with joy and passion. It was an easy matter to bring her to climax, not merely once but three successive times. Her cries as her body writhed in its spasms were so loud that Blade wondered if they might be overheard. But no one came in. They were left undisturbed, to lie half-exhausted beside each other until desire came a third time. It was not until nearly two hours later that Harima showed Blade the door to the secret passage. Then she gave him directions, kissed him full on the lips, and like King Nefus vanished with ghostly silence.

Blade had no very clear recollection of making his way through the dark tunnels away from Harima's chambers, and then through the corridors back to his own suite. But he had a very clear memory of waking in the morning light and seeing Guroth standing over him. The captain was obviously waiting to speak, and on his face was a look so bleak that Blade was awake in an instant.

"What is it, Guroth?"

"Word has come from the border, oh Pendarnoth. It arrived during the night, while you were with the Princess Harima."

"Yes?"

"The Lanyri army is on the march. It crossed the border six days ago."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Three weeks later Blade sat on his horse and watched Rojag horsemen milling about on the outskirts of a burning Pendari town. His horse was not the Golden Steed, for that beast was too sacred in the eyes of the Pendari to be risked in battle. Instead he rode a tall, dark gray stallion from the royal stables, the personal gift of King Nefus. It was larger than the average Pendari horse, and so quite equal to Blade's two hundred pounds. The Golden Steed was back in the palace stables in Pendar, no doubt gorging itself in luxury.

Blade almost wished he could be there also. He had been furiously busy during those past weeks, working night and day training the soldiers of the Pendarnoth's Guard. That was no easy job, for Blade had to polish up his own skills at mounted archery at the same time. All that kept the job from being completely impossible was Guroth's constant and loyal aid. The new High Captain of the Pendarnoth's Guard was as able an instructor as he had been a combat soldier. He was able to teach Blade at the same time he was teaching the guard. And he had won the confidence of the soldiers to such an extent that Blade had no hesitation about leaving them in Guroth's hands when he himself rode off to war. Only a small force of guardsmen rode with him, for it was not part of the plan for him to do any heavy fighting now.

It was as well that Guroth had proved so loyal and so able. Klerus was pushing his plots ahead as fast as he dared, now that his Lanyri allies were actually on the march. The Pendari armies were being ordered to fall back before the invaders. One general who had given battle on his own initiative, and actually wiped out a small Lanyri force, had been assassinated. That had produced much grumbling among the soldiers. But the more outspoken grumblers had met the same fate as the aggressive general. After that there was silence in the ranks of the army, although the western horizon was marred each day by the smoke from burning Pendari farms and villages.

And Klerus was recruiting his own guard. Since Blade had the blessing of the priests as well as the support of the king for the formation of his own guard, Klerus had chosen not to oppose it openly. Instead he was secretly assembling a force of his own. It was already so large that any attempt to arrest Klerus would mean a pitched battle. Before too much longer Klerus would have enough men around him and under his orders to stage an outright military takeover, if he couldn't manage things any other way. So much of the Pendari army was now out in the field watching the advancing Lanyri that it would be easy to seize the palace and even Vilesh.

Fortunately, Guroth and most of the Pendarnoth's Guard were back in Vilesh. They would do all that could be done there to fight Klerus. Blade could stop worrying about that and concentrate on learning about the Lanyri.

He had not seen enough of the tough Lanyri infantry to really know if they were as good as he had been told they were. But he had seen far too many Rojag horsemen scouting and marauding ahead of the Lanyri. Apparently the Rojags had turned out every man they could put on a horse. No doubt they hoped that their alliance with the Lanyri would bring them Pendari land and slaves when the Lanyri had won. Some of them even now had bows, no doubt captured from the Pendari, although they could not yet use them well from horseback. But they did provide the Lanyri with a scouting force that could move just as fast as the Pendari. Not to mention the looting, burning, and massacring they accomplished wherever they went. Blade had seen a Pendari village after the Rojags got through with it, and he still felt a little sick at the memory.

The smoke from the village was rising now in three distinct columns. As Blade watched, one of the columns turned a dirty blue. Something in a shop, no doubt, making the smoke come out that color. Some of the Rojags seemed to be dismounting, no doubt to loot and rape more effectively.

Blade scanned the bare brown hills beyond the village's green fringe for any further signs of the enemy. He could see nothing, but that didn't mean there was nothing there. The Rojags were past masters at using cover, and the Lanyri were no less clever.

Blade heard a hail from behind him and turned. The officer commanding the fifty-man troop of horsemen riding with Blade was coming toward him. The officer bowed his head as he rode up and said, "Hail,

Pendarnoth. I think we can attack those Rojag creatures and perhaps save the village. There are fifty of my men here and twenty of your own guard. I do not think there are more than half that many Rojags."

Looking toward the village again, Blade was inclined to agree. He could not count the cloaked, armed figures very accurately, but certainly he could not see more than about twenty-five. He wasn't supposed to get involved in heavy fighting, but this could hardly be called heavy fighting. And a victory here might save at least one Pendari village from ending up as a heap of smoking rubble, its maimed and tortured people sprawled hideously in the streets.

He nodded. "Very well. We shall attack. You will give the orders. I will lead my guard only." Blade did not yet feel he understood the finer points of Pendari tactics well enough to take command from an officer who had been learning them for nearly twenty years.

The officer rode back to his men and Blade heard his voice rise in shouted orders. He turned to his guard and told them of the plan. He was rewarded by savage grins. These were among the toughest soldiers in the whole army of Pendar, spoiling for the fight he had been denying them for nearly a week. They would follow him into anything, even if he were not the Pendarnoth. Then he turned his horse's head toward the village and waited for the horn blast that would signal the charge.

It came, harsh, raucous, floating across the fields to the ears of the Rojags. Blade saw some of the moving figures stop dead and rammed his spurs into the horse's flanks. It leaped and scrambled up the slope out of the gully. Behind Blade came the guardsmen, and off to his left dust rose in a cloud as the other horsemen came up the slope. Their bows were already in position, and Blade saw the sunlight glint on arrowheads as they began shooting. He did not bother with his own bow, for he had no hope of hitting anything with a horsebow arrow at this range.

Now all seventy of the Pendari horsemen were out on the level ground and picking up speed. The hoof beats thundered in Blade's ears, and the clouds of dust about him made him cough. Through the yellow swirl he could see the Rojags scattering to their horses. Some of them were already mounted, spurring their horses toward the far side of the village. But others already lay still or writhing in the streets, arrows in their bodies.

Blade urged his horse to the left, toward the center of the advancing Pendari line. The fringe of an attack was no place for the Pendarnoth. He saw the houses of the village closed. Had the inhabitants managed to barricade themselves inside their houses? A Rojag arrow arched across his field of vision, ill-aimed but close enough so that he heard its whistle. Time to try a few shots with his own bow—the range was getting down.

By the time Blade had nocked an arrow to his bow the charging Pendari were almost in the village. He took his first shot at a man scrambling onto his horse in the street to his right. The arrow missed the man but stung his horse. It broke into a gallop, thundering away up the street while the man ran frantically after it, waving his arms. Then the Pendari were in among the houses, and with walls on all sides there was no more room to use the bow. Blade drew his sword and raised his eyes to the hill beyond the town. It was dotted with little plumes of dust raised by the horses of the Rojags as they fled pell-mell up the hill. Blade dug his heels into the horse's flanks again and urged it down the street.

As he did so, horns blared all over the village. Not the raucous, bellowing signal horns of the Pendari, but horns with a deeper, clearer note, like great bells. Blade's horse reared in surprise. Before he could spur it into movement again, every door of every house in the village flew open with a crash. The deep horns sounded again. And from inside the houses, Lanyri soldiers poured out at a run, swords drawn and shields up.

The Lanyri infantrymen were trained to perfection. Blade recovered from his surprise within a few seconds, but even that was too slow. In those few seconds the Lanyri had blocked off both ends of Blade's street with a double row of soldiers, and they were doubling that again. In either direction he saw the sun glinting on massed Lanyri armor and weapons.

Blade knew that nothing short of a winged horse could get him past those lines of grim infantrymen without aid. But if the Pendari charged from the other side ...

He raised his voice in a mighty shout. "Halloooooo! I'm trapped in the central street! Charge them from the rear!" At least his shouts startled the Lanyri. He saw the formations stir. Then the rear rank of each one faced about. Out came six-foot throwing spears with burnished iron heads, and up they went, forming a bristling row of points facing any possible Pendari charge. But there was no response from the Pendari to Blade's call, not even an answering shout.

An ugly suspicion formed in his mind. Was the whole attack on the village intended as a way of leading him into a Lanyri trap? Certainly the Lanyri must have been waiting in the houses, from the way they swarmed out on signal. A trap, definitely. For him, probably. He looked beyond the soldiers to the slope of the hill. And what he saw there turned suspicion to certainty.

The entire Pendari force was charging up the hill, yelling, screaming, waving swords and lances, and shooting arrows, in mad pursuit of the fleeing Rojags. The latter had almost vanished over the hill, but the Pendari showed no signs of slowing. The whole hillside was hazed with the dust raised by the hooves of their horses. Even the Pendari who had been in the village, who should have been responding to Blade's call, were pounding away into the distance.

Blade looked behind him to see if the rear offered a way out. The Lanyri were just as thick and looked just as ready there. But beyond them Blade saw half a dozen Pendari he recognized as members of his guard. He raised his voice in another below.

"Halloooo! Guards! To me, to me!" Desperate as he was, he would not shout out the name of the Pendarnoth in the hearing of the Lanyri. If the enemy had the slightest doubt of his identity, he wanted to leave them doubting.

The Pendari heard him. They wheeled their horses in a wide circle and nocked arrows to their bows. The Lanyri, however, promptly lowered their heads and raised their shields to form a solid leather roof over their ranks. Blade shook his head. Half a dozen Pendari could do nothing against the well-protected Lanyri flanks merely by shooting arrows at them. They would have to press home a charge.

Three flights of arrows whistled down onto the Lanyri shield-roof before the Pendari saw what Blade had already seen. They had no horns with them, but Blade faintly heard their senior man shouting as he wheeled his men into line. Blade backed his horse up until he was just outside sword range of the Lanyri at the other end of the street. He wanted as much room to pick up speed as possible, and he was willing to gamble that Lanyri orders were to take him alive. It seemed likely. If they had wanted him dead, they could have put two dozen spears into him five minutes ago.

The Pendari were lined up now. Blade could see the horses pawing at the ground as the riders' excitement communicated itself to their mounts. Then the senior man barked a single word, and all six men plunged forward. At the same moment Blade kicked his horse into motion, charging down on the Lanyri.

It almost worked. Blade saw the line of spears waver for a moment, but then it steadied. The first line of Lanyri dropped to their knees, still holding their spears out. In a single precise sequence of motions, the second line dropped their shields, drew back their right arms, and threw their spears over the heads of the first line. At the same moment the volley of spears struck the charging Pendari, Blade struck the other side of the Lanyri lines.

If the soldiers facing him had been two seconds slower raising their spears, Blade would have plowed straight into their unprotected ranks. But the gleaming metal points flashed up. Blade sawed frantically on the reins, trying to turn or slow his horse. But it was moving too fast. Still at a gallop, it impaled itself on half a dozen points.

Even so the shock nearly broke the Lanyri line. Half the soldiers in the rank facing Blade went down like bowling pins, helmets and shields flying in all directions. Even some of the ones in the rank behind reeled backward. But Blade's horse also went down, dead before it hit the ground, blood gushing from its wounds.

Blade managed to leap to one side as his horse toppled, and to land on his feet, sword swinging. He knew his only chance was to plunge straight at the Lanyri. Perhaps he could cut his way through their ranks before they recovered from the shock. He charged.

He sprang into the gap in the line his horse had broken. His sword lashed out to either side and ahead in a deadly pattern. His blows clanged uselessly, jarringly, off Lanyri helmets and shields. He had to leap backward to avoid their sword thrusts. Lanyri swords were short, less than two feet long, which made them deadly for thrusting, deadly in this type of close fighting.

Blade came in again, and this time one of his sword slashes was deflected by the top of a shield into an enemy throat. Blade snatched the man's sword from his sagging hand and used it to thrust into a second man's thigh. Now there was a wider gap in the Lanyri line facing him and he hurled himself into it, both swords flashing. Two more men in front of him went down, and a third on his left. But from both sides other Lanyri were crowding around him. He could not fight so many on all sides, not with those deadly, thrusting, short swords. If he stayed in close, sooner or later someone was going to get a thrust into him. Whether or not they planned to take him prisoner, there could always be mistakes.

Again he backed away. As he did so, a man whose steel breast plate was silvered stepped out into the open.

"Ho, Pendarnoth!"

Blade frowned. So they did know his name. "What is this hailing me as the Pendarnoth?"

The officer threw his head back and laughed. "Don't play the fool, friend. You are indeed the man hailed by those dirty Pendari as their Father, the Pendarnoth. If we weren't sure you were the Pendarnoth, you'd have been dead ten minutes ago. My men have strict orders from General Ornilan to take you alive. How much alive he didn't say though. You'll be better off if you surrender now. Most of your men have run off and we've killed the ones who didn't." He pointed behind him, and Blade saw that all six of the guardsmen lay dead on the ground, drilled through by Lanyri spears. So did five of their horses. "Well?" the officer barked.

Blade thought fast. He didn't know what reason the Lanyri had to keep him alive. But if they were going to do so, for whatever reason, he'd be better off than continuing the fight against this kind of odds. If he surrendered unwounded, there was a better chance of escape.

"Very well," he said. "I submit."

The Lanyri officer grinned, and his men ran forward to surround Blade.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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General Ornilan was a large and beefy specimen of a normally rather small people. His breastplate and helmet were not only gilded but jeweled, and so was the hilt of his sword. He wore a dark red cloak and a red plume on his helmet. Both swirled and waved as he strode up and down inside his headquarters, without taking his eyes off Blade. Blade, unarmed but unbound, was seated on a stool in the middle of the room.

Neither did Blade take his eyes off the general. Every little bit he could learn or guess about Ornilan was something he might be able to use. He had learned that early in his career as an agent and followed it ever since. It had meant the difference between success and failure a dozen times, and had saved his life four times. So he watched Ornilan continuously, and mentally noted down every word the man spoke, every gesture he made.

Ornilan finally stopped in front of Blade and stared down at him. "You are a sensible man," said the general. "And you are not one of those dirty Pendari savages. That's obvious to anyone who looks at you. What do you think you have to gain by showing loyalty to them?"

Blade tried to pick the answer most in keeping with the image he was projecting. He wanted the Lanyri to think that he was really a cynical adventurer who was playing the role of the Pendarnoth for what he could get out of it. He wanted to come across as a man who might be bought, but who had enough of an opinion of himself to set a high price. That way he could spin on the bargaining as long as possible. In the process he could find out as much as possible about the Lanyri, and in the end win himself as much freedom as possible. Then all that would be left after that was to use the freedom to escape. All? That would be enough.

He shrugged. "You haven't convinced me I have much to gain by abandoning that loyalty to the Pendari." He waited for Ornilan to say something like "Except your life," and gave the general due credit when those words didn't come. Ornilan was not a blusterer who hurled wild threats like his soldier's javelins.

"There isn't much you could gain by simply joining us as another warrior, I agree. We already have more than enough auxiliary fighters, with the Rojags and the mercenaries. And even if we didn't have those, we could still win. Our soldiers are the best in the world." That was not said as a boast but a fact. Blade was more than willing to admit that the Lanyri were very good, even if not that good. He said so.

Ornilan beamed at the compliment. "I said you were a reasonable man. Do you really think then that the Pendari rabble can stand against our infantry?"

The Pendari had done so once before and could do so again, but that would not be the right thing to say. "They can certainly put up a long and stubborn fight. And they will be as stubborn as the rocks of their own mountains against a foreign invader who seeks to conquer and hold their land. I have been among them more than any Lanyri. I know the way their minds work better than you do." A blunt statement, every word of it perfectly true. And every word of it was intended to remind Ornilan that Blade was a

precious mine of information.

Ornilan got the message and rose to the bait. The man was not a good negotiator. He was much too eager to win Blade over, and inclined to be careless about the price he paid for it. The general's reputation was at stake in this campaign. And the Pendarnoth could make the difference between success and failure. So it was not surprising that Ornilan was reaching out with both hands to grab at any chance of winning Blade's support.

"You are quite right about the Pendari's courage. They may not have much discipline of the kind that has made Lanyr, but they have courage and they will fight long and hard. In such a fight their whole land will be terribly devastated. You must know what happens to those who resist the efforts of the Empire to bring them under its just rule. You can spare the people of Pendar all this fighting and death." The general was allowing for the possibility that Blade might be truly loyal to the Pendari. He was holding out the possibility of saving the Pendari by betraying them. Blade found it hard to keep a thin smile off his face.

But his expression was sober as he replied. "All these words are very pretty to hear. The Lanyri have as great a skill in word-spinning as they do in fighting. But you have not told me what you would like to see me do. Perhaps it is time you spoke of that."

From the expression that lit up Ornilan's face, Blade knew he had struck the right tone at the right moment. Ornilan would never make a poker player. He face telegraphed every emotion in him, and he would lose his shirt in every game.

"Consider," said Ornilan. "You are the Pendarnoth, the Father of the Pendari, the man who rides the Golden Steed, who fulfills the oldest and greatest myth of a foolish people much given to such myths. You have enormous power among them. What would happen if you rode back to Vilesh and proclaimed that you had just had a vision?"

"That would depend on what kind of vision I said I had. What are you suggesting?" Blade was trying to balance his voice between skepticism and curiosity.

"Let us say—a vision that the Lanyri come as friends to the Pendari, and should not be resisted?"

The contempt in Blade's laugh was entirely real. "Are you serious, General Ornilan? And I thought you were also an intelligent man." Ignoring the swift hardening of Ornilan's face, he went on. "It would be a miracle if I lived two days after saying something like that. The Pendari are determined to fight you, whether they have any hope of winning or not. And they believe they can win." This drew a short burst of laughter from Ornilan. Blade shrugged. "I know what you Lanyri think. But that doesn't make any difference here. What counts is what the Pendari think. And they are certain they can win."

Blade stood up and in his turn began to pace around the room. He was trying to look tense, concerned, and sincere all at the same time. "As long as they are certain they can win, they will try to fight. And it will be dangerous for anyone, even the Pendarnoth, to try to persuade them not to fight. I have not lived as long as I have by running into dangerous situations, at least not without some prospect of reward."

The word "reward" made Ornilan stop and almost glow all over, as if Blade had just offered him a ton of Pendari gold. Then the general clasped his hands behind his back tightly, as if he were trying to bottle up his delight. "We can manage a reward. Indeed we can manage a reward great enough to make any man interested. We can..."

"I want specific terms," said Blade sharply. "No more fine words. They may glitter like Pendari gold, but

they are like so much mountain rock when it comes to being worth anything."

For the first time Blade wondered if he had gone too far. Ornilan's face went first pale, then red. His voice grated as he said, "You set yourself very high for an adventurer, my friend. That will not improve your chances among the Lanyri, let me tell you."

"Tell me something I don't already know," snapped Blade. "Tell me why I should expect any chance among the Pendari if I go along with your proposals. And tell me what the Lanyri will do to me that the Pendari will not if they detect this change of loyalties and ... ah ... let us say, resent it."

Ornilan was not too angry to recognize the sense of Blade's words. His face returned to its normal color. "I understand what you mean. Very well, I will be precise. When we have conquered Pendar, you will be second viceroy. You will have free run of the women and gold of Pendar, a palace of your own, command of Pendari and perhaps even Lanyri troops—power and wealth greater than that of many kings."

"Who is going to be first viceroy? I must be able to work with him. Otherwise my gilded bed in Pendar may prove a bed of nails."

Ornilan grinned. "Have you been around the royal palace in Vilesh so long without knowing that? The High Councilor Klerus is our man, body and soul—at least for the moment." Ornilan did not want to put into words what Blade could easily see was in his mind. Klerus would be reliable as long as he needed the Lanyri. But after that? He might dream of the Pendari forgiving his treachery if he offered to lead them in revolt against Lanyri rule. If such a revolt succeeded, Klerus would be truly king, ruler of an independent Pendar, not just a satrap of the Lanyri. It was certainly an idea that would occur to Klerus, if it had not already.

"That also I have heard," said Blade. "But I find it hard to believe, considering the number of times that Klerus has tried to have me killed or at least made powerless."

Ornilan shrugged. "He is sometimes too eager. He no doubt thought you were an enemy at the time. I can understand what he tried to do."

"I can understand it, too," said Blade irritably. "But I cannot endure it any longer if I am to cooperate with you. And certainly not if I am to cooperate with Klerus. Am I, by the way?"

"Let us say that you will work in parallel but not hand-in-hand," said the general. "We cannot raise you above Klerus, for he would become jealous. We cannot put you under Klerus, for then you would be able to see only with his eyes and hear only with his ears. We want you to use your own wisdom in this matter." A polite way of saying that he should spy on Klerus. With pleasure!

"Very well," said Blade. "But you must send word to Klerus that I am no longer an enemy. That will keep him from trying to kill me. That way he can also protect me if the Pendari begin to suspect that I am no longer on their side. And finally, he can keep watch over me and in case I change my mind ... well, he has his methods, I am sure."

Blade managed to avoid holding his breath while waiting for Ornilan to answer this last speech. Here was the critical point. If Ornilan agreed and reported the agreement to Klerus, it would for the moment wipe out Klerus' suspicions of the Pendarmoth. And Blade had no intention of giving Klerus more than a moment after he returned to Vilesh. He would strike fast and hard and finally, and not even King Nefus or Princess Harima would know in advance. Besides, being in the good graces of Ornilan would make

the escape and the return to Vilesh much easier.

Blade saw Ornilan walk the whole length of the headquarters several times before he replied. "Very well, Pendarnoth. I understand all the reasons you give me. I particularly like the last one. If you are treacherous, Klerus will indeed find ways of dealing with you. Ways you will not like." Ornilan turned away from Blade and walked back to the table where his papers and maps were scattered. He picked up a pen and began writing on a piece of parchment.

"I will give orders for you to be kept in comfort here until I send a message to Klerus. We now have very reliable methods of sending messages to Vilesh, so it should take no more than a week." Ornilan grinned, showing all his teeth, and for a moment Blade was reminded of a skull. Then the general shouted an order, and half a dozen Lanyri soldiers tumbled into the room and led Blade away.

Ornilan kept at least part of his promise to Blade. Blade's quarters were not merely comfortable, they were positively luxurious. They even provided him with a choice of bed companions. Of both sexes, he noted—homosexuality was a popular vice among the Lanyri. Blade turned the men out—politely, except for one who became so insistent that Blade finally kicked him through the door—but kept a number of the women. No doubt Ornilan had ideas of getting information from Blade. But Blade in turn had ideas of getting information about the location and layout of the camp from the women. After ten days, Blade suspected that he had been more successful than Ornilan.

On the eleventh night no women came. The guards came in to bring the evening meal and pour fresh oil into the pottery lamps. But that was all. Blade was just settling down for a solitary night's sleep when he heard a scratching noise on the window over his bed.

The Lanyri had given him no weapons, but he had hidden a broken chair leg that would make a useful club. He now drew this from its hiding place. Then he lay perfectly still, the club clutched firmly in one hand but concealed under the covers. The scratching sound came again.

Moving inch by inch, Blade slid out of bed, got to his feet, and flattened himself against the wall to the right of the window. With one hand he reached out toward the latch of the wooden shutter, with the other he raised the club. A quick twist of his wrist, the latch clicked open, and the shutter swung into the room. A moment later Blade heard the sound of someone scrambling clumsily up the outside wall of the hut. A head concealed in a dark blue hood thrust into the room, along with two hands gloved in the same color. Blade waited until the intruder was halfway over the window sill before he moved.

He grabbed one of the hands and jerked so that the intruder toppled onto the bed. With his free hand he raised the club, then flipped the person over. He jerked the hood off, then stopped, club still raised but his eyes widening in surprise.

A woman was staring up at him from the bed, a strikingly lovely woman, her face full and round, flushed with exertion, and framed with a mass of now-tangled blonde hair. Blade did not let go of the club, but he lowered it a little as he spoke.

"Who the devil are you? And why are you sneaking around my quarters at night? That isn't wise, woman!"

The woman laughed deep in her throat. "Ah, warrior, I know it is not wise, but I had to get to you. I have seen you from far away, but I had to see you close, to touch you, to ..." her voice trailed off and

she made an explicit and unmistakable gesture.

"So you say. But who are you?" There was more suspicion in Blade's mind than he let show in his voice. He didn't want to drive this woman away unless and until he was certain she offered no opportunities—for escape, perhaps.

"A woman who wants you, my warrior. Is that not enough? Or have you lived so long with the intrigues of those dirty Pendari that you suspect even a woman who is panting for you?"

This was getting almost silly. The woman's language was so wildly exaggerated that either she was joking or she took Blade for a fool. If it was the second—well, Blade had no objection to being taken for a fool if it would keep the woman off her guard.

"I am a suspicious man, for if I were not, I would not be alive today. And you could do nothing with me. As it is—" but the woman was already rising to her feet and undoing the belt of her robe.

Standing up and watching the woman undress, Blade realized she was nearly as tall as he was, and her complexion almost as fair as his. Fairer, in fact. Blade's skin had weeks of suntan and accumulated grime darkening it. This woman's skin suggested a pampered and self-indulgent indoor existence. A lady of noble rank among the Lanyri? Perhaps, if there were any such in the huge camp. Or the mistress of some high person? More possible. The Lanyri were given to carrying their lovers of both sexes along with them, even on campaign.

The robe and hood came off and dropped to the ground. Under them she wore her golden hair under a filet set with jade and on her body a short white silk tunic. Her feet and her legs to the knees were bare. Blade noticed that the legs were long and well-turned, a perfect balance of grace and substantial flesh.

Then the woman reached down for the hem of the tunic. Slowly, with sinuous writhings of her hips, she drew the tunic up over her head. It rose up her thighs, revealing short silk panties, pale blue embroidered in dark red. It passed her stomach, with its impudently small navel peeping out from a gentle curve of white flesh. Then it whipped up the rest of the way over her head. Her breasts were full and round and as pale as the rest of her skin, so pale that Blade could see the network of blue veins surrounding the small pink nipples.

Giving a good imitation of a man drawn irresistibly forward, Blade stepped up to the woman and put both his palms on her breast. He felt the nipples quiver and then harden from one second to the next, pushing out against his palms in stiff points. Well, the woman seemed to be telling the truth, about her wanting him at least.

As her nipples hardened, he saw a moan pulse in her throat, and then her mouth opened to let it out. Her hands went around his body and pulled him against her so hard that he felt her breasts flatten against his chest. They stood locked together for a long moment. In that moment Blade could feel the heat almost radiating from her body. Even in the dim room light he could see that her skin was flushed. Why shouldn't she be aroused? God knows he was—he could feel his erection, rigid and jutting out against the woman's pubic hair.

Then she knelt down before him and for a moment he half expected those red lips to close around his swollen organ. But instead she twisted away suddenly, throwing herself on her back on the bed. This was clearly a woman who wanted no tenderness, delicacy, or preliminaries. If all there was in her was a rutting passion, why worry? He swung himself onto the bed and with practiced ease entered her.

She jerked and stiffened as he entered her tight wetness. For a moment Blade wasn't completely sure whether she had reached climax so soon, or was feeling pain as he drove into her. But soon the gasps and moans and little whimperings that came from her writhing mouth told him she was responding. Her response mounted rapidly, and Blade knew that he would not need to hold himself back. He could thrust and withdraw, thrust and withdraw, in a furious, mounting rhythm.

In minutes her body arched and the muscles of her stomach jerked and contracted in a long, fierce spasm. It faded for a moment, then swept on into another, a third, a fourth as Blade kept thrusting with vigor. Vigor, but rapidly fading control. His own body began to arch with the strain of holding back, his teeth clenched, his throat contracted to suppress a groan. Then the last of his control faded and his own spasm mingled with the woman's final one.

The woman sagged back onto the bed, all the vigor gone out of her body. It seemed to Blade that even its full ripe curves lost some of their roundness. The sound of her breathing roared in his ears like a blacksmith's bellows. The only movement other than the rise and fall of her breasts was a slow tossing of her head.

As her head swung back and forth, Blade saw something white glittering half-concealed in the blonde hair. He watched and waited for it to become more visible. Bit by bit it worked itself out of the woman's hair and finally fell onto the pillow. Slowly, so the woman's glazed eyes wouldn't notice his movements, Blade reached for it. A final quick motion of his own hand, and it was tucked up behind his ear. It seemed to be a small white cake of some kind, no larger than his thumbnail.

Some energy was coming back to the woman now. Her eyes focused on Blade's face and she smiled and raised her hands high over her head. "Ah, warrior, that was . . . it was such as I never get from that damned soldier." She started as she realized she had let something slip out. Blade did not start. The prospect of escape was keeping his mind almost unnaturally clear, ready to note everything that might help him.

"Would you like some wine, my lady?"

"Wine?"

"Of course. General Ornilan has ordered that I be well treated, and his orders have been carried out." He was looking for some reaction to the mention of General Ornilan, but this time her control was back. "I have every luxury here."

"Then wine by all means." No, her control wasn't back completely. It couldn't keep a smile of anticipation off her face. The wine definitely had something to do with her plans.

Blade went over to the cupboard and pulled out a leather wine bottle and two wooden cups. "Not elegant, my lady, but this is an army camp, not a palace. There will be better in Pendar when I have my own palace and retainers. Perhaps you will accept an invitation to . . . visit me there, let us say?" Was he moving too fast? No, it was all a question of studying people.

The woman seemed to quiver all over at the prospect Blade held out to her. He poured the wine into the cups and then almost, but not quite, turned his back. He was fairly adept at observing a person without seeming to. It was one of his skills that had turned out to be as much a lifesaver in Dimension X as in Home Dimension. Dimension X was a rougher game than any he had ever had to play as a secret agent, but the rules were often the same.

Blade saw the woman pick up one of the wine-cups, then in a quick flicker of long fingers raise her other hand to her hair. Those fingers probed into the blonde mass where the little white tablet had been. The woman started suddenly as her probing fingers found nothing—or at least not what they had been seeking. Even with only half an eye, Blade could see the woman's expression change. Her eyes widened—in surprise or panic—her full breasts heaved as her breathing quickened, and a touch of frenzy came into her movements. Both hands danced in her hair now, as if she were trying to pull it out, by the roots. Her mouth opened and shut, but no sound except her rapid breathing came out. Finally her hands tightened in her hair, seemingly frozen there. Her face sagged as if she were about to cry.

Then Blade reached up into the hair behind his right ear and pulled out the little white tablet. He held it out to the woman between his thumb and forefinger. He could not keep a thin smile off his face as he said.

"Is this what you were looking for, my lady?"

At that point she did start to cry. In fact, she sobbed so hysterically that Blade began to be afraid the guards outside would hear and come charging in to interfere. Any kind of interference was the last thing Blade wanted right now. He went over to the woman, sat down beside her on the bed, and put his arms around her until she calmed down. Then he gently turned her head toward him and said:

"All right, my lady. Who are you?" His voice was low but firm. He didn't want her to be in any doubt that he was in charge, or that he knew most of what she had planned. But he didn't want to frighten her any more either.

Her voice was so low when she answered that he had to strain to hear it. "My name is Raza."

"And you are General Ornilan's mistress?" She nodded. "He sent you here to find out what I was really thinking and planning, didn't he?"

"Yes. I was going to put the cake of tkul in your wine and then ... and then ..."

"And then I would answer all the questions you asked me truthfully. I would not be able to lie."

"N-n-no."

"Well, then, Raza, what are you going to do now? I have the tkul, and it seems to me the best thing to do with it would be to give it to you and have you answer my questions. Shall I do that, or will you answer my questions without it?"

"Oh gods, why ... why?"

"Why you, Raza? Because you aren't a very good spy. Why did you do this anyway?"

"Ornilan thought ... thought you were weak for women. A woman could ... get closer to you. He threatened to ... beat me if I didn't do what he wanted. And now he'll beat me because I've f-f-failed." She began crying and Blade had to comfort her again. He was getting impatient though. It showed in his voice when he spoke to her again.

"Do not worry, Raza. I will tie you up so that it will look like I overpowered you. Ornilan will not hold that against you, surely. In return you will tell me—quickly—where this camp is and how to get out of it without anybody knowing." She stared at him as though he had just sprouted purple fur all over his body.

"I said quickly, Raza. Otherwise I will tie you up anyway and try to escape on my own. But I will probably be captured. Then I will say that you helped me to escape. I doubt if Ornilan will like that very much."

For a moment it looked as if Raza was going to break down a third time. But somehow she found a few bits of self-control. She began to talk, rapidly and clearly enough that Blade could pick all the information he needed out of what she was saying. In a few minutes he knew he had learned all he was going to learn, and the time for action had come.

He pulled on his clothes and slung his sandals from his belt. Then he pulled Raza's robe and hood over his own clothes. He checked the impression in a mirror. In the darkness, with the hood pulled well down to cover his close-cropped hair, he would pass. At least he would pass as long as he kept his mouth shut, and as long as the sentries weren't too inclined to question anybody wandering around in Raza's cloak.

Blade left Raza well tied up as he had promised, and gagged as well. He arranged her so that to anybody peeping in, it would look like Blade was still in the bed. Then he scrambled out the window and slipped away into the darkness.

The gamble paid off. In the dead of the night most of the well-disciplined Lanyri were asleep in their tents. Those he met were sentries or members of punishment details, the first unwilling and the second unable to challenge him. Striding freely through the camp with an air of "I've got a perfect right to be here," he reached the horse lines within a few minutes.

The horse lines were more closely patrolled than the rest of the camp because the Rojag allies were notorious horse thieves. Blade got through the sentries without betraying himself, but not completely without trouble. Only a little trouble for him, but much trouble for the sentry who challenged him.. Two swift strides forward, a knife-hand chop to the man's neck just below his helmet, and a body was sprawled in the dust.

It was all that Blade could do then to keep himself from breaking into a run. But he forced his feet to move one step at a time across the well-trodden ground among the horses. They were all trained war horses; they kept silent. They even kept silent when he untethered one and swung himself onto its bare back. The soft clop of hooves was the only sound as he rode slowly out of the camp. When he saw its watch-fires vanish behind a spur of hill, he dug his heels into the horse's side. It swept forward into the darkness at a gallop.

He was still galloping when dawn broke over the hills. In the clear rose and gold light he saw an abandoned Pendar village. Outside its walls stood a tall stone pillar on which were marked the direction and distance to Vilesh.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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It took Blade less than five days to cover that distance to Vilesh, for he literally did not spare the horses. He kept the first one going at a gallop until it dropped, well into the afternoon of the first day. He was within a mile of a village, small and poor, but it had a few horses. After Blade slipped into the village stables that night, the village had one less horse.

That horse still had a good deal of life in it at sunset the next day. Then good luck brought Blade up with

one of the Royal Scouts. The man was carrying messages from one of the patrols keeping watch on Lanyri. Blade was careful to pick up those messages, along with the scout's clothes, badges, weapons, gear, and horse. The scout himself he deposited, stunned, bound, and gagged, within easy reach of the next village. Here the people had not fled. Apparently they were determined to go on tending their flocks and fields through Lanyri invasion, natural disaster, or the end of the world itself. They would find the scout when they came out the next morning. But they would learn little from him. Blade had toppled him out of his saddle with a well-aimed stone from an improvised sling.

Blade was determined to keep his identity concealed from everybody whose loyalty to the king he didn't trust. At least until the moment he had his sword at Klerus' throat, he added to himself. And there was nobody outside the palace itself he trusted.

Blade succeeded, thanks to the scout's badges and gear. A Royal Scout was a man privileged to ask and receive help in any form he might need from any subject of the King of Pendar. To refuse a scout's request for aid or delay him in his passage, even through negligence, was treason.

So stable doors opened and the best horses were led forth and saddled and bridled for Blade. Saddlebags were packed full of the choicest food the villages could offer. Leather bottles of wine and water were pressed on him. In some of the villages he might have received baths and even girls if he had been willing to stop. But he was not. All the girls saw of him was his back as he vanished down the road to Vilesh in a cloud of dust.

He reached Vilesh on the evening of the fifth day. By that time he was confident that no one, not even Princess Harima or Guroth, could recognize him as the Pendarnoth. A five-day growth of beard covered his face, and a five-day accumulation of yellow and gray dust covered the beard. His clothes were so stiff with sweat they could stand up by themselves. He suspected he could be smelled a hundred feet upwind. Over one eye he wore an improvised patch made from Raza's cloak, and on his left arm was an equally improvised bandage made from the same material. There was even a little dried blood on the bandage, smeared on it from a carefully cut thumb. The picture he presented was not merely enough to confuse, it was enough to frighten. Children pointed and ran screaming into the houses along the high road as he thundered toward the towers of Vilesh.

For all his travel-worn appearance, Blade was not tired. He knew he should have been nearly ready to fall out of the saddle, but somehow he was not. Perhaps it was sheer nervous energy. Perhaps it was also the knowledge that within a few hours he would finally be at grips with the High Councilor. He had spent too many weeks using his wits and his tongue as his main weapons. Now the time was coming to use his sword, and use it on the best target in this whole Dimension. Ornilan at least was a soldier and a good one as far as Blade could tell. But Klerus—there was nothing at all to be said for him.

The sentries at the main gate of the city let him through after a single look at his badge. That was welcome for the moment, but Blade knew he would have to speak to Nefus about the Royal Scouts. False badges could easily be made and distributed, and assassins and saboteurs bearing them admitted to Vilesh. The Pendari would have enough difficulty defending their city from the enemies outside without having to cope with others inside.

At the palace gate, however, the guards looked Blade over a bit more carefully. He recognized two of the eight men on watch as members of the Pendarnoth's Guard. That was encouraging. It meant that Klerus had not yet purged all the "unreliable" men from the palace guards. But Blade could not appeal to the guardsmen's loyalties without revealing his identity. He had to sit quietly in the saddle while his badges and message bag and sword were inspected with everything but a magnifying glass.

He also had to fight back the desire to ask questions about "the fate of the Pendarnoth." He could not be sure whether or not his capture had been kept a secret, but he suspected it had been. Certainly there had been no signs of mourning in the city or the villages around it.

Finally the guards appeared satisfied with his credentials and handed everything back to him. One of them looked him over from head to foot as they did so, a searching look that made it hard for Blade to sit still in his saddle.

"Have you heard anything of the Pendarnoth?"

Blade came out with his answer smoothly and calmly. "Not a word. Is there some great news of our Father?"

"None," said the guard. "And that is what is bothering many among us. He rode out to keep watch upon the Lanyri all but a month ago, and not one word of him have we heard since. There are tales that he is slain, captured, or even proved a traitor."

Blade managed to shrug, although, he felt a chill inside him at the last words. "I have been too busy riding among the patrols of soldiers to listen to tales, I fear. So I could say nothing worth hearing on this." The guard nodded and shouted up to the gatekeeper to open the gates. They rumbled apart, and Blade rode on into the forecourt of the palace.

By the time he had turned his horse over to the stable-hands and made his way out of the stables, it was nearly dark. So much the better. Here in the palace were both his best friends and his worst enemies, both of whom knew his face well. And he still didn't want to be recognized until he was safely surrounded by a dozen or so loyal men. Even that might not be enough if Klerus really called out all his hired killers and ordered them to the attack, but it was better than wandering about alone.

His grimy and battered appearance drew a good deal of attention as he made his way through the palace corridors. But it drew no challenges. The palace was obviously on a war footing now, all peacetime pursuits and ceremonial dropped for the duration. There were archers and scouts and soldiers of the various guards wandering about in such numbers that one more travel-worn scout was no more than another tree in a forest.

Blade made straight for the Pendarnoth's suite, although he could not be sure that Guroth and the men of his patrol would still be there. Klerus might not have launched a general purge of the Pendarnoth's guard yet. But there was no way to be sure he had not indulged in a few pin-pricks, such as routing Guroth out of his quarters. Blade hoped he would not have to conceal his identity through a prolonged search of the whole palace for the High Captain. Damn! He had been half-hoping that the intrigues would end and the fighting start the moment he entered the palace gates.

He approached the door of his suite as cautiously as he could without seeming to be sneaking up on it. He noticed that the masons had abandoned their work in the corridor. Dismantled scaffolding, tools, and loose bricks lay about helter-skelter. All of them were covered with a thick layer of dust. But the two soldiers standing outside the door were from Guroth's patrol. They no longer wore the gold-decorated equipment and embroidered clothing of palace troops. Now they wore full field gear, complete with strung bows, full quivers, well-worn riding boots, and even canteens.

Blade strode up to them with his scout's, badge displayed and his message bag slung over his shoulder. He raised one hand in greeting but kept the other hovering near the hilt of his sword.

"Hail, soldiers."

"Hail, scout. What do you bring?"

"I bring a message for the eyes of High Captain Guroth of the Pendarnoth's Guard. Is he within?"

One of the soldiers bent down, put his mouth to the hole in the door, and shouted, "Captain Guroth! A scout with a message for you." A moment's listening for the answer, then the door opened and a voice called from within, "Enter."

The two guards kept their eyes on Blade and their hands near their sword hilts until the door closed behind him. And four more soldiers stood behind Guroth as the captain came up to Blade.

"Welcome, my friend. What message do you have for me?"

Blade reached up and pulled off the eye patch and the head bandage. "My message is: I have come back."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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For a few moments Blade wondered if Guroth was going to drop dead on the spot from sheer surprise. The High Captain went white, then red, then purple. He seemed to be alternately strangling and breathing as though he had just run ten miles. Finally both his breath and his color returned to normal, and he stepped forward and embraced Blade with all his strength. Two of the guards let out shouts that sounded like Indian war whoops.

Blade gently pulled himself free of Guroth's bone-crushing embrace and put his finger to his lips. "The cheering can come later. At the moment nobody in all Pendar except you men know that I am here."

"Including Klerus?" asked Guroth with a savage grin.

Blade nodded. "Including Klerus."

Now Guroth looked as if he also wanted to shout and yell, but he caught himself in time. "Is it time, oh Pendarnoth?"

Blade did not need to ask "Time for what?" He knew that Guroth saw the situation as he did. "It is. How long will it take you to find out where Klerus is and gather enough men to deal with him and whoever he may have with him?"

Guroth frowned for a moment. "About an hour."

"Good. Start now."

For the first time Guroth looked at Blade with doubt in his eyes. "That soon, oh Pendarnoth? Without even asking the king?"

"If we take the time to ask the king, Klerus may learn that I have returned. And if he does, I don't think

he will refrain from killing me. He is playing for stakes that have grown much too great."

"I admit that seems wise. He certainly has a great many soldiers loyal to him. There will be a bloody battle if he calls them all to his aid. But if we strike at Klerus, and take the head off the conspiracy ..."

Blade nodded. "The body will writhe around like a headless snake. It may make a lot of noise, but it will not be very dangerous. So send your messengers on their way at once."

Guroth picked out eight men in a few minutes, and one by one they vanished into the darkness. Some went out the door, and some out onto the balcony and down to the ground on ropes. When they had all gone, Blade sat down and made a meal of the leftovers from the guards' dinner. Between bites of chicken and sips of wine he told the story of his adventures over the last month.

Guroth's face hardened as Blade described the treacherous desertion of the soldiers, then shrugged. "I do not think they lived long enough to get any reward for their treachery. None of them has been seen in Vilesh since your capture, and several of the officers have been reported killed. I suspect Klerus is having them killed off so they cannot tell of your capture."

"But why shouldn't Klerus let the word out? It would be a terrible blow to the spirits of the Pendari."

"Perhaps. But it might also make them determined to fight all the harder to avenge your capture. In any case, I do not think you were supposed to be captured. I think you were supposed to be slain on the spot. Dead men cannot escape or play games of their own. And if you had vanished mysteriously ..."

Blade grinned. "No doubt General Ornilan, the Lanyri commander, thought the same. So his men carried out his plans, not Klerus'. Then he tried to win me over to work for him. Not only against the Pendari, but against Klerus. Obviously the Lanyri do not trust their own viceroy."

It was Guroth's turn to grin. "Do you blame them?"

Blade used most of the rest of the hour to shave, scrub himself as thoroughly as possible, and don clean clothes and better weapons. Then he pulled a hood over his head. It was Curana's hood, the same one he had found on her body and worn the night of his meeting with Nefus and Harima. Now he would be wearing it as he went to avenge Curana's death on her murderer. Wearing it made him feel better than anything else could have done.

Before the hour was two-thirds gone, the messengers began reporting back, each bringing a handful of men with them. Some wore field gear, some wore palace outfits, all were armed to the teeth.

The last man brought in not only four of his comrades, but a priest of the Temple of the Holy Guardian. The priest was not exactly a prisoner, but he had about him the air of a man who had not come entirely of his own free will. He looked nervous and ill-at-ease, and kept looking fearfully about him at the grim gathering of armed men.

Blade took the priest and the soldier who brought him aside, into his bedroom. Then he asked, "What does bringing this priest here mean?"

"By your leave, Oh Pendarnoth," said the soldier. "This priest was the one who told me where Klerus is now. But he seemed to guess why I wanted to know. Since I could not trust him not to run to his fellow priests and tell the whole story, I brought him along."

Blade nodded. "A wise decision." Then he turned to the priest. "Well, my friend?"

The priest swallowed hard and said, "It is true that I told him where Klerus is. He is in the cellar chambers of the Temple of the Holy Guardian, in conclave with his allies among the priesthood. And I know that it is your purpose, Oh Pendarnoth, to seek out Klerus and slay him. But you must not use blasphemous and sacrilegious violence against even Klerus within the holy space of the temple. All those of the priesthood, even I myself, would turn against you then."

Blade frowned. He was rather weary of priests who set religious proprieties above the welfare of their people. But the priest's words seemed to imply a way out.

"My friend, do you mean that you share our hatred for Klerus and wish as we do to see him destroyed?"

"With all my heart, Oh Pendarnoth."

"Good. If we swear by the most Holy Guardian to lay no hands on him within the temple itself, will you lead us to a place where we may take him as he comes forth?"

The priest appeared dubious for a moment. Then he said, "There is such a place. But Klerus' guards will also be there in strength. A great battle may arise."

"Does that matter to you, as long as it is not within the temple?"

After a moment's hesitation, the priest shook his head. "It does not. I will lead you."

Blade clapped the priest on the back. "Good. You have done well for Pendar and will do better before the night is over."

In spite of his congratulations to the priest, Blade was far from congratulating himself as yet. There was much to do: reaching the temple without raising the alarm, setting the ambush, springing it, and fighting a pitched battle with Klerus' guards. Things could go disastrously wrong at any of these points.

Blade got his men out of the palace without trouble. The sheets of the beds and the cloaks and tunics in the chests provided hoods to cover their faces. A little work with their daggers and they took the Pendarnoth's Guard badges off their tunics. But even in disguise, fifty-odd armed men moving through the corridors of the palace could hardly escape attention.

But Blade and Guroth had replies ready. "We go about the business of the council," they said to all challenges or questions. Since that was the phrase used by Klerus' own supporters when moving about at night, it dissolved opposition like acid. Blade could not help grinning under his mask at the irony—their best disguise was the same as that of their worst enemy.

Outside the palace they found the streets grimly dark and empty. A strict curfew was keeping people at home. The only living things moving were the scavenger dogs and cats, the patrols of the watch, and the workmen of the shops. The shops were ablaze with light and filled with the continuous clanging of tools day and night. Piles of weapons and long rows of siege engines stood outside them. All the arms workers were exempted from curfew. But neither dogs nor cats nor watchmen nor armorers were inclined to argue with fifty men armed to the teeth.

Blade kept his men moving along at a brisk trot. They covered the mile to the Temple of the Holy Guardian on its hill in less than fifteen minutes. Another fifteen, and they had deployed and hidden

themselves in the alleys and doorways of the slum quarter to the south of the temple. It was here that the priest said Klerus would be coming out. Blade was inclined to believe the priest. He counted at least thirty men lounging or standing about near the south door. Although all of them wore the rags of beggars or the smocks of workmen, Blade and Guroth could not be put off by such crude disguises. They easily detected the alert, military stance of the "beggars," their concealed swords, and the care with which they had taken their positions.

The hours dragged on and the chill of the night deepened. It told on the watching men. Blade heard coughs and sneezes around him in the darkness. At each one he stiffened, watching to see if Klerus' henchmen had taken alarm. Each time he was relieved to see them show no signs of having heard anything. Boredom and cold had taken the edge off their alertness. Blade hoped things would stay that way.

The hours dragged on, and Blade was beginning to wonder. Was Klerus going to wait until daylight? Had he summoned overwhelming reinforcements? Had he taken alarm and decided to take refuge in the temple? Worst of all, had he made his way out of the temple and back to the palace by another route? In that case, Blade knew that he and Guroth might well be the ones facing an ambush before they grew many hours older.

It must have been less than an hour before dawn when a faint metallic clinking broke the silence of the dark streets. It came from down near the base of the temple. Both parties of waiting men were instantly at full alert. Blade drew his sword and dagger and whispered to the man beside him, "Get ready to move at my signal." He heard the whisper fade away into the darkness as it was relayed from man to man.

The clinking came again, and then the sound of a door opening on rusty hinges. At the base of the temple, figures moved. They were ghost like at first, then they acquired more substance as they mounted the stairs to the level of the street. There were fifteen or twenty of them, but Blade was paying attention only to the vast bulky figure that brought up the rear—Klerus. Some of the newcomers joined the guards. Then all formed a hollow square, facing outward.

Blade wanted to wait until Klerus and his guards had cleared the temple area. That way none of them would have a chance to flee back into it when they were attacked. But as he looked up at the sky, Blade realized that within a few more minutes men would lose the cover of darkness. He looked at Guroth, and the High Captain's eyes met his. They both nodded. The High Captain raised his trumpet, then Blade took a deep breath and shouted:

"For Pendar and for King Nefus! At them, guards!" The trumpet blared out, and before its echoes had died away, Blade was running forward, Guroth hard on his heels. All around them rose savage yells and the pounding of running feet as the Pendarnoth's Guard swarmed out to attack.

Surprise and terror froze Klerus' men in their tracks for a moment. The darkness around them was suddenly pouring out armed men, screaming like fiends. But if his guards were stunned and terrorized, the High Councilor was not. Blade saw the bulky figure whirl about and start back toward the door of the temple. He lengthened his own stride and cut in toward that same door, whirling his sword and yelling louder than any of his men as he ran.

Some of Klerus' guards had bows, but in the darkness Blade's hurtling shape made a poor target. Arrows whistled past him but none struck or even grazed. Uninjured and unslowed, he reached the head of the stairs that led down to the door of the temple. Then he whirled and jerked off his mask in a single swift motion.

One of the guards nearby recognized him even before Blade could shout out his own name. "The Pendarnoth!" screamed the man. "Oh Holy Guardian spare us, the Pendarnoth himself has come against us! Fly, fly, fly!" The last word broke off in a scream of surprise and agony as one of the man's comrades cut him down. A moment later Blade's own sword whistled down onto the killer's shoulder. It sliced through the man's collarbone and half of his ribs before it came to a stop. The man toppled sideways so fast that he jerked the sword out of Blade's hand. For a moment Blade stood in the midst of Klerus' men armed only with his dagger.

But most of them were not so brave or so defiant of the Pendarnoth as his first victim. Most of them were scrambling backward, moaning and crying pleas for mercy. Few of them found it: Klerus' guards went down whether they fled or fought, and Blade could not have called off his men if he had wanted to.

Blade himself barely had time to snatch his sword from the body of his first victim and raise it again when a tall figure sprang at him from beside Klerus. Blade recognized Threstar, the High Captain of the Council's Archers. The man was fighting with two swords and both of them whistled and leaped about Blade's ears. He ducked and leaped and parried, realizing that Threstar was trying to drive him away from the stairs. That would open a path for Klerus to flee into the safety of the temple.

Blade stood his ground as Threstar came at him, although it took all his strength and speed to keep both of the man's swords away from his flesh. The man was fast and strong and determined, and Blade knew he couldn't take any chances. For a moment both men went at it with everything they had in them, but Blade knew he could not afford a prolonged duel with Threstar. Behind the High Captain he could see the massive bulk of Klerus. He was edging around to Blade's right, about to make a dash for the door. Beyond Klerus the darkness was a hideous tangle of fighting and screaming figures. Klerus' guards had realized they could expect no mercy, and they were fighting for their lives.

Threstar closed again, and this time one sword reached out far enough to slice open Blade's scalp just above his left ear. But that reach was a fraction of an inch and a fraction of a second too long. For a moment Threstar's left armpit was turned toward Blade and open to his attack. Blade's dagger lunged out and up, stabbing deeply into the armpit. Threstar gasped and twisted away so fast that the dagger pulled out of Blade's hand. But that was the last time Threstar would move so fast. The dagger had reached his lungs. He choked, and bubbles of blood appeared on his lips. As he slowed, Blade's sword flashed down and smashed Threstar's right-hand sword aside. Then it kept on going, plunging down and sinking deep into Threstar's thigh. This time the High Captain not only reeled but fell.

Blade did not wait to see him go down, because Klerus was rushing forward. A sword gleamed in his massive hands and darted back and forth as he charged. If he could not have safety, he would at least have Blade's life.

Blade gave way before the assault, and for a moment it looked as if Klerus would have a clear run to the door. But Klerus was too blind with fury to see anything but Blade. He lurched forward again. This time he slipped on the blood now flowing freely on the pavement, but he stayed on his feet. Blade parried one of Klerus' slashes, but it came down on his sword like a hammer on an anvil and nearly knocked the sword out of his hand. Again he stepped back, and again Klerus followed him.

But the High Councilor was short-winded from too many years as an intriguer rather than a fighter. He could not keep up such a furious attack for very long. In the swelling dawn light Blade saw sweat pouring off Klerus' jowls, and heard the man's breath rasping in his throat.

Blade waited until Klerus had committed himself to a slash, then closed. He was relying on his own superior speed and the dagger which flashed in his hand. It drove straight forward into Klerus' massive

belly. It was not a wound fatal at once, but it stopped the High Councilor dead in his tracks. His mouth opened, and he let out a high-pitched scream of agony and surprise. Blade dropped his dagger, stepped back, and raised his sword with both hands. As Klerus' sword sagged toward the pavement, Blade's also came down. It flashed down at an angle, slicing into Klerus' massive neck, slicing through it. In a spray of blood, Klerus' head leaped from the neck and arched down to the pavement to land with a thud. The huge body stood upright for another moment, blood fountaining from the severed neck. Then it toppled with a much louder thud. It did not even twitch.

Blade stepped back and looked around him. Dawn was breaking over the city, revealing the blood scattered bodies in the street. He counted them. Nearly all of Klerus' men and less than a third of his own force were dead. Perhaps some had fled, but he was not going to worry about them now.

Guroth came toward him, picking his way cautiously across the littered and blood-smeared stones. The High Captain had a strip of cloth bound roughly around his left hand, where the thumb and forefinger were missing. But his unhooded face shone with joy as well as sweat.

"We have done it, oh Pendarnoth. Now for the Lanyri!"

Blade grinned and nodded. "You're wounded, Captain."

Guroth pointed at Blade's blood-caked scalp. "So are you, Pendarnoth."

"A little. Perhaps we had both better clean ourselves before we wait on King Nefus. He will want to hear the news that he is now truly King of Pendar."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Blade was able to lead his men back to the palace before the sun rose much higher and the streets filled with people. Those few who were up early scuttled hastily away from the large band of armed men carrying a shrouded body through the streets. Over the past few years Klerus' men had made people wary of being too inquisitive about such sights. Even as he was being carried dead through the streets of Vilesh, Klerus' reputation was clearing the way for the men who had killed him.

But rumors move faster than marching men. Before he was halfway to the palace, Blade heard alarm gongs and horns sounding in the palace. Yellow smoke began to spiral up from signal fires and he heard the roll of drums. The palace garrison must already be pouring out of its barracks. Blade knew that it contained many of Klerus' sympathizers. Though nothing these men might do could bring the High Councilor or his plots back to life, they might still send Blade and Guroth after Klerus. Blade was prepared to pay that price. But he was hardly enthusiastic about the idea.

Blade ordered the guardsmen to step up their pace, and they moved through the streets at a jog. Guroth brought up the rear, urging the men on. Soon they broke out into the main square of Vilesh and saw the white walls and gilded roofs of the palace gleaming in the rising sun. But that same sun also shined on the armor of the palace garrison already filing out into the square. With strung bows ready, they stood in a deep line across the gates.

Blade realized that he had to move fast before some officer sympathetic to Klerus decided to stage an "accident." But the only effective move he could see might be as suicidal as doing nothing. He would walk

out into the empty square alone, calling to the soldiers, relying on their unwillingness to fire on the Pendarnoth.

He called Guroth to him and explained his plan. The High Captain was too surprised to say anything, either in praise or in protest. He stood there gaping as Blade turned and strode out into the square, head up and arms at his side.

Silence fell fog like on the square as Blade strode out toward the waiting soldiers. He kept his eyes roaming along the line, trying to seem as if he were looking each soldier individually in the eye. Only one soldier was needed to nock an arrow and fire to bring things to an end. But at least the guardsmen behind him could see what happened and perhaps run for cover.

Nearer and nearer he came, until he could begin to make out individual faces, the decorations on the gilded armor, one man raising a hand to scratch his head. He decided it was time to speak. He stopped and took a deep breath.

"Soldiers of Pendar. I, the Pendarnoth, speak to you. With my own hands this night I have slain the High Councilor Klerus, for his many treasons against Pendar and against King Nefus. In all of these treasons he had but one goal—to sell Pendar to the Lanyri who are even now marching upon this city. They are leaving behind them a trail of death and destruction. If they had come upon Vilesh with Klerus still alive to lead them, it would have gone down like any village. You would be dead under Lanyri swords, your wives ravished by Lanyri soldiers, your children dashed against the walls or hauled off to grow up in Lanyri slave pens. All this Klerus wanted to bring upon you.

"And when he had ruined Pendar, he dreamed of ruling over its ruins, to help the Lanyri bleed the corpse yet more. But my night's work has put an end to all this. I return with the traitor's body ..." he pointed back to where the guard stood, Guroth at their head "... to lay before King Nefus. I will throw myself on his mercy, and if he judges me wrong in what I have done, let his will prevail. But I think he will call this night's work wise. And then I shall lead you out against the real enemies of Pendar—the Lanyri!"

Blade had never fancied himself as a speaker. He had never dreamed he could say anything to move such a mass of tough men. So he was as surprised as anyone by the reaction of the soldiers. They gave a single shout that was almost terrible to hear, two thousand men all yelling their throats out. Then they broke ranks and swarmed forward toward Blade, raising their hands and shouting, "Hear the Pendarnoth! Klerus is dead! Long live the Pendarnoth and King Nefus!"

They reached Blade and nearly trampled him to death in their enthusiasm. Then a few strong ones formed a circle around him, while others lifted him up onto their shoulders. It was on their shoulders that he made his way through the gates, into the palace, to the audience chamber of King Nefus. And it was from their shoulders that he greeted King Nefus. Even if the boy-king had wanted to punish Blade for killing Klerus, he would not have dared.

He would have faced a revolt of his own soldiers if he had done so. All he could do was wait—a long wait—until the soldiers quieted enough so he could make himself heard.

Then he climbed up on the throne and called out:

"Pendarnoth, you have this day slain a notable traitor to Pendar and to our house. You have done well. This day I call you by a new name, 'Pendarstrin,' the Savior of the Pendari." This set off another round of cheers, and Nefus took advantage of the uproar to slip out. Blade did not see him again until that afternoon, when the king summoned the Council of Regents to his presence.

Standing in full ceremonial robes, with Guroth on one side and Blade on the other, Nefus addressed the council in blunt, clipped phrases. "It is Our royal will that the Pendarnoth shall be now the High Councilor of Pendar. There are some among you who played your part in the treasons of the late Klerus. If you accept the Pendarnoth and give him and Us good and faithful service, you will be forgiven. If not, you shall die as Klerus did." At Nefus' signal both Blade and Guroth drew their swords. And behind them so did fifty of the Pendarnoth's Guard, with Princess Harima standing among them.

The message went home. Indeed, it could hardly have done otherwise, unless the councilors were very foolish or very tired of life. They voted Blade into the office without a dissenting vote. Then they sat down to discuss how to prepare Pendar to meet the Lanyri invasion.

Blade kept the meeting short and the discussion perfunctory. He had no intention of revealing his plans for surprising and destroying the Lanyri too soon. And he would never reveal them before a group whose loyalty he distrusted as much as the councilors'. So he merely spoke of the need to increase the output of the armorers' shops, train the soldiers, lay in supplies, and so on. The only specific item he mentioned was the need to increase the number of siege engines, particularly the long-range ones. There were already a hundred of these, but Blade wanted three times as many. The councilors listened in silence, not even bothering to ask questions. Those who had always been loyal didn't need to; those who had supported Klerus were afraid to. Again, without a dissenting vote, they endorsed Blade's program.

Blade saved the meat of his plans for a very private session that evening. Only Nefus, Harima, Guroth, and some other reliable officers attended. Blade gave them a frank outline of the way he saw the situation, then turned to his plans.

"I will no longer be content with merely driving the Lanyri back," he said. "I want to see them destroyed, destroyed the way they have destroyed Pendar towns and lives."

"That will be difficult," said Guroth. "If there was nothing but the Lanyri infantry coming against us, we could do as we have always done. Ride around and around them, picking our time of attack to take them at their weakest, and then drive home our charge. But the Rojags are riding with them, and that will make it hard for us to choose the time we will fight. We need to destroy the Rojags as well if we wish to destroy the Lanyri."

"That may not be as hard as you think," said Blade. "The Rojags are strong when they are in a mass. But break up that mass, and they have no discipline, no courage. They scatter and run. If we can break up their formations, we will have the chance to fight the Lanyri in the usual manner."

"That is true," said Nefus. "But how can we do this thing? It is not as easy to attack another army of horsemen as it is to attack soldiers on foot. The horsemen can choose where to fight much more easily."

"Then we tempt them to fight where we choose," said Blade.

"You make it sound so easy," said Guroth sourly.

"It is not easy," said Blade. "I have never thought it is, or will be. But it is our best chance." And he began describing his plan for the decisive battle. Occasionally Guroth or one of the other officers would ask a question. Usually it was simply to clarify a technical point. But once Guroth broke out in indignation. He was joined by Nefus and Harima.

"This cannot be, oh Pendarnoth! We cannot let you risk your life again, after you have already risked it

so many times. What would be the effect on the minds of our soldiers, if they saw you fall?"

"I hope they will avenge me properly," said Blade. "No, I must ask you to let me do this as I have proposed. General Ornilan is too able to miss an open trap unless we somehow blind him to its presence. And the best way of blinding him is to offer me as the bait of the trap. I humiliated him by my escape. He will desperately want to wipe out that humiliation by killing or capturing me."

"Desperately enough to throw sound tactics to the wind?" asked Guroth.

"I think so," said Blade. "I cannot make any promises. But can any general do more?"

Inevitably, for they recognized the realities of war, they accepted this. And because they accepted this, they also accepted Blade's plan. Blade walked out of the chamber arm in arm with Harima, feeling certain that he had done his best. He could only hope that would be good enough. And he had at least the consolation of knowing that he would have his answer within a few weeks.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Less than a mile behind Blade rose the walls of Vilesh. Two miles ahead rose a cloud of dust marking the advancing Rojags. Invisible behind that dust curtain was the Lanyri army—invisible, but there, where they were supposed to be. Scouts had been bringing in reports at ten-minute intervals all morning. Behind a cavalry screen thrown out by their Rojag allies, the Lanyri were advancing straight toward Vilesh.

Ornilan was throwing his entire army straight at the Pendari capital. Perhaps he did not know that the main Pendari army was lurking off to his right rear. Most of its fifty thousand men and horses were hidden in groves of fruit trees and fields of ripening grain. Most of the men were dismounted, saving their horses. Only a few thousand were mounted, enough to keep the Rojag scouts pushed back.

Or perhaps Ornilan knew and didn't care. Perhaps he couldn't resist this opportunity to get his army within striking distance of the walls of Vilesh without fighting a battle. If Ornilan was that sort of headlong fighter, perhaps there was no need to lure him into the trap prepared for him?

Blade very much wanted to believe that. Around him was only the Pendarnoth's Guard and two army regiments—barely two thousand horsemen in all. He wanted very much to believe that he didn't really have to sit out here on the Golden Steed and wait while five times that many Rojag cavalry advanced on him. But he couldn't let himself be that optimistic. He simply had to wait and see.

Around him also stood ruined cottages, the souvenirs of a Rojag raid two weeks ago. A thousand enemy horsemen had pushed right up to the walls of Vilesh. But when the smoke had cleared away, Blade realized that the Rojags had given him a valuable gift.

He scanned the ground around the ruins, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the sun. He would have traded five hundred horsemen for a pair of sunglasses, and a thousand for a pair of binoculars. But even his naked eyes could make out furrows and dents on the ground. During those two weeks, the long-range siege engines lurking behind the walls of Vilesh had been ranging in on the ruins. Now they could drop a salvo of two hundred stones and spears within a hundred-yard radius of the ruins. Blade had seen them do it. The next time they did it, those stones and bolts would be coming down on a mass of Rojag cavalry. Or so Blade planned. Part of the plan was for him to ride out in the face of ten

thousand Rojags with his two thousand Pendari to wave the bait in their faces.

If he was going to be bait, he was going to be tempting bait: Not only was he riding the Golden Steed, he was wearing the ceremonial war garb of the Pendarnoth. There had been no such thing until the night before, when a regiment of craftsmen urged on by Princess Harima had finished their work. Now Blade gleamed and sparkled all over as he sat in the saddle. His high-crested helmet was gilded and burnished, and the metal clasps of his leather armor shone golden. A massive gold buckle set with diamonds held a blue cloak encrusted with gold embroidery around his shoulders. His belt was made of gilded links of fine steel, with a gold buckle almost large enough to armor his stomach and groin. A scabbard of gilded leather held together with gold-headed rivets carried a sword with a jeweled and gilded hilt and gold engraving on the blued steel blade. The inscription read: "THAT THE PENDARNOTH MAY STRIKE DOWN THE ENEMIES OF PENDAR."

Gilded greaves on his calves, gilded spurs on his boots, gilded bit and bridle and stirrups, gilded rivets holding the high-peaked saddle together-the gold and gilding went on and on. Neither Blade nor the Golden Steed could so much as twitch a muscle without making sun blaze from something golden. Blade hoped he and his mount looked both impressive and tempting. But he had a private, nagging feeling that he merely looked ridiculous.

He would find out shortly. The wall of dust was moving towards him faster now. He could see a dark line more than a mile wide taking shape at its base. The first rank of the Rojag cavalry was coming into sight. They seemed to be heading straight toward him, but there was only one way to make sure they would keep on coming. He nodded to his trumpeter.

Once more the harsh call of Pendari trumpets hammered at Blade's ears. He could never call it a beautiful sound, but it was impressive and inspiring when you were waiting for a battle to begin. All along the line of horses there were flickers of movement and flashes of metal, as two thousand men scrambled into their saddles. At the far end of the line, red smoke mushroomed into the air as a signal flare went off. That told the watchers in Vilesh that the "bait force" was on the move.

More trumpet calls, and the Pendari began to move. Blade urged the Golden Steed forward to keep ahead of the advancing line. He had to show himself in the open, to give the finishing touch to the bait.

Now the Pendari were clear of the ruins and picking up speed. A mile away the dust cloud was slowing down and widening. The Rojags were not coming straight in. They were reforming and extending their flanks. Blade shook his head. He couldn't let them do that. They had to be kept bunched and coming on.

Again Blade turned to the trumpeter. "Blow the charge." More blarings, and then the sun glinted off lance points as the Pendari swung their lances down into position. The Golden Steed neighed loudly and tossed its head as it gained speed.

Ideally the Pendari should have covered most of the mile to the Rojag lines at a trot, breaking into a gallop only in the last few hundred yards. But none of the men cared about sparing their horses, or anything except getting at the Rojags. They were up to a full gallop within the first few hundred yards, and went thundering toward the enemy. To Blade, it seemed as if a solid wall of hoofbeats and war cries were rolling along just behind him.

As the Pendari charge came down on them, the Rojags stopped and began to bunch together. By the time Blade could make out individual horsemen in the dark line ahead, they were massed solidly, many ranks deep. Then the Pendari charge struck home.

Blade drove his lance into the first man in his path, and had it wrenched out of his hands. He heard an arrow whistle past his ear and suddenly realized that his sword was still in its scabbard. He barely jerked it free in time to parry a Rojag cut at his thigh. Then the Golden Steed crashed into the Rojag's mount and sent it reeling back. The Rojag kept his saddle, but that did not save him as Blade's sword flashed out and split open his skull. Then the Golden Steed was plunging into the solid ranks of the Rojags. Blade laid about him like a madman, using both hands on his sword, letting the Golden Steed go where it would.

The whole Rojag line was heaved back as the main body of the Pendari struck it. A hideous chorus of screaming men and horses rose behind Blade as Pendari lances drove into the Rojags. For a moment Blade and the Golden Steed might as well have been bogged in quicksand. He did not even have room to raise or swing his sword.

Then Pendari trumpets called again, and Blade felt the pressure on the Rojags ease. He slashed at the arm pushing a sword toward him, saw it jump free in a flurry of blood. Then he was digging in his spurs and pulling the Golden Steed's head around. The Pendari would be pulling back now, bringing their bows into play, further maddening the Rojags already stung by the charge. Blade had to get away from the middle of the Rojags before the arrows came down.

He used fists and feet and sword to clear his path, yelling and screaming as he did so. Some of the Rojags died or went down, others simply spurred their horses away from this madman in gold. One man shouted, "The Pendarnoth! The reward! He ..." but died in the middle of his shout with Blade's sword smashing in his temple. And no reward could make the Rojags stay within reach of Blade when the fighting madness was on him.

After a minute the blind frenzy died away. He realized that he was almost alone among the scattered front ranks of the Rojags. A hundred yards away the last of the Pendari were disappearing in a cloud of dust. Blade dug his spurs in and the Golden Steed seemed to leap away from the startled Rojags. Weaving and dodging to throw off any Rojag archers, Blade spurred after his comrades at a full gallop. Yard by yard he closed the distance. He was almost up with the rear most Pendari before he looked back over his shoulder. The Rojags were still re-forming, but some of the bolder spirits were starting in pursuit.

Then the Golden Steed stumbled. Caught off balance, Blade lost his grip on the reins, over balanced, clawed at the leather of his saddle, and went sailing off. He landed with a bone-jarring crash. Only his instinctive half-roll saved him from a dozen broken bones. Still on its feet and still at a gallop, the Golden Steed vanished into the dust. So did the last of the Pendari, in spite of Blade's yells and curses. A moment later the first of the Rojags loomed out of the dust.

In the swirling yellow-grayness both men were surprised.

But Blade was less surprised than the Rojag and his reflexes were faster. The Rojag lance dipped toward his chest, but his massive arms shot out and clamped down on it. A mighty heave and a twist and the Rojag flew up out of his saddle like a shell from a mortar. He landed somewhere off in the dust with a thud and a yell. The horse slowed, just enough to let Blade lunge forward and grab the bridle. The sudden savage tug on its head slowed the horse still further, and Blade vaulted into the saddle.

The horse quivered as though Blade had given it an electric shock. For a moment he thought it was going to try to buck him off. Then as more of the Rojags came thundering past, it gathered its scrawny legs under it and joined the charge.

By some miracle Blade's sword-thong had not snapped when he fell, and he still had his sword. As the Rojag horse carried him along like a log in a fast river, he slashed and hacked to either side of him. Empty saddles began to appear around him. The Rojags seemed to be taking no notice of the figure dressed in dusty gold pounding along with them. All their attention seemed to be on pushing their charge straight ahead, to avenge the insult the Pendari had given them. At this rate the Rojags would plunge straight into the trap in their own fury.

Which was all very well, except that Blade was charging with them. If he kept on he was going to be caught in his own trap, skewered by a six-foot spear or mashed by a hundred-pound stone. If there was a sillier way to die, he couldn't think of it right now. He had to get clear of the Rojags—and soon!

He dug his spurs in unmercifully. Somewhere the gaunt Rojag horse found extra strength and speed. It began to move up through the ranks of the charge. On either side Rojags pointed and stared. Those within reach of Blade's sword died. He left a trail of writhing forms behind him as he moved forward. Those who were writhing when they hit the ground were still after their comrades had ridden over them.

Gradually Blade worked his way up among the leaders of the Rojags. Again there were some who recognized him and tried to do something about it. But none could live within reach of his sword, and the Rojags were too closely packed for any of their few archers to risk an arrow.

The dust was beginning to thin out. Blade could again see the rear guard of the Pendari, with Guroth's unmistakable black cloak flapping among them. The Pendari were not keeping any particular formation. In fact, they were giving a remarkably good imitation of a beaten force fleeing in disorder. If they could just keep that up for another minute or two . . . Beyond Guroth, Blade could see the ruins.

The Pendari thundered past the ruins on toward the looming walls of Vilesh. Blade looked back. The Rojags were coming on in a wild dense mass, whatever discipline they had utterly gone. But the lead ranks of the Rojags were opening out a trifle now, and some of their archers were trying shots at the elusive Pendarnoth. Blade heard arrows whistle past. One glanced off his helmet with a metallic tack!

As he galloped past the ruins, Blade saw green smoke puffing up behind stretches of broken wall. The green flares were the signal to the crews of the siege-engines. Then the air seemed to be torn apart as the siege engines' first salvo came down on the Rojags.

Even the noise of the stones and spears coming down could not drown out the noise that rose when they struck: shrill screams, bubbling screams, screams of rage and terror and agony from both men and horses; the crash of stones hitting the rocky ground, bursting apart like bombs, and spraying chunks in all directions; the meaty whunk of catapult bolts pinning men to their saddles.

Fifty Rojags died from the stones and spears. Another hundred died or fell in screaming tangles of men and horses. Those who didn't lose their lives or their saddles soon lost their courage. By the hundreds they reined in, piling up into still more tangles. Those who still managed to stay in their saddles formed a great solid milling mass. Blade kept riding, and he was almost up with the Pendari when the second salvo came down. The massed Rojags could not have made a better target if they had been taking orders from the commander of the siege engines.

How many Rojags died as stones and spears plowed through their ranks, Blade never knew or even tried to guess. Hundreds, perhaps a thousand. And the survivors lost the last remnants of their courage. The Rojags became a churning mob. Every man tried to turn his horse around and plunge wildly away from the death striking down from the skies. In their panic they only jammed together more tightly than before. They were still jammed together when a third salvo landed. The screams from its impact had not

died away when Blade saw black smoke spout from the tops of every tower along the walls of the city. Every gate large enough to let a mounted man through flew open, and out at a full gallop came ten thousand horsemen. All the picked troops of Pendar were riding in a single charge. The air split apart again from war cries and the whistle of so many arrows. For a moment the sky seemed to turn black above Blade.

Once again Blade had the sick feeling he was going to be shot down or ridden down by his own side. The Pendar were coming on as if the devil were at their heels, and shooting arrows like firemen pouring water on a fire. The arrows sliced down out of the sky all around Blade, hitting dead Rojags, live Rojags, the bare ground, and a few Pendar, a great many horses, and anything else in their path. One sliced across his upper arm, leaving a bloody oozing gash but not sinking in. Then the Rojags finally broke and ran. They could run now—so many had been killed that the survivors at last had room to turn their horses.

Blade saw Guroth ride up to him with a broad grin on his dust-caked face. He was leading the Golden Steed. Blade hastily dismounted his Rojag prize and remounted the Golden Steed.

Guroth looked across the plain at the vanishing enemy. "So much for the Rojags. I do not think they will stop running until they are back in their own mountains."

"Perhaps not. But the Lanyri will not run. We will have to beat them."

"I hope they will not run. Like you, I do not want them to escape."

They turned their horses and spurred away after the Rojags. They made no effort to keep up with the headlong charge of the ten thousand Pendar who were riding fresh horses. They passed the ruins and the litter of dead Rojag warriors and horses at a trot. Then they were swallowed up in another swirling curtain of dust, this one raised by the Pendar charge. It was so thick they could barely see twenty feet ahead. Blade found himself navigating more by sound than by sight.

There were plenty of sounds all around. Men and horses screaming, Pendar and Rojag war cries, the snap of bows, the whistle of arrows, the pounding of thousands of hoofs. The Pendar were no longer sounding their trumpets. The enemy was in sight and there was nothing to do but chase him. It was every man for himself.

Then a new sound tore through the dust and rose above all the rest of the noise: Lanyri battle horns, sounding the alarm. Blade fought back an urge to spur the Golden Steed up to a gallop; he did not want to throw away its last strength.

Pendar trumpets now joined the booming Lanyri horns. Then Blade and Guroth and the Pendar's Guard rode out of the dust and saw the battle that was raging before them. Sixty thousand Lanyri infantry were formed in five massive squares, each with its baggage wagons and civilian camp followers inside. The sun made a blinding glare on the acres of armor and glinted on the deadly accurate spears the Lanyri threw at any Pendar who rode within range. A good many Pendar horses were already running about with empty saddles, and a fringe of Pendar bodies was spreading around each square. Any Pendar who tried to ride in and use his lance had only a slim chance of riding out again alive.

The Rojags had kept right on going, the sight of their allies apparently having done nothing to cure their panic. It looked as if they were going to be out of the battle for good. So most of the Pendar were riding around the massed Lanyri squares, shooting arrows from a distance beyond spear range. That kept the Pendar safe but did little harm to the Lanyri. Except for those in the two outer ranks, they kept their

shields over their heads. The Pendari arrows came down in black clouds but stuck in the tough, leather-covered wood.

Blade led his guard in until they were just beyond spear range and let them try a few arrows anyway. For the moment he could think of nothing better to do. In fact he was not even sure there was anything to do, for the moment. Once more the Pendari were outnumbered five to one or more. When the main army came up ...

There was a particularly deafening blast of the heavy toned war horns. Then the ranks of one of the squares began to open from the inside, as a force of mounted men began to push its way out into the open field. Blade peered through the dust and the glare and made out the red-cloaked figure of General Ornilan leading the horsemen. Behind him rode some five hundred heavily armored men. These must be the mercenaries he had mentioned.

Ornilan led the mercenaries through the last ranks of the Lanyri infantry and out into the open. They shifted from column into line, and Blade saw them checking their weapons and armor. His own guardsmen began dropping arrows among them, but heavy armor covered both men and horses and few were hurt. Then the line of mercenaries began to roll toward Blade.

Blade realized what Ornilan's game was. He was throwing his heavy cavalry straight at the Pendarnoth, seeking to kill or capture him and so break the spirits of the Pendari. It was a desperate venture, even if it was Ornilan's last chance of a decisive victory. Blade admired Ornilan's courage in risking himself along with the mercenaries. Such courage deserved to be met on its own terms.

For a moment Blade toyed with the idea of deliberately meeting Ornilan with only equal force—five hundred of his guardsmen. There was another moment of shock as he realized how close he had come to such a chivalrous—and foolish—gesture. He ordered his trumpeter to sound the charge. The Pendari swept forward, and with the eyes of both armies on them, the two lines met.

They met with a crash and a shock that threw both lightly armored Pendari and heavily armored mercenaries out of their saddles. But the mercenaries were riding heavier horses than the Pendari, and they stood the shock better. Their heavy lances drove through Pendari leather, while their mail kept out Pendari arrows and their shields blocked the lighter Pendari lances.

Blade snapped his own lance on a mercenary's shield and nearly ran straight into his opponent. The man was wielding a huge straight broadsword, almost large enough to require two hands. Blade saw it shear through one Pendari's leather cap as though it were paper and split the man's skull down to the chin. But Blade slashed at the mercenary's face before he could shift his guard. The man's mouth opened in a scream of agony as blood gushed from his mutilated nose and lips. Half-blinded, he reeled in his saddle. Blade swung again and slashed across. His sword drove under the base of the heavy iron helmet and into the back of the mercenary's neck. It did not penetrate his mail collar, but the impact, with Blade's arm behind it, crushed the spinal cord. The mercenary's eyes rolled up in his head and he toppled stiffly out of his saddle.

Another mercenary rode at Blade. He crouched low in his saddle so that the man's lance went over his head. Then the mercenary was riding past. At last Blade found himself facing Ornilan. He did not try to avoid the combat, for Ornilan at least deserved the honor of a personal encounter.

The Lanyri general wore a short sword at his belt, but there was a broadsword in his hand and a shield on his other arm. If the Lanyri despised horsemen, Blade would never have known it from seeing Ornilan handle his big roan stallion. It towered over the Golden Steed by at least four hands. It reared up and

struck out at the smaller horse with both fore-hoofs, but the weary Golden Steed was still fast enough to swing aside, and the smashing hoofs came down on the ground. Then Blade and Ornilan were at too close quarters to be able to do any more maneuvering. It was straight hard fighting.

Blade had no shield. But he was stronger and faster than Ornilan, and his sword had a point as well as a slashing edge. Ornilan's sword clanged against his at each stroke, while his own slashes and thrust sometimes got through Ornilan's guard. Most of these merely grated or scraped the general's armor, but before long two little trickles of blood showed on Ornilan's bare arms, and one on the side of his neck.

Why didn't he strike down Ornilan's horse and then ride the man under? He didn't know. He only knew that Ornilan was fighting with complete honor and complete courage. As both Richard Blade and the Pendarnoth, he had to fight the same way. He no longer found it odd that he was thinking in this almost medieval fashion with both men mounted, their endurance was increased. Because no man on either side cared to interfere, the fight went on, seemingly endless. Blade was vaguely aware that his guardsmen had finally driven the mercenaries back. A good many from both sides now lay dead on the ground around the two duelists.

He was explicitly aware that his arm muscles were beginning to scream in protest at the endless sequence of thrust, slash, and parry. His eyes were stinging from the sweat pouring into them. The same sweat was turning the dust caked on his face into mud. He began to wonder if his greater strength and speed would be enough to carry him through.

For more long minutes the fight went on. Blade's sword was beginning to lose its edge and show so many nicks it looked more like a saw than a sword. And there was blood on his left leg just below the knee, where Ornilan's sword had gashed it. So far the wound had not stiffened or cost him much blood, but it meant that his guard was no longer impenetrable.

It was the Golden Steed that found the strength to neigh, and rear, and lash out with both fore-hoofs. It caught Ornilan's horse on the side of the neck, and the horse stumbled and lurched sideways as its rider launched another stroke at Blade. The stroke missed. Half off-balance, Ornilan was slow to bring his guard back up. Blade's sword flashed out in a thrust, at the full length of Blade's long arm. Its point drove into Ornilan's neck, tearing through skin and flesh. Blood spurted out, and down on the general's armor.

Although he must have known that the wound was mortal, Ornilan dropped his sword and clamped both hands over the wound. For a moment the blood slowed to a trickle. His face pale, he stared at Blade.

"Why, Pendarnoth? Why, when you were offered so much?"

"It wasn't enough, Ornilan."

"But you are still going to . . ."

"Lose?" He shook his head. "I think not, Ornilan."

The words were barely out of Blade's mouth when he heard Pendari horns sounding beyond the Lanyri squares. There were more of them than Blade had ever heard. They sounded in an arc miles wide, from far around on the Lanyri left to equally far around on the right. And behind the harsh music of the horns was the earth-shaking thud of hoofs—not merely thousands, but tens of thousands.

Blade threw back his head and laughed, wildly and triumphantly. "The Pendari are in your rear, Ornilan! How will you get your army clear now? How, I ask you?" He caught himself as he realized there was an

almost hysterical note in his voice. Strain and fatigue were catching up with him.

Ornilan made no reply. Hands still over his wound but blood seeping between them, he dug his spurs into his horse. It cantered away and was lost in the cloud of dust spreading across the field as the main army of Pendar went into the attack.

Whether the Lanyri ever learned that their general was dying Blade himself never knew. Certainly they showed no loss of spirit or lack of courage as they stood and fought off one Pendari charge after another. But soon their spears were almost gone, and their arms too weary to throw those that remained—or to hold their shields up, for that matter. Pendari arrows began to find targets, and the Lanyri ranks began to thin. All through the long afternoon of heat and dust they thinned, still standing. It was not until the sun was dipping close to the horizon that the Pendari broke the first square. It was not until well after dark that the last one gave way. And it was not until dawn broke over the battlefield that the killing ended, for the Pendari took no prisoners. Sixty thousand Lanyri soldiers had come onto the field the morning before. Sixty thousand remained there the morning after.

In the gray light of that dawn Blade rode back to Vilesh with Princess Harima. He had his second wind now, or perhaps his third. He talked as they rode along side by side.

"It was odd. The whole point of my being out there was to bait the trap for the Rojags. But they rode straight into it anyway, simply because we had charged them. I'm not sure if more than a handful of them even recognized me. And as for General Ornilan . . ." He shrugged.

"Well, it doesn't matter whether or not it was necessary this time. You certainly won't have to do it again," said Harima. She went on, with a note of mock severity in her voice. "Do you think I'd let you, in any case? I don't want to be the Pendarmoth's widow, not for a good many years at least."

"Widow?"

"Didn't Nefus tell you? Oh, there are times when I want to slap that brother of mine, even if he is a king! I went to him the night before the battle and asked him if I could have you to husband. He consented. He will announce it tonight at the banquet."

Blade was about to ask, "What banquet?" But then pain stabbed into his head, pulsing savagely for a moment, then fading. The computer was tugging at his brain, seeking him out to snatch him back to Home Dimension. Its grip hadn't tightened on this first lunge, but it would be back. The grip would tighten, and Harima and the battlefield and all of Pendar would sink away into his memories.

As the pain faded and his vision cleared, he saw a familiar face staring up at him from the ground almost at the feet of the Golden Steed, a face white and drained of blood by a gaping wound in the neck. General Ornilan. He was naked—the scavengers had already been at work. Blade beckoned to one of the guardsmen riding with them and pointed down at the body.

"This man is to be taken to Vilesh and buried with honor. He was a brave opponent." The guardsmen looked for a moment as though he wanted to argue, but the hardening of Blade's face kept the man's mouth shut. He nodded and dropped back to pass the word on to his comrades. Blade urged the Golden Steed forward again.

As he did so, the pain struck a second time. After the first terrible pulsing, he knew that this time the

computer's grip was going to tighten. The outside world faded swiftly into darkness, with none of the effects he was used to. Oddly, though, he still had the sensation of gripping the Golden Steed tightly between his legs and holding the reins tightly in his hands.

The darkness—formless, empty, chill—swirled about him until all sense of time and space left him. Then it began to fade. Slowly at first, then suddenly it was torn apart by a glaring burst of light. The light dazzled Blade. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel the Golden Steed under him.

Then a voice was sounding in his ear. It was unmistakably Lord Leighton's voice, loud and almost shrill with surprise and indignation. And just as unmistakably Lord Leighton was shouting, "Get that horse out of here!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Once again Richard Blade was riding the Golden Steed. But instead of the yellow-brown plains of Pendar, the rolling green hills of Surrey stretched out around him. And instead of the white walls and gilded roofs of Vilesh, red brick cottages lurked among the trees, sending curls of blue smoke up from their chimneys into the dawn sky. It was a clear bright crisp dawn, too, something rare for the English winter. The Golden Steed's hoofs left a distinct trail across the white frost on the brownish grass underfoot.

Blade felt very much at peace with the world, for it had been a good trip into the Dimension of the Pendari. Its incredible wealth of gold had made the prime minister sit up and take notice with a vengeance. Blade hoped, however, that if large-scale teleportation was ever perfected to the point where Pendari gold could be brought to England by the ton, it would be traded for. Otherwise England would be acting as badly as the Lanyri, and that was a possibility Blade did not like.

Certainly Lord Leighton felt that teleportation was a good deal closer than it had ever been before. The return of the Golden Steed had been proof of that. Of course, there had been rather a lively time getting the horse out of the underground complex. It had nearly panicked on first emerging, and only Blade's best efforts had kept it from running wild and smashing up many hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of equipment. Then there had been the problem of cleaning up the chamber—a disagreeable surprise for some of the technicians. They had not expected to find themselves drafted as stable hands when they signed on with Lord Leighton.

Of course all the electronically guarded doorways had never been intended to let horses through, so the only way they could get the Golden Steed to the elevator was to disconnect all the electronic surveillance equipment. That was another lively time—somebody pulled one switch too many, and the entire complex was plunged into darkness for the better part of half an hour. It turned out that the emergency system had been accidentally cross-connected to the main one, so the two systems went out together, and the technicians had to grope around with flashlights and even matches to get things back on the line.

Finally they had managed to get the Golden Steed to the elevator. But "you can lead a horse to an elevator, but you can't make him get in." Once more the Golden Steed had nearly panicked, and to calm it down, they had to shoot it full of tranquilizers. They called it a carefully regulated dose, but someone was evidently not careful enough. For two hours they had faced the problem of concealing a full-sized, semi-conscious horse on the grounds of the Tower of London. Finally a horse trailer from Scotland Yard's Mounted Section arrived, with a security-cleared veterinarian, and hauled the Golden Steed off to

J's country estate. It was being stabled there now, rapidly eating its way through J's budget, and making J wonder if he could get some of the money back in stud fees, if nothing else. Blade wondered how Lord Leighton had managed to put the whole story of the Golden Steed into suitably detached scientific language. That would be an achievement sufficient to tax even Leighton's intellect, to say nothing of his command of scientific language.

Oh well, that wasn't his problem. What bothered Blade when he thought about it were those quixotic impulses that had continually struck him during the last battle in Pendar. Words like "honor" and "chivalry" had popped into his head repeatedly, unasked and unexpected. Admittedly the ideas weren't completely alien or ridiculous to him—public school and university had made that impossible. But if he were going to suddenly start thinking like a fifteenth-century French knight—one of the kind that had been slaughtered by the thousands at the Battle of Agincourt—he was courting trouble. He could easily wind up just as dead as those French knights if he overindulged in grand gestures.

That was a new kind of overindulgence for him. As a secret agent there were professional standards to follow, but the key one had nothing to do with traditional notions of honor. It was: stay alive. It had been impressed on him very early in his career that it didn't matter how an agent played the game, but rather that he won it and came out on his feet. And if necessary, that the opponent did not come out on his feet. But now, Blade found himself unable to keep his mind set in that mold.

Was it the computer affecting his brain again? Possibly. It had already given him problems with sex and with alcohol. Perhaps it was now giving him more subtle psychological problems?

Or was it simply too much exposure to worlds where fighting and violence had not been mechanized, where one could be "honorable" without winding up a corpse? Where in fact it was even sometimes to one's advantage to play the game a certain way? He didn't know. Nor did he know how far these new attitudes might lead him. He would have to keep it under control though. If it led him too far, he would wind up very dead, far from home, and perhaps for no good reason.

Or was honor perhaps a good reason for accepting death? There I go again, he told himself sharply. A year ago he would have given a professional's answer to the question. A large resounding no. Today... He would have to speak to both J and Lord Leighton about it, that was certain. It was something that might endanger his fitness for further trips into Dimension X.

But there was one consolation. Neither J nor Lord Leighton would laugh at him for admitting this problem. J was of the old school, and he tried to preserve its standards in his personal life if he could not do so in his profession. He would appreciate Blade's situation. And the scientist? Well, a sense of personal honor was not scientifically measurable, so Leighton would never admit its existence. At least not aloud to Blade. But there was a particular expression on Leighton's face when he was forced to recognize something that went beyond the limits of the measurable. It would be on his face when he listened to Blade explaining this new problem.

His mind was really wandering down strange paths today, Blade told himself. Time to get moving, get a little fresh air blowing in his face. He dug his heels into the flanks of the Golden Steed and felt it surge forward.