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TheCrystalSeas

Blade Book 16

By Jeffrey Lord

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## Chapter ONE

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It was all about to start again. Richard Blade was feeling tense, not frightened—he had been beyond that for many years. In twenty years as a secret agent and then several more years of travels into Dimension X; he had seen and done nearly everything a man could do. There was nothing left in this world and little in any other that could actually frighten him. But a trip into Dimension X was a trip into the unknown, and Blade was always keyed up to an extra pitch of alertness when facing the unknown. He had to be. Otherwise he would have been dead a good many times, both on earth and in the "somewhere else" of Dimension X.

That "somewhere else" was still a mystery, even after the years of time and the millions of pounds that had gone into Project Dimension X. Its existence had been discovered the day Blade's brain was linked to Lord Leighton's computer. That computer had been almost a moron, compared to the brilliant scientist's latest creation. But it had served to fling Blade—somewhere. And after Blade's long ordeal of survival, in the "somewhere else," the computer had also served to bring him back.

The discovery of Dimension X completely eclipsed Leighton's original project of linking a human and a computer intelligence. Being able to penetrate other dimensions and bring back their knowledge and perhaps resources to England was obviously an enormous breakthrough. So what had started out as an eccentric genius's private fancy suddenly became a Frankenstein's monster. Everybody seemed to want to get in on the act. Eventually Project Dimension X settled down to focus on four key people.

There was Blade, the only living man able to travel into Dimension X and return alive and sane, one of the most perfect physical and mental specimens alive. He only hoped that he could stay that way under the strain of successive trips into Dimension X. The one now only a few minutes away would be his sixteenth.

There was Lord Leighton. No doubt the scientist was waiting now in the main chamber of the complex far below the Tower of London, among the looming gray bulks of his computers. A hunchbacked, polio-twisted body, which looked like the caricature of a mad scientist's, housed one of the greatest scientific brains in history. It also housed one of the most irascible and ill-mannered dispositions, but anybody who had to work with Leighton for more than two days either got used to that or fled. The key men of Project Dimension X could not afford to flee.

There was the Prime Minister, who kept money in the project's budget and inquisitive politicians out. He kept his eye on the "big picture" and his hand firmly on the administrative reins to keep Lord Leighton from galloping off in all directions at once. This administrative hold was badly needed.

And there was J, walking beside Blade at this moment, down the long, gleaming corridor in the underground complex. Blade stole a glance at J. The man looked older each time they met, but he still hadn't lost the appearance of an upper-grade civil servant. Under that near-perfect natural disguise lurked one of the great spymasters of modern times, a man held in respect and sometimes awe or fear on both sides of the Iron Curtain. As head of MI6, he had recruited Richard Blade from Oxford more than twenty years ago. As head of MI6, he had been Blade's guide and mentor and almost father-figure during those twenty years. Still as head of MI6, he did for Richard Blade and Project Dimension X all the things that scientists or politicians couldn't do. The strain had shown on him; that was obvious. But he was the sort of man who would not abandon his post as long as he was alive.

Beyond these four key men spread out a net of lesser figures—several hundred of them. Project Dimension X had tentacles reaching out in all directions, the brain children of various people. Lord Leighton was the most important of these, but he wasn't the only one.

There were a number of projects. One aimed at finding a way to send Blade to a specific dimension, rather than simply firing him off blindly into the unknown. Another project aimed at finding other people able to make the trip into Dimension X. That project had not, as yet, been successful. But nonetheless there was already still another project planned—for training those new people, if and when they were found.

There were psychologists who evaluated Blade's reactions. There were scientists working on large-scale transporting of materials from Dimension X. There were electronics experts who maintained the electronic surveillance system in the complex. There were security men guarding the project from the curious or the hostile. And there was paperwork piling up like Mount Vesuvius! Blade did his share of that, but he had never been a desk man. His place had always been out in the field.

Blade and J were now approaching the final door into the central computer chambers its electronic devices scanned them, compared their characteristics with those of people permitted to enter, and decided they were who they were supposed to be. The heavy bronze-hued door slid open silently. The two men passed on into the heart of the complex.

Leighton was nowhere in sight. But with the sureness of long experience, the two men made their way through the maze of chambers carved out of the rock. They passed white-coated technicians watching consoles and monitors that rose high overhead toward the bare gray rock of the ceilings. Some nodded or smiled in greeting; others were too busy with the work at hand. There was a tension in the air that one could almost cut with a knife. There always was when the sequence had begun for hurling Blade off into Dimension X. He had gone fifteen times, and come back fifteen times. But only a very insensitive or stupid man wouldn't wonder if this might be the time something went wrong.

The last door slid open. They were in the central chamber, with Leighton's master controls and Leighton himself. The scientist bustled over to meet them, moving his warped body across the polished stone floor with surprising speed and agility.

"Are you trying for a controlled return this time?" Blade asked the scientist.

Leighton shook his white-fringed head. "Hardly. The gear hasn't been adequately tested yet, not by any means." Blade wondered about that, since Leighton's idea of a "hasty testing program" was three or four

hundred complex experiments. However, there was never any point in arguing with the scientist on something in his own field. Leighton regarded anybody who did so as a fool, and he did not suffer fools gladly.

Blade realized that Leighton was going on. "Besides, you gentlemen up there"—he jerked a gnarled thumb toward the ceiling—"have neglected to establish a priority system for controlled returns. Where the devil do you want him to go? If you don't say anything on the subject, you know perfectly well he's going back to the Dimension of the Ice Dragons and the Menel. I don't care what you gentlemen think, the discovery of a nonhuman sapient race is the most important thing to come out of this project to date!"

"I'm quite aware of that," said J. Blade thought his voice was a little chillier than usual. Obviously the old man was in no mood for an argument with Lord Leighton just before Blade went off into Dimension X. "But keep in mind that there are only so many of us gentlemen. Each of us can spend only so much time chasing all the hares you keep starting. So inevitably some things don't get done when you would like them to be done. If you could restrain yourself from asking for any new subprojects for about two years ..." J laughed. "But that would be like asking the sun to stop in the sky."

"Joshua managed it," put in Blade.

"I know," said J, with another laugh. "But that was a miracle. And it would take another miracle to keep Lord Leighton's brain from coming up with more ideas for two years."

Leighton laughed in his turn. "It most certainly would. But let's not keep Richard waiting while we argue."

That was a notion Blade heartily supported. Now that the moment was actually approaching, the strain on him was, as always, close to its peak.

And as always, the routine of preparing himself relieved most of the strain. It was so familiar, so monotonous, so apparently pointless—and therefore so refreshingly normal, so much like ordinary life in Home Dimension.

It might not be pointless, of course. There was no way of knowing what would happen if he didn't smear foul-smelling black paste over every inch of skin. It was supposed to prevent electrical burns and other possible nastinesses from the jolt of current passing through him at the moment of transfer into Dimension X. Perhaps it did. Perhaps if he ever left out this step, he would wind up in Dimension X dead and charred as black as an over-fried chicken wing.

So Blade played it safe. He stripped himself to the skin, smeared himself with the black goo, and pulled on a loincloth. Then he stepped out of the changing booth and walked over to the main chair. One or two wires might have been added or taken away since the project began, but otherwise the chair looked the same. A black metal chair with black rubber padding on the seat and back, it stood on a thick rubber mat inside a glass booth. It always looked and always would look too much like an electric chair.

Blade sat down. Lord Leighton bustled about him, attaching the scores of cobra-headed electrodes to every part of his body. The cords of the electrodes ran off like a horde of multicolored snakes into the great computer. Blade looked up at it. The monstrous consoles in their gray, crackled finish loomed as high as ever, frowning ominously down on him in the dim light of the chamber.

It always seemed that Leighton would go on attaching electrodes until there was no more of Blade's skin to take them. It was always something of a surprise to Blade when Leighton stopped. But it always happened, sooner or later, and Leighton always stepped back to admire his work for a moment.

By this time J had parked himself on the small chair in the corner reserved for him. A mask of self-control had descended on his lined face as he watched Blade get ready to go into danger again. Blade knew that J loved him like a son, but both of them were caught in a net of duties that they could not give up—not without harm to England, and not until there was someone else to do each of their jobs.

Blade did not have to wait much longer. The big clock on the master control panel worked itself around to zero. The sequence-indicator lights all lighted up like a Christmas tree. The main sequence was in the computer's banks, ready to respond to the impulse from the master switch.

Lord Leighton's clawed hand hovered over the master switch, and his surprisingly bright, dark eyes looked questioningly at Blade.

Blade nodded.

"Good luck, Richard," said J.

Blade nodded again. In this moment his throat was almost always too dry to talk. And his eyes were on Leighton's hand, now descending to pull down the switch. It slid down its polished slot and clicked into place.

As it did, the red lights on the panel suddenly began to swell and rapidly grow brighter, burning into Blade's eyes like miniature suns. In seconds the whole chamber was flooded with red light, pulsing and savage. Blade looked down at himself, saw the red light reflected in shimmering patterns from the glossy black grease on his skin. Or was it his skin that had turned glossy black? He stretched out an arm to look at it. It rose effortlessly. He stood up. Dimly, half lost in the red glare, he saw Lord Leighton and J shrinking away from him, transformed into dwarfed, ape-like figures.

He drew himself to his full height. Now he felt himself expanding and growing like a giant. Not like a balloon—every bit of him was as solid as it had been before. His hand touched the rock ceiling. There was a moment of pressure, then the rock seemed to explode away from around his body in red-glowing fragments and go whizzing away into blackness.

He rose up through the earth until his head broke the surface, and kept on rising. The earth gaped where he broke through, then closed behind him. He flexed his legs and leaped upward. His legs pulled free of the rock and earth. Now he stood in the Tower of London. Already his head was above the top of the flagpole on the White Tower, and as he turned from side to side to look over London, he continued to grow.

Black and shining, Blade grew, until he could see London spread out below him, lit with a hell-red glow from horizon to horizon. God-like, he stretched his arms out to embrace the city and seemed to hear it roar and pulse in response. Then the red light faded, and the city vanished. Blade stood alone in the blackness—the gigantic, terrible, blackness—knowing that this time he had been pushed beyond the normal human limits—into where?

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## Chapter TWO

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Blade literally came back down to earth with a bump. Suddenly the darkness was gone, and he was

back to normal size. Then he struck something hard and cold with a bone-shaking crash, bounced, and rolled over and over down a long, hard, sloping surface, picking up bruises as he went. He finally arrived in Dimension X with a bone-jarring thump against another hard surface.

He lay there without even trying to move until his head began to clear. He felt aches and pains all over, from the bruises and cuts he had picked up rolling over the rocks. And he knew he must have struck his head harder than usual, since there was a distinct, unmistakable roaring sound in his ears.

Eventually he got up the energy and coordination to move. Everything still seemed to be working—no bones broken that he could see or feel right now. Cautiously he stood up. For a moment his head swam, and he nearly lost his balance. But after that, he knew he would be able to stay on his feet. So he stretched, to get a few more of the aches out of his muscles and joints, then looked around him.

Now he knew why he had been hearing a roaring in his ears. He was standing on a rocky beach by the ocean. Great blue-green waves were roaring in onto the beach and breaking in clouds of foam and spray. They were breaking hard enough to move rocks the size of a man and breaking with a terrible, continuous grinding noise. A long reef of high-piled rocks ran out into the sea, off to Blade's right. The incoming surf broke in high rainbows of spray over a mound of black rocks at the far end, a good quarter of a mile away.

Blade looked back at the shore and along the beach. He didn't like what he saw. The beach lay at the bottom of a semicircle of high, weathered rock cliffs nearly half a mile long. At the foot of the cliffs was thirty or forty feet of rocky slope. Blade realized that he must have struck near the top of that slope and rolled down. Above the slope the cliff shot vertically nearly two hundred feet against the blue sky. Blade could see flowering trees and bushes tossing in the sea wind on top of the cliff. At least the land was not going to be totally barren and inhospitable—if he could ever get to it.

That was going to be the problem—getting off this beach and out of this cove to somewhere more habitable. He could try to climb two hundred feet of crumbling rock in his present battered condition, with only toes and fingers for climbing aids. Or he could try swimming out, getting safely through a hundred-yard belt of boiling white surf without drowning or being smashed against the rocks. Then he would have to swim some unknown distance along a totally unknown coast until he found a better landing place, and then back to shore probably through still more surf. Blade was a superb swimmer who could easily cover twenty miles at a stretch. But that didn't mean he liked such a plunge into the unknown.

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to have much choice. A look along the beach showed no signs of food or fresh water anywhere in sight. Besides, the line of weeds and shellfish on the rocks showed him that even a few more hours might be too long to stay here. The high-tide mark was a good eight feet above his head. As the tide came in, the cove would turn into a boiling cauldron. He would be tossed around like an onion in a stew until he drowned or crashed against the rocks.

But there was that reef extending out to sea. Blade shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun and examined the reef more closely. The spray broke impressively enough over it, but it looked as though the far end was out in deep water. Out there he would find fewer rocks jutting up to crash against. Blade stretched again to test his muscles. He walked to the base of the reef, then started out along it.

He moved slowly and carefully, picking his footing one step at a time. The rocks were crumbling and wet, and many were also slick with weeds or encrusted with shellfish. He knew he would be finished if he slipped and broke or twisted an ankle or split one leg open to the bone. He had to be able to swim out of here before the tide came in.

Step by step, rock by rock, Blade made his way out along the reef. Twice the only practical course lay close to the water's edge, where the breakers were crashing onto the rocks with explosive roars and churning tons of water. Once, he was able to scramble through the dangerous area during the moment between two waves. The second time he miscalculated. The incoming breaker loomed above him like a wall of blue-green crystal crowned with white foam. The moment before it struck, he braced himself as best he could and wrapped his arms around the largest and heaviest rock he could find. Then he took a deep breath and held it. The wave roared down and over him, flattening him against the rocks like a giant hand. Blade held on, although the strain seemed about to pull his arms out of their sockets. He held on until his lungs seemed to be filled with white-hot gas instead of air, and the blue-greenness about him began to turn gray and then black. Then suddenly the wave was past, its roar fading away in his ears. Almost by reflex, Blade's arms and legs pulled him up the rocks, out of the path of the next wave. He sat in safety as it roared past him, gulping in air, and flexing his arms to get the hard knots out of his painfully strained muscles. Then he rose and went on.

It began to seem that he had always been stumbling over crumbling, slimy gray stones, not falling headlong only by a series of desperate muscle-wrenching efforts. The spray from the breakers dried on his skin, stinging painfully in his cuts and leaving an itching crust of salt all over him. Once, a rock sheared in two under his weight, and a sharp edge slashed along his left leg. The cut ran almost from knee to anklebone, but by a miracle it was not deep. It soon stopped bleeding, and then Blade was no longer aware of it. He scrambled on, sweat now running down his skin to carve lines in the caked salt.

Almost before he realized it, he was near the far end of the reef. He found a perch on the highest rock he could reach and looked around. He grinned through salt-caked lips as he realized that he had been right. Out here the water was far deeper than by the beach. The big waves rolled in, rising ten and fifteen feet high, just as they did farther in. But they did not break on the rocks in a white cauldron of foam, ready to swallow even the strongest swimmer. They made a fringe of white around the edge of the reef, but that was all. Diving into the sea would be hardly more dangerous than diving into a swimming pool.

Blade looked out along the shore across the water, looking for a landing place. As he did, he noticed something so intriguing that he completely forgot about the landing place. The sea was incredibly clear and transparent, like crystal. Beyond the white fringe of foam, Blade could see the rocks of the reef falling away to an amazing depth. Far down in the pale blue-green crystal, he saw sparks of color moving and silver flashes as schools of fish passed by. Even farther down, he could see purplish darkness beginning to set in, as the depth of the water finally defeated the sun. He guessed he was looking down three, perhaps four hundred feet into the depths—before the light faded out.

Reluctantly, Blade lifted his eyes from the water and stared across the waves at the distant shore. To his left the cliffs ran away out of sight, without offering any visible way up through them and inland. Heading that way would be a badly conceived gamble.

But far off to the right was something that looked like the yellow sand of a beach backed by green trees. Blade couldn't be as sure as he would have liked to be, for the beach was a good six miles away. If visibility hadn't been nearly perfect, he wouldn't have seen it at all. But there it was. Even if it wasn't a route inland, it would be a better place to spend the night than a cove certain to be submerged twenty feet deep by the incoming tide.

Six miles. A good stiff swim even for Blade, in his present shape. He considered the prospect, then examined his situation to see if there was any alternative. He did this not out of any reluctance to face the swim, but out of an ingrained habit of assessing a situation and considering alternative strategies. His experience as a secret agent in Home Dimension had done that ingraining. It wasn't a habit one could use in tight spots where all that mattered was fast action. But a little care in advance could prevent a lot of

those tight spots. Otherwise one was likely to go blundering into unexpected situations, be surprised, and not live very long.

A minute was enough to satisfy Blade that the six-mile swim was the best choice. So there was nothing to do now except slip into the water and start swimming, preferably as soon as possible. Blade had no intention of being caught offshore by darkness in these lovely but strange waters. Approaching an unknown shore by night was something even full-sized ships seldom risked. And he knew that Home Dimension sharks were at their most dangerous after dark. He didn't want to risk these crystal seas being the home of something as large and hungry and with the same habits.

Blade slipped down off his perch and began to make his way over the last few yards of rock. The only problem he could see was that long range of water-rounded black boulders near the outer end of the reef. It looked high and slippery, with no hand- or footholds. But it sprawled squarely across his path. His progress toward it was accompanied by the usual clatter of falling stones.

He was less than ten feet away from the boulders when they gave out a long roaring hiss and began to move.

Blade let out an explosively short hiss as he sucked in his breath and froze where he was. The creature continued to move, writhing its way around in a semicircle over the rocks. A long neck rose, and a small head with a very large tooth-filled mouth rose on the end of it. The head turned toward Blade, and he gasped at a putrid blast of long-dead fish as the mouth opened. Its foot-long teeth stained yellow by age and decay clacked together. Blade continued to stand frozen, but not out of fear. With a head that small, the creature's brain could only be tiny, and its vision might well be dim. If he stood motionless, it might overlook him entirely, or not recognize him as prey, or see him and then forget about him almost at once. The head wove back and forth, and small yellowish eyes under heavy bony ridges flickered open and shut.

Then suddenly the head was driving at Blade with the speed and force of a battering ram. The mouth opened wide, showing a steamy red gullet. Blade sprang up onto the rock behind him and down the other side with split seconds to spare. The living battering ram crashed into the rock, jarring it halfway loose. If Blade had been in its path, he would have been crushed to a pulp and dined on at the creature's leisure.

Blade scrambled back another ten yards over the rocks. He fell and cut or bruised himself twice, but he was able to find a hiding place behind a particularly large rock. He flattened himself against the weeds and shellfish and looked at the creature again.

It stretched nearly fifty feet from nose to tail, every inch covered with glistening black scales. It was almost certainly a sea-dwelling reptile of some sort. Instead of feet or claws, it had four immense flippers, each as large as a good-sized door. And it was lying squarely across Blade's path into the water. Worse, it knew of his existence and was showing no signs of relaxing back into its sleep. The head on the long neck kept weaving back and forth, like the swinging of a guided missile as it homed in on a target. The mouth would gape open, then shut with a bang, like the slamming of the door of a safe.

Once more Blade considered possibilities. He could retreat back down the reef into the cove. On the reef he would probably be able to outrun the creature. But if it took to the water and got ahead of him—and even if it didn't, sooner or later the tide would come in. Then he would have to face the creature in the water. Clumsy though it might be on land, he was sure it would be deadly in the water.

Slip into the water here, quietly, and try to slip away unseen and unscented? A gamble, with certain and

gruesome death at the end of the game if he lost. If the creature did not lose his trail, things would once more come down to a fight in the water. Such a fight could end only one way.

No, he would have to fight the creature here, on land, where he could match his speed and wits against its tons of muscle and ferocity. And he would have to kill or cripple it. Wounded and enraged, it would follow his trail like a gigantic, scaled bloodhound, and track him down just as surely.

Weapons. If he hadn't had some notion of the weapons he would be using, Blade would never have considered a death-duel with the creature. But there were plenty of loose stones lying around that were small enough for handy throwing—by a man with a sure eye and a strong arm. Blade had both.

Some of the rocks would split and shatter into pieces as sharp as knives and a great deal heavier. They could also be thrown or used to stab through the heavy scales—if the creature got close enough. It would probably come to that. Blade doubted if he could get through the scales and bone into a vital spot from any distance. But there were always the eyes.

Blade reached out an arm, and hefted a rock the size of an orange. He judged its weight and lifted it over his head. Then in a single motion he sprang to the top of his rock and hurled the stone at the creature's head.

His aim was off enough to make the stone miss the head. It cracked against the scaly neck a foot below the base of the skull, bounced off, and dropped into the sea with a splash. The creature arched its neck and let out another long hiss. The tiny head bobbed up and down and darted from side to side, looking for the enemy. But Blade dropped down behind his rock the moment the stone left his hand. Gradually the creature began to lose interest and the head slowed. As it did, Blade grasped another stone. In a moment when the head hung motionless, broadside on to him, he threw the second stone.

This one struck even harder than the first—and struck its target. It smashed into the side of the creature's mouth. Blade saw yellow splinters of broken teeth shower down into the sea. The creature reared up as if it had been jolted by an electric shock, and let out a roar that half deafened Blade. As the head rose high and was silhouetted against the sky, he let go a third rock and saw it hit. Once again he scrambled up the rock behind him and went to the other side. Once again the creature's head came down with a crash, and its jaws slammed shut on empty air, where Blade had been only seconds before.

This time Blade rose from his cover with rocks in both hands. He threw them—one, two—as hard as he could. At this range, perhaps he could stun the creature.

One rock missed completely, and the other bounced harmlessly off the ridge above the left eye. The ridge cracked, but the creature's skull must have been far too thick. Blade would have to try for the eyes, then close in and kill it—definitely kill it, for he could not just blind the creature and leave it to die.

Blade got off one more stone before he had to shift position again. This one he aimed straight at the right eye, hitting just below it. Broken scales hung down below the eye as the creature's head rose and Blade scrambled for safety.

This time his first refuge offered no stones handy for throwing. So he had to keep scrambling on. With a massive rumbling and grating of disturbed stones, the creature lurched after him, hissing like a leaky boiler. Blade had to roll aside from a dart of the head, then duck around a boulder to safety. Eventually he found himself within easy reach of more throwing stones. Even better, one of the larger rocks was of the black splintery material. Several knife-sharp slivers had already been broken off.



By now Blade was sweating with the exertion and the strain and was bruised and gouged all over. Blood and sweat ran down his body and mixed in a slippery, stinging mess. He tried not to think about what would happen if some large and hungry fish picked up the scent of blood as he swam.

The scent of blood was certainly helping the creature trace him now. It wriggled and heaved itself forward after him, the long neck swaying, the long tail lashing back and forth, sending small stones hurtling into the sea. Every few seconds, the long yellow teeth would part, and a steam-engine hiss would come out. Blade picked up two stones and flung them hard at the head as it came snaking down toward him.

One struck low, taking the creature in the throat in the middle of a hiss. The hiss cut off abruptly. Then the other stone struck hard into the right eye. Blade heard the crunch of thin bone, saw blood spurt, and heard the creature scream in an awful mixture of pain and rage. The head flailed around frantically as the creature tried to watch Blade with its one remaining eye.

But Blade moved too fast for his enemy. He bent and picked up a rock so large that he needed both hands to lift it. Raising it high over his head, he threw it as hard as he could at the creature's blind side. The rock crashed and clattered on the boulders. The creature's head swung toward the sound, jaws gaping. Blade bent and picked up two of the sharp rock splinters. Then he ran forward, leaping from rock to rock like a mountain goat, ignoring the danger of falling, in his need for speed. He had to get close to the creature and find a vital spot before it could turn to meet him. Otherwise he would die, snapped in two by foot-long yellow teeth or pulped under twenty tons of scaly flesh as it rolled over him.

He leaped to the top of the last rock, then sprang for the creature's back, legs uncoiling in a desperate snap of powerful muscles. He soared eight feet through the air and landed on the black scales. Before the creature could react to Blade's sudden impact, Blade was swarming up its neck. The neck writhed and twisted under him, but he held on and clamped his legs so hard around it that the heavy scales rubbed his flesh raw. After a moment the creature seemed to quiet down. Blade risked loosening the death grip with his legs. The creature still seemed quiet. In a single furious rush, Blade hauled himself up the neck and plunged one of his rock daggers into the intact left eye. He drove the sharp point deep, seeking the brain.

Whether he reached it or not, he never knew. A monstrous convulsion tore through the creature's entire frame. The neck and head shot up into the air, as Blade locked arms and legs again. For a long moment the creature's head towered twenty feet above the rocks, the long neck swaying like a tree in a high wind. Then, like a released bow, the neck snapped hard to the right.

The jerk broke Blade's grip as though it were the grip of a child. He sailed into the air, losing his grip on the other dagger as he went. For a ghastly moment he thought he was going to crash down on the rocks. Then he saw crystal-clear blue-green water underneath him, the gray shapes of weed-grown rocks lurking below the surface. He had just time enough to take a deep breath and close his mouth before he plunged into the water.

The shock nearly knocked Blade's wind out of him. He plunged under, going deep, feeling the coolness and the stinging of the salt in his wounds. He churned furiously with arms and legs, trying to keep himself off the rocks. He could still smash into them hard enough to—

Ten feet down, he hit the rocks. But he did not hit hard enough to do any damage—just hard enough to knock the rest of the breath out of him. He clawed for the surface, feeling his lungs burn and seeing the water around him turn black. Then he burst back up into the sunlight and the air.

For a moment he was too busy gulping in air to worry about the creature. Then he realized that the only

sound around him was the wind and the rumble of the waves on the rocks. The hissing, the screams, the scraping of twenty scaly tons on rock—they were gone. Blade trod water and raised his head to look toward the reef. His eyes widened in surprise. The creature lay sprawled motionless across the reef, head almost at the water's edge. Blood from its wounds dripped down onto the rocks and into the water. Already small fish were darting frantically around in the blood-darkened water.

Blade found it hard to believe that the creature had died so quickly, so easily. But in any case he had better get out of the water before any larger and hungrier fish were drawn to the blood. He caught a projecting rock and hauled himself up on the reef with only a few more scratches.

As he did, something on the creature's head flashed sunlight into his eyes. He blinked and looked hard. Something metallic was glinting from the base of the skull. Blade stepped over to the corpse and looked down.

It was a crossbow bolt, a shaft of iron-hard wood driven deep into the base of the creature's skull with almost surgical precision. Blade reached down to pull it out. It was driven in so deeply that he had to use both hands and brace his foot against the scaly skin before he could pull the bolt out. It was a good two feet long, tipped with translucent green stone and finned with what looked like thin-sliced bone.

Where had it come from? Blade didn't know. He wasn't at all happy about not knowing, either. Whoever had fired that bolt into the creature's skull could very well still be lurking within range, ready and perhaps willing to put a second bolt through his own skull. Blade was even unhappier about that idea. He promptly went to cover behind a large rock, then shifted position until he was at least partly covered on all four sides. Very cautiously he raised his head and slowly scanned a complete circle around him.

The cliffs? No, they were out of range, unless the crossbow had the range and power of an antitank gun. The reef itself? There was certainly enough cover along the quarter-mile of tumbled rocks to hide a battalion of archers. But where could they have come from? And in any case, that bolt looked as though it had come from another direction—from the sea. Except that there was nothing visible out to sea. Nothing except the swell and surge of the blue-green waves, little flickers of foam, and the gold sparkle of the sun. No ships, no boats, not even a raft or a—

Wait a minute! There was something in the water about two hundred yards out. Blade rose partly out of cover to get a better look. Yes, something was out there. A small dark shape like a human head, then another, then a third. Swimmers? Divers? Blade ducked down again; so did the heads. On the surface of the water there was suddenly a smooth patch, as though a large fish had dived.

Blade didn't quite like the way those heads had disappeared. It didn't look like the movements of human swimmers. That was the least pleasant thought of all. But he was also curious to see what might be lurking out there, under those crystal seas. Once again he cautiously raised himself to get a better look.

This time he saw them clearly. Far down in the water, perhaps a hundred feet or more, were three moving shapes. They had human form, but no human ever moved so smoothly, so effortlessly through deep water. There was no sign of breathing gear either, not even a silver flash of escaping bubbles. There were mermen down there. Something—somebody—human or humanoid was down there, as much at home in the crystal seas as any fish.

Now the three were rising toward the surface, rising toward Blade. One of them carried a crossbow; the other two carried spears. Blade saw the light glint on the spearheads as they rose toward him. No, definitely, they were not wearing any breathing gear. They slid upward through the water with nothing on

their lithe bodies, except fins on their feet and belts and loin-guards around their waists. Blade rummaged around to find another handy-sized throwing stone. But he hoped he wouldn't have another fight on his hands. These—beings—were armed. That meant intelligence, and perhaps the chance of friendship. If they would just continue their approach—

They did. Now Blade could make out that one of them was female—unmistakably, magnificently female. There was a pale bluish tinge to her skin and a deep greenness in her hair. But there was also a lithe and lush body that rose through the water with almost frightening ease and grace. The three were less than twenty feet down now. In another moment Blade knew he would almost be able to read the expressions on those silvery-blue faces with their great golden eyes. Would they be friendly or—? He dropped the stone and got ready to stand up and hold his hands out peacefully.

In an instant the three merpeople had stiffened, going rigid and almost vertical in the water. They seemed to be listening for something, their heads turning back and forth. Then in a movement of unearthly grace, they flipped head downward. Finned feet kicking furiously, they plummeted down into the sea, until he could no longer make them out even as flickers of movement in the depths. Then he raised his head and saw why they had dived away.

A large ship with two masts and three square sails was rounding the point to the left. One of the sails was a dull silvery-gray, and on it was a black trident. Its deck was littered with barrels and boxes, and its railing lined with people.

Blade stood up and began waving frantically. He was not surprised when some of the people at the ship's railing began waving back or when others began lowering a small boat over the railing. But he was almost disappointed as well. The ship's crew looked like normal human beings, and there would probably be less danger among them. But now he might never have anything more to do with the merpeople than that one tantalizing almost-meeting. Unsatisfied curiosity nagged at Blade as he sat on his rock and watched the boat row toward him.

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### Chapter THREE

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Blade's disappointment pretty well vanished aboard the ship. He sat in the captain's cabin, drinking seaweed cordial and having the captain's daughter Svera smear ointment on his battered hide. Gradually the merpeople drifted into the back of his mind.

Part of this was because of the conversation; the rest of it was Svera herself, a tall and exceedingly full-bosomed young woman with a tanned and freckled face and blue-black hair done up in two braids. The face and hairdo looked girlish, but the figure definitely did not. Nor did the looks she was giving Blade from her wide blue eyes, as she smeared on the ointment. It seemed to Blade that she was smearing it on much more slowly and thoroughly than was really necessary. He found it hard to keep his mind on his conversation with the captain.

The captain's name was Foyn, that of his ship was Green Mistress. Both hailed from the Sea Cities of Talgar. The Sea Cities were a group of six artificial floating islands anchored in a shallow part of the ocean about a thousand miles to the west. The ship was now off the coast of the Empire of Nurn, the principal trading partner of the Sea Cities. Captain Foyn said that last phrase with a curse and a sour-faced grimace.

Blade grinned. "Why do the Sea Cities trade with the Empire, then, if their merchants make so much trouble and pay so ill?"

"How do you know what they do?" said Captain Foyn sharply.

Blade shrugged. "I have traveled far in my time. When I see honest sailors or merchants mention someone with a curse or a grimace, I know that someone is usually cheating them. Am I right?"

Foyn managed to blush slightly under his weather-beaten skin and close-cropped gray beard. "You flatter me, calling me honest on such short acquaintance. But you are right. We bring coral and fish and metal nuggets to Nurn, enough to fill our ships. But we take back to the Cities no such wealth. If we had any choice—" He sighed. "But we do not, and have not had for many generations."

"Why not?"

"The war with those filthy, slime-reeking Fishmen!" the captain exploded. "They've been our enemies for three hundred years. If the armorers of Nurn didn't make the best weapons, by the Silver Goddess, we'd go elsewhere! But no one else makes what we need to fight the Fishmen. Without Nurn, we'd be lost. The Sea Cities would sink down among the coral and the weeds and vanish from sight or memory."

So the Sea Cities of Talgar warred with the merpeople. Blade suspected there was more to the story. But he decided it would not be wise to bluntly ask why, and even less wise to ask about the merpeople or mention his own brief encounter with them. Apparently Foyn accepted the merpeople and the war with them as something changeless and inevitable, like the tides or the storms of the sea.

Just as apparently Svera did not. She swung her eyes from Blade to her father, and Blade saw them harden. "If we did not sail into the seas the Fishmen call their own, to take the fish and coral and—"

"Daughter, be serious!" said Foyn sharply. "Who cares now about the rights and wrongs over three centuries? I don't. What I do care about is that the Sea Cities of Talgar still float upon the waves and the Fishmen still skulk beneath them. Would you have things differently?"

"Yes, I would," Svera snapped. "What about my brother? And my mother—your wife, by the Silver Goddess! They couldn't be any more dead than they are, whatever had happened to the Sea Cities! And the war isn't over yet, anyway! Are you sure it will all be worthwhile in the end?"

Captain Foyn glared at Svera with a fury that embarrassed and disturbed Blade. For a too-long moment it looked as if Foyn were going to slap his daughter in the face. Then his broad shoulders slumped, and he let out a long sigh. It was the weary sigh of a man who has been over the same hopeless argument with someone he loves a dozen times before.

"Daughter, go to your cabin," he said quietly. "Whatever we may say to each other, I will not have it said before a stranger and a guest aboard Mistress. Would you disgrace the name that your brother and mother bore?" Svera bit her lip and was silent. Then she rose and went out. At the door of the cabin, she stopped and turned to stare hard into Blade's eyes. He had the impression that she was weighing him in some sort of mental balance. He rather wished he knew what she was looking for. Then he turned back to Captain Foyn, who was pouring out some more seaweed cordial.

The captain put his cup down on the table and shook his head wearily as he looked at Blade. "I am sorry that my daughter has no discretion," he said. "What she said is a family argument that sometimes seems to have been going on nearly as long as the war with the Fishmen."

Blade shook his head. "No need to apologize. I'm very good at forgetting things I should not have heard. And if I'm going to be spending much time among the people of Talgar, I'm going to be learning a lot about the war sooner or later." He filled his own cup again and looked at Foyn. "Do others think the way Svera does, about the war?"

Foyn nodded. "Quite a few. But mostly they are young people, like her. Also there are some of the poorer Brothers—the ship captains and officers—who resent the taxes we must levy to pay for the war. They make a tremendous amount of noise every time there is a council election or a vote for new taxes, but they can never command many votes."

Foyn sighed again. "The terrible thing about them is that I wish I could be more certain they were wrong. If—if our coral mines on the Black Reef, for example, are to the Fishmen what their raids on the fishing fleets or the moorings are to us—something too terrible—" He was obviously fumbling for words to express doubts he could neither openly admit nor completely deny.

Blade wished he knew enough about the situation to be able to supply those words, but for the moment there wasn't anything he could do except sit still and keep his mouth shut. For the moment. He had the feeling that he was about to land in a horribly complicated situation. Finding out what was going on between the Sea Cities and the merpeople might turn out to be more than just satisfying his curiosity. It might turn out to save his neck as well.

Eventually Foyn fumbled his own way out of his uncertainty. "The Silver Goddess alone knows who has the right of this whole stinking mess. But I will not do anything or let others do anything that would put the Cities in danger." On that fine and determined sentiment, he poured out two more cups of the cordial. Since the green drink was stronger than it looked, Blade really didn't want to take any more on an empty stomach.

Fortunately the captain's servant came in with dinner a few minutes later. There were three kinds of fried or baked fish, a soup made of seaweed, and a flagon of beer made of still more seaweed. Blade had the feeling that he was going to have to get used to a lot of fish and seaweed in this dimension.

Blade ate more than he really wanted, to help absorb the alcohol. It worked. By the time the steward cleared away the tableware, his head no longer felt vaguely fuzzy. Instead he felt packed solid from throat to groin and more than suspected he was in for a bout of indigestion. That would be a ludicrous way of ending his career as a Dimension X traveler—developing a digestion too delicate to handle strange and exotic foods. The thought made him smile, then laugh, and generally put him in a better mood. He was still smiling when he went out on deck to take a walk around Mistress's decks and clear his head with the sea breezes.

Mistress was a fair-sized ship, over a hundred feet long and thirty feet wide at her widest point. She was obviously designed for rough seas and heavy cargoes, with massive timbers a foot square, planking like armor plate, and high castles both fore and aft. Her two masts were massive tree trunks, the forward one carrying a single sail and the mainmast carrying two. All three were set now, to catch the offshore wind. Looking aft, Blade could see the black shapes of the headlands on the coast of Nurn silhouetted against the sunset. Mistress was running before the offshore wind, so it seemed, heading out to sea toward the Cities.

Blade stood by the railing, watching the waves develop whitecaps as the breeze freshened, watching the light fade from the sky—for at least an hour. He could hear ropes creaking and blocks banging overhead in the rigging, the occasional calls of the lookout in the crow's nest, and the more frequent calls of the men

at the tiller aft.

Eventually the breeze became chill enough and strong enough to get through Blade's borrowed sailor's jacket and trousers. He decided to go below, to his cabin in the aftercastle. Mistress had accommodations for a good two dozen passengers, but there were never very many going from Nurn to Talgar. These days, with the war apparently becoming hotter than usual, there were hardly any.

The passenger quarters were pitch-dark, lit only by strong-smelling fish-oil lamps flickering in horn lanterns.

The passageway between the cabins was filled with moving shadows and the creaking of the ship's timbers as the boat moved to the sea. Blade stalked catfooted along the passageway to the door of his cabin, then stopped suddenly and bent his ear to the latch hole. He listened for a moment, then slowly straightened up and drew the long sailor's dagger Captain Foyn had given him. Unmistakably, there was someone inside his room.

As carefully as a watchmaker working on a fine watch, Blade lifted the latch. Then he stepped back to the far side of the passageway, pivoted on one leg, and drove the other foot crashing against the thin wooden door. It flew open with a crash and split halfway from top to bottom. Before it had stopped swinging, Blade leaped through the opening, dagger held low for the upward stab of a trained knife-fighter. Then he stopped suddenly as the intruder sat up in the bed.

His visitor was Svera.

Blade did not sheath his dagger, but he did relax slightly. "What are you doing here?" Another look gave him a good idea. She had wrapped the blankets around her, but her bare freckled white shoulders gleamed faintly in the dim light that crept in through the cracks in the door.

Svera replied with a question of her own. "Why do I need any reason to be here at all?"

Blade was not put off. "Because I do not like unexpected visitors at night."

"Not even women?" She let the blankets slip down her shoulders a few more inches. More skin came into view, the upper swell of her breasts, and the cleft between them.

"That depends."

"Depends on what?" She held the blankets steady.

"On why they are in my cabin."

"Oh." Svera seemed surprised. "Don't you know?" She raised both arms, and the blankets dropped away. As Blade had suspected, she was wearing nothing under the blankets. As he had also suspected, her breasts were magnificent. They jutted out in massive, freckled white roundness, their tips rosy pink with no visible nipples. Svera raised her arms higher, and her breasts lifted also. They didn't really need any help.

Blade felt a sudden heat and hardening in his groin. He was within seconds of stripping off his own clothes and leaping into the bed, to get his hands on those breasts and everything else about Svera. But as he watched her face, he saw something he didn't like in her eyes. Once more she was trying to size him up, to judge his reactions. There was something more than simple desire that had brought Svera to

his bed.

From long practice, Blade easily kept all hint of his suspicions off his face. Instead he carefully laid the dagger down on the small table that folded out of the wall, well out of Svera's reach—or his own. Then he began to take off his own clothes. Svera watched him intently, the watchful-cat look never leaving her face. But she could not keep her eyes and mouth from opening in amazement and perhaps in fear or delight as well—when Blade stood revealed, fully naked and fully erect.

She reached out tentatively and patted Blade in the obvious place. He looked down at her, still keeping his own face impassive. He hoped she wouldn't grab hold too soon or too hard. His endurance was formidable, but now he not only wanted to last but to keep or at least seem calm and cold while doing it. That wasn't his favorite way of making love. But he knew it was the best way of finding out what lay behind the expression in those widening blue eyes.

He took the two steps to the bed and bent down, his arms going around her. This nearly led to disaster. As he reached down, she reached up. Her weight suddenly on him pulled him off his feet. He sprawled on top of her, feeling her warm breasts against his chest, but also hearing the bed creak and groan as though it were about to collapse. Blade had to bite his lip to keep from breaking out laughing. Svera didn't even try. Her mouth opened wide, revealing even white teeth, and she shook and quivered all over with merriment.

Before she had stopped laughing, Blade had hold of her again, pulling her whole long, solid-fleshed body against himself. Any doubt about maintaining his own arousal vanished in that moment. The sight and feel of Svera's body would have aroused the stone statue of a celibate saint.

And Blade was doing the same for Svera. Her blue eyes were still wide open and aimed at Blade. But he couldn't see anything behind them now, except a fast-growing glaze of desire. She whimpered, deep in her richly fleshed throat, as Blade stroked along the side of her throat and the lines of her jaw. Her lips parted under his, and her tongue crept out, thrusting first tentatively, then fiercely into his mouth. Her hands began to move, roaming up and down his back from shoulder blades to buttocks, stroking the small of his back, tugging at his close-cropped hair. Thank God she was too aroused to notice the expression on his face! Any detachment he might have tried to keep was fast going, if not already long gone.

His own hands drifted down over the massive breasts, so large he could hardly cup one in both hands. Their tips had sprouted nipples now, small but solid as jewels. He dipped his lips to each one and took it in like taking the cherry off the top of a sundae. Svera's arms tightened around Blade until he wondered if something was going to break and his face was pushed into the solid breast flesh until he could barely breathe. Just as his vision was starting to fade from lack of air, his hands found the thick bunch of damp hair between Svera's legs. He burrowed with one finger and squeezed with others. Inside she was not just damp, but already slick and ready. Very ready. She gasped and stiffened as she felt the touch, and Blade was able to pull his head from those magnificent, suffocating breasts.

Why wait any longer? Blade raised himself above Svera's quivering body and thrust his smoldering member deep into her in a single motion. It nearly took fire in that moment, as Svera seemed to suck it in. After a moment the madness faded. Blade began setting a steady, mounting rhythm. There was much more he needed and wanted to do to Svera.

Using everything he had ever done or thought of doing to keep going, he thrust deep and fast. Then twisting as he felt Svera reaching her first climax, he slowed while she heaved and trembled, then began again. Two, three, four, five successive times he managed to go through the cycle, biting his lip, doing

everything possible to delay or distract himself. Svera began to whimper, and the glaze of passion in her eyes gave way to a glaze of satiation.

Eventually Blade's endurance cracked. It had to. In the last moment before control vanished, he raised himself high, then thrust more deeply in than he could have imagined Svera would take. She was all around him as he shook and heaved and gasped and quivered from head to foot under the shock of his sudden fierce release. His own climax triggered her last, so she had one more turn to heave and shake. By a great effort, Blade kept himself balanced on his sweat-dripping arms until Svera lay still under him. By an almost equally terrific effort, he raised himself on those arms until he could withdraw, roll to one side, and collapse beside the girl. But then he did collapse, and neither his mind nor his body could have done anything more for quite a while, for any reason or in any cause.

Fortunately, neither could Svera's. As he began to drift off to sleep, a smile spread across Blade's face. Svera had come to his bed expecting to find out a good deal about him. Had she planned to recruit him into her little political underground? Possibly. Certainly she must have been planning to sound him out, as he lay exhausted and receptive and (she hoped) weak-minded beside her.

And he in his turn had gone into this tumble with the notion of reducing Svera to a mindless, whimpering erotic jelly. In that frame of mind she might—she would—have answered any questions he wanted to ask her, about her views and plans.

But for all their fine plans, neither of them had accomplished anything beyond a magnificent bout of pure sex. So magnificent, in fact, that it had aroused and then exhausted both of them beyond the point of asking or answering any reasonable questions. So much for bedroom politics.

It was all a fine, satisfactory, amusing irony—except for one thing. Blade wanted to find out about Svera's group and politics in Talgar in general as badly as he wanted to find out more about the merpeople. But with both, all he had so far was tantalizing hints. He had no idea of what he was getting into, as Mistress sailed on toward the Sea Cities.

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## Chapter FOUR

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A strong west wind pushed Mistress homeward at a good two hundred miles a day, fast sailing for such a clumsy and heavily laden ship. She was not the most comfortable ship to travel in. But for Blade, the greatest discomfort was his inability to find out much more about what he was sailing into—the war, the two peoples engaged in it, and the Empire of Nurn.

The crew was either too busy to talk to him or unable to give him more than vague impressions of what was going on. He learned from them that the merpeople—the Fishmen—were a hated but also respected foe—tough, brave, highly skilled both in organizing large battles and in individual combat. On the average they were smaller than the Talgarans, but fast and strong. Apparently they could live out of water for hours at a stretch, although they lost strength if they stayed in the air too long. On the other hand, the people of Talgar could attack the merpeople in their native depths only with breathing gear. So neither side could really carry large-scale warfare into the home of the other. The war was an affair of ambushes, raids, and attacks on City ships and Fishman settlements, little affairs individually, but scores of them each year added up to a considerable toll in lost men and lost ships for both sides. However, the war was part of the natural scheme of things, as costly as it was.



Nobody who had heard of Svera's opposition group, the Conciliators, had a good word to say for them. They were considered either mad or treacherous, and in either case ought to be shut up if they started making real trouble.

Blade would have liked very much to talk with the ship's officers. But they would talk with him about anything else but politics and the war. The way they changed the subject when he tried to pump them, he suspected they had orders from Captain Foyn. No doubt the captain regretted having exposed so much of the affairs of the Sea Cities to a stranger and was trying to lock the barn door after the sea horse was stolen.

Svera did not speak to Blade at all, and he noticed that she found it hard to meet his eyes. No more searching looks at him, that was certain, and no more bouts at night, either. Blade didn't much miss the first, but he rather regretted losing the second. He and Svera had done marvelously well, going to bed for politics. If they decided to go to bed for fun— But Svera obviously wasn't going to risk giving Blade another chance to find out what was on her mind.

As she sailed toward the Sea Cities, Mistress sailed over waters now more blue than green. But the ocean was as crystal-clear as it had been closer to shore. Blade could still see down two hundred feet or more into the depths, and spent hours by the railing looking down through the waves. He saw schools of fish of all colors and sizes. He saw large predatory fish that dashed in among those schools and broke them up in blood and flashing fins. Once he saw one of the great sea reptiles, the yulon. But apparently the size of the ship frightened the creature away. It glided off and away, making no effort to approach Mistress.

What Blade was looking for more than anything else was what he never saw. He never saw any of the merpeople or any signs that they even existed. Admittedly, the ocean was wide, and the merpeople seldom attacked a ship in the deep waters between Nurn and Talgar. As the days wore on, Blade became more and more impatient for the ships arrival at the Sea Cities.

On the morning of the sixth day, Blade was awakened by a gentle knock on his cabin door. He didn't bother to reach for his dagger this time before shouting, "Come in!"

It was Svera, carrying a wooden tray with thick slabs of dried fish and an omelet of seabirds' eggs steaming on it. Blade raised an eyebrow.

"Breakfast in bed?"

"Why not?" She seemed to be trying to keep a light note in her voice, but it wasn't working, at least not for Blade. He could see that the strain was back in her eyes, the strain now become almost desperation.

Blade grinned nonetheless. "I seem to remember what happened the last time you and I started exchanging questions like this." Every inch of Svera's visible skin blushed pink, and she closed her eyes for a moment. A pink tongue crept out to moisten her full lips.

Blade didn't say anything, but reached out and took Svera's hand. The dishes clattered on the tray as her hands shook slightly. Blade smiled. Svera smiled back, faintly and uncertainly. He could see the strain beginning to fade from her eyes and her breath coming quicker. His touch was awakening memories. Perhaps this time they could—

The roar of a fast-beaten drum blasted into Blade's ears. Svera stiffened, wide-eyed. The blast of a trumpet blown long and harshly followed. Then came Captain Foyn's voice, roaring out at the top of his

lungs.

"Battle call, battle call! All hands arm at once!"

Blade jumped out of bed and snatched his clothes up off the deck. The tray clattered on the planks as Svera rose and was out the door before Blade could get his trousers on. Barefoot and shirtless, he followed her out into the passageway, then out on deck, buckling on his sword as he ran.

The ship sailed sluggishly forward, her sails slack, over an oily swell shrouded in a mist that cut visibility to a few miles. Every man aboard seemed to be swarming out onto the main deck. Most of them were carrying weapons—swords, heavy crossbows, throwing spears. Others were opening lockers tied along the railings and hauling out large, weighted nets. Up on the forecastle stood four men waving tridents with ten-foot wooden handles and foot-long spikes. They looked too clumsy for anything except impaling fish—or Fishmen, Blade realized.

He swore out loud. Before he had a chance to find out anything more about the merpeople, he was going to wind up fighting them! A damnably frustrating mess! But he didn't have any choice, if he didn't want to be considered a madman or a coward.

Captain Foyn scrambled down the ladder from the quarterdeck, waving a long rapier in his left hand. He came up to Blade and laughed bitterly.

"Take a look over to port, friend. That's Fishman work, though they've seldom struck this far west. If they're still around, may the Silver Goddess protect us!"

Blade looked in the direction Foyn was pointing. Off to port, three waterlogged boats lurched slowly to the swell. They were all about forty feet long, high at bow and stern, with the broken stump of a single mast visible amidships. As Mistress drew closer, it was obvious the three boats had been looted thoroughly. Everything movable that might have been aboard was gone—except the bodies of the crews.

There had been three or four people aboard each boat. Fishermen, Blade suspected. Now it was impossible to tell what they had been and hard to tell how many they had been. The killers—the merpeople—had slashed and hacked at the bodies until they were a mangled mess—headless, disemboweled, limbs and genitals missing or mutilated. One body looked as if it had been bitten clean in two. Blade's eyes could also make out that entire sections of railing and deck looked as though they had been ripped or chewed away, by gigantic sharp-toothed jaws.

Blade wasn't the only one who saw those marks, who suspected what they might mean, and who didn't like it at all. He saw Captain Foyn's bearded jaw harden. He heard a babble of nervous voices rising from one end of Mistress to the other, as men pointed and stared.

"Fishmen work, all right. Raiders, though. No prisoners, so—"

"Hunh. Even if there were a thousand of them, they wouldn't be taking prisoners. They're so far west, they—"

"A thousand of them!" in a panicky squall. "Oh, Silver Goddess, have—"

A smack, of an open palm slapping flesh, and the panicky squalling broke off suddenly.

"Enough gabbling like seafowl!" roared Foyn, in a voice that spread a sudden silence from one end of

the ship to the other. "The fishermen are beyond our help, may the Goddess have mercy on them. We will remember them in our Thank Prayers to her, when we reach the Cities. And they are not beyond our vengeance, if the Fishmen are still about. We will leave off battle call for now, but all men will continue to go armed until I order otherwise. I—"

"Sail ho!" came down from the crow's nest.

"Where away?" called Foyn.

"Dead ahead," shouted the lookout. "Looks Eke Duln's Gainful." Silence while everyone stared toward the masthead, as though they expected the other ship to materialize there. Only Blade and Captain Foyn kept their eyes ahead, trying to pierce through the haze and make out the Gainful. Yes, there was something out there in the grayness. A ship very much like Mistress, in fact. She didn't seem to be moving, though. She—

Blade and Foyn and the lookout saw it in the same moment. "Gainful's on fire!" came a half-hysterical scream from the masthead. Foyn started so violently that his rapier clattered to the deck, and he and Blade stared ahead. Yes, black smoke was suddenly curling up from between Gainful's masts.

"She's under attack," said Foyn. "The Fishmen are still about." He raised his voice again. "All hands—we're going to aid Duln and his crew. Topmen aloft to take out all reefs. Sweepmen, man all sweeps. Fore and aft guards, keep a sharp lookout there! Archers to the lookouts." The scene of suspended animation on Mistress's deck dissolved in a flash, as forty-odd men ran to obey Foyn's orders. Discipline aboard the Sea Cities' merchant ships seemed almost military in its thoroughness.

Blade and Foyn ran forward, to join the men with tridents by the base of the bowsprit. Svera would have joined them, but Foyn clamped a hand on her shoulder and pointed aft. "You've refused the woman's training, so you've no place in this battle. Go below, so two good men won't have to waste their time trying to protect you." Svera glared at her father but obeyed.

Foyn shook his head. "More of her fancies. We give the woman's training so our wives and daughters can help defend the ships and boats. But the women of Svera's mind won't take it. Think it means accepting the war against the Fishmen. As though the war were our fault! But then they won't stay safe at home, either, but will travel out to sea just like the trained women." Foyn threw his hands wide in a gesture of despair and disgust, then looked ahead again. The black smoke was rising more thickly now. "She's heavily afire. If they can hold on until we can get there, maybe—" The rattle and bang of the sweeps running out made him break off. He sprang down to the main deck again and ran aft toward the hatch to the hold, leaving Blade and the fore guard to stare at the coiling smoke.

There wasn't enough wind for the extra sail area to make much difference to Mistress. But as the six long sweeps on either side settled down to a steady rhythm, the heavily loaded ship slowly began to pick up speed. The bang of the sweeps in their holes and the rattle of the chains that held them in place echoed all around the ship. So did the swelling gurgle of water at her bluff bow.

If Captain Foyn had wanted to drive the men at the sweeps to their full speed, he could have closed the gap to the stricken Gainful much faster. But he would have risked reaching the other ship and perhaps the merpeople with his own men too exhausted to fight even in defense of their own ship. He would do much to save a Brother, but not risk throwing away his own ship.

However, slowly the gap was closing. By now Blade could faintly smell the smoke curling up from Gainful. By straining his eyes, he could even make out fast-moving figures on her smoke-shrouded decks.

And he could make out others, paler than normal, scrambling up her sides. The merpeople were boarding her already. Blade began to wonder if Mistress would come up with the other ship before the merpeople not only did their worst on her but fled away unscathed into the depths of the sea.

The only warning Blade had was a sudden splashing under Mistress's bow, louder than any bow wave. He stiffened and drew his sword. One of the fore guard stepped to the railing and looked over the side, his trident held ready to strike. Then he sprang back from the railing and spun around, his mouth open and his face working in horror.

Before the scream could come out, one of the yulons rose monstrous and dripping alongside, right among the portside sweeps. The heavy wood cracked and splintered. Screams sounded from below decks as the weighted inboard ends of the sweeps lashed about like great clubs. Men began pouring up from below, with shouts and a clatter of footsteps. Some of them were limping or bloody. Mistress began to lose way and come around in a circle as the starboard sweeps dragged her along.

Then a second yulon rose to starboard, even closer to the ship's side. More sweeps heaved upward; more screams came up from below. This time Blade could clearly see the heavy woven reins leading to a heavy harness around the creature's neck and head.

Blade found that he suddenly had no more qualms about fighting the merpeople—the Fishmen. At least not here and now. Here and now they were doing their best to kill him. He would do his best to stay alive.

He strode over to the starboard railing of the forecastle, shoving his way between two half-paralyzed trident men. His hand closed on a spear lying on the deck, lifted it, tested its balance. Then the spear was hurtling through the air, down into the sea. He aimed it where he could now clearly see the two Fishmen on the back of the great reptile, and aimed it true. The spear vanished into the water with a hiss and a flicker of silver bubbles. A moment later there was a frantically thrashing body drifting away from the reptile, and the crystal seas were stained dark with gushing blood. The yulon reared back, then sank out of sight.

But the other one still had its riders in control. It heaved itself up with a mighty hissing and grunting, until the fanged head on its long neck came swooping down over the railing. It caught one of the men emerging from below before he could lift a weapon, hoisted him into the air, and dropped him over the side with a splash and a scream. Captain Foyn ran out of the sterncastle, sword waving, hurling curses at the thing that had taken one of his men. He stood his ground, legs wide apart, as the yulon swung its head toward him. He did not waste his rapier's point on the armorthick scales, but thrust for the eyes. The creature twisted its head to one side, knocking down two sailors. But the bosun remained on his feet, to thrust a trident into the creature's exposed throat. Driven in with all the bosun's enormous strength, the trident smashed through the scales into the flesh.

Blood gushed out around the prongs, and the monster's scream of pain changed to a hissing gurgle. Its head wavered uncertainly, splintering a long section of railing as it rocked back and forth. Then Captain Foyn thrust again, and this time the yulon's head did not draw back in time. The rapier plunged in through the right eye until it was buried halfway up to its hilt in the creature's brain.

With a crash like a falling mast, the creature slammed down on Mistress's deck, splintering more railing and crushing one of the fallen men, screaming against the planks. One of the archers fired a bolt into its skull at point-blank range. Another suddenly aimed over the side and let fly. His bolt smacked into the pale head of one of the creature's riders, incautiously lifted into the air for a moment. Blade saw more blood spreading in a cloud through the crystal seas.

Only now, with their two trained yulons dead or driven off, did the free-swimming Fishmen launch their attack. If they had been able to come in on Mistress when her crew was paralyzed or distracted by the great reptiles, they could have been all over her in minutes. But Blade realized that the use of the trained yulons must be a new method of fighting for the Fishmen as well as for their enemies. "Still a few bugs in their system," thought Blade with a savage grin. Then he settled down to the long fight against the swimmers.

It was a long fight indeed. For a time Blade wondered why the Fishmen simply didn't drill holes in Mistress's hull and wait until she sank under her crew. The bosun supplied the answer to that.

"Double hull below the waterline," he said. "Cement lining between the two hulls. Couldn't get through it, not unless they took a week and a few big hammers and chisels. Even then we'd take maybe a barrel of water an hour. Mop it up with a sponge."

So Mistress would be staying afloat then. The best the attackers could hope for was to board her, loot her, and slaughter the crew, then set her on fire the way they had Gainful. Blade spared a glance for the ship they had been coming to rescue. There would be no rescuing her now; she was on fire from stem to stern. As Blade watched, her foremast toppled over the side in a shower of sparks and an explosion of steam that he heard across the miles between. Then he had to turn back to the fight raging around Mistress.

It was a nightmarish battle, but for long stretches, a strangely bloodless one. The ship's crew could fight from above against attackers coming from below, but those attackers could retreat into the sea any time they chose. The ship's crew was always exposed to attack, but they could run from place to place aboard Mistress faster than the enemy could swim around her. Only by accident could either side kill. Blade and the rest of Mistress's crew spent most of the battle crouching behind the railings. The Fishmen spent most of the battle lurking below the surface, not invisible but almost invulnerable.

Almost. At odd intervals a crewman would leap to his feet, sight down into the water, and hurl his trident over the side. Most of the time nothing happened except a splash and darting shapes. But once a trident caught one of those darting shapes. A bubbling scream and a spreading cloud of blood drifted up from below the surface. The Fishman rose to the surface, clawing with pale arms at the trident teeth impaling him, screamed in agony and hatred, then sank out of sight as the sailor pulled his trident back in.

Another time a sailor rose to throw a spear, but he rose too high and stayed too long. The snap of a crossbow echoed across the water, and the sailor shot backward from the railing, dropping his spear. His eyes were wide as they stared down at the bolt driven through his chest. Then he slumped to the deck and the staring eyes closed forever. But the heavy Fishman crossbows were large and clumsy, and they could only be fired accurately from the surface. Any Fishman surfacing within range of Mistress's archers risked a returning bolt through him.

Some of them were still willing to run the risk, and for some of them it paid off. Wads of phosphorus came arching over the railing onto the ship's deck, trailing smoke and flame. Dry planking and tarred ropes offered fuel to the flames. But Captain Foyn had placed buckets of sand and powdered coral all over the decks. A bucket quickly emptied onto the fireballs, a hiss, and then there would be nothing but a cloud of pungent smoke drifting away to mix with the mist.

Other Fishmen threw three-pronged hooks on long cords, hoping to snag sailors and drag them over the side or make pathways up the ship's side for themselves. One hook did catch around a sailor's neck, but Blade dashed forward and swung his sword down as the rope began to tighten. The rope whipped back

over the side with a splash; the hook fell to the deck with a clatter.

As the bosun helped the bleeding sailor away, another hook came sailing up onto the deck. Blade grabbed it as the rope began to tighten and gave a tremendous heave. From over the side there was a splash and a surprised yell as the Fishman at the other end was hauled above the surface. Then there came a whick and a scream as one of the archers drilled the target. Blade peered over the railing, watching the dying merman drift away, writhing slowly, blood trickling from his mouth. No—her mouth. The latest casualty was a woman. Small-boned and small-breasted, but unmistakable. She drifted away, her hair floating out behind her.

A shout from the bosun behind Blade made him turn. Off to port, something was approaching Mistress under the water but moving as fast as a speedboat. Then Blade saw three fanged heads lift above the water. Another attack by the yulons? Blade saw some of the sailors turn pale at the thought.

But apparently the new arrivals were only a team drawing something like an underwater chariot. They slowed, then stopped and sank out of sight. Where they had been the water suddenly came alive with the heads of Fishmen, twenty or thirty of them. Then those too vanished. Blade stared down onto the main deck and saw that the dead reptile was still caught along the starboard side. Suddenly he realized where the new attack was going to come.

"Archers! Get ready to fire along that—" he roared, pointing and waving his arms. Then he took a running leap down onto the main deck, snatching up a fallen spear as he ran.

He was barely in time. Fifty yards from the ship's side, a cluster of pale heads rose out of the sea, and crossbow bolts whizzed past Blade on either side. Splinters flew from the masts and decks. Then Blade saw a dark cluster of figures approaching the submerged back of the reptile.

"Somebody get an ax!" he shouted. He hurled the spear with all his strength down into the middle of the approaching enemy. The mass broke up. Before they could re-form and continue climbing, four armed sailors ran up. One carried a bow, one a trident; two carried cutlasses. But the man with the bow also had an ax slung at his belt.

Blade snatched the ax and swung it high overhead. An enemy bolt whizzed past him as the ax came down, biting deep into the scales and the flesh of the dead yulon's neck. The whole huge body shook with the force of the blow. Several climbing Fishmen lost balance and splashed into the water. The archer fired, and one of the others clutched at his shoulder and plunged into the water backward. Blade's ax came down again, biting through the massive white vertebrae as well as flesh and scales.

Then he stared down the creature's back at the last enemy still holding on. Beyond any doubt, it was the same woman he had seen off the reef on the coast of Nurn. The high-cheeked face, the wide golden eyes, the lithe but well-fleshed body were all unmistakable. She still wore only her bright red loinguard and fins, but carried a spear in one long-fingered hand and a short-sword in her belt.

It seemed that she also recognized Blade. Her eyes widened, and for a moment it looked as though she would raise the spear and hurl it at him. Then with a graceful twist and dive she leaped from the creature's back into the sea. A bolt plunged through the bubbles in her wake, and Blade stiffened, wondering if she had been hit. Then his ax came down again. With a crackling, slithering noise, the last scales holding the yulon's neck together parted and the severed neck slid over the side, following the body down. Only the head was left aboard Mistress.

The collapse of their strongest attack seemed to take the spirit out of the Fishmen. They drew back

almost out of archery range and swam aimlessly around Mistress, just below the surface. Only the woman remained close in, swimming slowly and gracefully, as if daring the sailors to hit her. Occasionally she would turn on her back and mockingly display her superb breasts. Blade hoped she would break off this dangerous game before one of his shipmates got lucky. He himself could no more have shot at her than he could have shot at Svera.

Eventually the woman got tired of her game. With another graceful flip she upended and went arrowing away into the depths. The other Fishmen followed her. There was a final flurry of water as the drivers of the yulon-drawn chariot put their team in motion. Then the seas spread calm and empty around Mistress. For the first time in hours, her crew could sit down in peace, breathe in comfort, and relax.

Blade was still too keyed up to sit down. The fight and the tantalizing glimpse of the woman had left him weary but still excited, frustrated, and curious. He strode up and down the main deck like a caged animal, swinging his eyes around the horizon.

Gainful had now burned almost to the water's edge. There was nothing left of her but a smoldering hulk heaving to the swell. As Blade watched, she dipped still lower. Then a hiss and a cloud of steam rolled across the water. By the time the steam had rolled away, there was no sign of Gainful except a patch of dirty water pocked with wreckage and bubbles.

Now a breeze sprang up. Mistress's sails began to swell out, and the water began to chuckle and gurgle at her bow as she gained way. Slowly her crew came back to life, as the breeze dried the sweat and blood on their skins. They began to move about, cleaning up their ship and counting the losses among their shipmates. Out of a crew of forty men, five were dead, three were dying, and eleven more or less wounded or battered. The only ones who seemed to have any strength left were Captain Foyn, the bosun, and Blade himself. But gradually these three were able to put some of their own energy into the crew.

Two hours after the last merman had vanished into the crystal seas, Blade and Foyn were standing on the forecandle again. Mistress was running before a freshening breeze, heading east for Cities, which now lay only some eighty miles beyond the horizon. But Foyn's face was grim. Grim, that is, for a sailor on his way home. Not grim for a captain who has just lost part of his crew and nearly lost his ship.

What made Foyn particularly grim was not the attack itself as much as the unexpected form of it.

"It's long been thought that the yulons were beyond taming. But the Fishmen seem to have managed it, and without our hearing a single word of it until now. They must have been saving up this surprise for a really big attack. They could have sent hundreds of those monsters and thousands of their warriors into the western seas." He hesitated, then swallowed. "Perhaps even against the Cities themselves, the Goddess defend us!" He licked weather-beaten lips, then turned to Blade.

"Don't mention any of this to Svera, will you? I don't think she'd pass it on to her friends. But it would frighten her, and I don't want her frightened."

Blade wished he could believe that. But it was obvious from his tone of voice that Captain Foyn did not entirely trust his daughter. Love her, no doubt, but trust her? It was equally obvious that the voyage to the Sea Cities of Talgar wasn't solving any of the mysteries of this dimension. In fact, it seemed to be adding to them very fast.

Before noon they came up with a convoy of two more merchant vessels and three fishing boats. One of the merchant vessels had also beaten off an attack by trained yulons of the Fishmen. All had seen the burning and sinking hulks of other ships and boats. It was obvious that Captain Foyn was right. An immense force of Fishmen was at large in the seas to the west of Talgar, taking a dreadful toll of the Cities' ships and sailors.

Mistress sailed on. Her crew went about their duties armed to the teeth. The lookouts were doubled, and extra weapons piled ready at hand. All six ships clapped on as much sail as they could carry in the freshening wind. The convoy rolled forward as the sea rose in whitecaps, sails taut and rigging thrumming in the wind.

Svera came up to Blade as he stood by the railing amidships and slid her arm through his. Her face was pale and her wide eyes were for once completely blank of expression. Blade could feel her trembling slightly. He pulled her gently against him and murmured in her ear, "Don't worry, Svera. We'll be in port by nightfall. I don't think the Fishmen will attack when we're moving this fast, anyway."

He felt her nod. Then she said in a small voice, "But what made them do this? What have we done to make them attack us like this? It must have been terrible."

Fortunately the wind whipped Svera's words away unheard by any of the sailors. Blade knew what they would have said to her for remarks like that, after losing so many shipmates to the Fishmen. Even he wasn't sure anymore whether war to the death wasn't the only choice the Sea Cities had. Certainly the Fishmen hadn't shown themselves very peace-minded.

Six ships driving eastward in convoy must indeed have been too formidable a target for the Fishmen. Certainly no one aboard the ships saw any signs of the Fishmen or their tame monsters that afternoon. The wind held steady. As the setting sun spread gold and orange across the sea to the west, the lookouts called down, "Cities, ho!" Aboard Mistress the cheers were deafening—but no louder than the cheers aboard the other five ships. Blade could hear those clearly over the sounds of the wind and the sea.

Three hours later, Mistress and her companions were dropping anchor in the lee of the Merchant's City. This time the sounds that rose from the ships' decks were sighs of relief.

Boats promptly swarmed out from the piers and docks of the City. Some of them carried armed and armored fighting men; others carried only the curious. From the questions and answers that flew back and forth, Blade began to realize the scale of the merpeople's attack on the Sea Cities.

There were six of the Cities, each nearly a mile on a side and all anchored in shallow water in the lee of the southern tip of the island of Talgar. All but a few of the quarter-million people lived aboard the Six Cities, for the Talgarans were ill at ease on land. Only enough free Talgarans to supervise the slave gangs in the forests and mines lived on the island itself.

Of the Six Cities, the Fishmen had attacked three. They had of course been beaten off before they had pushed more than a few hundred yards inland. But for that distance they had killed and burned and destroyed everything and everybody they could. Over a thousand people lay dead or dying in the Cities tonight, in return for barely two hundred of the enemy.

Equally surprising, if less destructive, was the attack on the island itself. The Fishmen had actually dared



to come out of the water and attack the camps, slaying the guards and releasing more than half the slaves. The mines and logging camps would be paralyzed until these slaves were recaptured or replaced. That would be a long grim task, but a necessary one. Without the food and timber from the Island, the Sea Cities could neither feed their people nor repair and replace their ships.

A good many ships would need repairs or replacing. No one had a very good idea of what had happened at sea. Everyone was certain that a good many ships and boats had vanished without a trace, overwhelmed in surprise attacks far from any living eyes. But at least a dozen large ships and forty or more smaller craft were certainly gone, with more than a thousand sailors and passengers.

Blade could tell that the people of Talgar were furiously angry at the Fishmen attack. But he could also be sure that they were badly frightened. There was a tight, barely controlled note of fear in their voices as they told of what they had seen and done. The eyes of the soldiers had a haunted look and were constantly shifting about—in search of what? The Fishmen? Or just some explanation for what had happened? Blade didn't like those eyes, those voices, or the reek of fear and suspicion in the air. He realized that he had landed squarely in the middle of a people reeling in defeat and on the edge of panic. Not that he blamed them. But he didn't like it. This was not a time when strangers were likely to be particularly welcome in the Sea Cities.

Captain Foyn said as much when he spoke to Blade, after Mistress had been hauled into her dock. The crew was already streaming ashore as fast as they could, sea bags over their shoulders. It was as if they could hardly wait to convince themselves that they were still alive, by swigging down beer and cordial and embracing the tavern wenches.

"The Silver Goddess only knows what more evil's going to come of all this," said Foyn with a sigh. "But people are apt to be looking over their shoulders, and if they see a stranger there—well, you see. I'll appoint you arms-master of Mistress, so you'll have some rank and place in the Cities. But that won't explain where you came from."

"You found me off the coast of Nurn, didn't you?"

"Yes, but that won't help. A man from Nurn's likely to find a damp welcome in Talgar now, even damper than usual. We respect none of Nurn but the Sisters of the Night; and—" He broke off. "Wait! What would you say to being an escaped slave? There are a good many captured warriors from the frontier lands among the slaves in Nurn, and some of them do escape to find homes in Talgar."

Blade nodded.

"Good. That will save us both trouble. And the Goddess knows we've got more than enough of that already."

On that note they shook hands, and Blade went ashore to see the Cities of Talgar for himself.

Captain Foyn let him take his sword and dagger and gave him a well-filled purse and directions to the Foyn house, which lay in the City of the Sailors. Blade wanted to quietly buy himself a little light on some of Talgar's problems. Not by anything as crude as bribery, of course. But if you buy a barful of nervous sailors and soldiers a round of drinks—well, when they start talking, they may forget you're a stranger.

Blade moved several streets away from the docks before he started hunting out taverns. He eventually found one that looked as if it catered to craftsmen and the petty officers off the merchant ships. It was less than half filled, and most of the men in it seemed interested simply in getting drunk as fast as possible.

Blade decided to help them. He ordered an entire jug of the seaweed cordial and sat down at a corner table to drink slowly and wait impatiently.

He did not have long to wait. As he refilled his empty cup, he became aware that someone was looming over his table. Then a slurred deep voice spoke.

"You goin' to drink that—all 'lone?"

Blade looked up. The man standing over him was not nine feet tall and eight feet wide. He just looked that way in the dim light of the tavern.

"No, of course not. Sit down, by all means."

"I—thanks. Got to—forget. Damned Fishmen. Sixteen o' my mates. Sixteen!" He looked about to cry. Blade nodded. "You too?"

"Yes. I'm the new armsmaster off Foyn's Green Mistress. We lost eight."

The huge sailor stared blearily at Blade. "I—uh, don't know you. Not—'board, last time I saw Mistressh."

"I said I was new. I'm an escaped slave from Nurn. I was a warrior among my own people, so I was able to help Foyn beat off the attack. In return he gave me a place aboard his ship."

"Good man, Foyn," said the sailor, with elaborate gravity. "Too—too damned bad 'bout that daughter of hish, tho'."

"What's wrong with her?" said Blade, suddenly alert. He decided not to say anything more until the sailor answered his question.

That decision produced a long silence. The sailor seemed to be having trouble making up his mind what to say and then getting up the nerve to say it. He eventually had to drain another cup of the cordial before he could speak, and when he did, it was in a guarded whisper.

"Don't say it 'loud—she's-she's a damned Con-Con—Conshilyator!" He said it as though he were saying Svera had some loathsome disease.

Blade managed to look authentically shocked. "By the Goddess, no!"

"Uh-unh," said the sailor, nodding ponderously. "Disgraysh to a fine family. Brother killed by the Fishmen; mother drowned at sea. Not a blot 'n the whole family, 'cept her, 'lil slut." Blade tensed internally.

But apparently the sailor hadn't meant anything in particular by calling Svera a slut. He filled his cup again and rambled on, until Blade began to find it hard to keep from falling asleep. Fatigue, alcohol, the stuffy and smokeladen tavern air, and boredom were all working on him. But the sailor's ramblings were about the Conciliators, Svera's group, and Blade badly wanted and needed to know more about them.

So he managed to stay awake until he suddenly heard something that snapped him to full alertness. "Conshilyators goin' to do somethin' about all thish, betcha. Goin' to say—make peace with the dirty Fishmen. Never!" The sailor's fist slammed down on the table so hard that Blade was afraid the tough

wood would split. "Never! Dead not even buried. Damned little fish, not out o' the egg yet even."

"I thought there were some captains with them," said Blade cautiously. He was also looking for the fastest way out of the tavern, just in case the sailor accidentally took offense and became violent. He could easily put the sailor down for the count if he wanted to, but it would be much better to avoid a fight entirely.

"Hunh!" the sailor snorted like a walrus. "Young 'uns, maybe. No sea sense, no guts." He looked at Blade with eyes suddenly grown hard. "Know any o' them—names, I mean?"

"No," said Blade shoving his chair back a few inches. He didn't like the sailor's belligerent new look or tone of voice. "It's just rumors I've heard. I only got in tonight, remember?"

The sailor seemed to remember that and was pacified. "Yunh. And you fought off the damned Fishmen for Lando Foyn, too. Good man. Not like the captains with the Conciliators." Somehow the word came out right, for once. "Well, they're not goin' to do anythin'. We's goin' to raid the Fishmen, kill 'em like they killed us. Conshilyators try—get in our way—smash 'em dead. Killall—" The sailor's head sagged down onto his hairy arms. A final twitch of one massive brown hand knocked over his cup. Green seaweed cordial dripped down onto the floor. A moment later his nostrils flared, and a great rolling, gasping snore floated out.

Blade shoved his chair back the rest of the way, picked up the half-empty bottle, and carefully slid out from behind the table. He left the bottle and an extra handful of coins on the bar, and went out.

It was blowing half a gale in the narrow streets of the City, but Blade welcomed the wind and the salty chill in the air. It helped clear the liquor and the stuffiness out of his head. When it had done that, he headed for the bridge that led to the City of Sailors and Captain Foyn's house.

He walked fast and had to force himself not to let his walk break into a run. He very badly wanted to get to Foyn's house and talk with Svera. He still didn't know much about the Conciliators. But he knew much more about what people thought of them, and didn't like any part of it. If Svera and her friends tried to do anything except lie quiet during the next few days, there would be bloody trouble.

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## Chapter SIX

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Svera wasn't home when Blade finished his wanderings through the Cities and reached Captain Foyn's little house. Neither was Captain Foyn himself.

"No doubt he still be at t' ship," said the elderly maidservant.

"No doubt," said Blade. He couldn't tell the maid why he needed to see Svera. He didn't know to whom she might pass on anything he said to her. He had nearly got himself killed once by trusting the wrong person, on a mission in Turkey. The lesson had stayed with him. But it was maddening to think that Svera was probably out there in the Cities with her Conciliator friends, busily planning their moves, like lambs marching on the slaughterhouse. One more frustration, on a mission that seemed to be producing more than its fair share of them.

However, there wasn't much he could do about this or any other frustration at the moment, except sleep

on it. Considering how long the day had been and how much he might need all his strength and wits tomorrow, that was also the best thing to do. He asked the maid to show him to the guest room Captain Foyn had promised. She did, and Blade was asleep almost before he could unfold the blankets and crawl under them onto the seaweed-stuffed mattress. He didn't even bother to close the curtains on the small window.

He was awakened by sunlight streaming through the window. He climbed out of bed and began rinsing out his mouth with water from the jug by the bed.

As the maid came in, there was a sudden uproar of shouting and running feet in the street outside. A good many men were pounding past at a dead run.

"What's going on?"

"Ah, sor—nathin' t' bother ye, not at all. Y'see, them Conciliators, Goddess curse them, w' our boys not yet restin' in the sea—are agoin' to do suthin' at Council House."

Blade took a deep breath. "What?"

"Dunno, sor," said the maid, shrugging. "But a good many o' the captains be leadin' their menservants and crews t' Council House. They be hopin' the Conciliators to come, and then they swear by the Holy Silver Goddess herself they'll have them all for good. And then we can go out and smash them Fishmen w'out any traitors in our midst."

Blade managed to make his voice sound almost completely calm. "Is Svera at home yet?"

The maid shook her head. "And a sad disgrace to a good house it be, w' her father doubtless needin' her. She's naught but —"

She might as well have been talking to a yulon. Blade was pulling on the rest of his clothes with one hand and snatching up his sword and dagger with the other. The door of the house slammed behind him as he tore out into the street.

A group of half a dozen sailors was jogging past as he came out. They shouted and waved greetings with heavy clubs. "Coming to join us, man?" one of them shouted.

Blade almost answered "No," then realized he had no idea where Council House was. He nodded without speaking and fell in step behind the sailors.

They did not head for the bridge to the City of the Merchants, but instead turned into a street that ran away from that bridge. As they tramped along that street, more and more men joined them, and some women. All seemed to be armed, if only with kitchen knives, frying pans, or lengths of wood. All seemed to be grimly determined to cover as much ground as possible as fast as possible. It was as though a moment's delay in reaching the Council House might sink the Cities to the bottom of the sea. There was an ugly feeling in the air that came to Blade as clearly as the smell of the sea. The people beside him might be good or at least sensible people most of the time. But now they were part of a mob, and what they might never think of doing by themselves they might easily do now. Blade would have broken into a run, except that he didn't dare stand out too much from the crowd.

At the end of the street, the swelling mob had to turn again. By this time there were so many people trotting along that they filled the street solidly from side to side. At the corner they jammed into a pushing,

shoving, cursing mass. Blade used knees and elbows and occasionally fists to keep from being flattened against a wall or accidentally jabbed by somebody's spear.

Then a voice that roared like surf on a rocky shore rose above the crowd noises. "All right, ye stupid bastards. Sort yerselves out, there! People in the lead, get movin'! The rest of you, stop the shovin'! Save it for the Conciliators!"

The voice sounded vaguely familiar. Blade peered over the heads of the crowd and saw the huge sailor he had drunk with the night before, standing in the street and bellowing. Gradually he got the crowd sorted out. As it broke up and began to move along its new path, Blade joined the sailor. The man's eyes widened, and his weatherbeaten face split in a gap-toothed grin.

"Well, by the Goddess, if it don't be Foyn's armsmaster. You be goin' to help us smash the Conciliators?"

"If they show up, yes," said Blade cautiously.

"Don't worry 'bout that. They've already got a good dozen or so outside the Council House. You'll be seein' plenty o' Conciliator heads broken today, that you can be sure. And it'll be Gershon Dund's son who'll be doin' the greater part o' the breakin'!"

"My name is Richard Blade."

Down the street they went, windows opening with bangs above them and shouted questions floating from doorways. Eventually they reached the end of the street and the bridge that led to the City of the Guilds and the Council House.

The thousand-foot pontoon bridge swayed and lurched ominously under Blade's feet as the mob poured out onto it. Slave porters carrying loads crowded back against the railings of the bridge as the thousands filled the bridge from side to side. Blade saw some of the porters driven back over the railings and into the sea. Some sank at once, dragged down by their loads. Others were lucky enough to be rescued by the boats that carried the heavier loads back and forth between the Cities and the island of Talgar.

Then they were off the bridge. Blade could see a cluster of six gilded spires around a green dome ahead. "The Council House," Gershon said. Blade nodded.

In front of the Council House was the largest open space Blade had seen in the Sea Cities. Everywhere else he had been, buildings jostled each other like rush-hour riders in a subway, to get as much living space as possible in the smallest area. But the Council House fronted on a square nearly two hundred feet on a side.

The square was already half-filled when Gershon and Blade led their crowd into it. Directly in front of the Council House was a small cluster of people all dressed in white and green. There were no more than thirty of them. They were carrying banners with green lettering on white cloth. As Blade got closer, he could make out the banners:

LET THERE BE PEACE  
A WARNING FROM THE GODDESS  
CONCILIATION NOT VENGEANCE

As he got still closer, he could make out Svera, holding one end of the LET THERE BE PEACE

banner. Blade grimaced. There was such a thing as being right at the wrong time.

As the rest of Gershon's mob poured into the square, the circle around the Conciliators tightened. There were now a good three thousand people facing the thirty-odd demonstrators, most of them armed. They weren't in quite such an explosively ugly mood as they had been, fortunately. The long run had taken the wind out of a good many of them. If the Conciliators would just have the sense to quietly fade away and not say anything, the whole affair might blow over.

Moments later Blade's hopes were smashed. Svera herself gave her pole to someone else, sprang lightly up on the railing of the front steps to the Council House, and waved her arms at the crowd. There was an angry growl, but it faded away quickly. Perhaps Svera's beauty and courage would give her a peaceful hearing? Blade hoped so, but realized he was grasping at straws. A step at a time, he inched his way forward, until he was in the front row of the mob, only a few feet from the demonstrators.

Svera raised her arms again and called out, "People of the Sea Cities! Listen to me! We have suffered greatly from the Fishmen's attack. This is true. I grieve with all those who have lost husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters! Only by the grace of the Goddess and a strong man's courage was my own father's ship not lost! Do not think my heart is hard."

"Maybe it isn't," bellowed Gershon. "But your head sure seems to be pretty damned soft. Soft as those pretty tits of yours!"

Blade could see Svera blush. But she didn't lose her nerve or stop. "My heart is not hard, I said. But I cannot see what we will get from vengeance, from hurling ourselves on the Fishmen's homes and works the way they have on ours!"

"Teach the damned slime-skins a lesson!" bellowed someone from behind Blade. He felt a shiver go through the crowd, and stiffened. His hand drifted down to the hilt of his sword.

"What lesson will it teach them, my friend?" replied Svera. "I think—we Conciliators think—it will only teach them that we are as bad as they are. It will teach them that we will never give them peace. It will—"

"It will teach them we won't let them kill our men and get away with it!" came a shrill scream from off to the right. A woman stepped forward from the crowd. She was poorly dressed, her dark hair hanging down in a ragged mess. On one arm she carried a baby, and with the other hand led a girl of about three. "Look at my children! Look at them! My man was a soldier who fought to defend the city. One of those filthy monsters bit his leg off, and he died when all the blood went out of him. There's nobody left to take care of me or my children. I want the Fishmen women to feel the same way! I don't want anybody in Talgar saying anything else. Smash the Conciliators, people, smash them the way you're going to smash the Fishmen!"

A quiver ran through the whole crowd as if the woman's words had been an electric shock—or an order to march. Blade had long since made up his mind what he would do if matters came to this point. Now he did it.

One arm snaked out and plucked Gershon's ax from the sailor's hand. Before the big man could even turn around, Blade burst through into the open space around the Conciliators, waving the ax.

"Run!" he shouted at them. "Into the Council House! I'll guard the door. Run, I tell you!" He pushed the nearest Conciliator hard enough to nearly send him flying up the steps like a soccer ball. The young man stared at Blade for a second, then bolted for the door. The rest of the Conciliators dropped their banners

and scrambled up the steps after the first one. Svera lingered a last second to stare wonderingly at Blade, then she too hiked up her skirts and ran.

The rearmost of the Conciliators was halfway up the stairs before anyone in the crowd recovered from his surprise enough to act. Then it was Gershon himself who sprang forward, drawing his dagger, eyes blazing into Blade's face.

"Why you rotten—" he growled. Apparently he couldn't think of anything bad enough to call Blade.

Blade waved the ax in Gershon's face, stopping his forward rush. Then he took two quick steps backward and sprang up on the railing of the stairs, where Svera had been.

"People of Talgar! There's been enough bloodshed in your Cities already. Don't add to—"

"By the Goddess, we'll add yours to it!" roared Gershon. He stormed forward. But his rush was as furious and as blind as that of a mad bull. Blade sprang lightly down from the railing, sidestepped Gershon's lunge with his dagger, then brought the flat of the ax head down across the sailor's knife hand. Gershon bellowed in pain and flexed numb fingers, reaching out with the other hand for Blade.

He almost got a hold. Blade felt the sailor's thick fingers close in his hair and start to pull. He pulled hard in the opposite direction. He winced as he felt a handful of his hair pull out by the roots. Then he was free, pivoting to drive one heel hard into Gershon's stomach. The huge sailor folded up with a whoof of escaping air and sat down on nothing. He rolled down the stairs, knocking half a dozen of his followers off their feet, to land with a dull thump in the square.

For a moment no one in the square moved or spoke. Blade sensed that his repelling Gershon's attack had frozen the rest of the mob. For a moment he had the normal advantage of one man over a mob. That one man can always take somebody with him, and nobody in a mob usually wants, to risk being that somebody.

He used that moment to take a quick look up the stairs behind him. The last of the Conciliators was just vanishing into the Council House. Angry voices from inside suggested someone there wasn't too happy about their sudden arrival. Without turning his back on the crowd, Blade slowly began backing up the stairs, one at a time. He held the long ax ready to use either as a club or as a short quarterstaff. He was an expert with the latter. He did not want to kill or even seriously injure anybody if possible. That would excite the mob to bloodthirsty fury and probably lead to civil war in Talgar, with him as the first victim.

He reached the top step and looked about him. He was a good twenty feet above the level of the square now. No one could come at him except up the stairs. But the stairs themselves were a good fifteen feet wide. That could let far too many people up at him together. If they tried a rush—

The crowd continued to stand in motionless silence. Blade began to be aware of the smells rising from them as they stood packed together under the swelling heat of the sun-fish, sweat, other less identifiable ones. He began to feel sweat dripping down his own forehead.

Another flurry of movement in the crowd. Six brawny young men pushed through the crowd, shouldering people aside like Home Dimension gang members. That was probably what they were here, too. Tough young men, or at least young men who thought they were tough. With six of them, teaching them otherwise was going to be a risky business.

They came up the stairs in a wide line, flourishing clubs and daggers. Their plan was obvious—hold

Blade in place on the front while a couple of them got around to his side. And they looked as if they would kill. So Blade launched his attack first.

He took four steps in a single bound, landing squarely in front of the two young toughs on the right. He swung the ax single-handed and flat headed into the first one's hip. That stopped him dead. Blade drove his left arm through the gap that had suddenly opened up and into the second man's jaw. Bone cracked and the man toppled backward. As he felt himself going over, he clutched at the third man. They both went down the stairs together, rolling over and over in a tangle of flying arms and legs. From the way they cursed each other when they hit bottom, Blade guessed they weren't seriously hurt.

There was a slight pause, which Blade used to tap the first man gently alongside the head with the ax handle. He reeled and clutched at the railing as though it were a beautiful woman. Then the remaining three young men got up their courage to rush Blade all together.

For a few seconds Blade faced a bad situation. One of the men was a knife fighter and a good one too. He came in low, knife reaching upward to tear into Blade's stomach. Blade had to give ground and kick the man hard in the knee, not worrying about how much damage he did. He must have done a good deal, because the knifeman dropped his weapon and dropped to the stairs. He moaned and clasped both hands around a smashed and blood-dripping kneecap.

Before his cries had died away, Blade was moving in on the other two. One raised a club to smash down on Blade's head. Blade ducked in under the club and drove the end of the ax handle hard up under the man's chin. His teeth slammed together with an explosive click and his eyes rolled up in his head. Before he could even start falling, Blade was turning to meet the last of the six.

He didn't quite turn fast enough. The last man's club slammed down on his left shoulder hard enough to break his left hand's grip on the ax. It swung down and twisted out of his arms, to clatter on the wooden stairs.

The man promptly made the mistake of thinking Blade had become easy meat. He swung the club in a spectacular but badly aimed blow that left him wide open. Blade's right fist drove into the man's stomach, then his left foot struck squarely in the groin. The man quivered all over like a bowl of jelly and dropped in his tracks, then rolled down the stairs to join his friends.

Blade reached over to prod his left shoulder and winced at the pain. He was going to be one-armed and one-handed for the rest of this fight. He hoped nobody would notice it.

Once more, it seemed that Blade's deadly fighting had stunned the mob. Watching six men going down this fast was something they had never seen before, or perhaps even imagined. Blade suspected that it would take a while before somebody screwed up the courage to risk being part of the next act.

But somebody would, that he was sure. And all it would need was one lucky blow. Then he would be down and the way opened into Council House.

He listened for sounds from inside the House. The angry voices had died away. Apparently whoever was inside had given up objecting to the Conciliators. But it was hard to imagine anybody in there who would be willing and able to protect the Conciliators from three thousand furious people. If those people got past him—

Then he heard the sound of the door behind him opening, with only the faintest whisper as it swung on well-oiled hinges. A ripple of surprised movement ran through the crowd, and Blade heard gasps of



surprise and amazement. He risked turning his head enough to look behind him.

A man as undersized as Gershon was oversized stood there. Only five feet tall at most, he still radiated an almost majestic dignity and authority. His childlike limbs were draped in shimmering green and gold, and on his large bald head he wore a broad-brimmed gold hat with a green band.

"This is an abomination," he said, in a severe voice that somehow carried over the entire crowd. Silence fell in the square. "I do not know what these people in the Council House have done. For now I do not care. If they have committed any crimes, they will be punished."

His voice rose. "But you will not attack the Council House itself and slay them in its chambers and halls as though they were Fishmen. You will not.

"But you would have, without this man." He pointed at Blade. "This man I am told is new in the Sea Cities of Talgar, an escaped slave from Nurn. But he is also a mighty warrior, trusted as such by one of our most honored Brothers, Captain Foyn. And he has proved his war skills and his trust again today. Though new in Talgar, he yet seems to understand what is fitting under its laws better than you, citizens of the Sea Cities.

"But for this Blade you would have violated the House of the Council of Autocrats. But for this Blade you would have slain men and women in its halls and drenched its floors with blood. You would have sown internal violence through the Sea Cities, at a moment when all our strength must be united to hurl against the Fishmen. You would have committed an abomination and been damned forever for it in the eyes of the Holy Silver Goddess, Mother-Patron of the Sea Cities of Talgar. On your knees, people of the Sea Cities! Do honor to the Council of Autocrats, and also do honor to this man Blade who has saved you from the price of your own anger and folly!"

There was a long, tense moment of silence. Blade was not sure if the Autocrat's words hadn't been too harsh, his manner too overbearing. He might have calmed the mob. Or he might have stung them into still greater fury. In that case, Blade knew that he and the Autocrat had very little time left, and the Conciliators inside the Council House not much more.

Then the mob's mood changed, as suddenly as an earthquake. Some sailors down in front began shouting, "Long Live the Council! Long live Krodrus!" The little Autocrat smiled and bowed as he heard those cheers. His smile widened further as he heard other people begin to shout, "Long live Blade! Long live a hero of Talgar! He saved our honor! He saved our peace! Long live Blade!"

Blade looked down the stairs and saw that one of the loudest shouters of "Long live Blade!" was Gershon, now back on his feet. Blade laughed, releasing some of his own tension. Gershon was one of those powerful men who needs a still more powerful master. He will follow no man weaker than himself. But if he finds one stronger, then he will follow that man to the death.

Now the mob was beginning to break up. The people at the rear were drifting away into the streets around the square. But others were flowing up the stairs, waving and shouting. Blade saw the faces of some of the Conciliators peering nervously out of the Council House windows—

Then the crowd was at the top of the stairs. They lifted Blade off his feet and set him down on Gershon's shoulders. Balanced precariously on the huge sailor, Blade was carried around the square amid continuous deafening cheering from people who had only minutes before wanted his blood.

He felt relieved as he rode. But he couldn't help wondering whether being a hero of Talgar was really

such a good thing to be.

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## Chapter SEVEN

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Blade shortly found out that it wasn't.

Being a hero meant a number of things. It meant that he was promptly relieved of his post as armsmaster to Captain Foyn. He was given the best and most intensive training in Talgaran fighting methods, especially of underwater fighting.

It meant that he was assigned to the Conciliar Guard, the force of picked and trusted soldiers who guarded the Council of Autocrats at home and represented it in war. Its nominal chief was the Autocrat for War, a sour-faced man named Stipors, who was a fanatical advocate of war to the death against the Fishmen. Blade didn't much care for being under the eyes of such a man.

Meanwhile, plans for the great attack were going forward at full speed. Talgar was going to hurl against the Fishmen a good ten thousand men, half of them equipped with breathing gear, riding in nearly two hundred ships and boats. They would in fact be hurling against the Fishmen nearly every ship and man not needed for the defense of Talgar. If the whole force was lost—

But no one considered that possibility, at least no one who dared to open his mouth on the subject. The ships were re-rigged and repainted and stocked with arms and weapons. The crews and the raiding parties were picked, then drilled and trained within an inch of their lives. Weapons were piled up in the arsenals—tridents, bows, spears, swords, incendiary bombs, waterborne poisons, water-ignited chemicals. And chest after chest of breathing gear.

The breathing gear fascinated Blade more than anything else. It was not the comparatively clumsy gear of Home Dimension. Rather, it was a simple mask, with a pad impregnated with some chemical, that fitted over a wearer's mouth and nose. Breathing through that pad, a man could breathe in "the Life Principle" (oxygen, no doubt) from the water as easily as he could breathe it in from the air.

Even to the tough-minded Talgarans, this seemed almost like magic. Blade constantly heard whispers that the learned men of the Empire of Nurn had access to black and otherwise-forgotten arts that no honest man would use.

Blade didn't doubt that. It sounded as though the Empire had kept some remnants of the superior science of a vanished civilization in this dimension. Part of that science was obviously the secret of easily extracting oxygen from seawater. Home Dimension scientists knew this was theoretically possible, but Blade had heard of nothing practical done along those lines. Certainly nothing as breathtakingly efficient as the breathing masks from Nurn. One pad would keep a man deep in the sea breathing easily for as much as twelve hours. When the first pad ran out, one simply surfaced or found an anchored bubble and changed pads. The pads were expensive, but the attacking force would have at least fifty of them stocked for each of its five thousand underwater fighting men.

By temperament, Blade was a fighting man, a man of action. So he rapidly learned the underwater fighting techniques and the use of the breathing masks. Within two weeks his instructors were saying that he was handling his weapons and gear like a born Talgaran.

Unfortunately the delight in learning a new fighting skill didn't keep Blade completely occupied. He was painfully aware of the limits on what he could do.

For one thing, he couldn't lift a finger to get the Conciliators out of trouble. And they were still in trouble. Autocrat Krodrus himself made that perfectly clear in a brief talk with Blade.

"Passions run high in a city at war," said the little man. "Even if the Conciliators had done nothing whatever and this was known to all, it would still be wise to keep them confined for a time. That way they will be safe until the attack is launched and people have other things to occupy their minds. And it will look as though they have been punished."

"But they don't deserve any punishment, do they?"

The Autocrat shrugged. "It is not known. What is known is that some of our patrols were not where they should have been when the Fishmen launched their great attack. Stipors is certain that the Conciliators had something to do with this."

"That's outrageous."

"How can you be sure, Blade? Do you really know any of the Conciliators except Svera? She would not do such a thing, I admit. But I wish I could be sure about the others. And Stipors has much influence on the Council of Autocrats. Whatever I thought would make little difference. The Conciliators will be held and they will be questioned."

"Torture?" Blade's mouth was dry.

Krodrus shrugged. "It is permitted by Laws of the Sea Cities laid down long before you or I were born, Blade. Do not spend useless effort trying to fight what cannot be fought. You will do more for yourself and for the Sea Cities by using all your skill and strength against the Fishmen."

That was the other problem Blade faced. Everybody in Talgar seemed completely certain that the great attack was the best possible response to the Fishmen. Even such comparatively intelligent men as Krodrus seemed to take it for granted.

Blade's experience of war led him to doubt very much that the great attack would do much. Like the Spanish Armada, the fleet was too big, too clumsy, too slow, too large a target. It might very well meet the same fate as the Armada, leaving the Sea Cities defenseless.

But protesting would be useless. Worse, it might land him in fatal difficulties. He would do no good being thrown off the Conciliar Guard, still less good getting thrown in prison with the Conciliators. Perhaps he could find some other way of bringing these people to their senses.

But he still hadn't found one a month later, when the great fleet sailed to the attack.

Two hundred ships underway at once crammed the channel south of Talgar Island almost solid. A man could almost walk from the beach on the Island to the nearest reef on the other side of the channel across the decks of ships and boats.

This led to accidents. One large ship ran in too close to the reef and ripped out her bottom on the coral heads. But in the mild weather there was plenty of time to take off her crew and cargo. This accident bothered a few men, but most called it bad seamanship and some called it a luck sacrifice to the Silver

Goddess.

Farther down the channel a fishing boat ran across the bows of the transport and was rammed and sunk. Again her crew managed to escape, but this time not all of them were picked up. Four men were missing, and none of the bodies was found. That made for some discontented muttering. Some men said that the Silver Goddess was getting greedy. A few openly called the second accident a bad omen. These men were flogged for spreading alarm, at Stipors' orders.

The whole fleet got clear of the channel without any further accidents and clapped on sail for the voyage to Fishman waters. These lay on the other side of four hundred miles of shallow seas. Although there were only a few well-charted patches of reefs in those four hundred miles, the water was nowhere more than five hundred feet deep. In fact, it was sometimes shallow enough that Blade could see the sand and coral on the bottom more than three hundred feet below. At those times it seemed that the whole enormous fleet was just a fleet of toy ships, pushed by a child across a glass tabletop.

Once in open water, the fleet moved into its cruising formation. The larger ships were massed in the center, with faster, lighter craft thrown out on either side and in a scouting line ten miles ahead. The scout ships each carried a contingent of the best divers of Talgar, ready to strike at any attractive Fishman targets they found. Nobody seemed concerned that the fleet itself made an incredibly juicy target for the Fishmen.

The first day and the first night passed without incident. The seas rolled blue-green under the fleet, giving no signs that any race such as the Fishmen even existed. Blade began to wonder if the optimists might not be right in saying that the fleet would strike the Fishmen with terror. The optimists themselves were loudly sure of it. The fleet sailed on, and the second night fell with tropical swiftness over the sea. From the deck of the Council flagship, nothing could be seen except hundreds of gently moving lights—green, red, gold, and blue—as the sailors lit the night lanterns aboard the other ships.

Suddenly a terrifying orange glare lit up the sea far out on the port wing of the fleet. It swelled, silhouetting a dozen other ships, showing the victim already gushing flame from bow to stern. Then an explosion rumbled across the waves. The ship's masts and deck planking shot rocketlike into the sky and came down in trails of fire. The ship's hull fell apart, and she vanished with a terrible hiss and a cloud of steam.

Once again the sailors of Talgar showed their discipline. The ships nearest the place where the victim had gone down started edging in toward the main body of the fleet.

Stern lamp signals from the flagship sent them hastily back into position. A dozen small boats dropped back to comb the area of the sinking. Blade saw one of them pass, her sweeps pounding out a fierce rhythm, her decks blazing with lanterns. Their light gleamed on the weapons of the soldiers lining her decks and the divers perched on her stern, ready to go over the side. Then she was out of sight astern.

The boats found nothing except floating charred timbers. The sunken ship—the Golden Worm—had gone down like a stone. So had the 120 men aboard her.

When word of that got around the fleet, there was open fear and doubt even on the faces of some of the optimists. For three hundred years the Fishmen and Talgarans had let each other alone at night. There were too many risks in fighting under the midnight sea. Now the Fishmen seemed willing and able to run those risks. And they had a weapon that could consume a large ship in minutes and send her down to the bottom before anyone aboard could escape. That also was new and frightening.

A Guard officer named Nezdorn frankly admitted to Blade that he was frightened. "I don't know how the Fishmen did this. I've seen our own firepots go off aboard a ship, by accident. If the Fishmen have something like that and can hit our ships with them—well, that might explain it."

Blade nodded. "The firepots are made in Nurn, aren't they?"

"Yes. They're another of the things the wizards of Nurn can do and we can't. Why?"

"Just curious. The Fishmen might have—" Blade broke off with a good imitation of a coughing spell. It occurred to him that he had been close to expressing a particularly odd heresy. Fortunately Nezdorn didn't ask him to finish his sentence. But Blade couldn't get the thought out of his mind, even if he could keep it out of his mouth. Could the Empire of Nurn be playing a double game? It was a fascinating and horrible thought. Blade was also certain it would not be a very popular one, either among the Talgarans or among the Fishmen.

The fleet sailed on through the darkness. Just before dawn the orange flames gushed up again, this time on the starboard wing. Another ship gone in minutes, another hundred men swallowed up by the crystal seas. This time it took more than signaling to get the fleet back in order. At least two ships had to be boarded and their captains arrested.

The two disobedient captains were hanged from the yardarms of their own ships later that day, while the fleet drifted, watching the spectacle. Stipors was obviously determined to have discipline and order in the fleet, whatever the cost. It was hard to tell whether his gruesome demonstration succeeded or not. Certainly the fleet kept good order all that day and during the following night. But the Fishmen didn't launch any more attacks, either. One scout boat far out on the starboard end of the scouting line reported seeing one of the yulon-drawn chariots and driving it off with stones from a catapult. But that was all.

If the absence of the enemy helped keep the fleet in order, it didn't help the mood of the sailors and soldiers aboard. Even the wildest optimists couldn't help wondering if the Fishmen had really abandoned the struggle, or were just lying in wait. After all, it made good sense for them to let the fleet sail as far from its home waters as possible. Then they could more easily strike with their full strength—and destroy the fleet more easily. Mentioning this idea out loud in so many words was of course discouraged. But that didn't keep it from being the major topic of conversation whenever a few men got together in private.

"They're out there somewhere," said Nezdorn. He waved one large hand toward the dark sea as they both stood the midwatch aboard the flagship. "They've got their eyes on us every minute. We're not going to get much farther without a battle."

But incredibly, the fleet did. The sun rose over a calm, empty sea. Not a breath of wind was stirring. Every ship in the fleet sat in the water as though she had been glued in place. Occasionally there would be a shout as a school of fish or one of the great shark-like trinzan fishes broke the surface. But no sign of the Fishmen.

Stipors hoisted the signal for a council of war aboard the flagship. The flags dropped limply from the signal halyards as scurrying small boats brought over admirals and generals from the various lesser flagships. Stipors and his subordinates vanished behind the great bronze-hinged doors of the flagship's aft cabin. The fleet drifted aimlessly, the lookouts scanning the water for any signs of the enemy.

Half the men on board each ship were on deck by order, and most of the rest stayed on deck by choice. It was stiflingly hot below decks, and everyone felt (although no one admitted) the fear of being trapped below decks.

Blade lifted his helmet and used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat collecting on his forehead. If the fleet stayed here much longer, the heat and the fear were going to snap the men's nerves.

He looked over the side, deep down into the crystal water. Here it was even clearer than usual. The bottom was clearly visible, even the ripples passing through the purple and red masses of weeds that blotched the white or silvery sand. At least if the Fishmen attacked, they would find it hard to attack by surprise.

More weary hours passed. Blade began to wonder if the council of war and the fleet would both sit until every man aboard sweated away or died of strain and boredom.

Eventually the Guard commander came aft and called the men around him.

"Brothers," he said. "The council of war has chosen to strike. A thousand picked underwater fighters will be loaded aboard the light vessels. These will proceed with their sweeps to the nearest area of Fishman settlements. They will destroy those settlements, utterly and without mercy, avenging our dead, asserting the supremacy and honor of the Sea Cities of Talgar."

Blade suspected that the cheers which followed were more from relief than from any positive enthusiasm for the idea.

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## Chapter EIGHT

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Blade let go of the ladder and dropped backward, down into the crystal seas. The water closed over him almost without a splash. He straightened out, shoved himself away from the ship's bottom with its faint mustache of weed, and swam down.

He had been under the crystal seas many times now and often with full war gear. This was the first time he had plunged down into the blue-greenness knowing that somewhere not too far away might lurk enemies. For a moment he stopped and drifted downward, head first, searching the bottom as far as he could see it. The weeds rippled gently, but nothing else moved. Blade raised himself back to the vertical again with gentle movements of his fins.

One by one the rest of the ship's raiding company dropped into the water and drifted down to float around Blade. Finally came Nezdorn, commanding the company. With quick hand signals he formed the forty men into three lines, one above the other. Then he pointed his short-sword away to the east, and the company moved out.

On land Blade held the leadership of a sesg (like a platoon) and the rank of armsmaster to Nezdorn's company. But under the crystal seas he was only an ordinary fighter of the Guards. He was willing to leave things that way for a time, until he learned all the complicated tactics and the even more complex code of signals the Talgarans had devised for fighting under the sea.

Blade was in the second, or middle, line. Like the other men armed with short-swords and spears, he was close to the center of the line. There he could swim rapidly to either flank to reinforce the archers. And from where he was, he could defend the spare weapons and masks and the men who towed the floater nets containing the firepots that would be dropped into Fishmen dwellings.

They swam on through the crystal seas. Far out to the left, Blade could see the dimly moving shapes of another company of raiders from another ship. The bottom was beginning to rise toward them, showing purple-blue masses of coral and patches of sand with a golden tint. Nezdorn dove down to sample the sand. He came back up quickly, making the hand signals that meant, "Approaching reefs." He had no need to make the signal "Stay alert!"

A school of slate-gray trinzans glided past between the company and the surface. They had the sleek outlines of Home Dimension sharks, and from what Blade had heard, the same nasty dispositions. But they seldom attacked large groups of men, unless they had been driven to a frenzy by blood in the water. That, however, could easily happen before the end of this day. Blade reached down to make sure that both his swords were still held in their scabbards by their quick-release clips.

The trinzans were barely out of sight when Nezdorn suddenly tipped headfirst and stared toward the bottom. The eyes of his men followed him. On the bottom sixty feet below was a conical pile of coral blocks with a hole in the top. Sitting around the hole were four bluish-white human shapes. They wore no airmasks.

The Fishmen must have been watching the trinzans also. They saw Nezdorn's approaching raiders at the same moment Nezdorn saw them, but they reacted faster. One of the Fishmen plunged down through the hole in the top of the cone. The other three sprang upward, finned feet churning the water. They arrowed toward the east, legs moving so fast that they seemed mere flickering ghosts.

Nezdorn spun completely around in the water. One hand shot down toward the Fishmen sentry house, and four raiders from the left flank shot down, carrying a firepot. He spun farther, and his other hand shot out toward the sentries who were fleeing to give the alarm. Blade and five others from the right went arrowing away after them.

The Fishmen had a head start and the desperate need to give the alarm to their comrades. But Blade and his companions had an equally desperate need to keep that alarm from being given. Both parties plunged through the water faster than Blade had ever believed anything human could swim. But then the Fishmen lived in the sea, and the diving warriors of Talgar were much at home in it.

Soon Blade and his comrades were overtaking the Fishmen. One of the enemy had a bow, but they were still outside underwater bowshot, barely fifty feet. Not for long, however. Suddenly the Fishmen made a dive for the bottom, heading for a rearing mass of pasty-white coral that loomed on the sea bottom like a crumbling mansion out of a ghost story. Blade could see holes in the mass easily large enough to admit a man. If the three Fishmen got in there, finding them in time would be impossible.

So Blade poured out his strength, plunging furiously after the three fugitives. He remembered not to draw his swords until the last moment, so that he could use both hands for swimming. He remembered to keep head-on to the enemy, presenting the smallest target to their archer. He passed into bowshot, saw the archer raise his spring-loaded crossbow and saw something flash out from it. A rippling in the water, and the bolt was sailing away into the sea. A moment later Blade was up with the three Fishmen.

Suddenly he was unable to remember that he had no real quarrel with the Fishmen. As always, he accepted the laws of a battle—kill or be killed. And Blade was always firmly determined to be as hard to kill as possible.

So his short-swords leaped from their scabbards and darted out toward the Fishmen. Underwater fighting was almost all thrusting, with weapons that presented the smallest resistance to the water moving

along the straightest and shortest line to their target. A man trying to wave a long sword around underwater would be skewered six times over by one armed with a short-sword.

The first Fishman jerked his leg out of the path of Blade's first thrust and replied with a thrust of his own at Blade's left arm. Blade had to twist and spin in turn to get the arm clear. But that left him in a better position to make a quick high thrust for the second Fishman's chest. The sword went in deep, almost jamming between the ribs. Blade barely had time to pull it free and plunge downward. A thrust from the first Fishman drove through the water where his back had been.

Blade did a complete somersault in the water and came up facing his opponents, his back to the nearest hole in the white coral. The dying merman was drifting, trailing smoky blood from his wide-gaping mouth and punctured chest. The second came at Blade. The third broke away and headed for open water. Blade could only hope that the other raiders would catch that one. Then he had to turn his full attention to his present opponent.

This one was good. He must know that he had only a few minutes of life remaining, but he fought as though he would be carrying Blade's head home in triumph at the end of the battle. He matched Blade thrust for thrust and parry for parry. Blade's strongest strokes clanged into the circular guards of swords that seemed to be everywhere at once.

But Blade was half a head taller than the Fishman and must have outweighed him by a good forty pounds. He rammed one sword directly into the guard of one of his opponent's weapons, hooking and immobilizing it. Slowly he forced the other's arm back, until it was hopelessly out of position. The Fishman kicked at Blade, but only succeeded in twisting himself further out of position. Slowly the two cartwheeled in the water, as Blade forced the Fishmen's guard wider and wider open. He was waiting for a moment when the Fishman was not thrusting with his free sword.

That moment came. Blade's own sword slashed down, a blow that traveled barely six inches, offering little chance for the water to grip and slow it. With all the strength of Blade's right arm and shoulder behind it, the sword bit into the Fishman's left wrist. His left hand opened and the sword spun out of it. Before the Fishman could draw back an inch, Blade drove home a conventional thrust. The Fishman stared at Blade for a moment, his mouth seeming to open in a smile as though he were acknowledging his defeat. Then the eyes glazed over, and the mouth twisted out of shape and began gushing blood. The dying Fishman twisted himself off Blade's sword and went on twisting slowly down to the bottom. Thirty feet below, he caught on an outcropping of coral and came to rest there, draped over it like a length of seaweed.

Blade did not wait around after that. He sprang up to rejoin the other five raiders, who gathered around him and clapped him on the back and shoulders. He managed to smile, then made the signal inquiring, "Did you get the third?"

There were bleak looks and headshakes from all five. Blade shrugged and joined them as they swam up to join the company. He suspected there would be an even bleaker look from Nezdorn when he heard the news.

There was. But like Blade, the captain recognized there was nothing to be done now. Nothing except to move forward as fast as possible in the greatest strength possible, to do as much damage with the least danger in whatever time remained before the Fishmen brought up superior strength. He signaled the company to re-form. The usual underwater ballet swirled and twisted and the men darted into position.

As the three lines started off again, there was the unmistakable thump and ear-squeezing pressure wave



of an underwater explosion behind them. Blade looked inquiringly at Nezdorn. The captain ginned, and signaled that a firepot had just gone off in the Fishmen sentrypost.

("Get any?")

("Three more.")

So the first clash had cost the Fishmen five warriors and a sentry post, without so much as one man among the raiders scratched. There could be worse beginnings to a battle—Blade had to admit that. And it was obvious that the company thought so too. They looked proud and confident of beating anything they met, as they swam on through the crystal seas, deeper into the territory of the Fishmen.

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## Chapter NINE

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The messenger swam in through the hole in the ceiling. The Lady Alanyra rose from her chair and looked at him.

"Well?"

"The Air-Gulpers still continue to advance. They destroy or kill all in their path."

"That is their way. We cannot hope to change it in this one battle."

The messenger looked bewildered. "Noble Lady?"

Alanyra shrugged. "Never mind. Have their raiding parties showed any signs of uniting yet?"

"No."

"Then we will not move out yet. The whole force of our Clan is not to be wasted on one or two parties of the Air-Gulpers. We will wait until we can net five hundred or more at a time, like a great school of the lyknon. And the Stranger will be among them. Yes, the Stranger will be among them." There was a note of passionate belief in her voice as she said that. The messenger looked at her, still bewildered. She noticed his expression and her mouth curved in a smile. "Go to the steward and ask him to give you food and drink before you return to the battle. You look weary."

"Noble Lady." The messenger bent his body double, then straightened and darted out through the hole.

Alanyra stretched her superb body, testing each muscle. Good. She would be as strong and fast in the battle that was coming as she had ever been. Not only her Clan but she herself would emerge with honor from this battle.

She looked at the great wall map of woven byssus fiber that rippled gently on the wall and noticed that the Clan's Orderer of Battles was also looking at the map. She turned to the grizzled old warrior and smiled again.

"You think I am putting too much hope in the Stranger, Oknyr?"

No expression showed in Oknyr's scarred face or his one pale golden eye as he replied. But his voice had the precision and coolness Alanyra knew concealed doubt or disapproval.

"I must wonder, considering that you have seen him only twice. And what have you seen in him? A mighty warrior, to be sure. His fight against the yulon was like something from the Epic of Chyr. But is it certain that he is anything unusual? Is it even possible that there can be such as the Stranger you dream of?"

She sighed. "I admit I wish I could be more certain. But I cannot live without the hope that a Stranger will come to our people, to help us bring peace to the crystal seas."

"That is the attitude of a child, Alanyra," said Oknyr. But his smile took the sting out of those words.

"I know," said Alanyra. "But in some ways I am still the child you taught to use weapons and swim with the warstrokes. I think you see that and know it, and that is why you continue to serve me. And because you serve me, I today rule the Clan Gnyr in succession to my brother, the only woman among all the Sea Masters to rule a High Clan."

"That is so," said Oknyr. "But—"

He was interrupted as another messenger darted in through the hole and doubled up. "Noble Lady, Honored Warrior—the enemy's raiders are beginning to assemble."

Nezdorn's party of raiders was no longer almost alone in the crystal seas. To their right and left moved other companies. Above, the surface was broken by the keel and churning oars of a boat. Blade knew the boat would be loaded with firepots and heavy bows for the battle that must be coming soon. The Talgaran raiders were drawing together into a force that could sweep aside any sentry posts or casual patrols. They could drive deeply into the reefs and undersea valleys where the Fishmen had their homes and workshops. Sooner or later the Fishmen would have to come out in force—and fight.

A dull thud reached Blade's ears through the water. Another firepot going off—in what? Sentry post, home, fish pen? Blade didn't know. He only knew that those explosions had been thudding through the water for the past hour as the raiders swam on, deeper into enemy waters. The Talgarans were leaving an undersea trail of destruction as they moved on.

If the Fishmen were choosing not to fight for the moment, there were still plenty of them about. Almost any time he looked up, Blade had seen faint pale shapes darting along in the distance. The scouts stayed out of range and almost out of sight. They could neither be attacked nor driven away. They were always there, silent, swift-moving, ghostlike in the distance. Gradually their never-ending watch over the advance of the Talgarans began to have its effect. The arrogant confidence that had filled Nezdorn's company after the brush with the sentries began to evaporate. Dour and grim looks began to appear again.

No one said it out loud, but the captain said it quietly to Blade as they swam for a moment close together. "I don't like this watch they're keeping on us. It could be that's all they can do, and they're simply trying to warn their own people to get out. But I doubt it."

Blade didn't need convincing. His suspicions that the Fishmen were laying an elaborate trap were fast deepening. More and more, Stipors' passion for an all-out attack on the Fishmen began to seem like suicidal folly.

"They are still coming on," said Oknyr. He was looking at the map again. It showed a line of red-headed pins stretching almost from one corner to the other. Two of Oknyr's apprentices were busily moving the pins about. In the center of the red line a single gold-headed pin shone out. Alanyra's golden eyes were fixed on it as though it were drawing her gaze by some irresistible force.

"And the Stranger comes with them," she said quietly. "I knew he would. Such a warrior would come."

"If he is what you hope he will be," said the Orderer soberly. "Is there any reason except your own desires why he should be that?"

"Yes," said Alanyra. "There is the need of both the Sea Masters and the Sea Cities for peace, a need that few on either side recognize. If this man is indeed from some unknown land, he may see with clearer eyes than most of us. He may see as I do, and aid me."

"He may also be a brainless, heavy-handed killer, like so many of Stipors' men," said Oknyr wearily. "He travels with the Conciliar Guard, and it has long been Stipors' policy to have such about him."

Alanyra shrugged. Her full breasts swayed under the light robe she wore in her chambers. The Apprentices found it hard to keep their eyes on the map. "If he is such, the Truth-Finder drug will reveal him, as it revealed the others I thought were Strangers. But the prophecy remains—that the Goddess in the Foam would one day recognize our need and send us this Stranger. You cannot deny this, Oknyr?"

"No, I cannot and will not," said Oknyr, wearily. "But if he does not come soon, none of the Goddess's people will be left to be aided."

"Indeed," said Alanyra. "But I think it is time our Clan's warriors were moving out. Go give the orders. I shall retire to my chambers, to meditate and garb myself for war."

"It shall be done, Lady."

"And be sure that all understand it clearly. The fair-skinned man among the Conciliar Guards is to be taken alive, at all costs."

"I will do my best."

Alanyra rested a long-fingered hand on the Orderer's shoulder. "You always do, Oknyr. May the Goddess be with you today, as she has been in the past."

The crystal seas ahead now showed more than the darting figures of the Fishman scouts. More solid clusters of the enemy were approaching. They still stayed well out of range of the Talgaran archers, but they did stay in sight, gliding along ahead of the raiders.

Occasionally the scout boat above would get a clear shot. Arrows from the huge bows mounted in its bow would flash down in silver flurries of bubbles. But they seldom hit anything. The Fishmen would scatter for a moment, then reform. And each time they re-formed, it seemed that there were more of them. Before half an hour had gone by, Blade could see more than a hundred of the enemy continuously

in sight.

The feeling that the Fishmen were playing with the raiders grew stronger in Blade. It was a cat-and-mouse game with a vengeance. And it was not improved for Blade by the knowledge that he was among the mice.

Nezdorn's hands went into action. Then his fins moved faster, and he swam out in front of the company. From right and left the archers glided in to join him. More hand signals, and a dozen warriors from the center of the line also swam out to join the captain.

Blade was among those dozen. To his right and left he could see each company in the Talgaran line doing the same as his. These little vanguards would serve to prevent the Fishmen from breaking the main line with a sudden attack. Perhaps they might also pick off an odd enemy or two who wandered within bowshot.

It was becoming a nightmare, in any case—the endless slow swim through the crystal seas in pursuit of an endlessly retreating enemy. Blade saw growing strain and tension in the face of every man in the vanguard around him, from the captain on down. In his mind, conviction was growing, the enemy's trap would be sprung soon. The raiders were getting too far into the home territory of the Fishmen. If they were not stopped soon, they would do more damage than the Fishmen could possibly afford. It would be soon.

A bright flash cut through the blue-greenness off to the right rear. Blade began counting. A heavy pressure squeezed at his eardrums for a moment. That must have been a bigger firepot than usual, going off a good mile away. Blade found that his neck muscles were getting cramped. He wiggled his head from side to side, then looked down.

Looking down at that moment saved his life. He caught the flash of metal from the bottom fifty feet below, then twisted around in the water to offer the smallest target he could. As he did, a volley of arrows soared up through the water into the vanguard of Nezdorn's company. One took Nezdorn himself in the stomach. It tore through him and came out through his back, the soft metal head mushrooming as it did so, gouging out a mass of flesh and bone.

The captain screamed without shame or restraint, letting out all his agony along with all his breath, in a long raw gushing of bubbles and sound. He writhed wildly in the water, trying to clasp his hands over his blood-gushing stomach. His body arched into a bow, and his set mouth and clenched teeth forced out words that Blade could just barely catch.

"Ambush—Stipors's a fool. Wanted us—do—somethinnnnng!" The last word was half screamed out, then Nezdorn's body arched still further. Blade heard the unmistakable crrrrack of the spine snapping, then the captain's body was drifting down aimlessly toward the bottom.

So was a good half of the vanguard, most dead but some only dying. Blade realized from their contorted faces that the Fishmen arrows must be poisonous as well, to kill so fast. He also realized that the only hope was to dive down and attack the concealed Fishmen archers in their own holes. To stay up here was to become a target.

Waving his arms in the "Follow me" signal, Blade dove toward the bottom, drawing one sword as he did so. Looking behind him, he saw the rest of the vanguard hesitate for a moment, then follow him down. Beyond them, he could see the Fishmen clustering in front of the raiders. Now they were beginning to move in, streaking through the water to the attack.

The battle was joined.

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## Chapter TEN

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Alanyra swam up the tunnel from her chamber deep in the Reef of Clan Gnyr and emerged on the open bottom, in the shelter of a great cluster of dark-blue branching corals. Oknyr swam over to meet her. For all his age and his long and disciplined service to the Clan, he could not keep admiration for the Lady's beauty out of his one eye as he looked at her. She wore her usual fighting outfit of a red loinguard and belt with two swords, and nothing else except the black fins on her slender feet. No, that wasn't quite true. Her dark green hair was gathered up under a silver tiara set with rubies.

Oknyr frowned. "You wear that into battle?"

"Why not? It is of our Clan."

"But you should not—"

"Should not risk it in battle, Oknyr? Not even when I lead my Clan in battle?" The Orderer shrugged and turned away. Alanyra swam after him, to join the fighters of her Clan on the open sand on the other side of the coral.

There were more than three hundred of them there, picked men and women, plus a dozen of the trained yulons. Those great monsters were well off to one side, with their trainers and riders holding their reins tightly.

Alanyra saw some of her followers throwing nervous glances at the reptiles and fingering their bows. Indeed the yulons were not the easiest comrades to have in a battle. But it had been demonstrated in the great attack on Talgar that they were deadly and utterly terrifying to the enemy. They would not terrify the Stranger, but then Alanyra doubted if anything could terrify a man who had fought and slain a yulon with only thrown stones. The average raider from Talgar would not be so courageous.

Some of the Fishmen archers had died, thrust through with swords or spears or knives. Others fled or at least tried to flee. Those who tried to make a break for open water usually died, for the Talgarans were crowding forward. The wise Fishmen plunged down into the darkness of the tunnels that honeycombed the coral bottom. Few of the raiders had the nerve to follow them, and those who did were called back by their officers.

For the moment, Blade was one of those officers. In the moment of panic after the first volley of bolts, he had been the first to act and the first to be followed. His plunge down among them had surprised a dozen Fishmen archers before they could fire a second time. They had not recovered from that surprise before the remainder of the vanguard was diving down on them also, swords out and spears thrusting furiously. It had been a desperate few minutes of swirling bloody struggle, down there among the sharp-branched corals and weedy boulders. The Fishmen had lost three times as many men as the Talgarans. It was a time for cool heads and hard fighting, and Blade showed himself the best man in the company at both.

He rose up from the bottom, to take command of the company just as the Fishmen swept in to the attack from the front. Between one second and the next, all order went out of the battle. These Fishmen were not attacking from ambush, nor were they darting away. They were coming in to stay and fight.

At first the attackers didn't single Blade out for special attention. Three of them swept past him, leaving their backs open as they drove for the main body of the company farther on. They paid for that mistake. Blade kicked off from a boulder and rose like a rocket behind them, thrusting down with both swords simultaneously. Both thrusts went home into the backs of exposed thighs. The two victims turned, eyes blazing with surprise and pain and fury, but they did not turn fast enough. Blade whipped over in a complete somersault in the water, thrusting up with both finned feet to block his opponents' vision. They were still looking for him when he rose. With another double thrust his swords darted into their throats. They drifted away, darkening the water with outpouring blood as Blade swam off.

Blade sensed a shadow and a movement in the water behind him, and spun and dove away in the same instant. A spear drove through the water where he had been, and an enemy warrior followed the spear. Blade dropped down until he could push off from the bottom again, then arrowed upward. As the Fishman's leg came within striking range, Blade used all his enormous strength to slash the leg open from knee to ankle. The Fishman dropped his spear and doubled up, clutching his leg, exposing his neck to a thrust from Blade's other sword. The thrust went home, and another dying Fishman floated away.

Blade dove again, this time plunging all the way into the holes where the Fishmen archers had been. There were abandoned crossbows there, and he wanted to get one, or at least keep the enemy from retrieving them.

Two Fishmen barred his way, one of them a woman. The woman closed. Blade lunged at her, twisting his sword at the last moment so that the flat rather than the edge came up under her jaw. The blow rolled her halfway over backward and gave Blade time to turn and meet his other opponent.

This one seemed to be a commander of some sort. He wore a jeweled ornament on his headband and a sleeveless jerkin of scaly skin over his chest. His weapon was a double-pronged spear, like a giant tuning fork. It lashed out at Blade with a speed that nearly drove it through his thigh. He twisted aside with inches to spare, then closed with the warrior and hooked an arm around the man's neck.

Blade couldn't risk dropping either sword, and the Fishman warrior couldn't risk dropping his spear. So they grappled clumsily with each other, kicking or trying to kick, each trying to get a firm and deadly grip. As they grappled, their struggles sent them rolling over and over in the water, like a barrel going through rapids. The Fishman clamped his hand over Blade's mouth, trying to rip away his breathing mask. Blade clamped a hand down on the pale, slippery flesh of the man's shoulder, squeezing hard on the nerves. The warrior gasped and jerked the attacking hand away. As he jerked, he weakened his grip on Blade's other arm. Blade found room to pull his hand back six inches, then drive it and the sword it held forward again.

The Fishman jerked so violently as the steel went into his belly that Blade's sword was twisted out of his hand. His opponent's foot drove up against his chest with a solid thud. Blade was driven back as the Fishman writhed and doubled up in the water. But the man was obviously dying. Blade made no effort to return to the attack. Instead he dove down again, heading for the half-concealed pits where the abandoned bows lay.

He darted in over the coral, grazing his thigh on a razor-edged spiky branch, reaching down with his free hand into the dark holes. The first bow he reached had already been fired. But he found some use for it

just the same. A Fishman popped out of the hole as Blade raised the bow, caught the spear point in it, and twisted the spear out of the Fishman's hand. As the spear swung up and over, Blade dropped the bow, caught the spear as it floated past, reversed it, and thrust hard as the Fishman tried to close in. The thrust missed, but this Fishman was apparently a little more timid than most of his comrades.

He fled, rising rapidly until he vanished in the turmoil of blood and churning bodies above.

Blade crouched down out of sight and began his hunt for bows again. He found two that hadn't been fired, and he promptly emptied them into the two nearest Fishmen. The sudden attack from below startled some of the other Fishmen into backing away, in swirls of water. They left a clear space over Blade. Sword in hand, he shot up, back into the battle. The Fishmen backed away still farther. They had seen what Blade could do and didn't want it done to them.

Blade kept himself upright by pedaling with his legs, waved his sword, and ran through every obscene gesture he could think of. He had about despaired of getting any Fishman to attack, when a shadow overhead suddenly darkened the water. Blade looked up. The scout boat was passing overhead. As she did, splashes off her stern told of divers going into the water. The Fishmen lunged up to meet the descending Talgarans. As they rose, Blade was after them.

Once again he overtook Fishmen who weren't keeping a proper watch behind them; once again his sword laid open pale skin. His second victim was a woman, as he discovered when she turned around in pain and shock. She was carrying something on her back that looked like an enormous canvas-wrapped sausage. As she turned, Blade tried to direct his sword thrust aside. Instead it drove through the woman's shoulder and slit open the upper end of the sausage.

Instantly the sea was lit up by a searing blue-white flame as whatever was inside the sausage reacted to the seawater. The woman screamed, mouth open wide. Then she had no more mouth to scream with, as the fire spread over her and stripped hair and flesh away from her skull. Blade thrashed frantically with his fins and backed away from the pulsing core of fire.

Now the water around the woman was boiling, as the flame stripped her down to a skeleton and began to blacken and char the bare bones. A terrible hissing sound filled the water, and bubbles and steam roared upward in a continuous stream. Fishmen and Talgarans scattered in all directions. For the moment both sides were too busy getting away from the flames to have any attention to spare for fighting each other. Blade was one of the last to retreat, but even he eventually had to back further away as the flame heated up a whole area of ocean almost to the scalding point.

The fire died away, and the blackened bits of bone that were all the fire had left of the woman drifted quietly down to the bottom. As his eyes and ears cleared so that he could think clearly again, Blade realized that he had just seen another of the Fishmen's new weapons in action. Probably the one that had swiftly destroyed the ships. Then he realized that the Fishmen had scattered along with his own company. If he could rally his company first—

He swam up, waving his free arm to signal to the fighters from the scout boat. As he did, he saw a Talgaran swimmer thrashing toward him with an oddly lopsided stroke. A moment later Blade saw why the man's stroke was lopsided. One arm had been bitten clean off at the elbow, and the man was trying to tie his belt around the bleeding stump as he swam. Half unconscious from loss of blood, he swam straight at Blade, who swung to one side and caught the man as he passed.

"What is it?"

The man's eyes stared wildly into Blade's. "They bring the yulons! The yulons are upon us! Yulons!"

The pulsing blue glare coming through the water could only be a Ship-Killer, Alanyra realized. She hoped it had found a target. But even if it hadn't, the Talgarans were doomed. She took a brief look behind her, to make sure that her personal guard of spearmen and net-carriers was still close at hand. Then she tapped one of the messenger girls on the shoulder and pointed away to the left, where the dozen yulons glided along, their ugly shapes made almost graceful by distance. The girl darted off, while Alanyra counted off the seconds. Then she saw the yulons surge forward, their riders and guides trailing out behind them like seaweed from a rock.

The attack of the yulons was the signal to the whole force of Clan Gnyr. The fins of three hundred warriors churned the water faster and faster. Alanyra let herself angle upward, until she was just below the surface. Her guard and the whole first line of the Clan followed her. Below she saw Oknyr leading the second line down to the bottom. The Clan would come in on the enemy from above and below, crushing him between its two lines of warriors like a diver's foot caught in the shell of a giant clam.

A torrent of excitement poured through her. Was there any pleasure like the swift deadly approach to a mighty battle? Some women she knew said that men could give equal pleasure, to be sure. But Alanyra doubted it. She was no virgin, but neither had she found such a miraculous man in all her thirty years of life. If she ever did—

Then one of her personal guards was swimming up alongside of her, bellowing in her ear, and pointing forward. She followed his pointing finger with her eyes, then both her mouth and eyes opened wide.

The battle was shaping itself in the water ahead. And squarely in the middle of it was the Stranger.

Blade had only seconds to think about the yulons driving in against his men. Then there was a swarm of Fishmen racing in to the attack, where seconds before there had been only empty water. Not a single sound came from them, nor a single arrow. They seemed determined to close in one furious rush, to sweep away all of Blade's comrades in a minute.

And they were going to do just that. Blade realized that almost at once. He and all the Talgarans in sight could either flee or die. He decided not to flee. Instead he shot up toward the hull of the scout boat. If he could keep off those fire bombs—

He rose toward the oncoming enemy. Half a dozen swimmers were well out in front, each with one of those sinister sausages on his back. Blade drove in toward the lead one, sword thrusting out. The six promptly scattered. Before Blade could change course to chase any one of them, he saw a solid cluster of another dozen enemies coming down at him. These were all armed with spears, except for three who towed a wide-mouthed, close-meshed net behind them. And in the lead was the woman.

What she was doing here? What had brought them together again after so long? Blade didn't have time to answer these questions, though they flashed into his mind as he plunged down again. Whatever else he did, he was determined to escape that net.

The dozen plunged after him. Blade realized that they were trying to trap him against the bottom. He drove himself down faster, then swung to one side. He half expected a spear or an arrow to drive into



him. But apparently the warriors above had orders that he was to be taken alive. Well, they would find those orders damned hard to follow! He wasn't going to be hauled home to the Fishmen's caves in a net, like some fish for a feast!

Now he was on the bottom and leveling out. A massive block of coral loomed up ahead, and below it the black entrance to one of the Fishmen's ambush tunnels. If he could get into that— He would much rather face whatever might be down there in the darkness than face capture.

But as he dove for the hole, the block of coral shivered under a heavy impact. It lurched upward in a cloud of sand and debris, then rolled down, squarely blocking the hole. Blade pulled up short, then backed water furiously as the fanged head of a yulon thrust forward past where the boulder had been. Damn! The last thought he could find in his mind was fury that he was going to die snapped in two like a fish, instead of like a fighting man.

But those fanged jaws never closed on him. Instead a pale blue-white body darted down between him and the gaping red mouth. One long slim arm reached out, thrusting with a pole. The yulon's head churned up a cloud of sand and silt as it jerked back, away from Blade, away from the Fishman. The Fishman turned to face Blade. He recognized the woman. For some reason she had decided to save him from the yulon. For a moment he hesitated.

That moment's hesitation was a moment too long. Suddenly he felt something bristly on his shoulder, looked up, and saw the net drifting down over him. He pushed himself away from the bottom, surging upward. But the three men holding the net jerked down hard. Blade found himself yanked to a stop before he had risen a yard. He hung there just off the bottom, slashing at the fibers of the net with his sword. Tough as they were, he could feel the steel going through them.

But once again he wasn't fast enough. He saw a hole large enough to let him through open up in the mesh of the net. And he saw the woman swim down in front of the hole, and reach out toward him with the same long pole she had used on the yulon. He slashed at it with his sword, but she was too quick for him. A swift twisting of those long graceful arms, and the pole drove in through his guard, its blunt end slapping hard into his chest.

For a moment Blade wondered what the woman could hope to do by tapping him with the blunt end of a pole. Then he felt a numbing chill spreading through him, starting from his chest. He could still breathe, still hear, still see. But his arms and legs would not listen to the frantic signals from his brain.

The chill spread up through his neck. His mouth drifted open as far as the air mask would let it. He tried to lift a hand to hold the mask in place. He was still trying to do that when the chill spread into his head, and all sensation faded out.

Alanyra took her eyes off the unconscious Stranger for the first time when Oknyr swam up. Ten years seemed to have dropped from his bones as he pulled to a stop in front of her, and his one eye was shining with triumph.

"They are all dead, captured, or fleeing, Noble Lady."

"All?"

"At least all we came against," Oknyr said with a grin. "I won't say that the other Clans have done as

well."

"None could have," said Alanyra, pointing at the motionless form inside the net.

Oknyr's eyes fell on the Stranger, and he shrugged. "Perhaps."

Alanyra was very tired, too tired to be angry with the old warrior. She merely said quietly, "Did you doubt my word?"

Oknyr's skin turned almost purple with embarrassment. "Not your word, Lady. Only your—enthusiasm." Then, more briskly, "So you have him. Now let us set about getting him home to our Reefs, before the trinzans or the loose yulons decide to make a meal of him."

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## Chapter ELEVEN

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Several things surprised Blade when he crept back to consciousness. The first thing was that he was awake at all. That was a pleasant surprise. Then he realized that meant he was in Fishman hands. That was neither a surprise nor pleasant.

But apparently they meant to keep him alive and in good shape at least for the moment. The chamber in which he was lying was not only not underwater, it was even dry and lit by sunlight pouring down through a hole in the roof. The walls of the circular chamber sloped up toward the hole, forming a cone some thirty feet high. A brief touch told Blade that the walls were as smooth and slick as glass.

The floor of the chamber was about twenty feet across. Most of it was covered deeply with clean, dry, blue-gray sand. Blade himself was lying on a foot-thick bed of dried seaweed. In a yard-high niche in the wall, a stream of water trickled down from above and vanished down a white-painted drain. Blade stuck a finger into the water, then cautiously tasted it. Somehow the Fishmen had managed to contrive fresh running water out here in the middle of the ocean, hundreds of miles from the nearest land.

Blade found that his mind was beginning to work clearly again. That meant he found it hard to sit still. He rose and began to walk around the chamber, keeping close to the walls but searching the sand—for what? He wasn't sure. Something to use as a weapon, to start with. Then a way out, if possible.

There was a way out. He found it almost at once. In fact, he nearly fell into it. In a pit in the sand in the very center of the chamber was a pool of water. Again Blade dipped a finger and tasted. Salt water. He looked down and saw a vertical rock-walled shaft plunging away and down into blackness.

Fine. Except that this was a way out for a Fishman or a man with an air mask, and right now Blade was neither. Diving down that tunnel blindly might simply lead to his running out of air and dying miserably, to make a grisly find for some Fishman sentry a few hours or days later. He wasn't desperate enough to throw his life away like that. The Fishmen could come and kill him, if they wanted him dead.

But did they? Blade suspected that if they had wanted him dead, they would never have brought him here. For some reason he was more valuable to at least one Fishman alive than dead. Most probably the woman, he realized. That opened up all sorts of interesting possibilities.

Now that he was out of danger for the moment, he could sit down and think about the war between

Talgar and the Fishmen. And he could not keep his thoughts from returning to the notion he had considered as the fleet sailed toward battle. Was somebody—probably in Nurn—playing a deadly game with the two peoples of the sea? Admittedly the notion of a game of that kind lasting three hundred years was rather improbable. But in Dimension X, the improbable usually turned out to be what was actually happening.

And if some game player in Nurn had decided to suddenly raise the stakes? That would explain the sudden increase in the savagery of the war, as both sides poured out money and goods for arsenals of new weapons from the Empire's workshops. Could somebody in Nurn have decided that it was time to make a clean sweep of both Talgar and the Fishmen, so that Nurn could rule the seas itself?

Blade didn't know. All the pieces he had seemed to fit. But he also realized he didn't have enough of the pieces to be able to make a complete and accurate picture even for himself. However, he was certainly in the best place to pick up some more of those pieces. If he could manage it, that woman was going to answer a few questions.

Blade swept his eyes around the chamber and noticed that something was now floating on the surface of the pool. It was a small, circular, close-woven basket, made of some sort of reed and covered with oil or grease to waterproof it. Blade reached out over the pool and caught hold of the basket by the handle. As he lifted it, he felt a slight resistance. Too late he noticed a thin cord trailing from the bottom of the basket, a yellow cord that plunged away into the depths of the shaft. Damn! He had probably just given a signal to some watcher down below.

Well, if the damage was done, he might as well at least find out what was in the basket. It took a good deal of time and some raw fingers before he could get the lid off. Inside the basket he found a circular loaf of bread and a half a dozen dried salt fish.

Blade stared at the bread and fish for a moment. His stomach set up a rumbling like an exploding gasworks to remind him of how hungry he was. Fine. It looked like they wanted to provide him with a meal. And for prison food, it didn't look too bad.

But he wasn't that hungry yet, and he was suspicious. Carefully he picked up the bread and began examining it—for what? He didn't know exactly what he was looking for. His suspicions were formless, almost instinctive. But he had learned to trust those instincts of his. And once more he was right.

In the bottom of the loaf, where a casual and hungry diner would never see it, was a small, neat hole. It was not the kind of hole left in the crust of a loaf of bread by the baking. Blade held the loaf up to his eye and looked at it narrowly. Definitely something long and hollow had been pushed into the bread.

Blade picked up a handful of the seaweed from his bed and carefully wrapped it around his hands. Then even more carefully, he broke the loaf in two, trying to make the break at the hole.

The bread broke somewhat raggedly. With narrowed eyes, Blade examined each piece in turn.

Yes. Very faintly, so faintly that a man not looking for it would never have found it, the bread around the hole was discolored. The discoloration was faintly yellowish, like a saffron stain. Holding his breath, Blade brought the stained area close to his nose, then took in a quick breath. The odor was as faint as the color. If he hadn't been looking for it, he would probably never have detected it.

Blade looked sourly at the fish, and his stomach rumbled again. It was very tempting to assume that whatever drug he was supposed to get was in the bread only. But the stain in the bread could be like the

old trick of putting an easily visible microphone in a bugged room. Someone who was wary but not quite wary enough would rip out the "bait" microphone and then talk freely—right into another microphone lurking somewhere else: The Fishmen could be expecting him to detect the drugged bread, then gobble himself into a stupor on the fish.

With a sigh he put the cover back on the basket and carried it over to the seaweed bed. Hands still wrapped in the weed, he carefully buried the bread and fish away under the weeds. Then he overturned the basket and lay down on the bed. He wished he knew exactly what reaction the drug was supposed to produce. Finally he managed to contrive what seemed like a good imitation of someone who had sprawled unconscious, arms and legs flung out and breathing slow and shallow. It would have taken a keen observer to notice that his head was turned slightly toward the pool in the center of the chamber, and the eyes in that head were slightly open.

The guard at the lower end of the shaft waited for a full hour after the broken end of the basket's cord came drifting slowly down through the water. Then he summoned the Lady Alanyra.

She came as fast as she could flash through the water, not waiting to call her guards or even send word to Oknyr. She wore only her war garb, for speed and agility. But she carried her Robe of Ceremony in a pouch on her back. To question the Stranger was indeed a ceremony, one that might be the salvation of her people. Even of the Talgarans, perhaps, although she knew of none to whom she could confess that last hope.

She was brisk with the guard.

"Has there been any sound or movement from above?"

"None at all, Noble Lady. The Truth-Finder must be deep within him now. All is silent."

"Good." She pulled the pouch off her back and took out the robe. The warrior frowned.

"You would go to this prisoner alone?"

"And why not? With the Truth-Finder in him, he can harm no one." The guard dropped his eyes under Alanyra's steady gaze, and busied himself with the knot on the hilt of his sword. Alanyra quickly donned the robe, then stepped to the entrance of the shaft. It stretched up, into a darkness broken only by a small circle of light incredibly far above. Then she thrust herself off the bottom in a single graceful motion and surged upward.

The circle of light gradually became larger as she approached. Just below the surface, she stopped to check that her sword moved freely in its scabbard. To question the Stranger alone was necessary. To do it unarmed was folly.

Slowly Alanyra lifted her head above the surface and gazed at the sprawled form of the Stranger. He seemed even more magnificent out of the water than he had in the sea, with long muscular limbs and a massive chest and flat stomach. He was two fingers' width taller than Oknyr, the tallest Sea Master she knew—tall enough to make her feel almost like a half-grown girl.

But was he the Stranger she had long hoped for, the man who might bring victory—or even peace—to the troubled crystal seas? That was why she had put the Truth-Finder in the bread and the fish. Under its

influence, he would answer any question she might put to him, unable to lie or conceal anything he knew. The Truth-Finder had proved four previous Strangers to be men of little worth. Now their bones were gathering coral far down on the Reefs of the Clan. Would this man make the fifth? Alanyra hoped not. The situation between Talgar and the Sea Masters was more terrible than ever before. And—yes, she had to admit it, at least to herself—this man was gloriously beautiful, in a way that the other four had not been.

"Goddess of the Foam, let him be the true Stranger!" Alanyra breathed to herself. Then she reached for the edge of the pit and pulled herself out of the water. The sodden robe clung to her body, molding every curve, but she knew that the fiber would dry in minutes. She took two steps toward the sleeping man, readying in her mind the words that would wake him to respond to her questions. She took a third step.

And as she did, a long muscular arm snaked out and grabbed her ankle. Before she could scream or even take another breath, the grip tightened. She found herself flying head over heels through the air, to land on her back in the sand with a thud that knocked all the breath out of her. One arm was caught under her. With the other she reached for her sword. But before she could move it half the way, the Stranger sprang up on his knees and clamped his other hand down on her wrist. He did not speak, nor did he try to hurt her. But his grip was as unbreakable as if his hands had been iron shackles.

In desperation she opened her mouth to scream. In a move so fast that her eyes couldn't begin to follow it, the Stranger snatched her sword from its scabbard. He threw it across the chamber, so hard that sparks flew as it struck the far wall. Then he clamped the hand that had been holding her sword wrist over her mouth. What she had intended to be a scream audible clear down to where the guard sat came out a whimper and a gasp.

She thought of trying to bite the hand that was over her mouth. Then she looked into the piercing eyes of the Stranger, and the thought died. This man would not harm her by choice—only if he thought she was putting him in danger. But then he would not hesitate. And there was a strength in those hands and arms and body that she knew could tear her limb from limb with ease. She would not risk provoking that strength into action. And—again she admitted it with reluctance—there was an odd stirring of pleasure in those powerful hands on her body.

Now he was pulling the robe from her body, tearing the tough fibers as though they were wet seaweed, tearing them into long strips. One went around her face, filling her mouth until she could just barely breathe. Two around her legs, one at the ankles and one at the knees. Two more around her legs, one at the ankles and one at the knees. Two more around her arms, one at the wrists and one at the elbows. The knots were just tight enough to have no play, as though the Stranger had been able to judge her strength simply by looking at her. The idea of that sort of skill frightened her more than a little. With limbs so completely immobilized, she couldn't even hope to roll across the sand and vanish down the shaft.

Now the man was standing up and walking across the chamber, to retrieve her sword, then returning to sit cross-legged in the sand in front of her. His eyes roamed over her bare body, obviously lingering on breasts and hips and thighs and between her legs. There was no distaste in those eyes as they roamed. Indeed there was undeniable admiration. And Alanyra could not deny that she found it pleasant that the Stranger admired her. It was exceedingly odd that she should care what this unknown man thought of her. But it was true nonetheless.

The Stranger laid the sword across his knees and smiled at her. It was the last expression she would have expected, after the last few minutes. Surprise momentarily robbed her of the ability to think clearly. The Stranger had to repeat his first question before she could answer him.

"Who are you?"

It didn't occur to her to lie. "I am the Lady Alanyra, Chief of Clan Gnyr."

"Where am I?"

"You are in one of the chambers in the Reefs of the Clan."

"Why am I here?"

Alanyra hesitated. Anger flickered in the Stranger's eyes. She could not keep out of her mind a picture of those hands working on her body with the intent to bruise flesh, break bones, send terrible pain shooting through her. Never mind that the man could not escape punishment for whatever he did to her, that his own death would be long and slow if he harmed her. That obviously didn't play any part in his thinking. He wanted answers to his questions and would go straight after them until he got them, however he needed to get them.

"Since I saw you killing the yulon on the reef, I have wanted to—" She hesitated. "Capture" didn't sound right. "I have wanted to meet you. Your fighting skills make me wonder that you are perhaps from no people in the world."

Was the man hesitating, as if for once he was in doubt of what he should say? He must be! Alanyra suddenly found it easier to breathe.

"I am probably not from any people you have ever heard of," the Stranger said. "I came a very long distance to travel and fight among the people of these oceans. I came to the people of the Sea Cities of Talgar first, so I fought among them against your people at first. But I do not hate your people."

These last words were said as if there could be no possible doubt about them. And in fact Alanyra found it impossible to doubt them. She also found it impossible to keep her heart from pounding in terrible excitement. Would this Stranger stand apart from both the Sea Cities and the Sea Masters, to play the long-dreamed-of part in her plans? She found the emotions running through her at this thought so intense that she knew tears were welling up in her eyes. It was wrong that a Noble Lady of the Sea Masters should weep for joy in front of a man who might be from anywhere, for all his apparent virtues. But it was also inevitable.

"You do not hate the Sea Masters?" Her voice wasn't quite steady. But she knew that if she waited until her voice was steady, she would wait a very long time.

"No. Why should I? I come from a far-distant land, and neither you nor the people of the Sea Cities have done anything to make me hate them." He hesitated. "I am not even sure why you hate each other. You seem very much alike, even to some of your names for the creatures of the sea. You both call the great reptiles that you have tamed for war yulons, for example."

This time Alanyra couldn't have said a word to save her life. Her throat was too tight. This was the Stranger! He couldn't have taken any of the Truth-Finder drug. He must have realized her plans and done something to avoid taking it. But here he was, speaking as freely as if he were filled with it, saying things she had dreamed of hearing for five years. It was a terrible moment, to have such a long and dearly held dream coming true before her eyes.

And in the form of such a magnificent man, she reminded herself. That was very good fortune indeed.

She found herself shivering, not with cold, not with fear, and not—she thought—with desire. She felt and then saw the Stranger's eyes on her, and the shivering faded.

"What is your name?" she asked him.

There was no resentment in his voice as he replied. "Richard Blade."

"What is your Clan or City?"

"I am of the City of London, in a land called England. It is so far away that you need not be ashamed to have not heard of it. But I am much given to traveling far, and I have seen and learned much. I am a warrior, as you see. But I am also other things."

"You are very handsome," said Alanyra, then could have bitten her tongue out of her head for saying that. She wanted to keep that locked away in her heart for the moment. But—had the Goddess in the Foam perhaps willed otherwise?

"Perhaps," he said. "But I do not think I want you for my woman."

Alanyra jerked as if she had been slapped. And she felt almost as if she had been. Did she look as though she wanted to be his woman? She, a Noble Lady of a High Clan of the Sea Masters, to be the woman of this—this footloose warrior of London? She stiffened with outraged dignity and tried to roll over, to turn her back on Blade. But she couldn't. She wriggled and twisted and writhed, but she couldn't shift her position. Eventually she gave up the struggle, tears of frustration in her eyes. She was hard put to keep herself from whimpering like a child.

Blade stared at her, his eyes expressionless and his face like a stone mask. He might have been mourning her humiliation. He might have been rejoicing in it. She couldn't tell, either way.

Then he threw back his head, his mouth opened to show a mass of very white teeth, and his laughter roared out. It echoed around the chamber, so loudly that Alanyra wondered if the guard below would hear it. She realized that she didn't want him to hear it. There was something in the air that she didn't want to see vanish, something that would vanish if a third person came up the shaft.

Blade stood up, lifting the sword. For a moment Alanyra felt a chill of fear. Then he flung it lightly out into the center of the pit. It fell with a faint splash and vanished in an instant down the shaft. Alanyra stared at the bubbles, then back to Blade. She was still staring at him when he stepped over to her and hauled her swiftly to her feet.

She leaned against him, feeling the hard muscles of his bare body, while his hands tore at her bonds. Once more the tough fibers of her robe snapped easily under those hands. Then the hands were not ripping off her bonds any more, but roaming over her body. She felt them glide delicately down her back, then cup her buttocks. They squeezed and pulled at the firm flesh, pressing her groin hard against his. She felt a warmth slowly beginning to grow there. Unmistakably there was also a growing and hardening in Blade's groin.

She took advantage of the new freedom of her own hands to raise them to Blade's head. She ran her fingers through his hair, twirling the long tough strands between them, then bringing her hands down to stroke his cheeks. Her grip on his face tightened, and she tried to pull it down to bring his lips against hers.

She might as well have tried to pull the head off a stone statue. The cords in Blade's neck stood out as he easily resisted the tug of her hands.

Then suddenly his eyes were looking into hers, his neck muscles relaxed, and his head swooped down. His lips pressed down on hers, strongly, insistently, the lips of a man with an utter conviction that he wants something and will get it. Blade opened his mouth, and his lips spread out to surround Alanyra's, curling over and under them, warm and seeking. Even more warm, even more seeking, his tongue crept out from between those white teeth, to play against her mouth. Her own tongue came out to meet his, as though it had been drawn out.

She could hear Blade's breathing quicken, and she began to feel her own doing the same. The warmth in her belly was growing faster and farther too. It was growing faster and farther than she had ever felt it grow with any man before. Only charging into a battle had ever made her feel this way. But now—

Now Blade's lips were pulling away from hers. A moment's frustration. Then she felt them caressing her throat, the sides of her neck, the lobes of her small ears. It was as though a spark-fish were sending little jots of its life-spirit through her. She twisted in his arms, and this time she did whimper. But it was not in frustration. Slowly she was losing the ability to sense anything outside the two of them, herself and Blade, standing here on the sand, slowly writhing against each other, slowly exciting each other to a higher and higher pitch.

His hands were shifting from her buttocks to her hips now, tightening their grip, lifting her straight up into the air. She rose until his eyes could look straight into hers for a moment. A brief moment. His head dipped, and she felt his lips moving on her shoulders and down over her breasts. The nipples had long since stiffened into almost painfully tight little buds. Now his lips were around them, and once more it felt as though he were drawing sparks out of her body. These lips were warm and wet, and they were absolutely maddening. She wanted to scream. And this, all of it, while he held her in his hands in midair, as though she were a child. For a moment fear of such strength in a man almost chilled her desire.

That lasted only seconds. He lifted her higher and higher for a moment, then slowly lowered her down on the piled weed. It crackled under her weight, and she felt it prickle against her bare skin.

Then all other sensation vanished as he lowered himself down upon and into her. Deep—deep—incredibly deep! In a second her whole existence came to be focused around what was in her, sliding in and out of her, driving her slowly higher and higher in her passion. She whimpered again, sobbed, bit her lips until they bled, to keep from screaming or shouting or bursting out into hysterical laughter.

Then she was not rising slowly any more, but hurtling up toward her peak. She felt that peak growing and swelling within her, farther, faster—then it exploded within her. She clawed at Blade's back. She ground her hips and buttocks into the weeds, trying to twist and turn herself around his maleness, to get more and more of it. She wanted more of it, even while the furious pulsing spasms ripped through her muscles. She raised her legs and pounded her feet on Blade's buttocks, trying to hold him, trying to drive him deeper into herself.

And he was still moving, still solid, still driving into her—and now she was driving up toward a second peak, and this time she could feel that he was coming along with her. His eyes were glazed, his breath rasped, his whole body seemed wound up like the cord of a crossbow. Then all the tension went out of his body, and it was heaving and twisting and writhing along with hers. All the breath went out of his lungs in a single long rasping wsssssh, and it seemed that all the fluid went out of his body in a series of



powerful, hot pulses.

Eventually the erotic fog cleared out of Alanyra's head so that her senses began working normally again. Her mind remembered where she was, who she was—and who she was with. She raised herself on one elbow and looked cautiously at Blade.

His eyes met hers. His face crinkled into a smile, and he said quietly, "Lady Alanyra. I would like some food, if you can manage it. And without any drugs in it this time."

It was a long time before Alanyra could stop laughing enough to say yes.

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## Chapter TWELVE

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Blade realized that there was no easy way to influence a woman as intelligent, able, and strong-willed as Alanyra. Certainly just making love to her wasn't going to be enough. Of course she would be far more ready to listen to him on almost anything than she might have been otherwise. But he was still going to have to be able to talk to her seriously if he wanted to get her help.

He wanted and needed her help more badly than he dared tell her. She seemed to have some vague glimmering of an idea similar to his own—finding some way to peace between the Sea Cities and the Fishmen—the Sea Masters. Some way to peace, and an end to the preposterous and futile bloodshed of their three-centuries' old war. It was more than Blade had expected, to find someone like that among the Sea Masters. If Autocrat Krodrus felt the same way, as Blade suspected he did—well, something might be arranged.

Blade would have done his best to enlist Alanyra in his cause even if she hadn't already been more than half in sympathy with it. She was intelligent, strong-minded, and a leader among the High Clans of the Sea Masters—an invaluable ally. If he couldn't make peace in the crystal seas with her aid, he could at least try to get out of the Sea Masters' Reefs and back to the Sea Cities with a whole skin. Blade had been prepared to risk that skin any number of times in good causes, but he generally preferred to keep it as intact as possible, if he had a reasonable chance to do so. The suicidally inclined do not make very good secret agents, or very long-lived ones.

All this meant that Blade's work was only just nicely begun after he finished making love to Alanyra for the first time. He knew that if he could get proof of his guess that someone in Nurn was playing games with the two sea peoples, he would have Alanyra firmly on his side. More important, he would be able to convince others in both Talgar and the Reefs, and so create a faction among each people working for peace. Neither of Nurn's customers had much love for the Empire; that was obvious. If the Empire stood revealed as an open enemy in all but name—well, things might happen. Blade didn't know how many of them might happen before he was snatched away from the crystal seas, back to Home Dimension. But he was determined to get as much done as possible.

Unfortunately he couldn't do nearly as much as he had hoped to do among the Sea Masters. He could not move freely, for one thing. Alanyra said this was for his own safety, and Blade believed her. After three hundred years of war, the Fishmen didn't look on the Talgarans any more kindly than the Talgarans looked on them. Nor could he even talk freely with the warriors and scribes of Clan Gnyr.

"Most of them would not talk to you at all," Alanyra told him. "Those few who talked to you would most

likely not be able to answer most of your questions, even were they willing. You might find one who could understand your questions and answer them. And it would be even odds that he would simply be laying a trap for you, to discover your plans and betray you."

"It would be worth the risk," said Blade wearily. "Otherwise there doesn't seem to be anything for me to do except sit here like a barnacle on a ship's hull."

"Why throw your life away?" said Alanyra. "And why risk mine and perhaps Oknyr's as well? It would mean that, I know."

"Why?" asked Blade. He suspected he knew most of the answer already. But he wanted to hear from Alanyra's own lips confirmation of his educated guesswork. It was always better to avoid acting on your own guesses, if there was any alternative.

"You think I am strong among the Sea Masters, because I am Lady of a High Clan and my warriors are loyal to me? Well, perhaps I am. But I am not strong enough to survive being suspected of this—of spying for the Sea Cities.

"Oknyr would believe me, probably. And others would believe Oknyr and follow him. But the greater part of the men and women of Clan Gnyr would recoil in horror, and cast me down from my place. I would go to join my brother, and without even the chance of knowing I had died well. He died in a battle against the Sea Cities. I would be tortured with sea-snake venom and then staked out for rock eels to tear the flesh from my bones, piece by piece. And your own fate would be even harder. We would die, the Clan would be disgraced and divided, and nothing would be done."

"If that is so," said Blade, "then there is only one thing for me to do. There is no answer to be found here in the Reefs of the Sea Masters. There is none to be found in the Sea Cities. But there may be one in Nurn itself."

Alanyra's eyes widened. "How—how will you find it, if you must pluck it out of the heart of the Empire itself?"

"I won't find it easily, in any case," replied Blade coolly. "But I will have a better chance of finding it with your help."

"What—what can I do for you?" said Alanyra. Her tone left no doubt in Blade's mind that she would do her best to help him—if she thought his plan made any sense.

That was the problem. It took him three days of arguing in the intervals between their lovemaking before he could get her to start taking him seriously. Years ago when Blade had been senior field man for MI6, he had occasionally argued with J over the conduct of a particular mission. He thought then that J was the world's most stubborn and tenacious arguer. Now he knew that Lady Alanyra could out-argue J any day of the week.

Eventually he got her to the point where she didn't burst out laughing and try to kiss him when he explained what he had in mind. After a few more days, she was agreeing that his plan made sense. And a few days after that, she was making suggestions for improving the scheme, based on what she knew of the situation in Nurn.

But then there was Oknyr to be convinced.

"You and he are both mad," said Oknyr. Alanyra knew that thirty years' faithful service to four successive heads of Clan Gnyr gave him the right to speak thus. It was to his credit that he seldom abused that right.

"Perhaps we are," said Alanyra. She met his gaze without flinching or turning color. "But if we are, perhaps it is a madness sent by the Goddess in the Foam, to clear our vision instead of cloud it. With this newly cleared vision, we are seeing a way to peace between the Sea Cities and the Sea Masters."

"You are seeing a dream, Lady," said Oknyr with a sigh. "A beautiful dream, but still a dream. If there were any substance to it, do you think the war would still be going on?"

"I do not know, Oknyr. I think that perhaps Blade is right when he says there has been a terrible blindness on both sides. So terrible that we could not see a chance of peace if one came up in front of us. He says that perhaps there are those in the Sea Cities, among our people, and in Nurn, who do not want the war to end."

The Orderer of Battles pulled at one elongated earlobe. "Does he say who might be these—deceivers?"

"Stipors the Black, the Autocrat for War among the Sea Cities. He does not know enough of our people or of Nurn to be able to name any. That is why he wished to travel among us, and why he wishes to go to Nurn. He has hopes of finding a man who knows some of Nurn's secrets, and who can be given Truth Finder and so be made to reveal them to us."

"Will even that be enough to convince the Sea Cities to leave us alone?"

"Blade says he believes it will. He says that the Sea Cities would gladly be free of Nurn for all time to come if they had a chance. They have not had that chance only because of the war."

Oknyr nodded slowly. "There I have reason to believe Blade speaks the truth. I have heard the same from certain prisoners before they died or were sent to the Slave Reefs. If the Talgarans really hate Nurn so much, perhaps—" His face twisted, as though he felt inside him a pain that he was desperately trying to hide.

Alanyra watched him in silence with great compassion. The old warrior had fought in the war too long to be able to easily conceive of its end.

Finally he shrugged. "Lady, I still say you are mad. But you say that it is a madness sent by the Goddess, and this I am willing to believe. But there remains one thing. How are we to conceal this from the other Clans? You said you told Blade of the danger if word got about. Have you considered the danger enough yourself?"

"Why should any suspect us? We are only setting free some of our own Clan's prisoners, and not that many, either. A mere twenty or so."

"That will still look strange to the other Clans. Is there need to send any at all?"

Alanyra nodded. "Blade made it clear to me that there is. If he were to return to the Sea Cities alone, it would be suspicious. After their defeat, the Talgarans will be trusting no one, not even a returned prisoner. And if he is suspected of evildoing, not even Autocrat Krodrus will help him make the voyage to Nurn. Besides, why should it look strange that we release certain prisoners as a gesture of contempt for the Sea Cities? Take them back, we can seem to say. Take them, and let them not come again to our

Reefs, or this time they may remain forever!"

Oknyr laughed at Alanyra's fiery phrases. "Lady, are you sure that you are less wedded to the war than I am?" Seeing that she did not laugh, he sobered, then said, "What about afterward? When he—and you—sail for Nurn? What then?"

Alanyra shrugged. "The Clan will not be involved, either way. If we succeed, we will bring back a victory so great for both peoples that no one will ask stupid questions."

Oknyr was silent, but his eyes expressed the question he did not want to put into words.

Alanyra licked her lips before replying to that questioning stare. "If something goes wrong, it will go wrong far out of the sight of either Sea Cities or Sea Masters. We will vanish like a stone dropped into the Great South Deep, and none will ever see us again to chide us for our failure."

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## Chapter THIRTEEN

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Blade never wanted to take a worse sea voyage than the one from the Sea Masters' Reefs back to the Sea Cities of Talgar. Wind and weather kept them at sea nearly longer than their food and water supply could last. Two full-fledged storms nearly sent the battered, ill-equipped little scout boat to the bottom of the crystal seas. At least half of the nineteen freed prisoners with Blade were too badly wounded, too sick, or too apathetic to lift a finger to work the ship. Half of the remainder were energetic, to the point of being barely willing to recognize Blade's authority. He had to quell at least one near-mutiny by using his fists.

But four or five of the men proved loyal, willing, and able. Without them Blade had no doubt that the little ship would ever have made Talgar. As it was, they spent seventeen days at sea. Seventeen days, with Blade existing on a daily ration of a pint of water, three salt fish, half a pound of bread, and three hours' sleep.

Eventually they reached the South Channel and were hailed by the patrols. They were nearly sunk by the patrols too. The ships of Talgar seemed to Blade to be even more trigger-happy than usual. But the patrols did hold their fire long enough for Blade to identify and explain himself.

They put a guard aboard the ship, gave food and water, then towed it back to the Sea Cities.

Talgar seemed to be a land under siege. After Blade learned the details of the defeat of the great fleet, he could understand the feeling. He didn't like it, for it would make his own job more difficult. But he could not blame the people of the Sea Cities.

Of the ten thousand men that had sailed eastward aboard the great fleet, more than two thousand had never returned. Of the two hundred ships and boats, forty were gone. And because the losses had fallen upon the fighters of the Cities, the Cities were far more dangerous than they might have been otherwise. In barely two months the Sea Cities had lost nearly one-third of their first-line fighting men, thousands of civilians, and more than a hundred ships of various sizes. Their morale was shattered, their nerves taut, and their soldiers and civilians alike walked with one eye cocked behind them. There was an ugly feeling in the Sea Cities, and Blade knew that he would be happier when he was on his way to Nurn.

That took more time than he had expected. Officers of the Conciliar Guard thoroughly interrogated all the returned prisoners—to find out about conditions among the Fishmen, they said. But Blade suspected it was to find out if any of the returned prisoners had committed treason. There was a wide-spread conviction in the Cities that the two disasters must have involved treason somewhere, a conviction that bode very ill for the Conciliators, who were still in prison.

There was also one of Stipors' most notorious henchmen among the officers. Blade was careful to lead that man a merry chase down a dozen useless avenues of inquiry. Fortunately the officer was not a very good interrogator. But all this nonsense took time. By the end of a week Blade was ready to bite off all his fingernails and tear out all his hair in sheer frustration. He did not dare breathe a word of any of his plans to anyone except Krodrus. But he could not even ask to see Krodrus until the interrogation was finished.

Eventually it was, just in time to keep Blade from strangling several of the interrogators with his bare hands. Then he had to endure a round of feasts and drinking parties, laid on to greet the returning heroes. Blade was glad that the other returned prisoners had a chance to eat and drink their fill. But he himself ate and drank very lightly and kept a close watch on his own tongue and on anyone who tried to strike up a conversation with him. He had the feeling Stipors still suspected that something was wrong somewhere. The last thing he could afford to do was give the Autocrat for War any excuse to imprison him, or even prevent him from seeing Krodrus.

Eventually Blade got his private appointment with Krodrus.

He had somehow expected an undersized man like Krodrus to occupy an imposing office and sit on a raised dais behind a desk half the size of a tennis court. But Krodrus' office was barely larger than Blade's sleeping cabin aboard Green Mistress. His desk was a rickety little table half buried under stacks of papers and inkwells containing five different colors of ink. Krodrus obviously didn't need any props to build himself up. He knew what he was and what he could do and felt no need to impress anybody with either by artificial means.

The Autocrat sat quietly behind his desk while Blade explained what he wanted to do and what help he needed to do it. Except for the occasional flicker of his eyelids, Krodrus might have been the carved figurehead on the bow of a Talgaran ship.

Blade held nothing back, or almost nothing. He mentioned the possibility that the Fishmen might want to make peace, only as something he had guessed, from what he had seen in the Reefs.

"They've taken losses too, Financier. I would guess they've lost at least a thousand warriors, plus all the destruction. Not as much as we have lost, of course. But I imagine they'd find it cheaper to make peace, if we offered them reasonable terms."

Krodrus said nothing.

Blade did not mention Alanyra. Still less did he mention the fact that Alanyra and certain of her picked warriors were going to be helping him on his mission to Nurn. If he went.

"My Lord Autocrat," Blade finished. "What I ask is something strange, I admit. But it is dangerous only to me, at least for now. If I am willing to run these dangers to help Talgar find peace and perhaps freedom from Nurn, can I ask your help?"

There was a long and, to Blade, exceedingly chilly silence in the dark and musty little room. Blade stared

intently at Krodrus, trying to make out some expression on the brown and wrinkled little face.

He was trying to read the unreadable.

The silence stretched on, until Blade began to find it difficult to breathe because of the tension growing in him. And on. Now Krodrus wasn't even blinking. His dark eyes stared back at Blade, as motionless and expressionless as those of a snake.

Then the Autocrat took in a breath, and said, "What sort of help will you need?"

Blade in his turn let out a breath. He flexed muscles that had suddenly become cramped, and swallowed to get the dryness out of his throat. Then he gave the list that he had long since settled in his own mind. A small, fast ship, well-equipped and well-armed, with a small crew completely loyal to him and equally adept at fighting and seamanship. A reasonable sum in gold. Unquestionable credentials as an arms buyer for the Autocracy of Finance of the Sea Cities.

"I see you've thought this out well in advance," said Krodrus. "Good. I was afraid I might be sending you to your death."

"I have often done this sort of work before," said Blade. "One learns much in traveling far."

"One does. I wonder exactly how far you have traveled," said Krodrus. He seemed to be speaking half to himself. Then, briskly, "How many men will you need?"

"Ten or twelve. I can act as my own captain, but I'll need a good mate. If he's available, I'd like Gershon—the one I defeated on the Council House steps the day of the riot. He'll be loyal to me, I'm sure, so I can let him pick the rest of the crew himself."

"I will have word sent to the Registrar of Sailors," said Krodrus. "I hope for your sake and the sake of the Sea Cities that he can indeed be trusted. Stipors would pay well to learn of this mission, and I think even better to foil it."

"You think he is behind the war, perhaps?"

"He favors it because it favors some plans of his own. If I knew what they were— But one cannot go about accusing one's fellow Autocrats, unless one has proof of great wrongdoing. Not now. I do not think that he himself is the game player you believe in. I think you are right that there is one, but I also agree with you that he is most likely in Nurn."

"Have you any idea who he might be?" asked Blade. "If I can guide my search—"

The Autocrat shook his head. "There are any of half a dozen great nobles who might be ambitious in this direction. To break the power of both the Sea Cities and the Fishmen and make them vassals of the Empire would be much to his credit. Perhaps he might even think to set up his creatures to rule over both people, and then turn them into a base for his own power. In such a case he might be aiming at the throne of Nurn itself."

Intrigues piled upon intrigues, it seemed. But this was normal, in any dimension. "Thank you, Lord Krodrus. I hope to be back within two months with at least some of the answers."

"You would do well to be back sooner, if you can."

Krodrus's face clouded. "Stipors is speaking of trying the Conciliators for treason. If matters come to a trial, I am sure they will be convicted, and if convicted, they will die. If you can return in time—" He let the sentence die unfinished.

It was a hot airless summer dawn, with a low heat haze over the glassy sea. The scout boat Sea Fox drifted aimlessly, her sails flapping monotonously against her mast.

Gershon saluted as Blade came up from the tiny captain's cabin aft. "Mornin', sir. Put the men to the sweeps?"

Blade shook his head. "Not much sense in that. We'd have everybody worn out inside of two hours."

"I know, sir. But supposin' the Fishmen were about—?"

"All the more reason for keeping everybody fresh. We've got little enough chance if they attack as it is."

Gershon saluted again and went forward. Blade leaned against the railing, hands clasped behind his back, and looked up. The white-painted mast and yard showed clearly from the deck. That was the identifying sign he had agreed on with Alanyra. And here they were, within two miles of the rendezvous. Damn that haze! If Alanyra's little company couldn't find Fox before some other less friendly group of Sea Master raiders did— Blade swung himself into the rigging and hauled himself hand over hand up to the crow's nest. He might not be able to see much better up there. But at least he wouldn't be able to pace up and down the deck until someone asked him what he was so worried about!

An hour passed, then another. Sea Fox rocked gently to the swell. Small sounds floated up from her deck—voices, a bucket dropped with a clatter, the banging of the pump as it worked to keep the bilge dry. Not much needed for that—Fox was a tight, well-found little ship. Also, appropriately named for the mission she was on, thought Blade. He looked down again and realized that the sun was beginning to burn off some of the haze.

Then a shout from the stern made him spin around. A hundred yards dead astern the head of a yulon broke the water. Blade stared. It was a tame one. He could see the harness. But did that mean—?

Gershon was already beating the signal drum for battle call, and the crew was dashing about, snatching up their weapons. Blade flung himself into the rigging and scrambled monkeylike back down to the deck. As he reached it, the head of the yulon sank slowly out of sight. No sign of any of the Sea Masters with it.

Gershon was cursing under his breath as Blade came up to him. "We should never ha' come with such a small crew, Cap'n. Now we're all in trouble."

"Perhaps," said Blade. "It depends on how many of them there are." And also on who they are, he added silently.

Howls of fear rose from Fox's deck a moment later, as the head of the yulon rose from the water again almost alongside. But another head rose beside it, high-cheeked, elfin, green-haired, with a broad smile on the full lips, and red jewels glittering in the green hair. Blade waved a hand in greeting—then struck Gershon's crossbow to the deck as the mate raised it to fire at Alanyra.

Gershon let out an oath and drew his dagger. Blade stepped back until he had the railing and the sea behind him, then dropped into fighting stance. "Hold, Gershon! If you have any faith in me, let me speak. And make the rest of the crew let me speak too. Otherwise we shall all die, and so will many others—all for nothing."

Gershon's eyes narrowed sullenly, but he growled agreement. One of the other sailors sprang forward, knife raised. As he did, Gershon spun around and drove an enormous, sun-browned fist into the man's stomach, then chopped down with the other hand on his right wrist. The man folded in the middle, sat down on the deck, and tried to ease his tingling wrist and throw up his breakfast at the same time.

Blade was relieved. For the moment at least Gershon's loyalty held. He began to speak, in a low, firm, urgent voice. He left out nothing except his relations with Alanyra, nothing at all that was needed to explain the situation to the crew.

He could not be sure for a long time that they were listening to him, still less believing him. To have the idea of friendship with the Fishmen sprung on them this way would have stunned better minds than those of the sailors'.

But eventually Gershon sheathed his dagger. His brown face split in a rueful grin. He shook his head, so that his pigtail swung from side to side. "Well, may the Goddess strike me dead if I foreswear my friendship with ye, Cap'n Blade. I make no promises to like this new friendship, mind ye. But the Fishmen'll have naught to fear from me or any man aboard Fox, long as we've naught to fear from them."

Blade nodded and smiled. "Fair enough." It was as much as he could hope for at the moment. But it was also enough.

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## Chapter FOURTEEN

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The towers of Mestron, the capital and chief port of the Empire of Nurn, rose black against the sunset. Blade and Alanyra leaned against the railing of Fox's crow's nest. They watched the setting sun trail orange across the waters of the bay and gild the sails of the coastal shipping sliding in and out of the harbor. The wind had dropped, and Fox once again rocked gently on the waves.

From below, the voices of both Talgarans and Sea Masters rose into the evening air. The Sea Masters were almost submerged, hanging onto lines trailing over Fox's side. They seldom came aboard, but that was more to keep their presence a secret than out of fear of Blade's crew.

The week's voyage from Talgar had done one thing at least. It had taught each people that the other was not necessarily a monster lusting for blood and destruction. Hearing each other call many sea creatures by the same names and swear by the same Goddess had been a new, almost frightening experience for both sides. But slowly they had recovered. Now they still could not exactly be called friends. But they could be called a crew that Blade would trust to do anything he asked of them. That was a good enough start for the mission.

Alanyra turned to Blade. The red sunset light gave her skin a weird pinkish tinge. "Are you waiting for a pilot to take you in?"



"No. We're not going into Mestron, at least not aboard Fox. There's a smaller port to the north of Mestron that Gershon knows like he knows this ship's deck. That's where Fox and the yulon will be staying. There'd be too many prying eyes and wagging tongues around us in Mestron. In Clintrod there won't be so many questions asked, or so many soldiers around to fight if we can't give the right answer."

"I see. But you will be in Mestron, Blade. You will be in danger all the time, and the rest of us only part of the time. Is that fair?"

Blade shrugged. There was really no better answer to that question.

A big pleasure galley raced past, oars scarring the darkening water with silver foam. On her single, green, triangular sail was a black bull's head.

"Some nobleman's private yacht," said Blade. Then he leaned over the railing and shouted down to the deck. "Ahoy, Gershon! Set a course for Clintrod."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Blade's plan was simple, like any good espionage operation. Complicated schemes in that business had a way of going wrong in the worst way at the worst possible moment. The only thing complicated about Blade's plan was its use of eight Sea Masters and their trained yulon. But that was also something nobody in Nurn would believe even if they saw it. So nobody would be looking for it. Blade hoped things would stay that way until he had finished his work.

That work went slowly at first, slowly enough to have given Blade a few sleepless nights if he had been the type to lie awake worrying. He wasn't. He was painfully aware that the more time passed, the greater his chances of returning to Talgar and finding Svera's head nailed on the Traitors' Beam by the dockyard entrance.

Fox dropped anchor at Clintrod, and Blade and four sailors donned heavy disguises and went ashore. In their chests and bags rode armor and weapons, a good sum in gold, and enough other disguises to make the five men look like forty other ones. The chest also contained two sealed envelopes. One held credentials showing Blade to be an authorized arms purchaser for the Autocracy of Finance of the Sea Cities of Talgar. The other showed Blade to be an equally authorized arms buyer for the Clan Gnyr of the Sea Masters. The arms dealer would not ask any questions once they saw those letters. The arms trade was far too profitable for any dealer to wish to doubt a buyer's word and risk driving him into the arms (or warehouse) of a competitor.

They nearly came to grief even before they entered Mestron. A mile from the North Gate they heard the thunder of fast-moving hooves and the blare of trumpets behind them. Then came shouts of "Way, way for the Duke Tymgur and his household! Way all!" Blade pulled the two pack mules to one side of the road and turned.

A long, cavalcade of men in black and green livery on sleek black horses was coming up behind them. In the center rode a tall, thin man with a close-cropped black beard fringing his pale, bony face. He was flanked by two banner bearers. The banners they carried were green, with a black bull's head on them.

The cavalcade pounded on toward the gates of the City. Blade led his little caravan back onto the road. As he did, he overheard a brief grumbling exchange between two porters staggering along under massive loads of pots.

"Hunh—Tymgur be gettin' much abo' hisself, nae?"

"Yar. No t'Emperor hisself do ride like thot on common roads."

"Maybe Tymgur ha' dreams o'—"

"Hssssh!"

Blade kept that exchange and the Duke's face very much in his mind as they rode on into Mestron. A small bribe to the sentries got them the names of several reliable inns that catered to arms buyers and other merchants. Blade chose one called the Inn of the Seven Cats.

There were a good many more than seven cats underfoot as he entered, but the place was tolerably clean, and the landlord asked no more than the usual number of questions. Blade settled his party in two adjoining rooms and gave them a quick lecture on disguises and a longer lecture on keeping their mouths shut. "Never mind what good wine or willing girls you find. If you can't handle them and keep your tongue from flapping too, then leave them alone! Flapping tongues have been known to slit their owners' throats or stretch their owners' necks."

The next morning Blade went out into the city and down to the waterfront warehouses, to begin his career as an arms buyer.

The first few days were almost straight espionage work. The city was strange, the streets reeked of fish and horse droppings, and the policemen carried swords and crossbows instead of pistols. But it was the same sort of painstaking, careful work that Blade had done for the first twenty years of his career, in Prague and Ankara and Tokyo. However, he was too experienced ever to let himself assume that something was completely routine. That assumption might eventually take the edge off his alertness and his head off his shoulders.

So he was alert as he made the rounds of one stuffy warehouse after another, talking with one greasy bearded armorer's representative after another, inspecting one barrel or crate of weapons after another. He had been advised to bargain ruthlessly, sneering freely at the quality of the weapons offered him. Blade knew medieval and other primitive weapons as well as he knew the guns and explosives of the twentieth century. He put all that knowledge to use now. He found more often than not that he didn't have to pretend at all to sneer at the quality of the weapons he was usually offered.

He always broke off the dealings just short of making an agreement. If he had not done that, the merchant would have asked what his ship was and where it was. An awkward question, particularly when Blade had just finished discussing an order for spears and armor that would have sunk three ships the size of Fox. It was a question he was very careful to see never got asked.

He was also careful to never show up on the waterfront in the same disguise two days' running. He had hair dye to give his hair eight or nine different shades, false beards and mustaches, and a dozen complete changes of clothing with accessories. He also had enough skill in using all of these to make the job of picking out the one man under all the disguises nearly impossible even for someone who was deliberately looking for him. As long as nobody was doing that, he was even safer.

Each night Blade would return to the Inn of the Seven Cats. He usually had aching feet, a head splitting from the musty air of the warehouses, and a throat half raw from the endless bargaining. A sailor would

bring him a cup of wine and help him off with his boots, clothing, false beard, eyepatch, and the rest. Then Blade would sit down and write out his report of the day's events. He wrote in a Sea Master code, using the Sea Master's slightly acid ink, on the greased fishskin they used for paper. Such a message could be sunk a mile deep in the crystal seas and then brought up a year later, fully legible.

Usually it was a short report that nothing had happened, plus a set of numbers—a coded location. One of the sailors would take the message, put it in his pouch, and head out of the Inn. He would cover the ground at a good clip, although not fast enough to attract attention.

An hour or so beyond Mestron's walls, the message-bearer would angle down to the sea. He would pull out a small fish-oil lantern, light it with his flint and steel, and wave it in a complex pattern. Then he would wait until out on the dark waves the same pattern was repeated.

A few minutes later one of the Sea Masters would appear in the waves offshore, stride up the beach, and take the message from the sailor. Unseen but always there, two of his comrades would be lurking in the waves, crossbows aimed at the beach. The Sea Master would return to the water and swim out to rejoin his comrades. As the land-messenger made his way homeward, all three Sea Masters would swim still farther out into the sea. They would swim to where the yulon was tethered, release the tether, mount up, and head north.

"A yulon can cover the distance from Mestron to Clintrod in three hours without straining itself," Blade had explained it to Alanyra. "One of the Sea Masters himself could never do it. But fortunately your people tamed the yulons. They are faster than any ship afloat. Using them, we've got an almost perfect solution to one of the oldest problems any spy faces."

"What problem is that?" she asked.

"The problem of getting his information out. Look. I could get into the Emperor's private council chamber and sit under his table while he discusses his plans. I could learn everything I ever wanted to know about them, and more. But if I got caught and killed before I could get out of the palace and tell any of you, it wouldn't do any good. All the information would die with me."

"I see."

Blade couldn't help being slightly proud of his using unfamiliar tools to so thoroughly solve a very familiar problem. He would have been even prouder if there had been any useful information to send out. But night after night, all he could send out was a report of no progress and the code for the next night's rendezvous.

This went on for two weeks. A good chunk of the gold was gone. Even more disturbing, one of the sailors came in one evening to report what he had heard in a tavern on the waterfront.

"They say there be a yulon a-runnin' off the coast, like none ever heard of before."

"Could it be one wandering in from the sea?"

"I doubt it much, Cap'n. The times when they say it's been seen are too much like the comins' and goins' o' ours."

"Damn!" said Blade. All they needed now was for all the sailors and small boats in Mestron to turn out to hunt down a rogue yulon. His cherished message system would be up the creek—or rather, down to

the bottom of the sea.

That night he almost did find it hard to sleep.

But the next morning, after two weeks of sifting sand, he found his first nugget. He found it in the course of an argument with an arms merchant.

"You're charging twenty silver bits apiece for these—these pieces of junk?" Blade sneered, pointing at a stack of crossbows. "I ought to—"

"Oh, ten thousand devils take all you damned bloodsucking buyers!" stormed the merchant. "You want finished crossbows at the price of scrap iron! If you want something that cheap, go to Duke Tymgur's armorers! They can afford to give away their work. The Duke pays them enough, curse them!"

"You're telling tales," said Blade sourly. "Nobody's that rich or that foolish."

The merchant threw his hands into the air, dislodging the wig from his bald and sweaty head. "So you don't believe me? All right, then waste your money. I give up!" He turned away decisively and began rummaging in his desk for a ledger.

Blade would have liked to ask a few more questions but didn't dare risk it. Not here and now, at least. He couldn't afford word getting around too soon that he was unnaturally interested in Duke Tymgur's strange business practices. If it did, his disguise might not be enough to save him. The word might go out to watch for any man asking about Tymgur, and possibly also to follow such a man back to his lodgings. That would be fatal. But for the first time in weeks, Blade allowed himself a small bit of hope as he left the dark warehouse for the glaring sun of the streets.

His hopes were justified. Over the next three days, he was able to pick up a good deal of information by casually dropping Duke Tymgur's name. So casually, in fact, that only a well-trained observer could have detected anything unusual in Blade's words. He had to hope that there were no well-trained observers listening to him or watching his comings and goings.

Gradually he began to build up a picture. As each piece of that picture fell into place, he sent it off in the night's message. Duke Tymgur was pouring much of his immense wealth into subsidizing arms sales to both Sea Masters and Sea Cities. He had begun doing this about the time the war between the two sea peoples became particularly violent. He had a large force of armed retainers on his estates to the north of Mestron, almost a private army. He had immense influence among the nobles and among the officers of the imperial fleet and army, being openhanded with both patronage and money. He was not popular among the arms merchants, whom he constantly undersold.

Blade began to meet with some of those merchants by night, slipping gold into their hands. They said to him things they would not have dared to say in daylight. It did not take long for Blade to finish his picture of what was going on in Nurn and send the last detail of it off to the people waiting aboard Fox at Clintrod.

The last message he sent from the Inn of the Seven Cats read:

I am going tonight to a dealer reputedly in the service of the Duke himself. This is dangerous, but I must visit at least one such before I finish my work here.

There may be a trap laid for me. In case there is, I am having the four sailors move in disguise tonight to

another inn. They will wait for me there. If I do not rejoin them or send word that I am safe within a day, they will head north and go aboard Fox. You will not wait for me after they appear, but set sail at once for Talgar. My disappearance will be the final proof that Duke Tymgur is behind the plot to embroil Talgar and the Sea Masters with each other, to his advantage.

The Goddess be with you. Blade

Blade did not particularly enjoy the prospect of sticking himself up like a lightning rod and seeing what Duke Tymgur would throw at him. But he couldn't see that he had much choice.

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## Chapter FIFTEEN

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Richard Blade was prowling the streets of Mestron, at an hour when they were normally deserted by all honest people. No, that was not true. The Sisters of the Night, the high-class courtesans, were honest in that they gave value for money received. But none of their elegant carriages were within sight or hearing now.

Tonight Blade was not moving through the waterfront warehouses and taverns. He slipped along paths and alleys in a residential quarter, high on a wooded hill a good three miles from the harbor. It was also where Duke Tymgur's agent had promised a meeting.

Blade didn't know the quarter nearly as well as he knew the waterfront. The wooded villas and estates around him could easily hide an ambush. But he had no choice. If Duke Tymgur's agent seriously wanted to do business, that was fine. If he was setting a trap—well, no one could ask better proof of the Duke's treachery than an effort to murder the agent probing into his affairs. Blade hoped that if there was a trap, he could spring it and make his escape. He remembered what he had told Alanyra about getting the word out.

He had taken and was taking all the precautions he could think of. For the last mile he had followed a wandering, unpredictable course toward the rendezvous, to throw off anyone trying to follow him. He avoided patches of light as though they were quicksand and watched from the shadows each time he rounded a corner. His eyes flickered endlessly from side to side, his footsteps were light, and his hand was never far from his sword hilt.

He wore a short-sword and a broadsword on his belt, and all of his garments from hood to boots were dark gray or black. Under his tunic he wore a shirt of fine mail that would keep out all daggers and most swords. In sheaths at wrists and ankles, Blade carried four knives equally well-suited for stabbing or throwing. If there was a better concealed weapon than a good knife for silent killing in any dimension, Blade hadn't met it.

He also carried three signal pots in a pouch on his belt. Thrown down hard, they broke, ignited, and poured out vast clouds of thick greenish-white smoke. They made a signal clearly visible by day. By night they could also make a fleeing man invisible in a moment. Blade wasn't sure whether he was going to be cat or mouse in this game. But he knew that he might change from one to the other in a matter of seconds.

He checked behind him, looking down the street and then searching the wall tops to the left and right of him. No movement, not even a prowling cat or a waving branch. Blade took advantage of the pool of

shadow to do a few limbering-up exercises. Then he stalked on.

He came to the street that led to the agent's villa. He flattened himself against the base of a vine-grown wall. The street stretched out of sight, the gate of the villa clearly visible in the moonlight. There was no other light in the street and none visible through the trees rising above the villa wall. But there was plenty of light for an archer to aim by, and the street was open and bare of cover.

He wasn't going to walk down that street, an easy target for any archer lying in wait. If the agent was honest, and Blade's cautious approach made him uneasy, that was too bad. He could always say that he suspected the villa was being watched by the Emperor's agents. (Probably it was. And suppose they chose this moment to move in? That would solve the problem of Duke Tymgur, to be sure. But it wouldn't be much help to Blade if the Emperor's men stabbed first and asked questions afterward.)

Blade waited until a patch of cloud drifted across the moon. Then he flitted catfooted by the crossroads and dove into a ditch. Now he was at the foot of the villa's wall, around the corner from the gate.

Blade looked up, to the top of the wall. It was no more than eight feet high, overgrown with vines and jostled by small trees. He could see no spikes on top. He waited for another moment of dimmed moonlight. Then he was up the wall with a rush.

He flattened himself on the loose, crumbling bricks on top just long enough to listen for any signs of alarm and look down inside the wall. Vines, bushes, and weedy patches of grass crowded up against the wall. He swung himself down inside the wall, and flattened himself on the damp earth behind one of the bushes.

Still no signs that anyone in the villa was awake, alert, or even alive. If this was a trap, they were obviously waiting until he was well inside to spring it. There it might be hard to fight and impossible to run.

Once more Blade was doing something he had done a score of times before in as many different places. Not always for stakes as high as tonight, though. Tonight was not a matter of scoring points against the Russians or the Chinese or the Albanians. Tonight could make or break the future of two, brave peoples.

In the garden Blade did not need to look for pools of shadow. It was practically all shadow under the trees. He had to look instead for enough light to see where he was going, and also where he had been. He wanted to have an escape route firmly in mind, so that he could make a fast retreat if any of a dozen things went wrong.

Blade moved on. He would dart across thirty feet of open grass and go to earth under a bush. Then he would look in all directions and listen to all the sounds coming in from all sides. There were night-birds giving off gurgling coos, insects whining, and somewhere the sound of water running over stones. No human sounds—no footfalls, no clink of weapons, no voices. If he hadn't known this was a garden, Blade would have said he was alone in a forest miles outside the city.

Then he would creep forward on his hands and knees under the bushes. The slick, close-woven fabric of his clothes shrugged off thorns and branch stubs, but there were always stones and roots to leave bruises. Sweat ran down his face. It would not damage his dark camouflage grease, but it did attract swarms of insects. They whined and darted around his face and into his eyes.

Blade's caution paid off just when he had nearly decided that it wouldn't. As he flattened himself against a vast, gnarled tree nearly eight feet thick, he saw a high hedge about fifty feet ahead. Light shone through it, revealing a stone-flagged walk on the other side. The light also silhouetted a number of human heads

on the nearer side of the hedge.

Blade practically stopped breathing while he counted the men lying in wait. There were at least ten. Two had crossbows; the others seemed to carry swords or battle axes. As one of them half rose, the light revealed his face more clearly. Blade sucked in his breath. It was Stipors' henchman, the officer who had helped conduct the interrogation of the prisoners returning from the Sea Masters.

So Tymgur's agent was laying a trap for him. That meant Tymgur's plots were proved beyond any further doubt. With Stipors' man involved, that also meant the Autocrat for War was deep in the plot with Tymgur.

Did he have notions of being Tymgur's Viceroy over Talgar when the Sea Cities were weakened enough to be easy prey for the Duke? Blade didn't know or care. Right now, the best thing for him to do was to glide quietly away into the darkness, his mission accomplished, and get himself and his men out of Mestron as fast as possible.

But he didn't want to leave yet. Even a few minutes' eavesdropping might add details that could help break up the plot faster. Blade had always been reluctant to drop an inquiry until he had found out everything possible. He crept forward another ten feet and flattened himself under a bush. Again he hardly breathed as he lay and listened.

The Talgaran renegade seemed to be in command. He also seemed to be in a vile temper, swatting noisily at the insects and muttering under his breath. Blade caught snatches of those mutterings.

"Why—we out here—eating us alive—Durkas staying inside with his pleasure girl—trouble for us if—"

Another voice floated out of the shadows. "Is the gate open?"

"Course 'tis, you fool," said a third voice. "We want—"

"Shhhhhhhh!" came from the officer. Apparently he had suddenly realized that silence might be wise for a party lying in ambush. The silence descended.

It lasted for less than a minute. As that minute drew to a close, a raw, full-throated scream tore through the night air. It was a woman screaming in terrible agony and fear. In the few seconds after the scream, things happened very quickly.

The officer rose to his feet with a curse. "Damn Durkas! His games—" He turned toward the bush where Blade lay.

In the house voices shouted and feet pounded. Another scream came, then a window flew open with a crash.

Yellow lamplight flooded out into the garden through the open window.

By that light, the officer saw Blade crouching under the bush.

In the next few seconds, Blade made several more things happen.

In a single snap of trained muscles, he was on his feet. His arm jerked once, and a throwing knife slipped down into his right hand. His arm rose and jerked a second time. The knife flashed once in the air, then

flashed a second time as it buried itself in the officer's chest. Blade heard a solid chunk as the hilt slammed hard up against the ribs and knew that it was in more than deep enough to kill. The ambush party had lost a leader and Stipors had lost a henchman.

But nine more men were too many to fight in the dark on unknown ground. Before the officer had hit the ground, Blade was sprinting along the hedge, away from the house. The hedge was just too high for Blade to leap with this much armor and weaponry on his body. Instead he covered fifty feet in a matter of seconds, ducked behind a tree, and hauled himself up into its branches. Pushing off with arms and legs together, he sailed down over the thick hedge. He landed lightly on his feet on the walk, facing the house. It was blazing with lights now, but there was no sign of anyone coming out the bronze-shod door. Blade didn't wait. He spun about and headed for the gate.

He went down the path like a lion running down a fat buck, and came pelting up to the gate.

It was unlocked but not unguarded. A man stood on either side of it, one armed with a bow, one with a sword. The archer backed away and the swordsman came forward, so that Blade had to defend himself against the second man first. He would rather have taken out the man with the long-range weapon, but there was no way to manage that.

His own sword flew clear of its scabbard and up under the thrust of the guard. It struck the other's sword up with a clang. Before the man could bring it down again to restore his guard, Blade thrust upward. His point went up into the man's chin and kept on going until it rammed into the brain. The man's mouth and eyes opened and gushed blood. Blade jerked his sword from the falling body and a smoke pot from his pouch.

He was a little too slow. As the green smoke rolled up around the gate and hid him from the archer, the crossbow went spung. Sharp steel tore through the flesh of Blade's thigh, clattering on the stones behind him. Blade winced but kept moving. His second wrist dagger dropped into his left hand as he closed with the dim shape of the archer. The other was still backing away, struggling to reload his bow, when Blade's dagger drove up into him below the ribs. Blade left the dagger in the body and bolted out of the gate.

He did not stop to examine his wound. There wasn't time to do anything but run as fast as he could for as long as he could. If he could lose himself in the darkness before Durkas's bravos started combing the streets—

But as he ran, he knew that he wasn't going to be able to keep going that fast for that long. It was only a flesh wound the bolt had given him, but it was a flesh wound deep enough to be costing him a lot of blood. He could not run on too long without stopping to bandage the wound. Even after that, it would give him a stiff leg before too long.

He would have to go to earth somewhere among the villas, under the bushes in somebody's garden, and stay there for a while. Certainly until the immediate hue and cry had died down; perhaps until daybreak increased traffic on the streets enough that he might slip along unnoticed. He would have to move fast and hope that Durkas would balk at searching the villas of all his neighbors—or they would balk him.

Blade kept on without slowing or looking back for a good five minutes, ignoring the burning flame in his thigh. He turned each time he came to a corner, zigzagging away from Durkas's villa on what he hoped would soon become a completely unpredictable course.

Eventually the pain reminded him that he could not run much farther without paying attention to the wound. He dropped into a ditch, then poked his head up from the long grass. As far as he could see in



either direction, the road was empty under the moonlight. That light was getting paler too. Blade looked up and saw a solid mass of clouds marching up from the west, slowly shutting out the stars. And there was the smell of rain in the air. Good. In half an hour it would be pitch-dark and hopefully pouring down rain. An army of men with bloodhounds would find it hard to follow his trail then.

He looked up the wall on the other side of the ditch. This wall was a good twelve feet high, and there were no handy trees or vines close by to help him. He looked along the wall. On the other side of the entrance road and the ornate gate, two stout saplings grew within a foot of the wall and rose high above it. Blade started crawling along the ditch. It was overgrown with rank grass and occasional nettles, and its bottom was slimy mud and foul-smelling water. By the time Blade reached the gate, he was soaked to the skin and plastered with slime, sweating, gritting his teeth at the pain in his leg, and thoroughly foul-tempered.

He reached the entrance road and flattened himself in the grass, getting ready for a quick rush into the ditch on the other side. He checked up and down the road. The darkness was increasing, and he heard a distant rumble of thunder to the west.

Then two things happened together. Far down the road, Blade saw ghost-dim figures moving purposefully toward him. With a squeal of long-uncoiled hinges, the villa gate began to open. From inside he heard the clop-clop of hooves and the rumble of wheels.

The searchers were still a good hundred yards away, so Blade risked a quick look through the opening gate. Coming down the road at a good walk was one of the ornate four-wheeled carriages of the Sisters of the Night. High on the upholstered driver's seat rode the driver and his assistant. They both had their eyes fixed firmly on their horses and the road ahead. Blade grinned. Not for a moment did the two men look to either side of the carriage, still less behind it.

Blade tensed. If he could make his move before the searchers got close enough to see him make it. He looked behind him. The searching party had stopped and spread out across the road. They seemed to be poking spears or poles down into the ditch on either side. This was going to be bloody close!

The carriage rumbled past. Blade came out of the ditch like a striking rattlesnake. His wounded leg almost betrayed him, slowing him by a heart-stopping fraction of a second. He felt the left rear wheel of the carriage brush his foot. Then he was safely under the carriage, hauling himself up into place to cling like a monkey to the center-pole as it rumbled out into the road. He twined arms and legs around the polished wood to lock his grip, then settled down to enjoy the ride.

A second later he wondered if there would be any ride, except perhaps in a covered cart to a dumping ground for unwanted bodies. A harsh voice shouted "Halt!" from ahead, carrying over even the rumble of iron-tired wheels and the creak of the leather cords that acted in place of springs. The carriage slowed and stopped, and Blade heard the same voice calling out.

"We are of the service of the Lord Durkas. We seek an escaped slave, a most dangerous and wicked man."

"Durkas?" came a voice from inside the carriage. It was a woman's voice, full-bodied, bell-clear, strong. It held a note that Blade couldn't quite identify.

"Yes, Sister Brigeda," said the man. His voice seemed a little less harsh.

"I have seen no one pass by," said the woman. "I have only—" A prolonged rumble of thunder, very

close, drowned out the rest of her sentence.

As the thunder died away, Blade heard the man saying, "I grant that you have not had much chance. But it is the Lord Durkas's orders, Sister."

"The Lord Durkas is not my master, soldier," said the woman. This time the harshness was in her voice. "If he wishes my carriage searched, let him come himself."

Blade tensed. If the carriage was searched, and if the soldiers had half a brain, they would look underneath, Then—

Before he could complete that thought, a sound like the crack of doom slammed down from above. Blade felt the whole carriage jerk as the horses jumped in fright, and he nearly lost his grip on the center-pole. Then came a sulphurous blast of hot air, the sound of cracking, splintering wood, a heavy thud, and the swelling roar of falling rain.

Blade heard curses from the bravos standing all around the carriage and the sound of thudding feet as they ran for cover. Then the driver's whip cracked and the carriage lurched forward, rapidly picking up speed. The sound of the bravos faded rapidly away behind. Blade grinned again. Whatever the argument with Durkas's bravos, Sister Brigeda obviously wasn't going to sit around in the rain to finish it. And he doubted if the bravos would feel much like taking up pursuit. Not in this weather, and not without Stipors' officer driving them on.

Before too long Blade had to stop grinning in triumph and concentrate on holding on. The whip-crackings came almost continuously as the driver steadily lashed the horses up to a gallop. The carriage thundered along in a deafening chorus of rattles and bangs and creaks and groans. Every shock and jar seemed to go clear through Blade, until he felt that his flesh was about to be shaken off his bones and his bones shaken apart. He could only hang on and grit his teeth at the pain of his wound.

The carnage rumbled on through the rainstorm, jolting and lurching from side to side. Either Sister Brigeda didn't care how much she was bounced around, or she was more interested in getting home and out of the rain than anything else. Blade didn't blame her.

The streets were becoming slick with the rain. Several times the carriage swerved violently and nearly went into a skid. The fast-turning wheels began to throw up spray. Bit by bit, it soaked through Blade's already damp and filthy clothes. He began to feel cold water trickling down inside his collar and a prickling in his nose. He had to fight back an urge to sneeze violently.

Before much longer he was having to fight back an even more dangerous urge. It was an urge to loosen his grip, drop to the pavement, and lie there quietly and fade away. He knew where it came from; loss of blood was getting to him. He also knew he had to fight it. But that didn't make the fighting any easier.

He clenched his teeth until he could taste the salt of blood on his lower lip. He tightened the grip of his hands until he felt the nails digging into his flesh. He ran mathematical formulas, remnants of his public-school Greek, orders for long-forgotten missions through his head. Anything to fight off that urge to let go, to give up.

Blade was concentrating so completely on the fight to hold on that it was a while before he realized the carriage was slowing down. The rumble of the wheels was softer, the jolts less violent, the spray not so high. Blade had just realized this, when the driver's voice shouted out from above.

"Whoa!"

The carriage rumbled to a stop. Then Blade heard the door open, and the carriage tilted slightly as Sister Brigeda climbed out. Blade got ready to let go and duck for cover. Then another door opened and footsteps and voices sounded all around the carriage. From the words, Sister Brigeda's household staff was welcoming their mistress home. Blade gritted his teeth again and held on. When they had all gone—

But before the voices died away, the driver's whip cracked and the carriage started up again. Blade nearly swore out loud. He held on grimly while the carriage rolled slowly down a short stretch of cobblestones, then turned to the right.

More voices and footsteps sounded around the carriage. Men's voices, this time. Sister Brigeda's stablehands were going to work. Blade saw rag-bound feet around the carriage and heard the sounds of horses being unharnessed and led away. The carriage moved slowly and jerkily forward for perhaps thirty feet. Then it stopped. A moment later the feet vanished, the voices died away, and then a large door shut with a thump and a rattle.

Blade clung to the center-pole for a little longer. He wanted to be absolutely sure that everybody was gone away to stay. Then he let go, and dropped with a thud onto the floor of the coachhouse.

He lay there quietly, not moving until he felt his head clearing and some circulation and feeling returning to his cramped limbs. Then he rolled over on his side and began tearing away the cloth around the wound in his thigh. The blood had clotted so solidly that he finally stopped, rather than risk reopening the wound to pack or dress it.

Presently his leg stopped throbbing and he tested it. It still hurt like blazes, but he could walk if not run. Now to get out of Sister Brigeda's coachhouse and limp to the rendezvous with the sailors. Fortunately he wouldn't have to—

On the other side of the coachhouse, a door opened.

Blade froze where he was, then silently crawled back under the carriage. He felt like cursing, not silently. Of all the damned times for someone to come in!

He heard footsteps, the sound of the door shutting, then two voices, both young, one male, one female. The footsteps moved along the wall to Blade's right. A faint glow crept in under the carriage as one of the newcomers lit a candle. Then Blade heard the unmistakable rustle of clothes being taken off and the plop of them dropping on the floor.

A moment later the girl gave a soft little whimper. There was another kind of rustling sound and a grunt from the boy. Then another unmistakable sound—the furious thud of flesh against flesh as the couple went at it with all the eagerness in their young bodies.

In the pale yellowish light of the candle, Blade could see writhing shadows on the gray stone floor of the coachhouse. He could also see a slim tanned leg, obviously female, hanging down in front of a background of hay bales.

It was also obviously moving in the grip of steadily mounting passion, kicking higher and higher.

Blade sighed. It was tempting to make his break now, while the two were approaching climax. Odds were they would neither notice nor bother him, not in that state of mind and body. But he decided to play

it safe. Unless they were going to go to sleep and spend the night? Unlikely. He lowered himself off his elbows and tried to relax. The chorus of gasps and flesh surging against flesh was getting louder and faster.

Then something bit Blade sharply in the ear. He was so completely surprised that he snapped with a yell. His head crashed into the underside of the carriage with a jolt that dislodged the rat and nearly knocked him unconscious. For a moment blackness shot with sparks, and explosions swirled in front of his eyes.

The girl let out a scream like a steam whistle at Blade's yell, and jerked violently. With a thud the young lovers toppled off the hay bales, landing still entangled on the coachhouse floor.

Half stunned, Blade came out from under the carriage too slowly. By the time he had lurched to his feet, the young man had done the same. He had also grabbed up a pitchfork.

As Blade slowly stood up, the girl kept on screaming. In fact she was too busy screaming to make any effort to put her clothes on. The young man—he could hardly be more than seventeen—was wide-eyed and naked as a baby. The pitchfork shook in his hands. But he held his ground, meeting Blade's eyes with the determined stare of a man willing to die to defend his woman.

Normally Blade would have drawn his sword and dispatched an opponent like this in ten seconds flat. But damn it, he couldn't kill this boy and his girl! So he held out both hands in a peaceful gesture. "Be quiet, please. I'm not—"

But the boy apparently thought Blade was going to attack him bare-handed. The tines of the pitchfork darted forward like the head of a snake. Blade had to step aside in a hurry to avoid being pinned like a butterfly against the door of the carriage.

He drew his broadsword and raised it, intending to chop in a disarming stroke. He still didn't want to hurt or kill the young idiot!

But fatigue and loss of blood and the blow on the head had slowed Blade more than he had realized. As he closed in, the boy reversed his grip on the pitchfork and swung the handle in a roundhouse arc. Blade's sword rose, but not fast enough. Instead of being chopped in half, the pitchfork handle swung through its arc and smashed into the side of Blade's head.

Again he saw blackness shot through with fireworks. He reeled back against the carriage, trying desperately to hold onto his sword. But the boy stepped back and brought the pitchfork handle down full-strength on Blade's sword arm. His fingers opened numbly, and the sword clattered to the floor.

Blade was trying to stay on his feet and draw his other sword, when the door of the coachhouse flew open. Three men waving pikes dashed in and formed a circle around Blade. He bared his teeth in a defiant grin. Normally three men and a boy would have been easy meat for him. But this time he knew he would be too weak, too slow. But at least he was going out on his feet.

Blade had drawn the short-sword and was getting ready to fend off the pikeheads when light, fast-moving footsteps sounded outside the door. Then a slim, white-clad figure with dark hair was silhouetted against the darkness outside.

"Sister Brigeda!" exclaimed one of the pikemen. "This isn't—"

"Wait!" the woman said sharply. "Where did this one come from?"

"He was hiding under the carriage when-when—" the boy began. Then he stammered and blushed scarlet all over as he remembered how Blade had caught him and the girl.

A smile flickered across the courtesan's face as she looked at the naked boy and girl. "Go and get some clothes on, children," she said calmly. "The rest of you, escort this man up to the Fourth Chamber."

"Sister?" said one of the pikemen inquiringly. "I do not under—"

"You fool," Brigeda said, not angrily, but as though she was stating a simple fact. "This must be the escaped slave of Durkas."

"But if he is, then he is dan—"

"You do ill to argue with me, Fturn," said Brigeda. "Do you think Durkas would ever tell the truth in such a matter?"

"No, but—"

"The man will go to the Fourth Chamber," said Brigeda. "At once. Or you will go to the quarries tomorrow morning."

There was a dangerous moment of tension before the man's shoulders slumped and he nodded and turned away. Blade had been wondering what he could do to help Sister Brigeda if her servants turned on her. But obviously she had the force of character to keep them all in obedience without his help. A formidable woman. If she was really interested in helping him— But if she was going to be an enemy, it would be like falling into the den of a she-tiger.

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## Chapter SIXTEEN

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The three guards escorted Blade up to the Fourth Chamber as nervously as if they had been escorting a virgin princess to her wedding chamber. It took all the strength Blade could find not to fall on his face on the thick red carpet in the hallway.

Three maidservants took over from the pikemen when Blade reached the Fourth Chamber. Two were fresh-faced and smiling, but the third wore a veil that left only one brown eye visible out of her whole face. All three bustled about as eagerly as puppies, stripping off Blade's filthy clothing, sponging him with herb-scented hot water, and massaging the kinks and knots out of his muscles. He lay face down on the big feather bed, letting them work, until the tension and strain left his mind.

But he didn't relax too much. So far Sister Brigeda and her servants had done nothing that suggested he was in any danger. But he couldn't rule out some future plots, which he might be helpless to resist. He couldn't even use most of his unarmed combat skills, not wounded and exhausted as he was. However, he needed the treatment he was getting. That was for certain. And if there was going to be treachery afterward, Blade was sure he could at least take a number of Sister Brigeda's household with him.

However, the next person to come into the chamber was not an assassin. It was another maidservant, pushing a wheeled cart with several dishes on it. There was cold cheese and bread and meat and hot

wine. Blade looked at the cart hungrily and heard his stomach rumble ominously. But he shook his head at the maid. Once again he would take no chances with drugged food or wine. He would have to speak to Sister Brigeda herself before he could be sure if it was safe for him to eat and drink in her house.

"You are not hungry," said the maid with the veiled face.

"I am not," said Blade. He hoped his stomach wouldn't rumble again, loudly enough to prove him a liar.

It didn't. But his words apparently weren't enough to convince them. All four sat down cross-legged on the rug and stared at him. Occasionally their eyes wandered from Blade to the food and back again. The silence in the room thickened like a fog. Blade wondered how long he could refuse the food and wine without giving offense.

The silence was broken by the arrival of Sister Brigeda herself. Her flashing dark eyes took in the whole scene—Blade lying in bed, the untouched food, the staring girls—in a single sweeping glance. Then she lowered her eyes to the maids and jerked her head toward the door. Almost with a single motion, they sprang to their feet and scurried out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind them.

Brigeda sat down on the blue velvet cushion in the far corner of the room and stared at Blade. He thought he detected amusement in those dark eyes. He stared back, taking in the woman. There were wrinkles around her eyes and a bit of sagging skin on her neck; she must be forty or well past it. But otherwise she showed no signs of a life spent at her ancient and demanding profession. Her skin was smooth and high colored, her swept-back hair glossy black, her figure still almost girlishly slender and quick in its movements. Only a large jutting beak of a nose marred her features. No, not marred. Gave them character—a character that made Blade think of a bird of prey ready to plunge on a victim. The look in the wide dark eyes matched that air.

But Brigeda's red lips curled in a smile before she spoke. That smile didn't take the edge off Blade's alertness.

"You are not really an escaped slave of Durkas's, are you?"

Blade found it easy to decide that lying to this woman would be a bad move. Perhaps a fatal one.

"No, I am not."

"In fact, you are not any kind of escaped slave from anybody's household, are you?"

"I am not a slave at all, Sister Brigeda." Blade made his voice as flat and menacing as possible.

Brigeda ignored the tone. "I thought so. You have the mark of someone's trusted henchman. Not Durkas or Tymgur, I hope."

Blade's training held. He let the remark pass without showing any sign of surprise. But he noted the unmistakable hostility in Brigeda's voice when she said the Duke's name.

Then he shook his head.

"Good. Do you serve the Emperor?"

Blade was tempted to say yes. If Brigeda was loyal to the Emperor, as seemed likely, she would never

dream of touching an imperial agent. But balanced against that chance of safety was the chance of being caught out in a lie. Once more Blade decided against lying to Sister Brigeda.

"I do not."

That apparently stopped the courtesan in mid-thought. Her high forehead wrinkled into a puzzled frown, which Blade watched with interest, almost with relief.

"Who—who is your master, then?"

Blade did not hesitate. It was the right moment to add to his psychological edge, and the best way to do that was to tell the truth.

"Krodrus, the Autocrat for Finance of the Sea Cities of Talgar."

That not only stopped Brigeda's thoughts, but nearly stopped her breath. There was another long silence. Blade thought of also mentioning the Sea Masters, but decided against it. It would certainly further amaze Sister Brigeda, but the Sea Master-Talgaran alliance was too important a secret to reveal right now.

Besides, Blade wanted to keep his escape route open.

The silence went on and on, until Blade wondered if Sister Brigeda was ever going to speak again. Finally she shook her head and raised one hand to her immaculately coiffed hair. It was the first nervous gesture Blade had seen her make.

"How-how does Talgar send—spies—into Nurn?"

"Through a newly discovered wisdom. They suspect plots against them among the nobles of Nurn, seek to discover who is plotting, and how to foil him."

Brigeda's calm sagged a little further. Her hand went to her mouth, and her eyes widened.  
"You—suspect anyone?"

"We do." Once again Blade made his voice as flat as possible.

"Who?" Brigeda's question was almost a sob.

"Why should I tell you?" said Blade. This time he put a deliberate chill into his voice, intending to shock.

If it shocked at all, it shocked Brigeda back into a more sober mood. "To avoid being taken down into my cellar and—asked—who it is, until you will beg for the opportunity to tell me and my Sisters."

"I will die before that happens. You may, and many of your household certainly will." Blade put a bantering note in his voice. "There will be blood and bodies all over your house, your business will be wrecked, and I will be as dead as an iron spike. What good will that do you, Sister?"

Brigeda had apparently expected her cool threat to intimidate Blade. When it didn't, she was once again at a loss for words. Blade decided to take a small risk to improve his position. It was only a small risk, for he had made plans against this sort of situation before parting with the four sailors.

"In any case, what can you do without my men?"

"Your men?"

"Yes, my men. Do you think an Autocrat of Talgar is such a fool as to send a man against the nobles of Nurn alone? I will need my comrades with me if I am to help you against your—enemy. If that is what you want, of course."

"Oh yes." There was no mistaking the eagerness in Brigeda's voice.

"Good. Then I will tell you where my men may be found, and you can send your most trusted servant to them with a message. The message will be in a code, so there will be no danger to your man. But it will assure my men that I am safe and tell them to cooperate with you." It would tell them a few other things as well, but those were better not mentioned. "Can you do that?"

Brigeda swallowed, then nodded. "My steward will go forth this very night." She swallowed again. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes," said Blade. "You can leave me alone to get some sleep." Nothing was going to happen for at least twelve hours. After that a lot might happen very fast, and Blade wanted to be ready.

Brigeda nodded and left on silent feet.

She was back again only a little more than the twelve hours later. She was not silent as she stormed through the door, waving a bloodstained piece of paper, but cursing like a fishwife. Her eyes blazed and her finely chiseled nostrils flared. Blade could see her breast heaving under her tight bodice as she sucked in air.

Then she burst out furiously at Blade.

"You wretched, slimy traitor! Do you know what your men did? They took Jeshorn prisoner, and they're holding him and torturing him and—oh gods! They sent this message back, and—what are you doing? What—you—mmmmfggggg!" as Blade rolled out of bed, scooped her up with one arm, and slapped the other hand over her mouth.

He carried her to the bed, clasped both her hands in one of his, and kept the other over her mouth. "Do you promise not to move or speak until I've finished?" Silence. "If you don't, I'll have to bind and gag you, and that would be silly." She nodded. "Don't play any tricks, either. If you do, you'll certainly never get my support even if you live long enough to need it." Brigeda moaned, and nodded frantically.

"Good." Blade let her stretch out on the bed, then stepped over to the door, locked it, and stood with his back to it.

"Now, Sister. Let's put an end to this playing of children's games. You must have thought me a fool, if you thought I would blurt out my plans simply at your little threat. But you made me wonder what you might be planning. So I had to arrange for your steward to be captured to provide for my own safety—just in case. I would have been just as big a fool if I had not done that. All this has taken nearly a day, a day that's been practically wasted. I don't think we have that much time to waste.



"You want to do something to—or about Duke Tymgur and Durkas, don't you?"

"Only Durkas," said Sister Brigeda quietly. "We know Duke Tymgur is beyond our reach. But Durkas—" She broke off and clenched her fists until the knuckles were white.

"Very well, Durkas." Again Blade decided a part of his plans should remain secret. "So do I—so do we, in Talgar. I think you want my help. In fact, I think you desperately need it, otherwise you would not have threatened me. And if you could have found anyone to work against Durkas before this, he would not be troubling either of us."

Sister Brigeda's face was working as she listened to Blade strip her plans and schemes naked. Before he had finished, he saw tears glistening in the corners of both dark eyes.

"So why play any more games?" he finished. "I think we have a common purpose and a common enemy. If you will tell me why the Sisters of the Night call Durkas their enemy, I will tell you the same for the Sea Cities. Then we can begin planning."

Brigeda's mouth dropped open. "You want to see—hear—why we hold Durkas an enemy?"

"Yes."

She hesitated. "May I call one of my household?"

Blade nodded. "Certainly. But no tricks."

"I promise." Brigeda rose and went to the door, opened it, and called down the stairs.

"Send Sister Clarda to the Fourth Chamber." Brigeda closed the door and turned back into the room.

"Durkas—" She swallowed. "Durkas is a man of—strange tastes. He loves—pain, and women screaming. Sister Clarda went to him some years ago on a contract. She came back, but no other Sister has ever gone since. He must make do with girls from the slave pens or kidnapped from other households."

Blade nodded. "He must do fairly well. I heard a woman screaming when I was in his garden the other night."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs outside. Then came a soft voice. "Brigeda, it is I, Clarda."

"Come in, my Sister."

The door opened and the young woman with the veiled face slipped in. She stood silently for a moment, and Blade found himself oddly uncomfortable under her stare. Then Brigeda nodded and said quietly, "Remove your veil, Clarda."

The veil dropped to the floor. Blade kept his face straight with an effort as he saw what lay underneath it. Clarda had been beautiful—once. Then someone had slashed her face deeply from scalp to chin, using a sawtoothed edge, leaving a dreadful gouge and taking out her left eye. She wore a green silk patch over what must have been a mutilated and empty socket, for which Blade was grateful.

"This was Durkas's work," said Brigeda. "Do you need to look at it any longer?"

"No," said Blade.

"You may go, Clarda." The younger Sister pulled her veil back on with desperate haste and fumbling fingers, then vanished out the door.

Blade turned to Sister Brigeda. "I begin to think that I can indeed trust you. If Durkas did this ... You want vengeance on him?"

"For this and much else. If you will help bring him into our hands, he will suffer as have all his girls before we leave his head before Tymgur's gate." She paused. "And now—you promised to tell me, why the Sea Cities had a quarrel with Durkas."

Blade had his answer ready. "He is conspiring with our Autocrat for War, Stipors, to sow dissension and civil war in Talgar. He has dreams of using the war between us and the Fishmen to give himself influence in the Sea Cities."

"Durkas has these dreams?" said Brigeda. "Not Duke Tymgur, his master?"

"Not that I know of," said Blade. He hoped he was still able to lie with a straight face well enough to deceive Brigeda.

Apparently he was. She sighed with obvious relief and stood up. "Then it is settled, Blade. If you will give your men proper instructions, I will give the same to mine. We can easily lay a trap for Durkas, and when that trap springs shut, he will be in our hands. And then he will suffer. Oh, how he will suffer!"

Once more Blade kept his face straight. Durkas was not going to be thrown to the Sisters of the Night for their vengeance, although he certainly deserved to be. He was too important to the future of the Sea Cities—and the Sea Masters. Some complicated planning would be needed to get Durkas safely away without unnecessary bloodshed. But Brigeda had told him to give his men proper instructions. He would certainly do that. Some of those instructions, though, might come as a surprise to the Sister.

Then he looked at Brigeda. She was still standing, looking down at him. Her eyes were no longer tear-filled, but they were wide and glittering with a strange intensity. She licked her lips and spoke.

"Blade." Silence. "I—I am a Sister who receives two thousand gold crowns for one night. One night. Yet—somehow I feel that tonight—I want to be only a woman. No, not even that. A girl—an ordinary girl, perhaps with her first man. You—you have answered so many of my dreams and prayers, Blade. Answer one more for me, for you are—beautiful."

Blade didn't need much time to interpret that sort of invitation or to respond to it. If he ever did, he would probably be getting unfit for his job.

He crossed the room in two quick steps. Brigeda's arms rose to meet him and go around him. They were surprisingly strong arms, as slender as they were. What was not surprising was the skill of those swift-moving hands of hers.

They stroked his eyes and up over his forehead, then down his cheeks, across his ears, plucked at his earlobes, then went on and on and on. After a while Blade realized they were gliding down off his face and down inside the heavy chamber robe he wore. He bent his head and tipped up Brigeda's, until their lips met. Her lips were as experienced and expert as her hands. So was her tongue, sleek, warm and

wet, crawling out and curling under and over his. Blade began to feel a warmth that wasn't in the air of the chamber, and his breathing quickened. His hands drifted down along Brigeda's back, pressing into the elegant curve of her spine and on her small perfectly formed buttocks. He heard her gasp.

Her hands now plunged down farther under the robe, pressing against the flat muscles of his rib cage and stroking the flat stomach. But they did not stop there. They plunged farther down and grasped Blade's swollen maleness. It had already risen to meet them as they came down to close around it, so that it hardly needed their gentle warmth on it. But incredibly it stiffened still further as Brigeda's hands touched it. Blade began to feel as though he had a rod of steel jutting from his groin.

Before they did anything permanent, though, Brigeda's hands left Blade's groin. They rose to undo the belt of the chamber robe, so that Blade could shrug it off and stand naked, and Brigeda could press herself hard against that nakedness. Blade wasted no more time, but went to work reducing the Sister to the same nakedness. Perhaps it should have been a long, slow, luxurious job. But Blade was too impatient and too aroused not to be clumsy. Nor did Sister Brigeda mind the sound of tearing cloth. In fact, as her last garment dropped away, she bent to nuzzle her face into Blade's groin. Then those full lips closed eloquently around his swollen phallus.

Blade could almost wish she had not done that. Not only was it a horrible strain on his self-control, it distracted him from admiring her naked beauty. And there was too much of it to admire. Blade forced his attention off those skillful lips and looked down.

Everything about Sister Brigeda's body suggested the girl she felt like, rather than the woman she was. The line of her neck was perfect, with just the smallest hint of the cords. That line flowed smoothly into slim, slightly freckled shoulders, with little hollows below the shoulder blades. Those hollows rose and flowed with exquisite grace into the breasts—small, perfectly rounded, with enormous long nipples now thrusting far, far out in their red-black splendor.

Below those breasts a board-flat stomach, curving gracefully down to a patch of fine blue-black hair between the freckled thighs. Long lovely legs, small arched feet—the catalogue could go on for hours.

Perhaps the catalogue could, but Blade knew that he certainly could not. If he stood and submitted to those lips much longer, something irreparable was going to happen. He bent slightly, locked his fingers in Brigeda's hair, and gently pulled her head back from his groin. Her lips slipped once warmly along his maleness, then they were gone.

Before his erection could complain or falter, Blade had lifted Brigeda and laid her down on the bed. But she wriggled to one side as he descended. Half dazed with his arousal as he was, he found himself being turned around and turned over on his back. His erection jutted upwards as Brigeda came down onto it. She was a snug, maddening fit.

The madness rose in both of them more rapidly than before, as Brigeda twisted and turned and gyrated, up, down, and around. Sometimes she would pull back until she was almost free, then shove herself downward until Blade wondered how much room she had inside.

A lot, obviously.

But no matter how much room Brigeda had within, what she was doing was driving her steadily higher and higher. Her eyes were glazed when they weren't entirely closed, her breath came in gasps, her nipples were impossibly stiff and jutting, her skin was flushed and running with sweat. As for Blade, he found himself having to grit his teeth as glorious agony filled him. It rose higher and higher within him, and

within Brigeda. It was going to overflow.

It did. Brigeda went as rigid as a statue, and let out a scream as though she were being impaled on something much sharper than Blade's maleness. Then she sagged forward, her eyes closed and her mouth open and slack. Before she could collapse on Blade, his own spasm tore through him. He rose to meet her, and they thrashed together in a tangle of writhing arms and legs for a long time, until they were both completely empty and exhausted. Still entangled, they drifted off to sleep.

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## Chapter SEVENTEEN

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Again Blade was prowling through the dark streets of Mestron. This time he was down among the warehouses along the waterfront, and he was not alone. There were nine men with him—three of his four sailors and six picked fighting men from the households of various Sisters of the Night. The whole Sisterhood had an interest in tonight's affair. They wanted to make sure Durkas was not only taken, but kept.

With six of their picked guards against Blade's three sailors, the Sisters no doubt thought they had taken care of the matter. Under other circumstances they might have been right. But Blade had laid plans of his own.

That was why he had only three sailors with him. The fourth had gone south to Clintrod, Gershon, and Sea Fox. If he got through with his message, Durkas wasn't going to be the only person in Mestron getting a surprise tonight.

A whisper reached his ears from off to the right—Fturn, Brigeda's chief guard.

"Nearly there, Blade."

"Good."

The ten men slipped catfooted into the shadows of a warehouse loading dock. Eight of them drew their swords and flattened themselves on the damp, filthy stones under the dock. Blade and Fturn remained standing, to keep watch for Durkas.

The steward was supposed to arrive in a few minutes, not suspecting anything, his mind on picking half a dozen prime girls for his amusements. The story that had gone to him was that these were kidnapped free girls, some still proud and resisting. That was the kind he liked most but found hardest to get, for he could only obtain them illegally, by such nighttime deals as this. And because the whole affair was illegal, Brigeda was sure that Durkas would not bring a strong guard. At least not one so strong that ten picked fighting men couldn't dispose of it quickly, thoroughly, and silently.

Blade hoped Brigeda was right. Otherwise he was risking himself and his men and wasting time for nothing. And if Durkas was not as much in Tymgur's confidence as rumor had it

Footsteps sounded at the top of the street; four or five men were coming along at a brisk jog as though they owned the waterfront. Perhaps Durkas thought he did. He was about to discover differently. Blade pulled his mask down over his eyes and forehead. He wanted to make the first move himself. That meant getting close to Durkas unrecognized.

The footsteps were louder now. Was it his imagination, or did Blade hear a gleeful chuckling? If he did, that could only be Durkas. And if the steward's mind was so filled with anticipation of future pleasures

Five hooded figures rounded the corner of the warehouse at a trot. Blade stepped out of the shadows and went down on one knee in a ceremonial bow.

"Greetings, Master."

The five stopped dead but did not spread out. Blade noted that and smiled thinly. This might be very easy. His eyes searched the group, picking out one man stouter than the others and standing a little to the fore. Durkas.

"You have the wares?"

"We do."

"In there?" A thumb jerked up, pointing at the warehouse door.

"Indeed, Master." Blade took a deep breath. "And we bid you enter."

That was the signal for Fturn and the men under the loading dock to lunge forward. They came out swiftly, silently, with only a faint padding of feet to give warning, swords and daggers blackened to give no betraying flashes of light.

Blade did not pay them any attention once he heard them on the move. His goal was Durkas. And he did not run. For a man trained like Blade, the steward was in easy range. Blade covered the six feet between them in a single leap.

His sandaled feet drove into the steward's stomach in a blow certain to disable the man but unlikely to kill him. The steward doubled up, then toppled to one side. Blade twisted in midair to avoid landing full force on the toppling man's chest, went down on the pavement, rolled on his shoulders, and came up.

As he did, one of Durkas's guards rushed him, sword raised for a downstroke. But the man had raised the sword a bit too high. He could not bring it down before Blade twisted again, bringing one foot hard against the side of the guard's left knee. Blade felt bone crack, saw the sword falter and swing down clear of him, then sprang to his feet. He grabbed the man by his sword arm, twisted it hard to disarm him, then heaved. The guard flew clear over Blade's shoulder so fast that he had no time to scream or even gasp. After that it was too late for him to do or say anything at all. He came down squarely on his skull. The crunch and crackle of skull and spine told Blade that at least one guard would never tell anybody anything about this night's work.

As he looked around, he realized that neither would the other three guards. Both the sailors and Fturn's men had obeyed his orders to kill, swiftly, silently, and without mercy. All except Durkas. But Blade hadn't been worried about him. The Sisters of the Night wanted him alive as badly as Blade did—at least for the moment.

He motioned to Fturn and gave orders in a quick whisper. "Roll those bodies under the dock. We don't want them found too soon. Do you have the carrying net?"

"Yes, Blade."

"Good. Roll that"—he jerked a thumb at the sprawled Durkas—"into the net and have four of your men grab it.

Fturn was too concerned about getting out safely to be suspicious, let alone argue. Good. That was four of his men who wouldn't be able to react as fast as they should. Of course there was the risk they might panic and kill Durkas, but that was a small risk.

The men with the net spread it out on the damp stones. Fturn and Blade helped them roll Durkas into it. Blade pulled the man's hood down over his face and tied it around his neck. As long as no one recognized Durkas, no one would ask any questions about the group of silent men carrying a body through the street. It was a common enough sight—any time a master lost his temper with a slave too often or too thoroughly. Blade wondered if some of the girls Durkas had "used up" during his amusements had made their last journeys this way. He grinned savagely at the thought. If so, it was highly appropriate that Durkas should make his last journey in Nurn that way.

With half-stifled grunts and gasps, the bearers hoisted Durkas clear of the street. Blade looked up and down the alley, then nodded and set off at a trot. The other nine fell in behind him.

Down the alley, across the street, along the next alley, across another street, down another alley—they kept going at a steady trot. After the fifth street Blade threw a quick glance over his shoulder. Good. The three sailors had all drifted forward, to the head of the line. They were directly behind Blade and between him and Fturn's men. Only two streets more, and then—

The two streets passed as fast and as silently as if Blade and all the others had been moving in a dream—or a nightmare. They came to the corner and Blade raised a hand to motion them to a stop. Behind him the sound of feet faded away, as he looked down the street to the dock. Not a sound, not a movement was visible. The hull of a merchant ship threw the dock into an even deeper shadow than usual.

"Let's get down onto the waterfront. There's a place I know where we can rest and nobody will bother us."

Fturn nodded without saying anything and motioned to the bearers. Blade could hardly keep back a sigh of relief. If Fturn had decided to balk—well, here and now would have been a bad place. As soon as they got down on the dock, however—

Two minutes later they rounded the corner of the last warehouse onto the dock and slipped into the shadow of the merchant ship. All except Blade. He stepped close to the edge of the dock, turned his back on the dark waters of the harbor, and raised his left hand to his right temple.

He held it there until Fturn stepped toward him, a worried look on his face.

"Blade, is—are you ill?"

Blade shook his head, without lowering his hand. "No, I—" Behind him he heard a faint but unmistakable splash.

Blade stiffened slightly but did not move. Fturn was still out of easy striking range. And a single, splash

did not have to mean anything. A single splash could be accident or coincidence.

Then Blade heard two more splashes, and Fturn took the step that brought him within range. Together, that meant something—that the moment for action was at hand.

Blade took a single step forward, his right arm rising in a deceptively slow, flowing motion. The heel of his hand slammed up under Fturn's jaw, snapping the man's head back. Blade could kill with that blow, or compress a man's spine just enough to drop him in his tracks.

Fturn shot back, then dropped. As he hit the stones, a whole chorus of splashes sounded behind Blade. Then slim, fast-moving shapes were darting past on either side of him and hurling themselves on the Sisterhood's guards.

There were five of them—Sea Masters armed with strangling cords and knives, their pale skins darkened with grease. But their golden eyes flashed as they struck like hunting cats, as fast, as silent, and as deadly. Behind them charged Blade's three sailors and Blade himself, swords drawn to deal with any guard who panicked and drew steel.

None of Fturn's six had time to do that, even if they had the will. The five Sea Masters swirled around the two not holding the netted Durkas. There was a flurry of fast-moving bodies, a thud, two groans, and then two more thuds as the two guards collapsed.

The other four dropped Durkas onto the dock with a crash and stood openmouthed. They stood staring, unable to decide whether to fight or run. They kept standing until the matter was decided for them. Five Sea Masters, three sailors, and Blade swarmed over them, clubbing, punching, and kicking.

Blade drove his fist hard into one guard's jaw, saw the man crumple, ducked a sword stroke from a second, then stumbled over an outstretched arm. He went over backward, but converted his tumble into a backflip and came up with a knife in his hand. The guard cut at him with a clumsy sword-stroke. Blade's knife rose to block it with a clang and a shower of sparks. The guard raised the sword to strike again. Then a golden-eyed figure sprang up behind him and wrapped a padded leather thong around his thick neck. The guard's eyes bulged, his tongue thrust out between his teeth, and his face turned purple. The Sea Master whipped the cord away, and the man crumpled as limply as a jellyfish onto the dock.

Blade stepped back from the fallen man and looked around him. Fturn and his men were all down, but a quick check showed they were all more or less alive and breathing. With luck, they would stay that way.

The slimmest of the five Sea Masters stepped forward, golden eyes wide. Blade reached out and stroked Alanyra's cheek and shoulder. But his voice was crisp.

"You have the masks?"

"We do."

"Give them out and let's be off."

She nodded and darted off to snap orders to her fighters. Swiftly they bound Durkas's hands and feet and tied an air mask over his face, then gave masks to Blade and the sailors. Netted, bound, masked, and unconscious, the steward of mighty Duke Tyngur was lowered over the edge of the dock like a dead fish. A faint splash from below told of his hitting the water. Louder splashes in rapid succession told of the Sea Masters and the sailors following Durkas into the water. When Blade had finished adjusting his

mask and looked up, only Alanyra stood gracefully on the edge of the dock.

"Coming, Blade?"

"A moment."

He unbuckled his sagging pouch from his belt and opened it. He took out a leather bag bulging with silver and gold coins and a letter. He read the letter over one final time:

Sister Brigeda

We mean the Sisterhood no harm. But what is best for the Sea Cities will also be the best for the Sisterhood and in time for Nurn. Fear not. Durkas will not live long or die easily, though he escapes your hands. This money I leave for Sister Clarda, a gift from the Sea Cities.

—Blade

There was much else he could have added, but someone might come along and read the letter before Fturn or any of his men awoke. Blade shoved both letter and purse inside Fturn's tunic, then turned toward the water. Alanyra was gone, and it was high time he joined her and the others.

He ran lightly to the edge of the dock, took one swift look, then plunged into the harbor.

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## Chapter EIGHTEEN

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A war-trained yulon in good condition could easily tow twenty men at a good clip all night. The one waiting in the depths of the harbor had been hard worked, but it could easily tow a dozen men and women and one inert body twenty miles offshore by dawn.

An hour after dawn Blade stuck his head up through the crest of a swell and saw Sea Fox's white-painted mast on the horizon. An hour after that, they were aboard her and pumping stimulants into the unconscious but still-living Durkas. And before nightfall, Durkas was conscious, full of Truth-Finder, and pouring out all he knew of Duke Tymgur's plans.

That was quite a lot. Blade suspected that Krodrus would find his report most interesting.

Krodrus did.

The Autocrat for Finance would have found it even more interesting if he had been able to confront Stipors with the full tale in open council. However, word had apparently reached Stipors that his dealings with Duke Tymgur were about to see the light of day. His choices had then become very simple—try to kill Blade or flee at once. He had chosen to flee. In fact he had fled two days before Sea Fox picked up Blade and his prisoner off the coast of Nurn.

This balked Krodrus of having his colleague tried and executed for treason. But it did solve one problem literally overnight. With Stipors no longer concerned in the matter, the execution of the Conciliators was



quietly dropped. In fact, they were all pardoned and released the day after Blade's return. The proclamation of pardon had to be rather weasel-worded, of course. Blade's mission was still a closely guarded secret. But at least there was no more danger of Svera's losing her head.

There was some danger of Captain Foyn's deciding that Blade would make a perfect son-in-law and heir. The fact that Blade was obviously a man who would rise high in the Sea Cities, whatever his origins, didn't help matters. Blade had to find a way to avoid saying yes, no, or maybe without giving any hint of why. He knew that his time in this dimension must be drawing to a close. But there was still one large item of unfinished business before he could go home with a clear mind—Duke Tymgur. So he was as eager to speak to Krodrus as he had been after his return from the Reefs of Clan Gnyr.

This time he didn't have to wait.

Neither Krodrus's officer nor the man himself had changed much. But the little Autocrat's expression was harried. It was obvious that Blade's discovery had brought him no real peace of mind.

"You have done marvels," he said to Blade. "You and all those who helped you. But I cannot see that you have solved our problem. Duke Tymgur still lives. We have weakened him both here and in Nurn, but a man such as he can always find other trusted stewards, other traitors in the Sea Cities and elsewhere."

"Not if what we have learned is revealed to—all concerned," said Blade.

Krodrus shrugged his narrow shoulders. "How can that be? There is still too much hatred built up from centuries of war. And even if such a revelation would cause no trouble among us, it would not weaken Tymgur's power in Nurn. That power is so great that I think he could push the Empire into a war of conquest. We cannot stand against it. Not now. We have—both—lost too many ships, too many fighters in the past few months."

"Suppose there were no Duke Tymgur?"

"Eh?"

"One kills a yulon most easily by cutting off its head. A conspiracy can be killed the same way."

"Yulons have only one head, Blade. Conspiracies—"

"Conspiracies differ, I know. But this one has only one head. Duke Tymgur has been careful not to let any of his supporters become over-mighty in their own right. Kill him, and the danger from his faction ceases. There are none among it with the skill and power to rebuild it, at least not before Tymgur's enemies move in. Perhaps even the Emperor himself would take a hand in that case. He is weak, but not fond of over-mighty subjects."

Krodrus made a vague noise that suggested he was considering the matter. After a short silence he shook his head. "How could you chop off this—head? Tymgur's seat we know is a castle with a garrison of at least a thousand. We could hardly surprise and take it in time to catch the Duke. And even if we could, to raid the coast of Nurn would bring instant war with the Empire. All the nobles would rally around Tymgur. Even the Emperor's hand would be forced."

"I wasn't thinking of a raid on his castle."

"No?"

"The Duke travels from Mestron to his castle and back again by sea. A ship at sea is a much easier prey to a surprise attack than a castle. And a ship at sea can be made to disappear much more easily than a castle, as well. If Duke Tymgur vanishes from the face of the sea as though the Goddess had whisked him away—"

"I see," said Krodrus. There was an uncertain smile on his face. Then it became firmer. "Very well. How is this to be done?"

Blade pulled out a map of the coast of Nurn and began to explain.

He had the plan well worked out and Krodrus was a good listener. Furthermore, he was a man who did not delay making up his mind when there was a vital decision to be made. When Blade had finished, Krodrus nodded.

"It shall be done as you wish, and you shall have everything you need. I confess I would not have thought of it myself. But one doubt remains. If so many Fishmen—excuse me, so many Sea Masters—are involved with so many of our people, how can we keep the secret of the peace between the two peoples?"

"We can't," said Blade flatly. "It would be a waste of time to even try. But if Tymgur is dead and gone, it won't matter any more. Even if the Emperor decides on war against the two peoples, he will not plunge Nurn into it the way Tymgur would. There will be several years at least for trust to grow, for plans to be made, for new warriors to be trained." Several years which I shall not see, Blade added to himself. As much as I would like to.

Krodrus was silent for a very long time. "Then so be it," he said. "We seem to worship one Goddess, although under different names. Perhaps in truth we are one people or once were. If so, I am sure she will bless this undertaking and all that flows from it."

The idea that Sea Masters and Talgarans had a common origin was one that had also occurred to Blade. But the reasoning that lay behind that idea was not something he could explain to Krodrus, even if he wanted to.

"Perhaps you are right," was all he said.

Nineteen days had passed. Again Blade was off the coast of Nurn. In fact he was only a few miles offshore from the cove where he had arrived in this dimension. But instead of fighting a yulon, now he was riding one. In fact, he was sitting astride its neck, just behind the small head. He prodded the base of the skull with a stone-pointed goad, and the creature lifted its head still higher. Blade stared at the southern horizon, toward Mestron.

Coming over that horizon was a ship with a single sail—a green sail with a black bull's head on it.

For once a simple idea had also been simple to carry out. It had involved a good deal of work and planning, of course. But it hadn't been hard to explain it to any of the people involved—Sea Masters or Talgarans.

Duke Tymgur's yacht never went more than twenty miles offshore. It didn't need to. The land dropped off sharply into the sea along the coast of Nurn, with deep water only a mile or two offshore. Water more than deep enough to hide a yulon—or for that matter six yulons, or a hundred.

So Blade set up a patrol line off the coast. Six yulons, each with three Sea Masters and three Talgarans and everything they needed to remain on station for days or even weeks. Both Sea Masters and Talgarans were more than tough enough to stand it. The only problem had been persuading the Talgarans to mount the yulons. But the spectacle of Alanyra herself leading one of them around like a house pet had solved that problem.

Eighty miles offshore, Green Mistress sailed back and forth. Aboard her were extra food and weapons, Captain Foyn, Oknyr, and more warriors of both people. Hopefully she was far enough out that no one would connect her with what was about to happen.

As Blade had told Krodrus, there was no hope of keeping the alliance secret now. But so far there was peace among the two peoples. And the secret would certainly last until Duke Tymgur was no longer around. That sail was approaching fast. The Duke had two more hours to live, if he was lucky.

Blade reminded himself not to get his hopes up too high too soon, and used the goad again. The yulon lowered its head into the water once again. Blade let go of its neck and swam down fifty feet to where Alanyra waited, astride the neck of a second yulon. Fifty feet farther down were the remaining four and their fighting teams—six yulons, thirty-six picked fighting men and women. That would probably be enough, with surprise on their side. If there had been time to get more men in from Green Mistress—But there had been no time. Oknyr would not like being left out of this fight, but there was no helping that.

As if she had read his thoughts, Alanyra smiled and said, "Oknyr would like to be here."

"I am sure of it. He loves a good fight too much. Perhaps too much for his own good. We don't want a long battle now. I don't care how much honor and glory there might be in one. We're after Duke Tymgur, not honor and glory." Alanyra looked hurt at the implied rebuke to Oknyr. Blade smiled to take the sting out of his words, and went on. "Besides, Oknyr already has enough honor and glory to last him the next several lives. He should give us younger fighters a chance, not hog all the glory."

"You have glory beyond all other men, Blade," said Alanyra. "You are the Stranger sent by the Goddess." Blade looked away. The expression of worship on Alanyra's face and in her voice made him uncomfortable. Then he looked up toward the surface. There was enough of a breeze to kick up small waves and make the crystal seas a little less transparent. They would not need to drop down too deeply, to escape being seen. They could even have used one of the Ship-Killers, if Oknyr had been willing. But the Orderer of Battles was not yet willing to let Talgarans use the Sea Masters' most potent weapon and risk its secrets getting out. The trust was growing, but as yet it was far from complete.

Once more there was no point in wishing for what they did not have. Thirty-six men and six yulons with surprise on their side should do the job. And even without surprise—As Blade had said to Krodrus the morning they sailed, "If Tymgur dies, we can afford to lose every man on this mission. If he lives, every man who dies will have died in vain." Blade did not want to die in vain, and neither did any of the others.

He swam back over to Alanyra again and motioned downward. "Time to take our stations, Lady."

"So soon?"

"We can take no chances of being seen too soon."

"A yulon can overtake any ship, Blade."

"In time, yes. But this close to land, Tymgur could run his yacht ashore before we could catch him. He would lose the ship and every man aboard, perhaps, but he would do that to save his own skin."

"He would that." She swam free of her yulon, arched her body gracefully, then signaled to the four teams below. Blade repeated the signal to the team on the surface. Minutes later, all six were two hundred feet down. Blade alone remained close to the surface. There was small risk of one man being noticed, and someone had to keep a lookout in case Tymgur's ship changed course at the last moment.

It did not. The big galley came driving on as straight as though it had been running on rails, the oars throwing up silver foam on either side. It came on until Blade could begin to make out individual figures on its deck. Not faces yet, but he did not need to. The Duke's personal banner was flying from the masthead. The Duke was on board.

Blade waited until the yacht's bow was looming above him like a wall. Then he plunged down, stroking furiously away from those churning oars, arrowing down into the depths. The sleek shapes of the yulons appeared. Blade flipped end-over-end and gave the signal. Faint and ghostly, cheers came up from below.

With those ghost cheers still in his ears, Blade turned and led the way back to the surface, to the battle.

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## Chapter NINETEEN

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Blade's head broke the surface. Damn! He had miscalculated. He was a good fifty yards astern of the yacht. That would be too long a swim, unless—

A yulon rose among the yacht's port oars, with a terrible splintering of wood. Men stood frozen on the yacht's deck, staring openmouthed, waving their arms, and starting to draw their weapons. Blade saw one man who was too slow. As he raised a spear to throw it, a crossbow shot from the water drilled him through the chest. He toppled back. The yacht began to swim around in a drunken circle.

Then a second yulon rose among the starboard oars, leaping half out of the water. Its jaws slammed shut on another man on deck. He screamed and writhed and kicked until the yulon pulled its head back and the water closed over him with a gurgle.

A third yulon burst to the surface within a few feet of Blade. One of the Talgaran fighters threw out a rope's end. Blade caught it, and the Sea Master driving the yulon jabbed in his goad. The creature surged toward the yacht.

Arrows began to plunge into the water from the yacht's high stern. Blade kept his head down as the arrows hissed and splashed around him. The storm of arrows became thicker. Several arrows bounced off the yulon's head and one took a Sea Master in the arm.

Then the fourth yulon reared up out of the sea like a leaping dolphin, head driving toward the yacht's stern. The head smashed through the railing like a battering ram, scattering the archers. Several went down. Two ran frantically across the deck and leaped into the water just as Blade and his companions

swam up.

A quick flick with Blade's knife, and one of the archers went under, bubbling out his life into the crystal seas. A Sea Master caught the other one, dragged him under, then twisted his neck until the spine gave with an audible crack and another corpse was floating away. Blade reached out, caught one of the trailing oars, and began hauling himself hand over hand up the side of the yacht.

As he approached the deck, two soldiers ran toward the railing, spears thrusting down. Blade braced himself with his feet against the ship's hull and lunged with one hand for the first spear that came at him. His hand closed around the shaft, his arm jerked, and the spear twisted out of the soldier's grasp. Blade swung the spear across, parrying the other thrust, then reversed the spear and thrust upward. The second soldier crumpled. Before anyone else could approach the railing, Blade had hauled himself over it and onto the ship's deck. Behind him Sea Masters and Talgarans were following him up the oars.

Blade drew his swords. Today he wielded a full broadsword, three feet long and as heavy as he could swing, with a razor-sharp edge. He smashed it down on the helmet of a man running at him with a knife, then chopped through the man's arm as he fell. Blood gushed out across the deck. Another man who ran at Blade slipped in the blood, reeled, and started to go down. Blade's sword hacked his head from his shoulders, and the man hit the deck in two pieces.

Then there were six men running at Blade, and he had to give way. But there were also five of his own side climbing over the railing behind him. A Sea Master darted low, rolling in against the legs of two of the oncoming men. They stumbled over him and went down. The Sea Master's knives flashed and the two soldiers never got up again.

This left four soldiers against Blade and four of his fighters. Blade and his men were all over them in a moment, slashing, hacking, thrusting, kicking with feet and clubbing with fists. Another moment of sword-strokes, screams, and blood, then all four soldiers sprawled on the deck.

But in dying they had bought time for their comrades. More soldiers were swarming up from below and out from the ship's sterncastle, forming two lines across the deck. The one toward the bow began to move against the attackers coming up there. The one from the sterncastle stood firm against Blade.

At least it tried to. But Blade was in a towering fury, and they might as well have tried to stand against a hurricane. He smashed into their left flank, broadsword whirling in the air and short-sword thrusting low. Two flashes of light, two dull chunks of steel biting into flesh, and a soldier went down, head lolling and arm cut half through.

Blade took a step backward, parried a downcut with the short-sword, slashed hard crosswise with the broadsword. It took a man in the chest, not cutting deep, but stopping him in his tracks. The broadsword rose and came down on the man's skull, splitting it from the crown of his head to the bridge of his nose. Blade jerked the broadsword free, stepped into the gap left by the falling man, and lashed out to either side. A man clutched at a thigh opened by the short-sword. Another clutched at an arm reduced to a spouting stump by the broadsword.

Now Blade was beyond the line, approaching the door to the sterncastle. Behind him the other attackers were hacking their own paths through the soldiers, rolling up the line in both directions. Two of the attackers were down, the other three were bleeding but still fighting on.

The soldiers began to break, crowding toward the railings. Some got up their courage to jump, in time to escape the swords of the Talgarans and Sea Masters coming at them.

But they did not escape the yulons. The great reptiles were splashing busily about on either side of the ship, their long necks swinging from side to side in search of the human prey so marvelously abundant today. When they spotted a fleeing swimmer, the neck would arch, the head dip down, and the jaws close. A clack of yellow teeth, a scream, a flurry of water and blood, and another servant of Duke Tymgur would be gone.

They were killing the Duke's servants at a great rate, Blade realized. The second line of soldiers toward the front was breaking up as the yulons began to reach over the side and snatch men from either end. When they saw that, the men in the center dropped on their knees, threw down their weapons, and begged for mercy. They did not get it. The blood of both Talgarans and Sea Masters was too hot today for taking any prisoners. And Blade's orders had been strict. "No one is to leave the yacht alive and free. If you can't take them prisoner—"

A fresh rush of enemies from the sterncastle forced Blade to turn his attention there. He backed himself against the railing and went to work with both swords, while the three with him attacked the newcomers from behind. Blade searched the brown faces coming at him, looking for the thin, bearded face of Duke Tymgur himself. The Duke might send his men out to die for a long time, but sooner or later he would have to come out himself. Otherwise he would die like a cornered rat below the decks of his yacht.

Unless he wasn't aboard at all? Blade went cold for a moment at that thought, then did his best to push it out of his mind. If the Duke wasn't aboard, then the whole attack would do nothing except— He broke off that train of thought with an effort and concentrated on fighting the men coming at him.

Eventually they were beaten off, killed, or driven over the side. Another Sea Master went down also, to lie on the bloody decks of the yacht. Swinging his eyes fore and aft, Blade saw that the attackers now had full control of the deck. Not a living enemy remained there. Screams and splashes from over the side told Blade that the yulons were still efficiently at work polishing off the swimmers.

Damn! If Tymgur was aboard, they were going to have to dig him out like a cornered rat. A rat with perhaps very sharp teeth.

Alanyra made her way aft to join Blade. She was ignoring a shallow cut that ran across her ribs just below her breasts.

"What now, Blade?"

Blade's voice was grim. "We go below and search this ship from stem to stern, until we find Duke Tymgur or—" He decided not to go on. Instead he led the way to the door of the sterncastle, A few smart blows with a battle-ax drove it off its hinges, and Blade stepped into the musty gloom of the after cabins.

A passageway stretched before him, doors opening off it on either side and a light at the far end. Without turning his head, Blade snapped at Alanyra, "Put a man at each door and follow me." Feet scurried about behind him as he headed down the passageway toward the light at the end. That should be the great cabin, Tymgur's private quarters, and if the Duke was anywhere aboard—

Blade came to the end of the passageway and stared into the cabin. A long-legged figure in black sat hunched on a couch, head sunk on its chest and one long-fingered hand resting limply on the hilt of a rapier. Blade raised his own sword and cautiously approached. That certainly looked like Duke Tymgur—but was he alive? Had the terrible Duke chosen the coward's way out, taken poison or opened

a—

Blade was five feet away when Tymgur sprang to his feet and thrust with the rapier, all in a single motion.

If Blade had been a foot closer the rapier would have driven clear through his heart and ended everything for him in a split second. But Tymgur was over-eager, and Blade's reflexes were as fast as they had ever been. He leaped back, twisting as he did so. He did not leap back far enough to keep the rapier from tearing through his side, but he lived. His teeth clamped together hard at the pain, but he stayed on his feet. And his broadsword whirled up, then down, and smashed into Tymgur's rapier, driving it down so hard that the point jammed in a crack in the deck.

The Duke in turn sprang back, leaving the rapier quivering in the deck and drawing a long knife. Then he came at Blade again, lunging out of a half crouch, hoping to carry through to his goal by sheer speed.

Again his terrifying speed almost succeeded. The edge of the knife ripped flesh along the outside of Blade's left thigh as he twisted away. But his broadsword came down again, and Duke Tymgur's sword-hand jumped from its wrist. Hand and sword fell to the deck with a thud and a clatter. Tymgur straightened up, his eyes widening in surprise. Those dark eyes looked squarely into Blade without fear, without pain, with nothing except hatred and perhaps a small bit of respect. Their expression hadn't changed when Blade's sword came down a third time, smashing through Tymgur's shoulder and ribs down into his heart. Blood spurted from his mouth, and he fell to the deck and lay still.

Blade felt like joining him. His knees were turning to water and there was a roaring in his head, as the pain of his wounds began to tear through him. He took a slow step forward, then began to turn around.

As he did, there was a scuffling sound behind him, the sound of steel in flesh, then a high-pitched, choked gurgle. Blade spun the rest of the way around and stared down.

On the deck lay Alanyra, half on her side, a shortsword thrust completely through her from behind and coming out just under her left breast. Over her stood a familiar dark-faced figure, just rising to his feet as Blade turned.

Stipors.

Blade had wondered where the treacherous Autocrat for War had gone when he fled from Talgar. Now he knew. And Alanyra had died in helping him find out—and in saving his life from an attack from the rear. An attack that might have taken him, weakened as he was.

But he did not feel weak as he walked quietly over to Stipors, both his swords raised. The broadsword flickered out like a snake's tongue, and Stipors' weapon flew into the air. He didn't try to pick it up. Something in Blade's eyes and face stopped him. Instead he stood there, letting Blade back him against one of the doors.

Blade's swords clattered to the floor. His hands reached out, one taking Stipors by the throat, one by the belt. He lifted the Autocrat for War as though he had been a child and walked slowly down the passageway, carrying him. The Sea Masters guarding the doors ran back into the great cabin at a nod from Blade.

Blade came out on the deck. He felt no pain or weakness from his wounds now. In fact he felt unnaturally strong and clearheaded as he walked to the railing. The Talgarans and Sea Masters both made a path for him.

Twenty feet from the ship's side a yulon lay in the water, head just below the surface. Blade shifted his grip on Stipors and tossed a chunk of wood at the head. It rose dripping from the crystal seas. Blade shifted his grip a second time, raising Stipors high over his head. Then like a child throwing a peanut to a bear in the zoo, he threw Stipors to the yulon.

The long neck arched, the huge jaws opened, then came together. Stipors had no time to scream before the yellowed teeth met in his body. But he did scream then. The scream was still echoing in Blade's ears as he walked slowly back down the passageway to where he had left Alanyra.

The Sea Masters stood in a semicircle around her. Her golden eyes were wide and staring, her breast motionless. But her full lips were set in a faint smile. Why not? thought Blade. She lived to see the coming of the Stranger, and the Stranger's victory that promised peace for both Talgarans and Sea Masters.

Promises, promises. There were wounds to bind up, his and others, then the long trip back to Green Mistress. And this ship—set it on fire? Yes. Blade bent down and lifted Alanyra into his arms. His head swam with the effort, but he straightened up and walked back down the passageway to the deck. Each step sent pain shooting through him. If he did not get his wounds treated fairly soon—

But he managed to get to the railing and call down to a Sea Master in the water below.

"The Noble Lady Alanyra is dead. I have brought out her body. We are going to set this ship on fire, and—"

Before he could finish the sentence, it seemed that Duke Tymgur's rapier—or somebody's had been rammed into his skull. White-hot pain exploded in it from back to front, pulsing and swelling, making him shake all over. His vision blurred. He reeled forward, came up hard against the railing, felt Alanyra slip out of his grasp. With fast-fading vision he saw her drop down into the crystal seas that had been her home, landing with a splash. Sea Masters and Talgarans alike gathered around the body.

Then Blade was staggering back, away from the railing. He felt himself losing his balance and falling. He braced himself for the bone-jarring crash onto the blood-covered deck.

But there was no jar. Instead it was like falling into a bottomless pile of gray feathers, that swallowed him up and took him steadily downward. The light faded; the feathers turned from gray to black. And the tension and pain went out of Blade, as he knew that he was leaving the crystal seas behind.

He was going home.

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## Chapter TWENTY

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The nurse scurried out of the hospital room as J entered. He came over to Blade's bed and looked down at him.

"How are you, Richard?"

"Still sore, I must admit. But if the doctors are trying to convince you I need to be kept here for another—"



"They haven't said a word, at least not to me."

Blade grinned. "That's a refreshing change. Perhaps they've decided not to play God anymore."

J smiled. "Or perhaps they've remembered what an absolutely impossible patient you can be when you think you're being kept in bed longer than necessary."

"Possibly. They're certainly not doing anything to encourage me to want to stay around here. I've never seen an uglier set of nurses!"

J laughed out loud, but Blade caught an underlying tension in that laugh that he didn't quite like. Then J's face sobered. "Richard, would you be willing to help with a new subproject?"

Blade clapped his hand to his forehead in mock horror. "What has Lord Leighton got into his bonnet this time? I thought he was working full-time on getting the last few bugs out of controlled return. I hope he succeeds, incidentally. And when he does, I would like to put in for going back to the crystal seas. You people managed to snatch me away just a bit too soon."

"You managed to finish off Duke Tymgur, didn't you?" said J. There was an edge in his voice that Blade liked even less. "What more could you want?"

"I—oh, what the devil! You're right. But nonetheless, I want to go back there just as badly as Leighton wants to send me back to look at the Menel. I can argue that with him, however. What's the new project?"

"I can't discuss it in any real detail here and now," said J. He seemed both relieved and tense at the same time. "Apart from security reasons, we're still taking observations, and since we're having to use some covert operations for it—well, it's taking time. It may be a couple of months before we can really be sure where we want to go, let alone how to get there."

"You're talking in riddles," said Blade gently.

J sighed wearily, and Blade felt a moment's guilt at adding to the burdens the old man was obviously bearing. He hadn't seen J like this in ten years, since the nightmare week when four of MI6's best agents were killed and a fifth defected and had to be tracked down and "terminated."

"Richard, I'm sorry. But the whole matter involves a good many things I don't really understand, and won't understand even after we've got a better picture of what's involved. But basically, it's a question of paranormal psychology."

"ESP and hypnotism?" asked Blade.

"Yes, and what young drug-users call 'altered states of consciousness.' "

"Like LSD?" said Blade.

"Yes, but much more complicated, and it doesn't necessarily mean drugs, either," said J. "There's been a lot of legitimate research done on the matter under scientific conditions. Unfortunately, most of it's been done in the Soviet Union."

"Oh," said Blade.

"Yes," said J. "I think you see the possible implications."

"Not all of them, but—yes, I'm game for your project."

"Good," said J. He got up to go. "And I promise you, Richard, I'll stop talking in riddles as soon as possible."

"I know, sir."

After J had gone out, Blade lay back in the bed and ran the conversation over in his mind. It had been weird and disjointed, but he was willing to take it seriously if J was. He trusted the old man that much, or more.

But it was one more complication to Project Dimension X, and that meant one more complication to his own existence. For England he could and would do and endure much but there was a limit to what one man could cope with.

Blade had a horrible feeling that he might be approaching that limit.