
Pirates of Gohar

Blade Book 32

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

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Lord Leighton was eighty years old. He'd been born a hunchback, and his legs were twisted from polio as a child. Yet the wrinkled hands and long arms were still surprisingly strong and skilled. He easily unlocked the heavy steel door and started pushing it open. Then Richard Blade stepped forward to help the scientist.

Richard Blade was one of those dark men who look older than they are when they're young and much younger than they are when they get older. He stood an inch over six feet, and his two hundred pounds moved with the ease and grace of a hunting animal in perfect condition. He placed one large hand against the door and with a single smooth motion pushed it open.

Beyond the door was a small low room, with a bare concrete floor and whitewashed stone walls. In one corner a gleaming metal ovoid seven feet high rested in a steel cradle. It might have been a lifeboat for a spaceship. On the wall opposite the door was a rack of electronic testing gear, and on the floor in front of the rack a pile of components. Much of the gear and all the components were smoke-blackened, twisted, or half-melted. The ceiling over the testing rack was also black, and Blade detected a faint smell of burned insulation.

"Good God," said Blade. He'd seen far worse accidents with electronic gear, but not in this top-secret complex. "Who did what?"

Leighton shoved both hands into the pockets of a filthy laboratory smock and grimaced. "As far as we can tell, some idiot installed Circuit 19 backwards." He shrugged. "It could have been much worse. The circuit breakers kept the surge out of the capsule itself. The automatic alarms shut the door, the fire extinguishers suffocated the fire—"

"And suffocated the technician?" asked Blade with a perfectly straight face.

Leighton gave Blade a gnome's smile. "No, but I wouldn't have minded if they had. All the automatic elements worked perfectly. It was the human element that failed. And people still ask me why I love

computers!"

Blade's face and voice hardened. "Perhaps. But I seem to recall that it wasn't a human being who released the Ngaa in this Dimension."

Leighton's eyes met Blade's—and then the scientist looked away. "Richard, that also was ultimately human error. My error. The KALI computer made only those mistakes I allowed it to make, in my—ah, misplaced—confidence that it was completely self-correcting."

Blade's face softened again, and he felt a sudden genuine warmth toward Leighton. The old man looked like a cheap horror-movie version of the mad scientist, who will cheerfully risk destroying the world to prove one of his theories. He wasn't. His reaction to the one time he'd actually come close to doing this proved it.

Not that Leighton wasn't as brilliant and eccentric as any man in the history of science. Even his worst enemies didn't deny the brilliance, and his best friends admitted he was eccentric to the point of being maddening. His brilliance had conceived a computer far ahead of anything in existence at the time, and his eccentricity led to the idea of linking it with a human mind. He hoped the resulting combination of human flexibility and machine capacity would produce a super-mind.

For the subject of the experiment he chose Richard Blade, a top field agent for the secret intelligence agency MI6A. Blade was one of the finest combinations of sound mind and sound body in the world, and Leighton expected notable results.

He got them. The computer hurled Blade, mind and body alike, into an alternate reality. They called it Dimension X when he came back to tell them about it. The name was still appropriate, because after years of work, millions of pounds, and many more trips into Dimension X, there were still more questions about it than answers. They couldn't even be sure that all the strange places Blade went to had a distinct physical existence. Could they simply be images his computer-distorted senses fed into his brain?

The unanswered questions piled up, but they didn't stop the research. The value to Britain of such a whole new world, with unimaginable resources, was obvious. Successive Prime Ministers kept Project Dimension X going, even in the face of the country's economic problems.

They also kept it going under the tightest security blanket in British history. Blade's former chief at MI6A, the near-legendary spymaster known only as J, became the Project's security chief. He did his best to keep the Dimension X secret, and his best was more than good enough, until events put not just the Project but the whole world in deadly danger.

Leighton was using a completely automated technique for sending Blade into Dimension X, based on a new computer, the Kinematic Analog Leighton Integrator. The initials also spelled out the name of KALI, the Hindu goddess of destruction—a grimly appropriate acronym, as it turned out.

Blade went into Dimension X, and when he returned, a being called the Ngaa returned with him. It was the collective mind of the ancient inhabitants of a dying world, seeking a new home on Earth. The Ngaa left a trail of death and destruction behind it, and nearly brought Project Dimension X to a disastrous end. Eventually Blade took his life in his hands, returned to the Ngaa's Dimension, and destroyed it, but as J said, quoting the Duke of Wellington about the Battle of Waterloo: "It was a damned close-run thing."

In fact, it was much too close for everybody's peace of mind. The automated KALI computer was dismantled, and the only component of the system Leighton still used was the transition case—the

seven-foot oval capsule now in front of Blade. In it, electrical current flowed evenly through his whole body in the moment of his transition into Dimension X. With the old technique of electrodes placed by hand, the flow of current varied. Using the capsule seemed to reduce the stress of the transition, perhaps enough so that in time other men and women could survive to travel into Dimension X.

That would be an immense relief to everyone, starting with Richard Blade himself. He was still the only living human being who could travel into Dimension X and return alive and sane. Being the Indispensable Man is a rosy dream only for those people who haven't really had to be one. For them, it's a nightmare.

So Leighton was allowed to go on experimenting with the KALI case. Blade took his remarks about "human elements" and "why I prefer computers" as hints Leighton might be experimenting more boldly than that. Blade was the last man in the world to stand by and let this happen.

The nightmarish affair of the Ngaa led directly or indirectly to some thirty deaths. One of the dead was a woman named Zoe Cornwall. Once she and Blade hoped to marry, until the increasing demands of Project Dimension X and the Official Secrets Act, which protected it, drove them apart. Blade hadn't really stopped loving her, and her lonely death on a distant world left scars that he didn't expect to heal soon, if at all. Leighton would start translating his more exotic notions into experiments again only over Richard Blade's dead body.

Now he'd heard Leighton admit that he'd made a mistake—what was more, a mistake involving computers. Some of Leighton's friends would no doubt say this proved the old man was finally losing his grip. Blade hoped it really meant that Leighton was no longer convinced of his own infallibility.

Leighton cleared his throat, and Blade realized that he'd been standing there like a zombie, paying no attention to what Leighton was saying. The scientist started over again.

"Fortunately there's no damage to the capsule, and that saved most of the really irreplaceable components. It would take a year to replace that. The testing gear was mostly off-the-shelf hardware. We'll lose a month and a few thousand pounds, nothing more."

Blade mentally crossed his fingers. He was comfortable with machinery, but more so with pre-electronic-era equipment than with Leighton's pet computers and similar modern marvels. He knew just enough about them to know how many things could go wrong even under the most favorable conditions.

That thought led Blade on to a specific suggestion. "Do we really need to have all the workshops down here in the Complex? They take up space, and we don't exactly have that to burn."

"Nor hardware either," said Leighton with a wry grin.

"Very true. Some of them are a fire and smoke hazard, or could send an electrical surge onto the main circuits and damage the laboratories. Also, having the workshops down here means higher security ratings for all the people who work in them, more paperwork, and more expense."

Leighton cocked his head on one side and pulled at the tuft of white hair protruding from behind his left ear. "You do have a point, Richard. Possibly a very good one. It would mean more traveling for me, of course—"

"I hadn't thought of that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Leighton interlaced his fingers and cracked all his knuckles with a sound like a string of firecrackers. "The day I get too old to travel from here to—oh, some suburb—and back twice a week, I'll be too old for the rest of the job as well. No, what concerns me more is security for an outside laboratory. Here everything is behind those damned Special Branch men on the surface and underneath two hundred feet of earth and rock."

"That's true, sir. But—and correct me if I'm wrong—how much could anyone tell about the Project from simply looking at the components? I couldn't tell if they belong to a stereo set, a tank's range-finder, or a missile guidance system.

"In fact, it could improve our security, putting all the work that isn't readily identifiable above ground. The fewer people we need down here, the better we can screen each one, and the less chance anybody has of penetrating the Complex."

Blade knew what he was talking about there. Twice the Russians had put agents inside the Complex. Neither of them had survived to report anything, but there'd been a stronger element of luck in this than Blade liked.

Leighton nodded slowly. "You may very well be right. I'll certainly join you in raising the question with J. But I must say, I thought you always left this sort of thing to the desk types?"

"I used to, but this is fairly important to the Project. That means it's important to whatever chances I have of dying in bed. Also, if I do die in bed, it will be because I eventually do wind up behind a desk. Hopefully it will be a desk connected with the Project, but it's going to be a desk all the same. I might as well get used to the idea now."

A faint chiming crept in from the corridor outside the room—Leighton's private signal. "Speak of the devil," he said. "That's probably J now."

The old spymaster seldom showed it, but he saw Blade as the son he'd never had. It took something really desperate in the way of emergencies to keep him from coming down to the Complex and seeing Blade off to Dimension X.

It was J. He was waiting outside the main computer room, Lord Leighton's private sanctuary. No matter what clearance they had or where else in the Project's Complex they could go, no one got through the last door to the computers except in Leighton's company.

J still looked austere, undramatic, and superbly tailored, with no visible clue to his profession even to the most discerning eye. It was obvious that he was in excellent condition for a man of his age, but what that age was and what he did to keep in condition would be mysteries.

There was a slight change. When the Project began, one could have taken him for a senior civil servant. Now one could take him for that same civil servant, recently retired. Appearances weren't entirely deceiving. As the Dimension X Project grew and stretched out tentacles into more and more areas that needed security precautions, J had less and less to do with the day-to-day activities of MI6A. Except for major decisions, his three Deputy Directors virtually ran the store now. No one objected to this arrangement, either. Even the most obtuse Prime Minister or Minister of Defense knew that J working half-time was worth any other two men working full-time. There are great names—the equivalent of Rembrandt or Einstein—in the shadowy world of intelligence and espionage. J was one of these.

After the usual greetings, J and Leighton sat down to talk, while Blade went off to the changing room.

He threaded his way among the gray crackle-finished consoles of the main computer. There weren't any loose wires dangling, and everything had been largely cleaned up. Just as well—it would be years before anyone let Leighton play with the sleek, squat consoles of the KALI system again.

Inside the changing room the routine was nearly the same as always. Blade stripped down and pulled on a brief loincloth. The loincloth was more like the fig-leaf in a painting than anything useful. Blade hardly ever arrived in Dimension X other than naked as a newborn babe. When he did, it seemed to be more a matter of luck than anything else. At least he no longer had to smear himself with that foul-smelling black grease to prevent electrical burns.

When he returned to Leighton and J, they'd just finished discussing his proposal for an above-ground laboratory complex. "Sound enough, in theory," said J. "I much appreciate your suggestion, Richard. Unfortunately we still can't be sure how much about the affair of the Ngaa reached the opposition. We did our best, but that may not have been good enough. If it wasn't, the KGB may know enough about the Project to recognize anything associated with it. Then they'd give any new laboratory a high priority and give us a first-class headache. Frankly, I'd rather devote our resources to getting that second capsule operational."

Leighton grinned like the Cheshire cat. J was normally rather reluctant to give his blessing to any of the scientist's cherished ideas. Getting J behind the two-capsule rig made it almost a foregone conclusion, given time, money, and hard work.

"So would I, sir," said Blade. "I usually need all the help I can get in Dimension X."

"We'll listen more carefully than usual for any strange noises from the opposition," said J. "If we don't hear anything in the next few months, we can certainly give the matter some further thought." He looked around at the rock walls. "This blasted tomb certainly does cost a bloody fortune."

Blade stepped up to the KALI capsule, the twin of the one in the damaged workshop. This one had its lid standing open and the padded interior, contoured specifically to Blade's body, standing open. As he lay down, he saw Leighton press the START button on the controls for the main sequence. Then the scientist and J gripped the lid and carefully swung it shut on Blade. Now he was in darkness, as complete as if he'd already been in a lightless alternate universe. He knew that he was also linked to the computer more thoroughly than he'd ever been in the days of wires and cobra-headed metal electrodes.

Then there was no more blackness, only an eye-searing flash, which made Blade think he'd been shifted into still another universe, one filled with light. He felt a tingling all over his skin, a series of sharp blows on his chest and temples, and then he was falling endlessly through a cool clear blueness.

Chapter 2

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The dream-like falling sensation went on until Blade got used to it. It began to remind him of the days he'd been weightless in Riyannah's spaceship on the way to Kanan, during perhaps the strangest and certainly the most far-traveling of his adventures. That time, he'd traveled not only some unmeasurable distance across the Dimensions, but at least a hundred light-years across interstellar space as well.

Blade was just beginning to recall pleasant memories of making love to Riyannah in weightlessness, when suddenly the fall came to an end. Something solid slammed up under his feet so hard that his knees

buckled, and he fought for balance as the normal world started to take shape around him.

At first, all he could see were blurred forms, which might have been anything, and he could hear only a muffled whispering like wind or waves. He was clearly aware of his own body, and was relieved to discover that it seemed to be in working condition. He had no trace of a headache, no pains in his joints or muscles, only a slight shortness of breath. It began to look as if Lord Leighton was right about the KALI capsule. It did drastically reduce the stresses of a transition into Dimension X.

Then the world around Blade took shape. He saw that the reduced stress of the KALI capsule was probably going to save his life. He'd joked many times about how one day he might have to fight the moment he landed in a new Dimension. This time it was no joke.

He stood on the foc'sle of a fairly large sailing ship well out to sea. He could see an endless blue horizon all around him, and other ships close on either side. Then matters and people even closer at hand brought themselves forcibly to his attention.

Two men were standing even farther forward than Blade. Apparently he'd taken solid shape before them as they did the same before him. One man turned the color of a dirty bedsheet, and his eyes seemed about to pop out of their sockets. Then his brain pushed his body into motion. With a wild yell he leaped into the air, clearing the railing like a high-jumper and vanishing over the side.

When the other man leaped, he leaped down off the foc'sle onto the main deck. As he came down, he flattened several of his shipmates, who were crowding forward to stare at Blade. Blade used the delay to study the opposition and realize that he had a good fighting chance. He was as naked as usual and totally unarmed, but he couldn't see any guns or bows. Against anything else his unarmed-combat skills should keep him in action long enough to borrow someone else's weapon. Of course it would be even better not to have to fight at all, but—

At this point four sailors started scrambling up the ladder from the main deck. The foc'sle was raised just enough so that the sailors had to use the ladder. Since it was only wide enough for two men at once, this gave Blade an extra advantage.

One sailor of the first pair was totally unarmed, but was nearly as big as Blade. The other carried a short club and had a sheathed knife hanging from his belt. He was obviously the more dangerous of the two.

Blade moved in against the man, who apparently had no idea of what he was facing. He raised his club for a roundhouse swing, which could only have worked against a complete novice or a drunk. Blade had black belts in three different martial arts, plus a knack for plain old-fashioned brawling. He ducked under the swing of the club, grabbed the man's wrist, and punched him hard in the stomach. After that the man was too busy trying to throw up everything he'd eaten or drunk recently to care how the fight went.

The other man now came at Blade, in a bare-handed crouch rather like a gorilla's. He had to come around the first man, giving Blade plenty of time to choose his attack. Blade leaped to the side, pivoted on one foot, and drove the other into the big man's ribs. The man went clear over the edge of the foc'sle, knocking one of his shipmates off the ladder as he did so. Both men landed with a crash, but after a moment of listening to their cursing Blade knew they couldn't be seriously hurt.

Either luck or foresight had made the last man snatch up a short sword with a curved single-edged blade, rather like a machete but with a heavily weighted pommel. The sailor held his sword low and to one side, and waved a length of red cloth in the other hand.

Does he think I'm a bull? thought Blade. Then the man was coming in, much too fast to be a joking matter. Blade dodged, and saw that one end of the red cloth was wound around the man's wrist. As he closed again, Blade snatched up the club dropped by the first man, and with his other hand grabbed the end of the red cloth. A tremendous jerk with all Blade's weight and strength behind it yanked the sailor off-balance. Then Blade brought the club down across the sword arm. He heard bone crack and the sailor scream, knew he'd struck harder than he intended, and snatched the sword from the sailor's limp fingers.

As Blade raised both the sword and the club, the disarmed sailor decided he was too much to tackle now, and went back down the ladder as fast as he could. Blade let him go. He'd driven off the first attack without killing or apparently even seriously hurting any of his four opponents. Now perhaps the ship's crew would realize they couldn't easily stamp him into the deck. Then they might be willing to talk peace.

Blade saw that the ladder up to the foc'sle was only tied in place. Two quick slashes cut the ropes, and a push sent it clattering down onto the main deck. Now it would be even harder for the crew to get to close quarters over Blade's objections. Then he laid down the sword, slowly and carefully so that everyone on deck could see him do it, and raised his right hand in a gesture of peace.

The suddenly widening eyes of the men closest to Blade gave him part of the warning, and the sound of metal on wood behind him gave the rest. Blade whirled, bending to snatch up the sword as he did so, and saw two sailors scrambling over the railing. They must have climbed along the hull outboard of the railing and below Blade's angle of vision. He didn't have time to admire their agility, but he did have the sword. This was lucky, because one of the sailors had a sword of his own and the other held a six-foot spear with a barbed head.

Blade chopped down with the sword as hard as he could, taking off the spear's head and two feet of the shaft. With the club he blocked a sword cut. The spearman dropped the stump of the shaft and started to draw a knife from his belt. Before he could complete the movement Blade closed with the swordsman, immobilized his weapon, grabbed the man, and swung him around. Blade got his living shield into position just as the other sailor thrust hard with his knife. Fortunately he only stabbed his shipmate in the buttocks. The first man let out a yell, struggled wildly, and cursed fluently. Blade couldn't tell if he was cursing his enemy or his shipmate.

Blade put an end to the curses by squeezing the man's right wrist until he dropped his sword, then picking him up like a sack of flour and heaving him off the foc'sle. The second sailor had the courage to try facing Blade armed only with his knife, but this didn't do him any good. Blade cracked the man hard across one knee with the back of his sword. Then he twisted the knife free and sent the knifeman flying after his shipmate. He landed squarely on top of the swordsman, but once again the amount of noise floating up from the main deck told Blade that both men were more or less in one piece.

Less reassuring was the fact that the main deck of the ship was now filling with armed sailors. At least a dozen of them held spears, and two of them had bows and quivers of arrows. None of them were armored and none of them were saying anything, but none of them looked particularly friendly either. Blade realized he might have rather overdone the job of showing them he wasn't an easy victim. Now he'd better start talking before one of those archers let fly, and hope they wouldn't consider his trying to talk peace a sign of weakness.

Again he raised one hand in a peaceful gesture. This drew some harsh laughter, and one of the archers nocked an arrow to his bow. Blade had a thoroughly unpleasant feeling that this trip to Dimension X was about to become his shortest and possibly his last.

"No! Listen to me!" he bellowed, in a voice that carried from one end of the ship to the other. The words formed themselves in his mind in English, but they came out in the guttural growls of the sailors. Somehow, each time he passed from Home Dimension into Dimension X, his brain was altered so that he both spoke and understood whatever languages he'd need there. Even Lord Leighton had several different theories about how this happened, and nobody else had more than guesses. No matter how it happened, Blade was glad it did. Not having to learn new languages each time he entered a new world saved time, and here it might save his life.

All the sailors jumped at Blade's shout, but the archer also began to draw. "No, listen! I'm not your enemy!" Blade shouted. He was also trying to decide if he should jump down on to the main deck and attack, or jump over the side and take his chances there.

Before the archer could finish drawing, the door to the aftercastle flew open and a short, black-bearded man came stamping out. Unlike the rest of the crew he wore armor, a short jacket of metal discs sewn on leather, and carried two swords. He waved one over his head so wildly that several sailors had to jump back in order to avoid being struck. As he strode forward through the sailors, he cursed them eloquently without raising his voice above a normal tone. By the time he was standing below the break of the foc'sle, looking up at Blade, he had the attention of every man on deck.

While the bearded man—the ship's captain, no doubt about it—was cursing his crew, Blade had time to consider how to explain himself. Apparently he'd appeared out of thin air, as if by magic, so there wasn't much point in giving a purely natural explanation for his arrival. Sailors were a superstitious lot in any case, and they might not accept a natural explanation even for a less spectacular arrival.

All right, then, he'd give a supernatural explanation. He'd been sent by the gods—no, that might not be a good idea. He had no idea of what gods were worshipped here, or how. There was always the risk of being denounced as a liar and blasphemer and punished accordingly. Even if they believed him, claiming to be a messenger from the gods always threw him into local religious politics, which could be even bloodier than the normal kind.

So forget about the gods. If he didn't come from this world or from somewhere Up Above, where else was there?

Of course. The future. He couldn't be sure what kind of gods these people worshipped, but he could be nearly certain they had some concept of a past and a future. If he said he was from—

"Huh, stranger," said the captain, rapping the edge of the foc'sle with one sword to get Blade's attention. "You said you weren't an enemy. You certainly aren't of Gohar, so what are you?"

"My fathers a thousand years before I was born might have been of Gohar," said Blade. "I do not know. I do know that I come from a time when your children's children's children are only a distant memory."

The captain sheathed his sword and looked Blade up and down so intently that Blade had the feeling the captain was counting each scar or even each hair on his body. Or perhaps the captain was just trying to decide whether he faced a man from the future or an escaped lunatic.

At least the sailors were quiet while their captain examined Blade. The archers still held their bows, but no longer drawn. The men with spears let them trail on the deck. Satisfied that the sailors accepted their captain's authority and were no immediate danger to him, Blade looked around him. For the first time since his arrival he got a really good look at the ship.

She was about a hundred feet long and nearly thirty feet wide, heavy-timbered, high-sided, probably slow and clumsy, almost certainly built for carrying capacity rather than speed. She had two stout masts, each supporting a large square sail of coarse cloth, reinforced with strips of leather. The sail on the foremast showed a badge—a blue bird with outspread wings.

Looking over the port railing, Blade saw a series of ports in the ship's side a yard or so above the water, covered by stout wooden hatches. No doubt these were ports for sweeps, which the sailors could man to get the ship into or out of port against Contrary winds. She was certainly too heavy and too clumsy to row in the open sea.

At the stern an aftercastle rose one level above the main deck. Spears and axes were racked along either railing. In the shelter of the aftercastle two men stood at the long tiller, feet braced wide apart and chests slick with sweat. Apparently the people of—Gohar, the captain had said—had invented the stern rudder for their ships.

Beyond the railings, a blue sea rose and fell gently under a paler blue sky spotted with puffy white clouds. If Blade had been in England, he would have called it a perfect day for sailing. A hundred yards to either side of Blade's ship, two others kept pace with her. One was the same type as Blade's, but slightly smaller and with her foresail showing a large green hexagon as a badge. The other ship was much smaller, with no castles at either bow or stern and only a single mast.

Astern Blade could see another trio of ships, also lined up abreast. Beyond them he caught a glimpse of a seventh ship, apparently bringing up the rear by herself. This last ship seemed to be low, two-masted, and painted black all over.

Before Blade could make out any more details of the little fleet, a wild scream jerked everyone's attention aloft. On the lookout platform at the fore masthead, a sailor was hanging over the railing and waving his arms frantically.

"Pirates! Pirates! Pirates to the northwest! Three ships! Three Bloodskins!"

The captain raised his eyes to heaven and his hands to his head. He clutched at his hair, and Blade could tell what the man was thinking almost as if he'd been speaking out loud.

Pirates! Pirates now, of all times, with a madman aboard and some of my men unfit to fight! The captain turned toward the archers, and his fingers twitched as if he was about to signal them to shoot. Blade spoke quickly.

"Captain, I'm sorry about your men. I wouldn't have hurt any of them if they hadn't attacked me. I don't think most of them are too seriously hurt to fight.

"But I do owe you something for what I did to them. Give me some clothes and weapons, and I'll stand with you against the pirates."

The captain looked from Blade to the archers, then toward the horizon, then back to Blade. His head jerked in a brief nod. "All right. But HemiGohar help you if you're lying."

"I'm not lying about being a fighting man," said Blade. The captain looked at the sailors either still unconscious or slowly picking themselves up, then somehow managed to laugh.

"No, you're not lying about that."

Chapter 3

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Everyone promptly forgot about Blade for a while. The captain was clearly determined to be sure all his own men were armed and ready to fight before he let Blade loose among them. Blade didn't blame the man, but he didn't like the prospect of facing the pirates armed only with the sword and the club and wearing nothing but his bare skin.

The pirates themselves were no particular surprise to Blade. Virtually every civilization trading by sea found pirates preying on that trade sooner or later. At times pirates grew so prosperous that they became almost like independent war-like states. Blade remembered the pirates who'd fought a full-scale war against the Kingdom of Royth.

So the seven ships were a convoy, sailing together for mutual protection. The seventh ship astern was probably an escorting warship. Blade looked aft, and saw the black ship pulling out to port. He'd guessed right. She was low and rakish, with lateen sails on both masts. Though she carried plenty of sail, she was clearly designed to be easily rowed as well. Twenty oars were already in action on the side Blade could see, and armed men were gathering amidships. Sunlight blazed from the metal of armor and weapons.

The warship now came racing up the port side of the convoy, red oars beating fast and foam curling up silver at her bow. The shape of the bow wave hinted at a ram lurking just below the surface. On the stern someone pounded away at two large drums, and someone else signaled with a long pole with a colored disk on either end.

Meanwhile, the crew of Blade's ship were arming themselves with a speed and efficiency that suggested they were used to this sort of thing. Blade hoped they were, or he might wind up regretting his alliance with them. The weapon racks on the aftercastle emptied swiftly. From below someone began handing up armor. The two archers got scale-mail jackets like the captain's. Nearly everyone else got a coat of boiled leather and a helmet with a jointed tailpiece to protect the neck.

Two men staggered up through the hatch, carrying an iron pot filled with hot coals, and emptied it over the side. Other men who'd finished pulling on their armor were scurrying about, setting out buckets of water and sand, axes, and more spears. Three fresh men took over at the tiller. Beside them a sailor laid out vials, bottles, and strips of cloth for bandages.

Blade had just about decided that he really was going to have to fight this battle in his skin when someone ran up to the foc'sle and threw a bundle at his feet. "Here, man! Cap'n says you put this on." Blade found trousers, a linen shirt, and a helmet. The helmet fit perfectly and the trousers were snug but wearable. The shirt was hopeless and Blade wound up wrapping it around his left arm as a protection against knife thrusts. He could have done better, but in most kinds of fighting he could make his great speed a substitute for armor.

As Blade finished dressing, the black galley cut across the bow of his ship, then backed her oars to drop astern. She passed between Blade's ship and the one to port, then took station between the two lines of merchant ships. All the men on the galley's deck were heavily armed. Half of them carried bows and quivers, while most of the rest carried spears or two-handed swords.

A little more maneuvering by the six merchant ships followed, and now Blade began to see what the Goharans were planning. The six merchant ships were moving into a rough square, with the galley in the middle. The merchant ships were close enough to support one another, and there was room inside the square for the galley and her fighting men to move freely to the rescue of any merchant ship which needed even more help.

The merchant ships were plodding along at no more than three or four knots, so even the best seamanship couldn't get them into battle formation quickly. By the time the square was taking shape, the pirates were in sight from the foc'sle of Blade's ship. Everyone was still too busy to tell him where to go or what to do, so he stayed where he was, watching the pirates close in on the convoy.

The three pirate ships were low and rakish, with two high masts carrying enormous lateen sails. The hulls were painted and the sails dyed a bluish-gray, obviously to blend in with the sea and sky. The ships had platforms rigged along either side, and another mounted on their stubby bowsprits. They were coming in under full sail, heeling over so far that the leeward platforms sometimes churned up spray. They were lean, stripped for action, and thoroughly formidable—true wolves of the sea, coming down fast on the flock of sheep. At least that was the way it might look to an outsider, but Blade had his doubts that the merchant ships would prove quite so sheeplike.

With their lateen sails, the three pirates could sail much closer to the wind than the square-rigged, fat-hulled merchant ships. They came in from well off to starboard, not shortening sail at all and staying as close together as if they were running a race. Apparently this was the pirates' reply to the tactics of the Goharans—striking all together, to board the same ship or pair of ships in overwhelming numbers and carry them off before the escorts could intervene. Pirates or privateers could always cram more fighting men aboard their ships than any merchant captain who needed to show a profit on the voyage.

Certainly these ships were carrying heavy crews. The decks of all three pirate ships were crowded, and all the men Blade could see were apparently wearing red-lacquered armor or red body paint. From foremast to stern, the deck of each pirate ship showed the rusty red of dried blood. It gave them a distinctly sinister appearance.

The pirates drew still closer, in the oppressive silence possible only in a sea battle fought without gunpowder. Water clucked and splashed alongside Blade's ship, the planks underfoot creaked, occasionally someone swore or gave an order. Once a bucket fell, with a clatter like an explosion. At times Blade had the feeling that these ships would vanish like mist if he blinked or coughed.

Blade also realized that the pirates were making his ship their first victim. Up here on the foc'sle he might have a better view, but soon he'd also be a better target. Blade dropped down to the main deck, picked up two spears, stuck them point down in the crack between two planks, then stepped to the railing.

By now the pirates were so close that men were climbing out on the bowsprits. They seemed to be wearing only knee-length breeches and sleeveless tunics, with flat black hats. Every square inch of exposed skin was painted rust-red. On the very end of the bowsprit of the nearest ship stood a bare-chested figure, brandishing two curved swords over his head.

Then one of the archers aboard Blade's ship drew, his bow twanged, and an arrow stood out from the pirate's chest. He staggered, dropping one sword, then toppled from his perch. He was still holding the other sword as he struck the water and the bow of his own ship smashed him down into the depths.

Like a pin puncturing a balloon, the pirate's death released all the pent-up noise on both sides. Blade found himself shouting wordless cries along with all his shipmates, while spearbutts thudded on the deck

and the flats of swords clattered against the railings. From the pirate ships war cries floated back, along with obscene threats, the shrill wail of flutes, and the thud of furiously beaten drums. The archer shot again, and the cries and threats from the pirates grew even louder. Blade noticed that in spite of all their shouting the pirates didn't forget to throw themselves flat on the decks. He waited for the pirates' archers to reply, and thought he was waiting calmly until he realized that he was holding his breath. No matter how many battles you fight, it still makes a difference to know that you may be dead in the next minute.

Then Blade had no more time to think, only to react like the superb fighting machine he was. The leading pirate ship seemed to rush toward him at the speed of an express train. No arrows came from her decks, and Blade realized now that the pirates had no archers. Suddenly the platform along the near side of the ship was filled with pirates. Some carried long spears with barbed crosspieces. Others swung grappling hooks around their heads on lengths of rope, then let fly.

Blade ducked as one hook flew straight toward him, then heard a cry from behind. The hook was caught in a sailor's shoulder. As the man was dragged forward, Blade slashed down with his sword, cutting the rope. Then he picked out the pirate hauling in on the rope, snatched one of his spears from the deck, and threw. The pirate stiffened, looked down at the spear jutting from his thigh, then gripped it with both hands and pulled it out. Blade saw tears running from his wide dark eyes as the blood poured from the wound, but he stayed on his feet. The spear went overboard, then Blade was staring, as the pirate raised his left hand in an obscene gesture.

It wasn't the gesture that made Blade stare. It was the hand making it. It was broad and thick, with the usual four stubby fingers and a thumb. It also had webbing between the fingers and thumb, and instead of five nails it had five hooked, needle-pointed claws. Fingers, thumb, and hand were all covered with fine rust-red scales, and Blade saw that those scales stretched all the way up the arm and on to cover the whole body. Pirates were sometimes a "people apart," but not often this much! The pirates of Gohar weren't even completely human.

Still, anyone who could pull that spear out of his thigh and stay on his feet afterward was a formidable opponent. Blade picked up his second spear and raised it for a throw. Then everything seemed to happen at once. The pirate ship swept alongside, with a terrible grinding and cracking of timbers. Part of the platform buckled and disintegrated, with a sound like a wooden box being smashed with an ax. Several pirates fell between the two ships as the platform gave way under them. Blade heard their screams even over the explosion of war cries and curses as the pirates swarmed over the railing onto the merchant ship's deck.

Blade saw a pirate coming at him with an ax, and threw his second spear almost by reflex. At close range it went completely through the pirate's torso and pinned him to the railing. After that, Blade had to avoid the rush of several more pirates. He drew his sword with one hand, raised the club with the other, and settled down to what he knew would be a long and not necessarily successful fight.

One pirate thrust a spear at him and he smashed the club down on the pirate's hand. The pirate hardly blinked, but his thrust went wide and Blade managed to turn and meet another attacker with an ax. Blade slashed sideways with his sword, chopping halfway through the ax handle and completely through one hand holding it. The pirate screamed hoarsely, held onto the ax with his remaining hand, and swung at Blade again. It was a wild swing and the pirate lost his balance without touching Blade. He went down and Blade's sword slashed across the back of his neck. Even one of the indestructible pirates of Gohar couldn't keep fighting with his head nearly hacked free of his shoulders.

By now the deck around Blade was as slippery as ice with the blood of both sailors and pirates. He shifted position in search of better footing, beating off several half-hearted attacks as he did. Apparently

enough pirates had seen him fighting to look for easier prey elsewhere. Blade found himself falling back into a ragged line with his surviving shipmates. Now he had friends on either side, and time to look around. He put a spear through a pirate trying to get around the end of the line, then looked to the right and left.

The pirates outnumbered the crew of the merchant ship better than two to one, and they were brave, determined, and tough fighters. On the other hand, the sailors were just as determined, and they had their body armor and their archers.

Blade saw that one archer was sprawled on the aftercastle, his face a bloody mask, but the other was still shooting as fast as he could find targets. A good many of the pirates were now attacking with bleeding wounds or even arrows sticking out of their arms and legs.

The second pirate ship had grappled one of the smaller merchantmen. From what little Blade could make out, the pirates were winning by sheer weight of numbers. The black Goharan galley was approaching. The last pirate ship was just visible, standing off beyond the one alongside Blade's ship.

Then the black galley ran alongside the merchantman, and a gangplank was dropping across the merchantman's railing. Swordsmen poured across from the galley, while her archers held their fire as friend and foe got thoroughly mixed up on the merchantman's crowded deck.

A moment later, the brief lull in Blade's battle came to a noisy end. Drums pounded aboard the last pirate ship, and grappling hooks flew across to her comrade. Sweating pirates pulled the two ships together, and then the last ship's crew swarmed across to reinforce the first one's. Among them was a pirate even larger than Blade, wearing only a heavy leather loinguard and leather braces on both wrists, wielding an ax nearly as tall as he was. On his chest an immense claw was painted in white. He was shouting orders, and the others jumped to obey him.

The pirate chief charged straight at Blade. Blade stepped forward, knowing that he'd be in trouble if he let a man with that ax choose the distance. As he closed, Blade slashed twice, but the pirate chief was so fast that neither slash struck with its full force or where Blade intended. One left a flesh wound just above the pirate's left elbow, the other took a chip out of the ax handle. Then the pirate shifted his grip on the ax and thrust with the spiked head at Blade's stomach. Blade had to dance aside to avoid being impaled on the spike, but as he did he swung at the pirate's head with his club. The club caught the pirate just above one ear, not really hurting him but provoking him into a serious mistake.

Instead of leaving both hands on the ax, the chief reached up and gripped Blade's wrist. Blade gritted his teeth as the huge red hand tightened on his wrist and expected it to snap at any moment, but with his free hand he swung the sword twice. The pirate's right arm gaped open and bloody, then his right shoulder, then the ax clattered to the deck. Blade hurled himself backward, jerking his wrist free and feeling as if he'd left a few fingers behind in doing so. Then he raised his sword high overhead with both hands and brought it down. The pirate chief was bending to recover his ax, but this second mistake saved him. Blade's sword came down on his head with the flat rather than the edge, and instead of splitting his skull it merely knocked him senseless.

The pirate chief collapsed at Blade's feet, and a collective shudder seemed to run through all his followers. Blade dropped his sword and picked up the ax. Against opponents as tough as the pirates, its smashing power would be more useful. Then he whirled the ax completely around his head with one hand, making the air hum, brought it down into striking position, and charged forward.

The pirates' line parted as Blade hit it. The pirate to Blade's right died with the ax crushing his skull. The

pirate to Blade's left sprang clear, but died a moment later with an arrow in his chest. Then Blade was in the open, with the merchant sailors swarming through the gap in the pirates' line to join him.

The merchant ship's railing appeared ahead. Blade took it at a leap, soaring clear over the narrow gap of water between the two ships. He landed on the pirate ship's platform, and heard planks crack under his impact. He leaped again, and managed to get onto the pirates' deck before the rest of the platform dropped into the sea.

Now Blade was alone on the enemy's deck. For the moment there was no way for his shipmates to follow him, but he'd attacked so fast that the pirates didn't realize they only faced one man. Now he went into action so furiously that most of the pirates didn't live long enough to learn the truth. Blade's ax danced and whirled around him, until approaching him was rather like trying to grab a rotating buzz saw barehanded. He cleared a circle around him, then started forward, stepping over the bodies and parts of bodies he'd strewn across the deck.

Before he'd gone three steps he found merchant sailors crowding around him, grabbing his arms and shoulders to pull back and shouting in his ear: "Enough!"

"Love o' the gods, no more!"

"Ye've done ten men's work today."

"We'll not lose our lucky man!"

Blade shook off the hands and was about to reply when all the sailors started cheering so wildly they couldn't have heard him. While he was fighting on the deck of the first pirate ship, the last one had taken aboard all the survivors from both and cast off. She was a hundred yards away and her sails were filling as she turned to flee. Most of the survivors were crowded amidships. Some must have gone below and manned the oars Blade saw thrusting out of ports below the side platforms.

Blade didn't think that either oars or sails were going to get the ship clear in time. The black galley was racing in toward her at a speed rowers couldn't hope to keep up for more than a few minutes. They wouldn't have to, either. The galley would intercept the pirate ship long before the other could either gain speed or come about on a new course. A lateen-rigged ship can sail closer to the wind than a square-rigger, but a galley driven by hard-worked oars can ignore the wind entirely.

The gap between the pursuer and the pursued shrank to two hundred yards, then one hundred. The decks of the galley were almost deserted, and now Blade saw why. She'd left half her fighting men to defend the second merchantman and board the pirate attacking her. The rest of the crew was now below at the oars. Dividing your forces this way was always a gamble, but here it looked like a winning one. Blade hoped he'd have a chance to meet the galley captain, who seemed to know his business.

As the black galley closed in, the pirates saw they weren't going to escape and instead turned to meet their enemy. The pirate's oars thrashed, trying to turn the ship around in spite of the drag of her sails to meet the galley bow to bow. The pirates didn't succeed. The galley swept in, her oars suddenly trailed as her rowers braced themselves for the crash, then her ram drove hard into the pirate's port side. Even across several hundred yards of water Blade heard the screams from pirates crushed by the ram or maimed by flailing oars. Other pirates flew into the air, as if from a springboard, as the port-side platform buckled under them.

The pirates started throwing grappling hooks, and if they'd been able to hold the galley they might still

have boarded her. Instead the galley's rowers backed water furiously, pulling clear of their crippled enemy before any hooks could land. The galley's oars trailed again as the rowers poured up on deck, snatching up weapons apparently laid out ready for them.

As it turned out, there wasn't much further work for the galley's crew. Before she was well clear of the pirate, the other ship was listing sharply to port. A few pirates dropped their weapons and began leaping over the side. The rest clung to the rigging, apparently determined to go down with their ship. The galley made no effort to pick up the swimmers. In fact, as soon as they were within range, the men on her deck started hurling spears and stones and shooting arrows at the pirates in the water. One by one they screamed and thrashed out their lives in a flurry of blood and foam, or just quietly sank. By the time the last of the swimmers was gone, so was the pirate ship. Nothing was left behind except a dozen or so floating bodies, and a patch of sea faintly tinted pink.

The cheering around Blade had stopped when the galley rammed the pirate. Now it started again, and much of the cheering was for Blade. If the deck of the pirate ship hadn't been slick with blood and swaying gently to the waves, some of Blade's shipmates would have tried to lift him on their shoulders. As it was, they pounded his back and shoulders and embraced him until he felt he wanted some armor to keep his ribs intact. Most of the Goharans were smaller than he was, but they seemed to be nearly all muscle.

At last Blade pushed his way clear of the sailors and scrambled back aboard the merchant ship. If the Goharans fought the pirates without taking prisoners, Blade wanted to get back to the pirate chief he'd stunned and protect him. As a matter of principle, he'd be damned if he was going to let anyone kill a man he'd taken prisoner. Also, he wanted to learn more about the pirates than he suspected the Goharans would care to tell him. He was on the Goharans' side for now, but that sort of thing could very easily change in Dimension X.

Chapter 4

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Blade was wrong about the Goharans taking no prisoners when they fought the pirates. The men the galley left behind aboard the small merchantman quickly cleared her deck of pirates, then boarded the pirate ship alongside. By the time the rammed pirate ship sank, the galley's men were well on the way to capturing the last enemy. A few more minutes, and some of the pirates started jumping overboard, to drown themselves or be shot by archers. Many of the rest tried to surrender, and about twenty succeeded.

By the time Blade learned this, the pirate chief he'd stunned had recovered consciousness and would have been sitting up if he hadn't been bound hand and foot. Now that he could get a close look at one of the pirates, Blade realized that they were both more and less human than he'd realized. In addition to the red-scaled skin and the webbed clawed hands and feet, they had no hair and oversized, slightly pointed ears. On the other hand, they had basically human proportions—Blade had seen plenty of men with equally massive torsos and short thick legs. The faces were definitely human, except for oddly thin lips and broad noses with nostrils like slits. The genitals were entirely human, and there were no spines or gills.

At this point in Blade's examination, the pirate's wide dark eyes not only opened but focused on the Englishman standing over him.

"You did me—no good—saving me," the pirate chief said. He spoke Goharan, but so softly and with such an accent that Blade could understand him only with difficulty. Fortunately the pirate also spoke very slowly.

"I don't kill brave fighting men when they're no danger to me," said Blade.

"You didn't, but—the Island of Shells —will." Apparently he noticed Blade's blank expression, since he went on at once. "Island—the Goharans send us there to dive—and die."

"You can escape from any prison, but not from being dead."

"Not escape from—dishonor."

Blade didn't laugh. He didn't want to hurt the pirate chief's already battered feelings, and in any case he'd never found anything to laugh at in the notion of "honor." Some of the things people called honor were fairly silly, and so were many of the things they'd do to protect it. Still, there were things Blade himself would die rather than do or let be done, and even those who sneered loudest at "honor" probably also had their limits.

Blade nodded. "Perhaps. But among my people it takes more than merely being captured to lose honor. It's dishonor to become a faithful servant of your captors, but I don't see you doing that."

The pirate chief managed a feeble smile, showing yellowish, ridged triangular teeth. Then he looked Blade up and down. "Your—people? You—not of Gohar?"

"No, I—"

"Ehhhh." It was something between a sigh and a groan. "Then—guard yourself. The men of Gohar—if you are not of them—you may come to the Island yourself. I—" The chief broke off suddenly and closed his eyes, pretending to be unconscious. Blade had already heard the footsteps approaching behind him, and was turning.

It was the ship's captain. He'd taken off his helmet, but he still wore his mail shirt, now spattered with blood. A crude bandage was tied across his right cheek. He laughed and slapped Blade on the shoulder.

"Sorry I didn't get to you before this. You've done well—before today I wouldn't have said any man could do what you've done. You must have been telling the truth about not wanting to kill my men."

"I was telling the truth about the rest, Captain—"

"Nemyet's enough of a name for anyone who's done me good service. And you?"

"Blade of England."

"Well, Blade, if you are from the future, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't tell you about ourselves. What do the English know about Gohar and the Bloodskins?"

At this point a sailor came up to help Nemyet take off his armor. This gave Blade a few minutes to make up a plausible version of Gohar. He didn't need any longer. Lord Leighton had once paid him a somewhat backhanded compliment by saying: "You know, Richard. When you retire from the Project you could make a fortune in advertising or as public relations man for some politician." (In Lord

Leighton's vocabulary, "politician" was virtually a four-letter word.) "You can tell bigger and better lies in less time with a straighter face than any three other men I've ever known put together."

"It's all a matter of practice, sir," Blade replied, with a bland smile. This was not only tactful, but true. He'd started training his imagination with cover stories while doing intelligence work, and gone on explaining his origins to people in more than twenty different Dimensions. This was simply the newest occasion for practicing an old skill.

"Well, we know that Gohar was founded by people who came across a great desert from a land between two river valleys . . ." Blade went on speaking rapidly and borrowing details wholesale from the history of the Phoenicians and their colony Carthage, the Romans, the classical Greeks, and even the Byzantine Empire. By the time Captain Nemyet had his armor off, he was smiling. By the time Blade reached a twisted description of the Punic Wars, the captain was laughing so hard he had to grip the railing to keep from falling.

"Blade, Blade, Blade," he gasped, tears running down his cheeks. "You English may know everything even the gods do about war. But when it comes to knowing where you came from, and how your fathers lived—" He broke off again, in more laughter.

Finally Nemyet wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his sweat-darkened shirt and called for wine. "Blade, you've more to learn than I can tell you, I think. I'm a sailor and a trader, not much for sitting with books all day. Back in the City, you'll find lots more of those. But I can tell you enough so you'll know just how much you don't know. Fair enough?"

Blade put out his hand and Nemyet took it. "Very fair. If I can, I'd also like to talk with the captain of the galley, and with the pirate chief here."

The captain frowned. "Don't know about Degyat. He's likely to be busy enough with his ship and men, until we reach the City. I'll put in a word for him seeing you afterward, though. As for him"—a thumb jerk at the pirate chief—"what can a man have to say to one of them?"

Blade decided to turn the matter into a joke. "Probably not much. But you've said we English don't know much about your time. There are other people in my time beside the English. Who knows? Maybe the Bloodskins were fathers to one of them."

For a moment Blade thought his joke had backfired. Nemyet stiffened and his face twisted up as if he'd smelled something foul. Then his eyes widened as he understood Blade, and he laughed.

"The Bloodskins the fathers of true men? Blade, you English will believe damned near anything! For the love of HemiGohar, stay away from the street vendors in the City. They'll sell you theCrystalBridge , or even the Emperor's palace!" He turned away, chuckling to himself and still muttering, "Men coming from the Bloodskins! The Bloodskins!"

Blade looked toward the pirate chief, hoping to see some reaction. Either the pirate was really unconscious again, or he was determined not to give his captors the satisfaction of seeing him react to their insults.

It took the rest of the day to put the convoy in order. There were live pirates to be chained below and dead ones to be thrown overboard. There were dead sailors to be prepared for burial and wounded

ones to be tended. There was cut rigging to be set up again, bloodstained planks to be scrubbed down with sand and sea water, cargo to be checked for damage. There was plenty of work for everybody, Blade included. After that everyone was too tired and hungry to talk, so after a meal of salt fish and porridge, Blade rolled himself up in a blanket on the floor of Nemyet's cabin and fell asleep.

The next morning, Captain Nemyet began Blade's history lesson.

Compared with the confusion in some Dimensions, Blade found this world almost simple. Gohar, the City, was the capital of an empire of the same name, with most of its territory at the northern end of what was called the First Sea. At the southern end the First Sea opened into the Ocean. Near the straits into the Ocean was the city of Mythor, founded as a colony by Gohar several centuries ago.

North of Gohar lay mountains, from which three rivers flowed into the Sea near the City. To the east of the Sea lay a land of forested hills, and to the west broad plains. Beyond the straits to the Ocean the coast stretched away to the southeast. The Goharans had explored as far as the mouth of an enormous river.

The prosperity of Gohar was based on carrying the trade of all the peoples around the First Sea and along the explored shore of the Ocean. From the mountains to the north came metal—copper, tin, iron, and silver. From the plains to the west came meat, hides, and fine horses. From the forests to the east came wood, resins, furs, and a stone Blade recognized as a form of amber. From the kingdoms scattered all along the Ocean shore came slaves, tropical woods, exotic animals, spices, and gold.

All of these things found their way into the holds of Gohar's ships, and most of the profits of carrying them found their way to Gohar. The Goharans were the first people in this Dimension to build seagoing ships. They still had more and better ships than everyone else put together.

Three hundred years ago, Gohar founded Mythor on its bay near the straits to the Ocean. This gave the City a port nearer the Ocean, letting it expand its trade with the kingdoms there. The merchant ships of Gohar could not sail close to the wind, but fortunately the winds of the Sea blew mostly from the north in the autumn and mostly from the south in the spring. So Gohar's ships sailed south to Mythor late in the year, spent the winter trading on the Ocean, then sailed homeward in the spring.

The First Sea stretched slightly less than two thousand miles from north to south, and about five hundred from east to west. Near the middle of it, a rocky peninsula jutted out from the western shore, narrowing the Sea to barely half that width. On that Peninsula lived the Sarumi, also known to their enemies as the Pirate Folk or Bloodskins.

"The gods cursed them and would not let them live among true men," said Nemyet. "So they ran to the mountains. Then, after we built Mythor, the gods cursed us in their turn, giving the Pirate Folk ships to prey on us."

Blade mentally translated Nemyet's account. The Sarumi hadn't been able to survive in the face of competition from better-armed and more numerous "true" humans. They'd fled to the peninsula, where the Sea protected them on three sides. They'd been able to survive there, and even increase in numbers until population pressure began to affect them. By that time they'd gained some skill in building and handling ships, so they'd done what the Vikings did—went to sea to find their fortunes. An old and grim story, played over and over in too many Dimensions.

Something in Blade's expression seemed to suggest skepticism to Nemyet. The captain shook his head. "Blade, perhaps you don't believe me because of our victory yesterday. I swear we were lucky. We

were six, and we had the galley and Degyat, who's one of the best. We also had you."

He went on to explain that most of the time either the merchant ships had no escorts, or the pirates were so numerous it didn't matter. At least one ship out of every five that sailed from either Mythor or Gohar during the past five years never reached her destination.

"We could gather the ships together more often, if there were more galleys. But the Emperor doesn't seem to care, and Prince Harkrat—" He broke off and looked around somewhat nervously, then shrugged and was silent.

So there were Goharan politics involved in the problem of the pirates. Blade wasn't surprised. He also didn't expect to be told the details, at least not by Nemyet. Fortunately Goharan politics, no matter how tangled, wouldn't start affecting him seriously until he reached Gohar the City. Between him and it lay another ten days' sailing, with no enemies but the Pirate Folk. Dealing with them was a fairly simple matter.

Chapter 5

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Once Blade learned the basic facts about this Dimension, he found time on his hands. Captain Nemyet couldn't tell him much more. Degyat, the galley captain, came aboard Blue Swallow only once, to meet Blade and inspect the pirate chief. He seemed a level-headed, sensible young man, but he wasn't aboard long and he didn't say much.

Blade tried to talk to the pirate chief as much as he could without danger to either himself or the prisoner. Unfortunately he got only a small reward for many hours of frustrating work. He learned the pirate chief's name, a collection of syllables Blade mentally organized into "Khraishamo." He learned that the pirate chief hadn't expected to meet a full convoy with a crack galley escorting it. Blade asked why he'd gone ahead and attacked when he saw the strength of the opposition, but Khraishamo refused to answer that. Blade had the impression that he was ashamed of something, and not just the mistake he'd made in attacking or the defeat he'd suffered.

Khraishamo did drop a few hints about life at home, which more or less confirmed Blade's suspicions about the Sarumi. The poverty of their homeland and their increasing population were driving them to sea. At the same time, nomadic horsemen on the plains to the west of the Sea were driving them farther and farther out onto the Peninsula. Each year they had less and less secure land, fewer and fewer villages where a child could be sure of growing up in peace.

"Why don't you take up the bow?" asked Blade. "It's an ideal weapon for defending rough ground against horsemen. They make fine targets, and your people can—"

"My people—they will not use a coward's weapon," said Khraishamo. He spoke as firmly as a king handing down a judgment from the throne.

Blade frowned. He hoped the Pirate Folk didn't carry their notions of honor to the suicidal extreme of rejecting an effective weapon because it was "cowardly." He also knew he'd better drop the subject. He would hardly endear himself to the Goharans by urging their worst enemies to take up the bow!

Learning this much from Khraishamo took Blade five days. After that the pirate chief refused to speak to

anyone, even when the sailors stopped giving him a bucket of sea water each day to pour over himself. It was Captain Nemyet who finally noticed that the pirate's skin was looking puffy and his eyes were swollen and nearly as red as his skin. After that Khraishamo got his daily bucket again.

"The Bloodskins must have been sea creatures once," Nemyet told Blade. "Leave one dry-skinned for two days, and he'll be sick. Leave one dry-skinned for a week, and he'll be dying. Sea water or fresh, it doesn't matter, but they've got to get wet."

"Why are you so concerned about Khraishamo's survival?" said Blade. "I thought you preferred any Bloodskin dead rather than alive."

"Mostly I do," said Nemyet, "But there's a famous chief among them by the name of Khraishamo. If this is the Khraishamo, he'll be worth more to me alive than dead. The Emperor may want to parade him through the streets. If the Emperor doesn't, the Prince surely will."

Blade nodded politely, but his thoughts were less polite. So the Goharans are going to lead Khraishamo in a sort of Roman triumph. I think I'll do something about that.

What Blade did was to slip down that night into the hold where Khraishamo was chained, and give the pirate chief a small but razor-sharp knife. The pirate stared at Blade for a long time in silence, until Blade wondered if his pride was going to keep him from saying anything at all. Then: "Why, Blade?"

Blade explained. "I didn't capture you for that. It's against the customs of the English. I don't care so much for the friendship of the Goharans that I'll see them do this to you. Not when I can stop them."

Khraishamo examined the knife carefully, testing the point and the edge on the planks at his feet. Then he looked up again. "What is to keep me from using this knife on you?"

"Two things. First, because you know that I am telling the truth. Second, because if you do I will break your arm."

Khraishamo laughed softly. "Very good, Blade. You have the spirit of the Sarumi, in the body of a man. Very good." His hand flickered, and the knife vanished so completely Blade couldn't even guess where it was hidden. "I may use the knife on others before I use it on myself," he went on. He looked hard at Blade, and Blade realized he was being tested.

He smiled. "As you choose, Khraishamo. I would not presume to tell you where to put a knife."

Another laugh. "Even better, Blade. I may use the knife on a few Goharans. No one but you and I will know how I got it. Now—best you go."

Blade agreed. As he climbed the ladder from the hold, he wondered how long the Goharans would be able to keep Khraishamo a live prisoner. He didn't envy the men who would have the job.

At a steady seventy to eighty miles a day, the convoy ploughed its way northward. The days were still warm and bright, but now the nights were cool and the deck was slick with dew when Blade awoke in the morning. On the seventh day he awoke to find the sea shrouded in fog and the sails hanging as limp as wet laundry from the yards.

Nemyet shrugged. "If we didn't run into fog at least once coming north, I'd say something was wrong."

"What about the Sarumi?"

Nemyet's raised eyebrows told Blade he'd been guilty of bad manners, calling the "Bloodskins" by their proper name. Blade ignored the captain. He was going to maintain a detached objective attitude, suitable to his cover story as a historian from the future. That meant not letting the Goharans lead him by the nose into all their prejudices and quarrels.

Then Nemyet shrugged. "We're farther north than they often come. Even if Bloodskins are about, they'd have to find us first. Can you see them doing that in this?" He made a sweeping gesture at the fog.

"No, and I can't see anything else, either."

"Exactly." The captain went off laughing. Blade rather regretted that there wasn't much chance of another attack by the Sarumi. He'd probably fight them just as hard as he'd done the first time. He'd also look for a chance to release Khraishamo and let him escape to his own people.

The convoy spent the whole day and part of the next becalmed in the fog. About noon on the second day, the mist began to break up and the wind rose until it was kicking up whitecaps. The merchant ships lurched and rolled violently enough to make Blade willing to stay seated most of the time, although his cast-iron stomach was nearly immune to seasickness. Some of the younger sailors weren't so lucky, and there was a good deal of cleaning up to be done.

That night they passed beyond the northernmost limit of Sarumi raids, and in the morning Degyat's galley was hull down on the northern horizon. "Probably wants to bring the good news of the victory to the prince," said Nemyet. "Degyat's one of his favorites."

"I thought you said Degyat's a good man," said Blade. He was trying to draw Nemyet out on Goharan politics, but the captain refused to be drawn.

"He is," said Nemyet. Then he added sharply, "Why shouldn't a wise prince favor good men?"

Blade smiled. "I didn't mean to offend. It's just that we Historians know too much about princes who weren't wise and favored men who ruined them."

"You won't have to worry about that here," said Nemyet, Blade hoped the captain was right.

As the day passed, the horizon became dotted with sails, and the convoy began to overtake fishing boats hauling in nets and lines. Every time this happened, Nemyet or one of his men shouted the news of the victory over the Pirate Folk. He didn't mention Blade, and the Englishman was glad of that. He was going to be getting more than enough attention when he reached Gohar.

Toward late afternoon the wind began dying again. The convoy was nearly becalmed again when the lookouts sighted two galleys on the northern horizon. By the time the western horizon was turning a sunset red, the two galleys were in sight from Blue Swallow's deck. One was Degyat's black ship, the other was a blue-hulled galley nearly three times as large, with two banks of oars, three masts, a high castle on the stern, and a gilded prow. Nemyet's eyes widened as he recognized the second galley.

"That's Prince Harkrat's King Bull," he said. "If it's you that's brought him out here..." His voice trailed off, and his face took on an unmistakable look of calculation. How much would it be worth to Nemyet,

being the discoverer of a man from the future who might end up high in the favor of the heir to the throne of Gohar? Blade recognized the sentiments, and didn't blame Nemyet at all. Even the most honest man couldn't be expected to turn down such an opportunity.

"King Bull" was also a good description of Prince Harkrat himself, as Blade discovered when the big galley came alongside Blue Swallow and the prince came aboard. Harkrat was three inches taller than Blade and at least fifty pounds heavier. He wore knee breeches, which barely held his massive thighs, and a coat of scale mail that bulged outward over his belly. The scales of the mail were gilded, and the leather was tooled and dyed. He was completely bald, but his bushy gray eyebrows and bristling gray beard nearly made up for this.

As soon as Nemyet pointed out Blade, the prince scattered his escort and practically ran across the deck. A fist like a pile driver descended on Blade's shoulder, and a roaring laugh sent a garlic and wine-scented breeze whistling about his ears.

"A Historian from the future, eh?"

"Yes—"

"Call me lord if you want to, but better you call me up some good wine!" More laughter.

Blade suspected the prince had already drunk enough wine for one day. He smiled. "This is Captain Nemyet's ship. His hospitality to me hasn't been lacking, so I'm sure he'll do even better for you."

"Why should he?" The prince seemed honestly surprised. "Friend Blade, princes come and princes go. But the gods don't send us a man from the future every day. Right now, you could mean more to Gohar than I do."

"You're honoring me beyond my—"

"Don't say it, don't say it! Wait and find out what you deserve, before you talk like that!" He turned to Nemyet. "I think we all deserve something to drink, if your ship hasn't run dry."

"No, Lord."

"Then bring it, damn you!"

Blue Swallow was out of wine, but a barrel of ale filled many cups and quieted Prince Harkrat for as long as it took him to drink enough for three ordinary men. Blade was glad he didn't have to drink cup for cup with the prince. When Harkrat finished wiping the foam off his beard with the back of his hand, he looked Blade up and down, then grinned.

"Nemyet says you're a Historian, but he says you're a fighter too. You look like one. That's good. History's all a thing for books, and there's not much you can do with books. Not if they're bound up, at least. Now if you've got a scroll and the right sort of woman ..." and Harkrat went off into a long, quite witty, and thoroughly obscene monologue.

When he'd finished talking, Harkrat wet his throat down with another mug of ale, spilling a good part of it into his beard. Then he shouted for his boat and his guards, and the pile driver came down on Blade's shoulder again.

"Well, then, son of the son of the son of the son of the gods know who!" he roared. "You'll have my voice when you come to Gohar, and don't let any man deny it. Take care of him, Nemyet, and there's more for you." He yanked a purse from his belt, snapping heavy leather thongs like thread, and tossed it to the captain. Nemyet just managed to catch it. Then the prince turned, gathered up his escort, and went over the side.

Nemyet was able to restrain himself from opening the purse until the prince's boat was nearly back to King Bull. Then he opened it, and this time he did drop it. Gold and silver coins clattered on the deck and rolled in all directions. Nemyet went to his knees, scrabbling for them, all dignity forgotten. Over and over again Blade heard him murmur, "There's enough here to buy a new ship. There's enough here to buy a new ship."

Blade stood back, wondering what to make of Prince Harkrat. He was big, bluff, good-hearted, generous, and didn't stand on ceremony. He would be a valuable friend and patron, although probably impulsive and certain to leave bruises!

There was one other thing about Harkrat that hinted at an important element in the politics of Gohar, and why they might be a delicate matter. Harkrat looked closer to fifty than forty, and he was the heir to the throne.

That meant the Emperor of Gohar must be an old man, perhaps close to the end of his life.

Chapter 6

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Blade guessed right. Thrayket IV, Emperor of Gohar, was well past his eightieth birthday, and would not see many more. Blade learned this quickly, along with many other things. In fact, he learned so much so fast that if he'd really been any sort of scholar he could have written an entire book about Gohar within a few days of reaching the City.

At dawn the morning after the prince's visit, the mountains behind Gohar were visible to the north. So were the masts of another two-decked galley, coming out to meet the convoy. She came alongside Blue Swallow and took Blade aboard. His presence in the City was required, he was told, by the Emperor, by Prince Harkrat, by Baiham Klorete, and by others as well. Baiham was the title of the chief councilor of the Emperor. Literally it meant "Wisest Friend," but Blade mentally translated it as "Prime Minister."

Nemyet drew Blade aside before he went aboard the galley. "I don't like hearing Klorete's name in the summons," he said. He looked around to see if anyone was within earshot, then said, "He's a bad enemy, and almost worse as a friend. He'll be after you, to get you on his side."

"My friend," said Blade wearily, "I expect every man, woman, and child in Gohar to be doing that. What can Klorete do that anyone else can't do?"

Nemyet saw officers from the galley approaching and whispered quickly, "If there is anything else, Klorete will think of it."

Gohar stood on the west bank of the middle one of the three great rivers of the land. The mouth of the

river was blocked by a sandbar too shallow for oceangoing ships, unless it was dredged regularly. The Goharans carefully dredged a narrow channel, right under the walls and fortresses of the city. Its hundreds of ships could pass through the channel, anchor or tie up along the river, take aboard cargo, and be completely safe from enemies or bad weather in the open Sea.

North and south along the riverbank ran the quays and shipyards, and behind them the warehouses and the lodgings of Gohar's twenty thousand sailors. Behind them was the old walled city, a huddle of wooden houses looming over dark narrow streets, still holding more than two-thirds of Gohar's people.

To the west of Old Gohar were the new quarters, where the streets were broad and tree-shaded, and walled gardens hid the houses of merchants, wealthy sea captains, and nobles of the court. Here also were the royal palace and pleasure gardens, reaching down to a mile-long stretch of white sand beach.

Still farther out was a semicircle of barracks and small forts, stretching from the seacoast around to the river and the naval arsenal. It had been so long since anyone attacked Gohar by land that its richest citizens were happiest in the open, sheltered only by the ring of barracks and forts.

The galley carrying Blade went straight through the channel and started threading its way through the maze of anchored shipping beyond the sand bar. The rowers kept up a fast stroke, relying on the helmsman to avoid any collisions. Several times Blade held his breath as the galley bore down on a loaded barge or a light skiff, missing it by only a few yards. Then they were through the heaviest of the shipping, bound upriver for the arsenal.

One of the galley's officers pointed at a broad street running up from the waterfront. "That's the Warrior's Way, the oldest street of Gohar. Some thought you'd be going up along it in a procession, to honor your part in the victory. But the Emperor said no procession. He's getting frugal in his old age, it seems."

"So the Bloodskin prisoners are going straight to Shell Island?"

"Yes."

Khraishamo wouldn't have to use his knife to keep from being marched through Gohar as a trophy of the convoy's victory. Blade hoped he would now be able to resist the temptation to kill himself at least until he'd reached Shell Island and looked around. With his strength and wits, Khraishamo might find the place a good deal less than escape-proof.

By the time the galley was tying up at the pier of the arsenal, an escort was already waiting. Twenty horsemen in silvered mail surrounded a line of five two-horse chariots. Blade was hurried ashore and pushed into one of the chariots as if he were perishable cargo, to be rushed to shelter as fast as possible.

As he climbed into the chariot, Blade realized that he'd been hurried away from Blue Swallow without any chance to change clothes or even shave. He didn't particularly want to approach the Emperor looking more like the survivor of a shipwreck than an envoy from the future. He also definitely wanted to see how strong his position among the Goharans was, even before he met the Emperor. His life might depend on what kind of orders he could give and have obeyed.

"Hey!" he shouted to the commander of the escort. The man's horse reared and the officer nearly fell off. The Goharans apparently hadn't invented the stirrup. If they had good bows they doubtless used horse archers instead of cavalry charging home with lance or sabre.

The officer rode over to Blade. "Yes, Lord?"

"I am going to the palace. Is that true?"

"Yes, Lord."

"No need to call me lord each time. Just answer my questions."

"Yes, L—. Yes."

"Good. And when we reach the palace, I am to go straight before the Emperor?"

"Yes."

Blade shook his head. "Not before I've bathed, shaved, and found some proper clothing."

"But, Lord Blade, the Emperor's orders—"

"Are now changed, as far as I'm concerned. I'm sure the Emperor didn't know I would look like this, or he'd have changed the orders himself. I will not appear before Thrayket as I am now."

"But—"

"Captain, let me ask you this. You know who I am, and where I come from. Are you willing to have me return to my own people and my own time and tell them that the soldiers of Gohar are so stupid that they will even obey orders which make no sense?"

The officer seemed to be struggling with several impulses, one of them being to draw his sword and run Blade through. Blade softened his voice. "Captain, I am sorry to have been harsh. I fear I am not the best man to send across the years.

One with a smoother tongue might have been better. But I am here, and must do my best. Do you really think the Emperor will be pleased if I come before him looking as if I'd just escaped from Shell Island?"

The captain's anger seemed to fade, and at last he shrugged. "Certainly the Emperor wishes to see you. But he has also said we should hear your wishes." He took his hand from his sword. "Very well. I shall send a man ahead to warn your servants."

The messenger rode off in a cloud of dust, and then the chariots and their escort were moving. Blade hung on, thinking over what he'd learned. He had at least the position of a man whom no one wanted to openly offend until they knew a great deal more about him. So he was going to have to play the Mystery Man, concealing anything which might be considered a weakness, until he had a few reliable friends and allies. This was an old game he'd played for high stakes in half a dozen different Dimensions. If he hadn't learned to play it well, he wouldn't be riding toward Emperor Thrayket's palace now.

The road from the naval arsenal was paved and lined with carefully planted and pruned trees, but beyond the trees was open countryside. Blade saw villages of squat wooden huts with thatched roofs, green fields, and more fields of squat wooden huts with thatched roofs, green fields, and more fields on terraces rising up the foothills of the mountains to the north. Sometimes they passed mounted men with bows slung across their saddles or carts drawn by red-brown beasts, which looked like a cross between a water buffalo and a rhinoceros.

After about half an hour they came to a long blue-painted wall, and turned through a well-guarded gate into a garden which seemed to go on forever. The chariots and horses slowed down, crunching softly along gravel roads and across bridges over sluggish streams and the arms of ornamental ponds. Eventually they stopped at a small villa of whitewashed brick, with a roof of pink tile and bronze screens in place of windows.

The escort commander turned to Blade. "If you still wish to bathe and dress before seeing the Emperor—"

"I do."

"Very well. Here is the house the Emperor ordered given to you while you are among us. You may use it as you see fit, and we shall wait for you. But be quick, in the name of the gods!"

"I shall be as quick as I care to be, Captain," said Blade, climbing out of the chariot. He was not going to be hurried or pushed around, even by the Emperor's orders, if he could avoid it.

The villa had six rooms, three large public ones and three small bedchambers, plus a bath, all luxuriously furnished. A gray-haired man with three fingers gone from one hand took Blade's weapons, while two girls in flowing yellow robes led him to the bath.

Blade realized he probably should hurry, but it was hard to resist all the delicious sensations of his first hot bath in weeks. The herb-scented water steamed, perfumed oil and rough sponges scoured away dirt and sweat and salt, the girls perched like two bright-feathered birds by the side of the bath and handed him everything he asked for.

As the girls' robes grew damp with the steam from the bath, they clung more closely. Blade couldn't help noticing that both of them were slim and lovely. The darker one was a bit small-breasted, but from the way the girls were looking at him, he suspected they wouldn't mind the request he was thinking of making.

Then he heard what sounded like an army of horses and chariots approaching, along with drummers, horn players, and men shouting orders. The girls shivered, jumped up, and dashed out of the bath chamber. Moments later they were back, along with the gray-haired man. He was carrying an elaborately embroidered black tunic and silvery-white trousers in one hand, tooled sandals and a belt in the other.

"Quickly, Lord Blade," he said. "Quickly! The Emperor comes."

Blade climbed out of the bath and began toweling himself dry. He might not have offended the Emperor by insisting on bathing and dressing before his audience, but being caught in his bath might be a little too much.

Unfortunately Thrayket seemed to have some of his son's impulsiveness and refusal to wait on ceremony. As Blade was pulling on the trousers, footsteps sounded outside the door, a voice bawled, "His Radiance Thrayket of Gohar," and all the servants prostrated themselves on the tiles. Half-dressed, Blade couldn't have done so if he'd wanted to. There was nothing for him to do but greet the ruler of Gohar bare-chested and with only one leg in his trousers.

Thrayket looked Blade up and down, and though his eyes were small and squinting Blade got the feeling they didn't miss much. Then he signaled Blade to continue dressing, and a servant to bring a folding chair. With a barely suppressed sigh of relief Blade finished getting dressed, meanwhile stealing looks at Thrayket as often as he could.

Certainly anyone could see that Thrayket and Harkrat were father and son. The Emperor was even taller than the prince, and above the beard his face was a wrinkled, liver-spotted, nut-brown version of Harkrat's. He was also rail-thin and stooping, and his beard was a straggling silvery wisp. Blade had the impression of a man with little physical vitality left, who kept on moving and thinking only by sheer willpower.

At last Blade was dressed and Thrayket spoke.

"Lord Blade, it is said you come from the future to study the past." The tone was almost skeptical.

"This is so, Your Radiance," Blade retold his experiences aboard Blue Swallow, and how the people of England seemed to know very little about the true history of the Empire of Gohar and its times.

"If that is what you remember of us, certainly it is time you learned better," said Thrayket. His voice was soft and somewhat high-pitched, without sounding weak. "Yet I think you can learn enough about us, without everybody in Gohar learning about you."

Apparently Blade was expected to understand this without further explanation, and he was afraid he did. He realized that he was also going to have to argue with the Emperor.

"If this means that I am to be your prisoner—"

"Lord Blade, that is not a well-chosen word. Say, our guest."

"Two words for one thing, Your Radiance, and that a thing I cannot accept."

Thrayket frowned. "You are rather free in choosing when you will obey me and when you will not. With my son you might do well, but do you expect to please me by this manner?"

Blade didn't know if this was a test or if the Emperor was really on the verge of getting angry. But he'd begun by taking a firm stand, and if he quickly abandoned it now he would find it hard to keep the Goharans' respect. Besides, if he was going to be confined to the palace grounds, he wasn't going to be able to carry out his mission in this Dimension. Blade was enormously stubborn when it came to resisting interference with his missions, whether by Soviet secret agents or aging rulers.

"Your Radiance, I do not wish to displease you in any way, but I must please my queen—"

"A woman rules England?"

"Yes. Those of us who travel into the past do so with her blessing, and speak to her of what we have found when we return home. If I am to be held in the palace, I can do nothing but return to England at once. There I will have to say that I could learn little of Gohar, because the Emperor Thrayket did not wish me to do so. My queen and my fellow Historians will have to think that the men of Gohar wish to hide from their children."

Thrayket frowned again, and his long-fingered hands twisted and knotted themselves in his lap. Blade

decided to risk pushing on.

"Your Radiance. Your name has not come down to the time of the English, but among your own people I have heard you called a wise and honest ruler. So I understand why you fear what I may do among the people of Gohar."

"I do not fear," said Thrayket sharply.

"I beg your pardon." That had been a genuine slip of the tongue. "You doubt what I may do, because you know very little of me. I will be happy to stay here in the palace for thirty days, as your guest, so that you may learn about me what you need to know. At the end of that thirty days, I must ask to be allowed either to move freely about Gohar or else return to England with what I have learned."

Thrayket's frown deepened, and his hands clenched into fists. After a long pause, he nodded. "Blade, I think I understand you now. You do not wish to defy me, merely to do your duty to your queen?"

"Yes."

"Well, I shall not stand between you and your duty if I can avoid it. Nor do I wish to insult a fellow ruler, even if she is a woman and a thousand years in the future. You will live here thirty days, and we shall watch you. At the end of those thirty days ..." He shrugged. "As you wish."

It seemed the right time to bow. "I thank Your Radiance."

Thrayket rose. "I will not thank you, Lord Blade, but I must say I now believe you are indeed from the future. No man from any land of our days or our fathers' days could stand before an Emperor of Gohar as you have done, without fear." He turned and shuffled out.

The Emperor's servants came in to retrieve the chair, and Blade's came in to help him finish the bath. The man's hands were actually shaking, and the girls were so pale that Blade wouldn't have considered bedding them even if he'd still had the impulse.

He didn't. For the next thirty days, he intended to be on his best behavior, assume that he was being watched even in bed, and keep his back to a good, solid wall as much as possible.

Chapter 7

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Thrayket IV of Gohar might be a hard man to talk to, but he was also one who kept his promises. After a few days in the villa, Blade began to realize that in fact he was both "guest" and "prisoner."

The villa had a staff of five—the gray-haired man, the two girls, a cook Blade never saw but who produced delicious meals three times a day, and a gardener who kept up the grounds. They gave him impeccable service, but practically no information about Gohar or even about themselves. The man was a close-mouthed professional servant, the two girls were obviously frightened of talking out of turn, and the gardener was a deaf-mute. Not a natural one, either—his ears had been pierced and his tongue cut out. His silent presence was a useful reminder of the iron hand which might lie inside Thrayket's velvet glove.

The villa stood within an acre of lush garden, and was watched politely but continuously. If Blade took

more than a few steps beyond the invisible boundaries of the grounds, Goharan soldiers seemed to spring from the ground or drop from the trees. They were always polite, but they always included archers with bows strung and arrows ready. Even if he'd felt himself in real danger at the villa, Blade would have looked for safer ways of escaping.

Blade felt hemmed in, but he didn't lack company or even information. Of course, all the information was from "official" sources, no more likely to be reliable in Gohar than anywhere else. Most of the Goharans who talked to Blade were intelligent and well-informed, however, and he learned a good deal.

Much of what he learned simply confirmed what he'd been told aboard Blue Swallow. Some of it was new, such as the fact that Gohar was not on the best terms with its daughter city of Mythor, at the southern end of the Sea.

Blade learned this from Prime Minister Kloret, who paid him a call on his fifth day at the villa. The man's appearance surprised Blade. He looked a good deal more like a soldier than a politician—tall, broad, hard-muscled, with a short stabbing sword on a belt over his silky-yellow robes and a long scar along his exposed left arm. In fact, if you added about thirty pounds and a beard, Prime Minister Kloret would look like Prince Harkrat's brother.

After the initial exchange of polite greetings and compliments, Kloret got down to business. The people of Mythor had developed a foolish resentment against the rule of Gohar, he said. This resentment had been festering like a boil for nearly a century, but the wise and moderate rule of Thrayket kept matters from coming to a head.

"This I can believe," said Blade. "The justice of a ruler like Thrayket would soothe the temper of a wild bear."

"Bear?"

"A forest-dwelling flesh-eater from England." Blade gave a vivid description of a grizzly on the rampage. "We hunt them for sport."

Kloret seemed impressed. "We have nothing like this in any land we know."

"The world is large," said Blade with a shrug. "No doubt my England is not only a thousand years in your future, but in another part of the world."

"No doubt." This time the Prime Minister seemed polite rather than impressed. He continued with his recital of grievances against Mythor. "But the years gather thick upon Thrayket. In time he must pass to his fathers. I pray that this day will not come upon us soon, but it will come."

"I join in those prayers," said Blade. That was both polite and true. He suspected Thrayket's death would cause a crisis in Gohar, and he'd rather not be caught in the middle of it. He also suspected that Kloret was hoping for such a crisis, for reasons of his own.

"There is not the same trust in Harkrat that there is in his father," said Kloret. "No doubt this will pass when people see his wisdom and justice, but much mischief may be done before then." He looked as if he expected Blade's agreement, so Blade nodded. "Indeed, some evil men in Mythor are already playing upon this distrust of Harkrat. They wish to persuade their fellow citizens to revolt against the rule of Gohar, to make Mythor an independent city."

"That seems foolish of them," said Blade. "The two cities must stand together against the Pirate Folk and the Maghri."

The Maghri were a race of barbaric horsemen who lived to the southeast of Mythor, and occasionally raided its frontiers.

"You and I see as one," said Kloret, with a smile that just missed being disgustingly smug.

I doubt that, thought Blade. But I don't know exactly what lies you're tell me. For the moment, it's safer to agree.

"Now," said Kloret. "I will not ask you to thrust yourself into our affairs. You could do no good, and put yourself in danger. But I would ask that you tell me, from your knowledge of what is to come—does Mythor revolt or not?"

Blade had seen the question coming. He threw his answer back at Kloret almost before the man stopped talking.

"I cannot tell you enough to do you any good," he said with a regretful smile. "You know how confused and twisted are the tales of Gohar and its time, which have survived to the time of England. Mythor is not even mentioned. There are tales of revolts of one city against another, some successful, some not. Perhaps one of these tales refers to Gohar and Mythor, but not all the Historians of England together could tell which one." Blade now hardened both his face and his tone of voice. "Also—even if I knew, I would not tell you."

Kloret didn't draw his sword, but the expression on his face made Blade wonder why not. He went on. "You might use the knowledge to change the course of history. We are not allowed to say or do anything which could cause that."

"Yet you are allowed to tell us that you come from the future. Isn't that information itself enough to change our actions?"

There were several possible answers to that question. Blade chose the one he hoped would most quickly end the conversation. He wanted to learn as much about Kloret as he could, but not at the risk of making an enemy of the man this soon.

"Our first Historians weren't even allowed to say who they were," he said. "We feared exactly what you've just described. Some of our people fell among races less civilized than the Goharans. They died by torture to keep their secret."

"Honor to their memories," said Kloret. At least he was still ready to be polite.

"Yes. In time a few of our people let the secret slip—and nothing happened. The Historians began to understand that time is so solidly rooted that no small force can affect it. Time is like one of those mountains north of the city. An earthquake can shake it and change it, but one man or even a hundred men kicking it aren't even noticed."

Kloret laughed. It wasn't a particularly pleasant laugh. "And telling me what happens to Mythor would be like an earthquake?"

"It probably would be. I certainly can't afford to take the risk."

"We could put the truth of your tale to a rigorous testing. I trust you know this, Blade."

"I do. I trust you also know that this would do you no good. Remember the other Historians who died rather than reveal the great secrets.

"If I died, other Historians might come to Gohar and learn of my fate. They might take vengeance, and certainly they would blacken your name for all time.

"If I didn't die, I would return to England with the tale that the men of Gohar are cruel and treacherous. Do you want to replace the legends in our books with that sort of fact?"

"No."

"Good. I also suggest that you not repeat this sort of threat. I understand that you made it out of your great concern for the future of Gohar, and I do not call you an enemy because of it. But if you talk to me this way again, I shall have to speak to His Radiance about it." Blade knew that Klore's response would tell him something about how much real power Thrayket still held.

Apparently the Emperor's name still carried a good deal of weight. Klore sighed. "No, Blade. There is no need to speak to the Emperor about this. I shall not raise the matter again. But—I am glad that at least you understand why I did it." He seemed to be almost pleading for a sympathy Blade wasn't prepared to show.

"Good," said Blade again. Then they talked politely of the weather and compared Gohar's wines with those of Blade's own time. After a few minutes of this face-saving conversation, the Prime Minister turned to leave.

Blade watched him go, once again aware of the strong resemblance between the Prime Minister and the heir to the throne of Gohar. It was hard to believe that no one had noticed it, but certainly no one had mentioned it in Blade's hearing. Was there some ancient scandal here, ranking as a state secret to be kept from the ears of the man from the future? Quite possibly.

It also seemed quite possible to Blade that he'd made an enemy of Klore. However, he seemed the kind of man it was safer to have as an open enemy than a false friend who might knife you when you weren't looking. In any case, if the Emperor was still ruler in fact as well as in name, that might be enough protection.

If not, there was always Mythor. If Klore was telling the truth, the people there might be glad to hide a man who needed to stay away from the rulers of Gohar. But was Klore telling the truth?

The other people allowed to see Blade during his thirty days in the villa didn't help him answer that question. They mentioned Mythor freely, but only when it was a question of trade or history. The question of a rebellion might not just be Klore's imagination, but it very well could be another state secret to be kept from Blade.

After a while, talking with the people who had a "security clearance" became amusing, and then boring. Blade's position as a man who could carry news back to the future helped keep him safe. It also helped make sure that most of the people who came to see him wanted to make sure the English Historians knew their names, deeds, and virtues. They didn't seem to care whether they'd held any important position or done anything noteworthy. All they wanted was Blade on their side, and some of them

weren't particularly subtle. While under the Emperor's protection, Blade could not easily be threatened. So people tried bribery.

Blade found himself being offered women and girls, men and boys, gold and silver, jewels, spices, wine, drugs, and every other imaginable form of wealth or pleasure. He began to feel like a politician surrounded by all the special-interest groups in the world at once. At times he thought of taking up one or two of the more outrageous offers, just to see if the people would deliver. More often, he began to wonder if he'd made the right choice in calling himself a man from the future. Being dragged into Gohar's religious politics might have been easier and perhaps even safer.

Prince Harkrat visited twice. Those visits were a positive relief to Blade, even though his shoulders and back were bruised and aching afterward from the prince's bear hugs and bear slaps. The prince was happy to talk to Blade as one warrior to another without worrying about what the English would know of him a thousand years from now.

The first time, they talked of nothing but women, wine, and war. Blade gave an edited description of warfare in the twentieth century, and explained that he couldn't tell anymore without breaking the Historians' laws.

"Of course, of course," said Harkrat cheerfully. "Don't worry about that. We're a long way from knowing the magic needed for those chariots without horses and those ships without rowers or sails. If it isn't known in Gohar it isn't known anywhere in our time. So even if we could build the chariots and ships, we wouldn't need them. Don't worry, Blade. Your English secrets are safe, and you'll have my word on that if anyone argues."

On the prince's second visit, the talk was more formal, because Harkrat brought his wife Elyana.

"Only one wife, you understand," Harkrat said. He seemed slightly ashamed, as if Blade might question his virility for not having the six wives Goharan law permitted him. "My father insisted."

Thrayket was wise. Given free rein, someone as full-blooded as Harkrat might sow enough children across Gohar to hopelessly confuse the succession and breed civil war.

Elyana was tall for a Goharan woman, nearly reaching her husband's shoulder. She was dark, with a plump, almost plain face but a truly magnificent figure draped to advantage in a heavily embroidered robe of silk-like tissue with a pearl-studded belt and sandals. She was also obviously intelligent and alert, with a quick, even sharp tongue—and not held back from using it by her husband. This was something of a surprise to Blade, since even among the highest nobility Goharan women were given little freedom and less education.

Elyana began the conversation with a question about books in Blade's England, and kept things moving after that. Within a few minutes, Harkrat was leaning back in his chair, trying not to look too obviously bored. He had the easily recognizable expression of the husband who knows little and cares less about what his wife is discussing.

With a fine sense of tact and timing, Elyana changed the topic just as her husband showed signs of real impatience. Now both prince and princess talked of the feast they'd give for Blade when the thirty days came to an end.

"Don't know what my father's thinking," Harkrat said. "I never have, I probably never will. He doesn't talk much. But we'll have the feast no matter what he does. Either we'll welcome you among us, or send

you back to England in a good mood. That's all I'm going to do to get on your good side, in spite of what all those other damned fools are offering."

"You've heard some of the things I've been offered?"

"Of course. I'd have to be deaf not to, considering how some of them have talked, and cursed you for being—whatever you are."

"Perhaps he's just incorruptible," said Elyana, smiling.

Harkrat rumbled with laughter. "He's not human if he is."

"You may be right, but I could hope you're wrong," she said. "And who knows? Things may be so arranged in England that an honest man can rise high." She didn't smile as she said this, and both Blade and her husband noticed it. There was a moment's silence, then Harkrat put an affectionate arm around his wife.

"Lovely one, I believe in a lot of things, including—" Here he listed several parts of Elyana's body, so that she blushed and feebly tried to pull away from him. "But not even HemiGohar can make a world where honest men can prosper in a palace. So I'll go on believing that Blade's got something hidden in his boot. I do believe that it's nothing dangerous to us, though. Fair enough?"

"Oh, I agree with you," said Elyana. Her smile was back, but only Blade noticed that it was pasted on like a fashion model's. Then prince and princess rose, and Elyana held out a hand to Blade. As etiquette required, he kissed his fingertips, then pressed them to the palm of her hand.

"Until we meet again."

Chapter 8

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The next time Blade met Harkrat and Elyana, it was at the banquet held to celebrate the end of his thirty days in seclusion. It also celebrated his welcome to Gohar.

"Naturally you will obey the same laws as any other noble of Gohar," said the Emperor, when he'd finished giving Blade the news. "Otherwise you may go where you wish, see what you wish, and ask any questions of any man, woman, or child." He smiled thinly. "I do not promise that you will always get answers, though. The people of Gohar will honor a Historian from the future, but they will not let him into their bedchambers or baths."

"I doubt if I'll need to go there," said Blade. "Your Radiance has given me permission to do practically everything necessary."

Thrayket appeared unmoved by the praise. "Thank me if you must," he said sourly. "But don't forget to thank my son, and above all thank my son's wife."

"Elyana?"

"Of course. My son has only one wife, as I'm sure he's told you more times than there are fingers on

both our hands! At times I think I would have done better to let him take the lawful six. Elyana is worth two or three ordinary women, but half the time she forgets that she's a woman at all. Ah well," with a long sigh. "I'll not burden or bore you with tales of an old man's family troubles."

Blade was quite sure that hearing the secrets of the Imperial family would be neither a burden nor a bore. He was equally sure that it was something he could hardly ask. He stood in silence as Thrayket struggled to his feet and departed.

Was it just his imagination, or did Thrayket look and sound weaker than he had thirty days ago?

The Emperor was not at the feast in Blade's honor, but nearly everyone else who was anyone in Gohar and could reach the City in time appeared. Blade was introduced to most of them, but after a while all the names jumbled together in his mind and, he remembered only those people he'd met before.

Prince Harkrat and Princess Elyana were both draped in flowing robes of the silky tissue, with coronets of silver set with marble-sized pearls on their heads. Princess Elyana's robes covered her from head to foot and drifted around her like smoke.

It turned out that the "silk" of Gohar was the lining of a large clam found in the shallows of the Sea. Blade was reminded of the byssus shell, which provided a similar luxury fabric for the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean. Blade mentioned this, and he and Elyana fell into a long discussion of silkworm culture and shell diving.

"When I was about fifteen, I got the shell women near my father's estate to take me out diving," said Elyana. "I slipped out about once a week for nearly three months before my father caught me. I think that was one of the things that told him he'd better find me a husband soon. It was fun, though, and I can still swim better than most men."

Then the princess saw Captain Nemyet and Degyat, newly promoted to admiral for his victory, approaching together. With a wave of her hand she turned to go, and for a moment she stood silhouetted against a rack of torches. In that moment Blade knew that, however much her robe might cover, she was wearing nothing under it. She held her pose until Blade was sure it was no accident, then vanished.

Degyat now wore gilded armor over dyed leather breeches and an elaborate headdress that was both hat and helmet, apparently to remind people that he was a fighting man as well as a courtier. The combination wasn't entirely successful, but in spite of his promotion the young admiral was as plain-spoken and sensible as ever. He was also much more at home in this exalted company than Nemyet. Blue Swallow's captain looked like a young actor playing his first big part before a hostile audience and frightened out of his wits.

Eventually Degyat left, after inviting Blade to come for a cruise with the fleet aboard his galley while he was in Gohar. "From what you've said, it seems the memory of Gohar's rule over Sea and Ocean may have survived. You might like to see more of how it really was."

"Thank you. I might."

Nemyet nearly blew out the nearest torches with his sigh of relief after Degyat was out of sight. Blade smiled. "Feeling dizzy from the height?"

Nemyet laughed bitterly. "You should be a poet as well as a Historian. Yes. Until you came to Blue Swallow, I was so far below these people"—he waved a hand at the crowd around them—"that I could hope none of them would ever notice me. Now they know I exist. That can mean rewards. It can also mean other things."

Blade nodded. "I know. I could say that an honest man has nothing to fear, but I'd be a fool if I did. I haven't found very many courts where somebody isn't setting traps, and this certainly isn't one of them."

"No. You seem to be a friend of both the Emperor and the prince, so you've won half the battle. If you can win over—" Nemyet's eyes, looking over Blade's shoulder, widened suddenly and his mouth snapped shut like a trap. Blade turned to see exactly what he'd expected—Prime Minister Kloret approaching at the head of a whole platoon of family, friends, courtiers, bodyguards, servants, and heaven only knew what else.

Blade said farewell to Nemyet and the sea captain hurried off, trying to get clear of the area without moving fast enough to attract Kloret's eye. Blade helped him by approaching the Prime Minister, hand outstretched and his best smile firmly pasted in place.

"Greetings, Lord Blade," said the Prime Minister. "Did I interrupt a private conversation?"

"Hardly," said Blade. "I was just refusing Nemyet's invitation to join him on Blue Swallow's next voyage. I've seen enough water and pirates for the moment."

"Where was he going?" said Kloret. "Mythor?"

"No. Just a short voyage on the eastern shore, to load timber and resin."

"Ah," said Kloret. Then Blade realized that one of the women in Kloret's party was looking at him even more intently than the Prime Minister. Blade returned her stare, which wasn't hard to do. She was small and slender, with an impish, gray-eyed face under a cloud of shimmering blue-black hair. She wore a dark green robe without any ornament, slit almost to the waist on the left side. As she sensed Blade's eyes on her, she turned slightly, to display the full length of one surprisingly long and shapely leg.

Kloret laughed without looking pleased. "Ah, Blade, you remind me of my duty. Fierssa, this is the Lord Blade, the Man from the Future. Lord Blade, my daughter Fierssa."

Blade forced himself not to look too intently at the young woman while going through the formalities. She wasn't so self-controlled. Every time Blade looked at her, he found those immense gray eyes devouring him. He recognized curiosity and sexual interest in her expression, but felt there was more behind Fierssa's peculiar intensity. He hoped Kloret wouldn't notice this exchange of looks between Blade and his daughter.

Eventually the Prime Minister finished all his social duties in this part of the garden and marched off, Fierssa with him. Blade noticed that five or six young men brought up the rear of the Prime Minister's party. None of them were armed, but all of them looked tough enough to either handle or cause trouble without weapons.

Blade realized now that he'd been so busy talking that he'd forgotten to either eat or drink. He put Kloret, his daughter, and his goon squad out of his mind and headed for the line of tables beside the pond in the center of the garden.

Blade ate fast, but not fast enough. Before he'd finished his first plate of food, people were gathering around to offer him drinks. Out of politeness, he had to cooperate. After a while even his hard head began to buzz, so he got more food to ballast the wine, then found himself being toasted again, then had to refill his plate. . .

By the time the food and wine ran out, he'd eaten and drunk a good deal more than he'd planned, and far more than he found comfortable. He was reasonably sure he hadn't done or said anything foolish or dangerous—his brain had a sort of built-in censor, which went into action whenever he'd had one drink too many. He still badly wanted to climb into his litter and head back to the villa and a quiet night's sleep.

He was drifting along the edge of the pond, between the water and a thick stand of flowering trees, when he heard a voice.

"Blade?"

It was a woman's voice, and he stopped. "Yes?"

"A private word with you, please."

In spite of the "please," the tone was that of a command. Blade decided to obey. He suspected he was just drunk enough not to be properly cautious, but was sure he wasn't drunk enough not to fight his way out of any trap.

The trees kept jumping out in front of Blade as he made his way toward the voice, but he managed not to make too much noise. Finally he pushed past the last set of branches and came out into a little clearing. It was completely surrounded by trees on all sides, but overhead a full moon shone through. It was easy to recognize the woman who sat cross-legged on the grass, her back against a tree.

"Greetings, Your Highness," said Blade. He found that both his legs and his voice were steady now.

"Greetings, Blade," said Elyana. She laughed. "I didn't ask you to come here so you could stand at a distance and be admired."

"I really didn't think so." He crossed the clearing in three strides, as Elyana raised both arms. Blade took her hands and pulled her to her feet. For a moment they stood at arm's length. Elyana's perfume, the scent of the flowers and the grass, the warm night air, the secluded place, the wide eyes staring into his, the full lips with a nimble tongue licking in and out across them—all wrote DESIRE in the air between Blade and Elyana.

Then Elyana threw both arms around Blade, and one hand crept in under his tunic. Long, warm fingers played urgently across his bare skin. He bent to kiss her, and at the same time put both hands on her shoulders. The gown was just loose enough to slip down, leaving her shoulders bare. Blade's fingers danced up and down Elyana's cheeks and neck, across her throat and down across the swell of her breasts until they met the tissue of the gown. Meanwhile her own hand was working down his chest onto his stomach.

Elyana moaned, and Blade heard himself doing the same. Her perfume was changing subtly, as the smell of her arousal joined it. She gripped one of his hands and almost jerked it down to cup her breast. Blade heard the tissue rip, didn't care, and began to play with the hardening nipple under his fingers. The moans

turned into gasps.

Elyana stumbled and fell against Blade, more tissue ripping and her nails digging into his skin as she held on for balance. This time her laugh was girlish.

Now she tried to pull her gown all the way off without letting go of Blade or moving back from him. In the process she pulled him off balance, and they both went down. Fortunately he didn't fall on top of her. The unexpected fall left him motionless just long enough for Elyana to strip off what was left of her gown, pull Blade's trousers nearly off his legs, and mount him.

Now that they were actually joined, Blade somehow found it easier rather than harder to control himself. His experience told him that Elyana would hold nothing back, if he first gave her the satisfaction that she sought so desperately.

Elyana was exquisite as she swayed back and forth above him, face turned to the stars and the moonlight glowing on shoulder and breast and thigh. Naked, she showed a sagging here and a thickening there that told of a good many years and several children. She also showed magnificent breasts with nipples like buds ready to blossom, and hair that caressed Blade's face every time she bent forward. As she breathed, she breathed out the warm musk of rising desire, and soon the gasps and moans turned into whimpers. Blade held her around the waist with one hand, while the other played with her breasts.

She reached her satisfaction so suddenly that Blade gasped not only in surprise but in pain as her hands gripped his hair. She twisted and writhed back and forth, tears running down her cheeks, and Blade had to grip her by the wrists to keep his hair from being pulled out in handfuls.

The movement sent him past the end of his own self-control. Before Elyana stopped writhing and twisting, Blade was doing the same. She fell across his chest as he shook, burying her face in his throat, letting her hair flow over his chest, clutching him to her as though trying to hide inside him or let him hide inside her. After a long time the last convulsions passed, and both of them lay still.

Chapter 9

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The night was warm, and Blade and Elyana lay on the grass in the little clearing for hours, breathing the scent of the flowering trees and of each other. In those slow and lovely hours, they explored every inch of each other's bodies.

Finally Elyana gently pushed Blade's hands away from her breasts, sat up, looked at the torn and grass-stained remnants of her gown, and started to laugh. "Blade, could you look through the gardens and see if there are any clothes lying around that I could put on? I'd rather not return looking like this."

"Do you think there will be any stray clothes?"

"I'll be surprised if there aren't. We weren't the only people spending the night this way."

Blade laughed and started pulling on his pants.

That was his first night with Elyana. It wasn't his last, but there were fewer meetings than he'd expected, considering the hunger and passion she'd shown in the garden. Blade understood her reasons. No one

expected a husband in Gohar to be faithful to his wife, but unfaithful wives could be set aside or even sent to the Island of Shells. Matters would be even more delicate when it was the wife of the heir to the Imperial throne.

One rainy afternoon they were lying on a flower-draped couch in the little shelter by Elyana's private swimming pond. The princess raised herself on one elbow and spoke.

"Blade, if you worry about offending Harkrat—don't waste your strength. You need it for other things." She patted him in a way that made clear what "other things" she had in mind.

"You know him better than I do, Elyana," said Blade. "I'll believe you, if you'll explain why this is so."

"If I explain, will everyone in England know what I tell you?"

"No. I can leave anything you tell me out of my report. Not even my fellow Historians will know the details of your personal life."

"Will you do that?"

Blade was about to agree, then realized he had a priceless opportunity to ask a few blunt questions about Gohar's secrets. "I will, if you will tell me what I need to know about Mythor."

"Mythor?"

"You know. Mythor and its rebels."

Elyana stiffened as if he'd jabbed her with a knife, and her teeth clamped down on her lower lip. "You know?" It was almost a whimper, but not the kind she let out in passion. Now she sounded more like a small animal with its paw caught in a trap.

"I know just enough to want to learn more. Unfortunately, I haven't yet figured out a way to ask the right questions without Kloret hearing about it. I don't want that."

"Kloret?"

"Yes." He told her of his conversation with Kloret, and the Prime Minister's interest in Gohar's daughter city. By the time he'd finished, Elyana was laughing. She went on laughing until Blade realized she was on the edge of hysterics. He took her in his arms, kissed her lips, then her breasts. He stroked and caressed her until her laughter turned to moans and sobs.

When they were quiet again she said, "Blade, I don't suppose I can really do anything to you if you break your promise. At least not without injuring Harkrat and Gohar. Do I have your word of honor that you won't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you?"

"You do."

What Elyana had to tell Blade was very simple. Prince Harkrat, heir to the throne of Gohar, was impotent. Completely and hopelessly. He'd been that way ever since he reached what would have been manhood in a healthy prince. He was a fine physical specimen in every other way, but one vital part of his body simply would not do what nature intended.

An idea seemed to strike Elyana suddenly. "Blade, are the English as far ahead of us in medicine as in everything else? Perhaps if you—"

Blade shook his head sadly. "Elyana, I am a Historian, not a doctor. I know just enough about medicine to know that your husband's case would be far beyond my skills. I might maim or kill him if I tried anything. Besides, would he be willing to let me know his shame? I would help him if I could, but I don't see that I can."

"I suppose not," said Elyana, and went on with her story.

Harkrat was no intellectual giant, but he was shrewd enough to realize that he'd have to learn to live with his flaw. If he didn't, he would ruin more than himself—he would ruin the Gohar his father had spent many years keeping at peace.

"And he's a kind man," said the princess. "He'd have been a wonderful father if the gods had made him otherwise. As it is, he sees every Goharan as his son or daughter, to watch over and care for."

"What about the three children you've presented as his?"

That was the most closely guarded secret in Gohar. Each of the three children was Elyana's by a different father, a nobleman carefully chosen for his healthy stock, resemblance to Harkrat, and total discretion. One of the three fathers had been killed in battle five years ago, and so far the other two had held their tongues.

"I think the Emperor would have had all three of them quietly killed," said Elyana. "But Harkrat wouldn't have it. He said it would dishonor the throne."

So the two surviving noblemen, Harkrat, Elyana, and the Emperor alone knew a secret which could shake the throne of Gohar.

"Are you sure about that?" said Blade. He stared at Elyana, until she lowered her eyes and with her face against his chest shook her head. "No. Kloret has the secret."

"Did he learn it himself, or was he told because he has the Emperor's blood in him?"

A long silence, then: "Blade, do I have to tell you anything? Or can you see everything at a glance?"

"I can see that Kloret could very nearly be your husband's brother. Is he?"

"No. Only a cousin. Thrayket had a younger brother, who died of a fever two years before Thrayket became Emperor. Kloret is his bastard son. But that's another secret."

"I suppose everyone else at court these past thirty years has been so near-sighted they can't see what I saw the first time I met Kloret?"

Blade couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice, even though he knew it was unfair. The more he learned about this net of intrigue he'd fallen into, the less he liked it, even though he felt sorry for some of the Goharans involved.

Elyana shook her head again. "No, Blade. A great many people have seen it. But everyone who knows the truth has always denied it."

"Including Kloret himself?"

"Yes."

"But at a price, I suppose?"

She sighed. "Of course. The price was being made Baiham. Since he's a wise man and a good soldier, I don't think he was a bad choice!" She said this almost defiantly.

"No," said Blade. "But I imagine that as Baiham he was in a much better position to learn Harkrat's secret."

Elyana honestly didn't know. Certainly nobody would admit telling Kloret, but just as certainly he behaved as if he knew. If he was bluffing, it was a bluff they didn't dare risk calling, not, when he could start a civil war if he really knew.

Fortunately Kloret played his cards very carefully. He never asked for any favors or privileges which would arouse suspicion or jealousy. He only asked for what would make his own position secure. A few estates, a house in Gohar, a squadron of galleys whose captains took orders from him, the right to hire bodyguards more or less as he pleased—all this would pass as the eagerness of a loyal servant of the Emperor to equip himself for the job.

"He also asked one other thing," said Elyana. "That we not send our spies where he'd already put his own."

Blade laughed. His experience with the bureaucratic politics of intelligence organizations told him what came next. "And one of those places was Mythor?"

"Yes. So I truly can't tell you what is happening in the south. There are rebels in the city, or at least men who might become rebels. Harkrat has a few men there, and they've learned that much. But he doesn't dare try to learn more, or Kloret will accuse us of breaking the agreement."

So matters stood. Kloret played the spider, spinning his webs. Harkrat did his public duties and tried to keep up his spirits as well as he could. Most of the time he succeeded. Elyana gave her husband all the help she could, and occasionally refreshed herself with discreet affairs. She preferred men who were not only virile but intelligent.

"If I'd been a man, I think I would have entered one of the houses of scholars and scribes. As a woman, I could not, and Harkrat doesn't give me much help there. He's good and kind and seldom turns his anger against me, and he's wiser than many think who only know how he babbles in his wine. But he would never have made a scholar." They'd gone on like this for many years, and they might go on for many more if Thrayket lived. Unfortunately it wasn't just Blade's imagination that the Emperor was near the end of his life.

"If he lasts out this year, it will be a miracle. If he lives two years, I will build a shrine to HemiGohar with my own hands, and mix the mortar with Kloret's blood!" The soft body against Blade stiffened at the last words.

It was a race against time. Slowly, quietly, and so far without detection, Harkrat and Elyana had been building up their own system of trusted people and spies. If the Emperor lived another two years, the

prince might have a chance to strike at Kloret before the Prime Minister could defend himself.

"And if he dies, his schemes die with him. He has no heirs except his daughter Fierssa, and a girl her age can hardly keep alive a plot against the Emperor." Blade remembered the gray-eyed girl flashing her bare leg at him. He turned to Elyana, kissed each nipple once, and sat up.

"So you can't tell me about affairs in Mythor. In fact, I suppose you'd be happy if I could learn about them and tell you."

Elyana stared. "You'd be willing to do that for us?"

"Why not?" said Blade. "Frankly, I don't much care for people like Kloret. Nine times out of ten, they do more harm than good. So I'll go to Mythor and look around. If I'm sure that defeating Kloret won't change history, I'll help.

"Don't expect miracles, either. I can't just disappear and slip off to the south. That would cause too much talk. I'll have to go openly, and I'm fairly sure Kloret already has men watching me. I doubt if he'll strike at me, but he might accuse you of violating the agreement about spies in Mythor."

Elyana shrugged. "If he does that, I'll take all the blame myself. Then he'll have to try to get Harkrat to repudiate me, and that will throw him into a whole new fight."

"Just be careful he doesn't decide to have you killed," said Blade. He bent down and kissed her shoulder. The skin was like satin, and she was using a new perfume today.

She started to shrug again, then suddenly her face broke and she threw both arms around Blade, pulling him down beside her. "Blade, I'm frightened. I don't want to be, but I can't help it. I think somehow it's your fault."

"Mine?"

"Yes. Before you came, I couldn't really see there was much hope for us. Now—well, you're something new. Something Kloret may not understand until it's too late. Now I can hope again, and somehow that frightens me."

Blade was going to tell her again not to expect miracles, but she was arching upward to bring her lips to his and their bodies together. This was no time for talking, only for giving her the reassurance she needed in the way she needed it.

For the first few days after his talk with Elyana, Blade had no time to even think about Mythor, Kloret, the problems of princes, or the plots of Gohar. He was moved bag and baggage to an eight-room suite in one wing of the main palace. The reception hall of the suite was larger than his whole villa in the garden, and the other rooms were in proportion.

At least a dozen permanent servants and as many more on call came with the suite. Blade tried to get this mob reduced as much as he could without making too much of a fuss, then gave up. He simply had to accept the fact that he'd probably have Kloret's spies underfoot morning, noon, and night.

Fortunately, things could be worse. Blade was fairly sure he could give anyone in Gohar the slip if they

tried to trail him. Eavesdropping could be more of a problem, but Blade knew all the precautions there too. There was something to be said for primitive societies, when it came to getting involved in political conspiracies. No number of human ears any Prime Minister could buy were equal to one good technician and a dozen well-placed microphones.

For several days, Blade suspected Klore's spies were close to dying of boredom at what they overheard. He certainly was. Once again the petitioners swarmed around him, trying to make sure their names would be recorded by the Historians of England a thousand years in the future. Now that he was no longer shut in the villa, everybody with access to the palace could come and bother him. Sometimes it seemed to Blade this included half the population of Gohar. When he heard the Third Keeper of the Emperor's racing stable beg to be remembered as a man who was always kind to his horses, it was hard not to laugh in the poor man's face.

Then suddenly one night Blade had a visitor he couldn't laugh at.

Chapter 10

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It was late at night and Blade was returning to his suite from a banquet. His host had been an Admiral Mayarshet, one of Klore's most reliable supporters. When he climbed into his chariot and drove off to the admiral's villa, Blade was ready to guard not only his tongue but his back.

Now he was coming home, ready to go to bed and digest what he had to admit was a memorable meal. It started off with three or four kinds of shellfish, raw, baked, or fried with bacon. It went on to a soup thick with plump grains of rice and bits of dark strong meat, then roast lamb, chicken baked in clay, an immense stew of goat meat and vegetables and another of a dozen kinds of fish. In the end he'd eaten enough to make the thought of any more food positively repulsive. Fine meals were part of even the poorest Goharans' hospitality, and Blade was moving among the richest and most generous in the Empire.

He pulled off his cloak, made of the water-repellent feathers of a sea bird, and gave it to a servant. He moved on down the hall toward his bedroom. By now he was sufficiently used to the servants kneeling as he passed to ignore them.

The last servants knelt as Blade passed into his bedroom and locked the door behind him. Fortunately the Goharans had good locks, and were willing to install one on his bedroom door when he asked for it. He said he needed to ensure privacy for his meditations. Upper-class Goharans weren't particularly religious. They'd have laughed out loud at Blade's calling himself a messenger from the gods. However, they knew that some people took the gods more seriously. If the English were such a people, Blade's request was reasonable.

The lock didn't completely guarantee Blade's safety, since there was a balcony outside the bedroom, and beside it a stout vine rising up the palace wall from the ground. Only a very light and agile person could climb the vine, however, and the palace guards would almost certainly spot anyone trying it.

A thunderstorm was moving in as Blade got ready for sleep. He'd washed and was turning toward the low bed when a sudden blaze of lightning flooded the room with its glare. Against the light, he saw the silhouette of a human figure climbing over the balcony railing.

Blade covered the rest of the distance to the bed in a single leap. He snatched his sword off the night table by the bed and with the other hand picked up one of the pillows. In another leap he was across the bed, and in a third he was at the balcony door.

As he stepped out onto the balcony, a clap of thunder exploded overhead. It sounded as if the sky itself was splitting apart and falling down on Gohar to crush it to powder. Whoever was on the balcony apparently felt the storm's power as well. In the rumbles and crashes after the first clap Blade heard someone moaning in fear but desperately trying to hide it.

Blade scanned the balcony, but in the darkness even his superb night vision couldn't find anything at first. Then he saw that one of the huge marble urns at the far end of the balcony was a little wider than it should have been. There was no time to lose and no room for maneuvering, so Blade simply charged, sword in hand. As he reached the urn, a vaguely human shape sprang up from beside it. Blade struck with the back of the sword and with the other hand clutched at where the head ought to be. A gasp of pain turned into a stifled scream as his fingers closed in long hair and pulled the intruder toward him. Then he was lifting the slim form, light enough to tuck under one arm while he held the other hand over its mouth. He kicked the door open, plunged through, and tossed the visitor face down on the bed.

Then another flash of lightning showed that his visitor was Klore's daughter Fierssa.

She was wearing a man's trousers and tunic, and seemed to have no weapons on her anywhere. Blade felt safe in leaving her to retrieve his sword and close the balcony doors. As he came back he saw her shoulders begin to shake in silent weeping.

He sat down on the bed beside her and stroked her hair with one hand. "Fierssa, I don't think you've done anything wrong. But I'm going to have to ask why you're here. Did your father send you?"

Fierssa started and looked up at Blade. In spite of the tears still running down her cheeks, she giggled, then began to laugh. A moment later she was laughing so hard that Blade was afraid the servants would hear. He pulled her across his lap, held her tightly with one arm, and clamped the other hand over her mouth again.

Slowly Fierssa giggled and gasped herself into silence. Then she sat up, wiped her face on a corner of the sheet, and said, "Blade, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so weak. But I'm frightened of thunderstorms. That's why I came tonight. Then when you asked me about my father ..." She clenched her fists and bit her lips, and after a moment could speak again.

"My father would kill me if he knew why I was here," she said. "And not quickly, either."

"For having an affair with me?"

"No, for treason. I've come to ask your help for the rebels of Mythor."

Blade's voice was low and quite expressionless. "Fierssa, I think you'd better tell me more. Much more. Otherwise I may tell your father that you came here, if not why."

This started Fierssa crying again, and Blade held her until she calmed down as much as she could under the circumstances. Blade had the distinct feeling that Fierssa might be rather high-strung to be a successful conspirator.

She also felt very comfortable in his arms. Her warmth was pleasant, since it was an unusually cool night

for this time of year in Gohar, Instead of perfume, she exhaled the agreeable smell of a clean, healthy young woman.

When she was able to talk, she needed only a little prompting from Blade to tell the story of the Friends of Mythor and what they wanted from Blade.

There was indeed a rebel movement in Mythor. It was not hostile to Goharans in general, only to Gohar's rule over its daughter city. They felt Mythor paid too much in taxes and didn't receive enough protection. The merchants of Mythor received fewer privileges, and the Emperor's judges almost always decided in favor of Goharans. And so on and so forth. Gohar simply hadn't recognized that its daughter city was developing pride, self-confidence, and the ability to stand on its own.

"The rebels don't want a war against Gohar unless it's forced upon them. They'd much rather have Mythor declare its independence, then make a treaty of alliance with Gohar as a friend and equal."

Fierssa couldn't say how this miracle was going to happen. She also couldn't say exactly what the Friends of Mythor in Gohar were planning on doing to help matters along. After a while Blade realized she couldn't say because she didn't know, and neither apparently did most of the other Friends of Mythor. Many of them were the children of court nobles, officers of the army and fleet, or wealthy merchants. They might very well be sincere in their friendship for Mythor and their belief that the rebellion could be peaceful. They also seemed hopelessly naive about everything else, including the dangers they were facing.

Blade realized that the Friends of Mythor weren't the sort of people he'd care to join in organizing a picnic, let alone a revolution. That thought also reminded him that Fierssa hadn't said exactly what the Friends wanted from him. He doubted it was simply that he take back word of their good intentions to his fellow Historians in England.

He asked her bluntly, and she was quiet so long he thought perhaps she didn't have an answer ready. Then she said slowly: "It depends on how much danger you're willing to run to make Mythor free."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm rather a well-known man in Gohar. Sneaking off to Mythor is out of the question. Also, I can't really help the rebels. I don't know whether Mythor succeeds in its rebellion or not."

"Yes. My father mentioned that. I thought you might have been lying to him."

"I wasn't. I don't know, and since I don't know I can't really help the rebels. That might change history enough to destroy the England where I lived. Then I might disappear, or be trapped here in Gohar for the rest of my life."

"The freedom of the people of Mythor means nothing to you?" She sounded almost angry. She seemed blind to the possibility that anyone could disagree with her or her favorite cause. He decided to be blunt again.

"The people of Mythor mean very little to me, and so do the people of Gohar. I hadn't heard of either one until I came here. I've been in dozens of different times, among dozens of different peoples. I have to stand apart from their problems, or I would leave a trail of destruction behind me." I hope she never finds out I've done exactly that in some Dimensions. "If the people of Mythor have a good cause, I certainly wish them well. But I doubt if I can help them."

For a moment Blade was sure Fierssa was going to start crying again. Then she got herself under control and said, "Will you at least meet with some men the rebels have sent here to Gohar? You can talk to them, and decide if it's safe to go to Mythor. If you do go, we can introduce you to other rebels."

That made enough sense for Blade to consider it. He wouldn't be committing himself to anything, except a certain amount of danger if Kloret's spies had penetrated the Friends of Mythor. Considering what amateurs the Friends seemed to be, they probably had been penetrated.

He was willing to run that risk. Fierssa was giving him the best chance he'd probably have of making contact with the rebels, and he'd promised Princess Elyana he'd try to do this. Once he'd learned what might be going on in Mythor, he could go ahead and tell Elyana. The Friends of Mythor might not have much practical power, but Elyana and her husband were another matter. If he gave them a powerful weapon against Kloret, they could be trusted to know how to use it.

"I'd like to meet—" he began, then a whole salvo of thunderclaps drowned him out. Fierssa whimpered and held onto him as if he was a log and she was drowning. When the thunder died away, Blade stroked her hair and continued.

"I'd like to meet some of the Friends of Mythor. After that, we can meet the rebels who are in Gohar. Then I'll see about going south." Blade wished he didn't have to promise the first meeting. Unfortunately, the Friends would probably be insulted and therefore uncooperative if he didn't work through them. Amateurs! The word had the quality of an obscenity.

"Blade?"

He realized he'd spoken out loud. "Nothing, Fierssa." Another thunderclap, and she quivered all over. Blade laughed softly. "Fierssa, if thunderstorms frighten you so much—"

She looked up at him almost defiantly. "Because they frighten me, I came out tonight. I must make myself strong, gain courage, stop being a child and become a woman. My father won't help me, so I must do it all myself."

Now Blade could see her smiling in the darkness. "Also, my father knows how thunderstorms frighten me. If anyone saw me or learns you had a woman in your room, he'll hear about it. But he'll never believe it was me, running around in the middle of a storm. Never."

Blade kissed her on the forehead. It must have taken real courage to force herself out into the storm. She'd also shown a certain grasp of practical psychology, picking a night which would confuse her father and cover her tracks.

Perhaps she doesn't have as much to learn as I thought, then Blade decided he was not going to get tangled up in running a school for Gohar's young revolutionaries. They were going to have to learn their lessons themselves. With Kloret around, he was afraid they would learn some of those lessons the hard way.

"Blade," Fierssa said shyly. "Could I stay here with you until the storm passes?"

"All right, but you'd better be gone before it starts to get light. If one of the sentries challenges you—"

"I understand."

"Good. There are sleeping robes in the chest in the corner, if you want to get out of those wet clothes."

She went over to the chest, and Blade rolled over, carefully looking away. He heard the plop of wet cloth hitting the floor, then the rustle of shell-tissue on skin, the soft padding of bare feet, and finally more rustling as Fierssa climbed into bed. A moment later two slim, warm arms slipped around him from behind, and even warmer lips closed on the lobe of one ear.

"Fierssa—?"

"Blade, they're going to say you had a woman in your room tonight. If you're going to have to face the talk anyway, why not get some pleasure out of it as well?" She laughed, and her teeth closed on his ear just hard enough to tell him she knew exactly what she was doing.

Now it was Blade's turn to laugh. He rolled over and found the girl pressing her body against his even before he'd stopped moving. His hands moved down her body to her waist and touched bare skin where her robe had crept up to her hips. They slipped in under the robe to stroke her thighs, and he heard her moan. His hands moved back and forth, reaching the little damp tuft of hair between her thighs, and she moaned louder.

Then her hands also moved, pulling up his robe. For a moment his fingers lay across small firm breasts with hard nipples. Then she pulled herself completely out of his hands, her head swooped down between his thighs like a bird, and her mouth closed on him.

"Fierssa—"

"Lie still, Blade. There's time, and there's strength in you." The words came out muffled, because she didn't stop working as she spoke.

"Fierssa." It was a sigh, with exquisite delight and exquisite pain mixed together in it. Then Blade couldn't even say the girl's name, as she served him with impossible, unimaginable gifts of skill and tenderness, torturing him so that he would gladly have been tortured this way for hours on end.

Mere human flesh couldn't stand hours or even a few minutes of what Fierssa was doing. Blade felt himself on the edge of exploding, fought as long as he could, then fell over into the explosion. Fierssa didn't stop, didn't draw back, and didn't speak until Blade caught his breath.

"Oh, Blade—" Her voice was half-choked. Lightning flashed, and in the glare he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed. She was naked now, her breasts were as lovely as he'd imagined, and the thought of touching them woke desire in him again. This was impossible, but it was also happening.

He sat up and put both hands on Fierssa's shoulders. Startled, she tried to twist away, but he tightened his grip. Finding one hand enough to hold onto her, he stroked her breasts with the other. She stopped trying to twist free, and her eyes closed. Blade moved the other hand down between her thighs. Her mouth sagged open, she swayed like a tree in the storm outside, then fell back across the bed.

Now it was as if there was a telepathic link between Blade and Fierssa. Her thighs slid apart at the exact moment Blade was prepared to enter her, and her arms and legs locked around him as she took him into herself. She moaned, then tried to choke off a cry, then stopped trying. By now Blade was too aroused to care whether or not the servants heard.

He drove himself into her almost fiercely, holding himself under control until she'd twisted and tossed

under him twice. Then as she reached a third climax he found his own, and his breath went out in a long groan as hers went out in a great sobbing sigh. She was asleep even as he drew himself free of her.

Blade didn't sleep. He knew that if he did, he'd never awaken in time to send Fierssa on her way before daylight. That would certainly make the worst sort of trouble for her, and probably too much for him. So he stayed awake. Never on any mission, in Home Dimension or Dimension X, had he faced such a struggle against sleep.

Eventually Fierssa awoke, kissed him, pulled on her clothes, and was gone into the rain. Blade stayed awake long enough to see her safely on the ground, slipping away through the trees. There were no guards in sight, and no trace of dawn in the dark sky that still dripped rain. She should be able to reach home without being challenged.

Then he lurched back into the bedroom, and was asleep before he could even properly stretch out on the bed.

Chapter 11

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Blade's first night with Fierssa wasn't the last night he went short of sleep while in Gohar. He now found himself dealing with two women who liked his company in bed, two political conspiracies, all his public social activities, and the normal daily routine of eating, sleeping, bathing, and going to the toilet.

To make matters worse, he had to be careful not to let Princess Elyana know anything about his dealings with Fierssa and the Friends of Mythor, or give Fierssa any idea he was on intimate terms with Princess Elyana. Both women hated Kloret, but otherwise Blade couldn't be sure they'd have much in common. Elyana wanted to learn about the rebels, but she could hardly want to help them against her own husband. Fierssa already knew about the rebels, and wanted to get Blade on their side.

There was also the matter of jealousy. Very few people were completely immune to it, and Blade doubted that either Fierssa or the princess were among these few. When he was sleeping with more than one woman at a time, Blade always preferred to say too little rather than too much.

Fortunately he and Fierssa weren't able to get together often enough to require explanations to Elyana, or as often as the girl would have liked. There weren't enough safe places for them to meet, and even Fierssa admitted this. "I'm not going to put my friends in danger just to have more fun in bed," she said.

"Good for you," said Blade. Half the time Fierssa seemed as naive and foolish as a child about what she was doing. The other half she seemed as thoroughly clear-headed as anyone could ask. She was a strange mixture of child and woman, and if she lived long enough for the woman to replace the child, the Friends of Mythor might have the leader they needed. How desperately they needed such leadership was clear after his first meeting with them. They had plenty of courage, but were short of practically everything else.

It was also clear that he was going to have to get to Mythor as soon as possible. Ideally, he should be ready to leave as soon as he'd met with the rebel envoys and found out who to meet in the south. Any unnecessary delay could be an open invitation to trouble from the Prime Minister.

It was the wrong season for a swift voyage to the south, so Blade's choices would be limited. Degyat's

galley squadron was already at sea, and might not be back for weeks. Blue Swallow had returned with her load of timber and might be making an out-of-season voyage to Mythor, but Blade was reluctant to drag Captain Nemyet into his affairs. The captain might already be a marked man in Kloret's eyes, and any further involvement with Blade could put him in real danger.

Eventually Blade decided to put the whole matter before Elyana, so that if all else failed she could ask her husband's help. Before he could arrange the necessary meeting with the princess, events suddenly moved completely out of his control.

It was announced that His Radiance Thrayket IV had taken to his bed. A congestion of the chest and a fever, said the official report. There was no need to fear. The less official and almost certainly more reliable word said that Thrayket was never going to rise from his bed, and might leave it in his shroud within a few days.

Two days after that, Blade met Fierssa and learned that she'd arranged the meeting with the envoys of the Mythoran rebels for the next night.

"There's a beach north of Berkyut's Tomb. Do you know where that is?"

"No."

"Well, then. Meet me here at the first night hour, and we'll go together." She kissed him, drew the hood over her face again, and hurried off.

Blade was reasonably certain nobody trailed him to his rendezvous with Fierssa, but this wasn't much comfort. He doubted if Kloret wasted any time or men trailing him now. It would be so much easier to keep a watch on the Friends of Mythor and let them act as bait for larger fish. Blade had shown that he had both skill and determination in covering his tracks, while the Friends had neither.

Even less reassuring was the complete absence of any official news about the Emperor's health. This almost certainly meant Thrayket was so sick that it was no longer safe to tell the truth. Blade would be very surprised if the maneuvering for position, which always follows the death of a king, hadn't already begun. Everybody would be doing it, whatever faction they supported. The only consolation was that Kloret might now be too busy watching his own back to watch anyone else.

"On the other hand, he might think no one is watching him, so he can strike freely," Blade told Fierssa, as they walked along the shore. A mile ahead, the chopped-off black pyramid of Berkyut's Tomb was fading into the twilight. Beyond the trees on the other side of it was the beach where they'd meet the rebel envoys.

"I couldn't say," she replied. "Father's told me even less than usual. That might be a good sign. When things are going well for him, he always boasts. If he's silent ..."

She seemed to be taking some comfort from this reasoning, and Blade didn't feel like pointing out its faults. She was dressed as a man, so he couldn't take her hand as they walked. Side by side, they tramped across the hard-packed beach sand, rounded the base of the dune where the tomb stood, and climbed up through the trees. By the time they came out on the beach beyond, it was nearly dark.

As they descended the slope, slipping and lurching in the loose sand, a cluster of dark shapes rose from

the sand to their right.

"Mythor," said someone.

"Shall," replied Fierssa.

"Be," from another shape.

"Free," said Fierssa.

A lantern glowed yellow, and Blade saw three faces he recognized from the Friends of Mythor, two young men and a girl. Four others must be the rebel envoys. Mythorans were slightly darker than Goharans from exposure to the fiercer southern sun, and the men were usually clean-shaven.

Blade stepped forward to greet them. As he took his third step a sharp voice rose behind him, drowning out the wind and the sea and freezing him in midstride.

"Stop, traitors to Gohar!"

It was Kloret's voice.

Each of the "traitors" reacted at his own speed. Blade was the fastest, the four rebels next, and the Friends of Mythor a bad last.

Blade whirled, drawing his sword and shielding Fierssa. The four envoys also drew their swords, looked up and down the beach, then as if they'd been one man sprinted off toward the west. Before Blade could take two deep breaths the Mythorans were out of sight in the darkness. They must also have been out of sight from above, because Blade heard Kloret's voice again, sharp and angry.

"Don't waste arrows, you fools! Some of you go after them. The rest come with me."

Two lanterns glowed, showing half a dozen armed men dashing off after the Mythorans. The rest followed Kloret down onto the beach. Five of them were archers, with arrows nocked and ready to shoot. Blade estimated the chances of doing anything, and decided that they weren't good. In fact, the chances of doing anything except taking Kloret with him were small, and he'd have to pick the right moment for that.

Even waiting and watching would still help gain time for the Mythorans. As long as Kloret was dealing with Blade and the Friends, he might not send more men after the rebels. In the darkness, the Mythorans could probably evade or kill the ones on their trail now.

So Blade stood quietly, letting the Prime Minister's men disarm him. It was unfortunate that Goharan clothing didn't provide any secure hiding places for knives, but that couldn't be helped. The soldiers were carrying plenty of weapons, and some of them would certainly be within easy reach when he decided to strike.

Two of Kloret's men stood behind Blade with drawn swords and two others covered him with their bows while their comrades went to work on the Friends of Mythor. The two men and the girl were stripped naked and their hands tied behind their backs. The men were dragging Fierssa forward to strip her when Kloret raised a hand.

"No. Leave her to me."

So Fierssa had her hands tied, but otherwise she was left alone. She stood just behind her father, head bowed, eyes closed, face pale and sweating. She seemed as much ashamed at being protected by her father as she was afraid of what might come.

With driftwood and branches, the Prime Minister's men built a fire and tossed the clothing from the stripped prisoners into it. The three exchanged uncertain looks, and Blade saw them fighting hard for self-control. They thought the burning of their clothing meant they wouldn't be leaving the beach alive. They were probably right.

However, Blade might have some influence, and if he did he'd better use it now while everybody was still in one piece. "Kloret," he said sharply. One of the swords pricked him in the back, then the Prime Minister raised his hand again.

"A moment. Yes, Blade?"

"What have these people done?"

For a moment Kloret looked as though he suspected Blade's sanity, then he laughed. "Does it matter to you, Blade?" Before Blade could think of an answer, Kloret went on. "If you don't know what they've done, why should you worry about their punishment? But I think you're lying. I think you know exactly what they've done and that's why you're here with them. So you're as guilty as they are. If we can't learn what we need to know from them—"

At this point the courage of one of the young men broke. He threw himself on the sand as close to the Prime Minister as he could get, sobbing and desperately twisting his bound hands. The other two Friends stood close together, the girl swallowing hard and the man trying to comfort her with looks only. Blade remembered that they were lovers.

Eventually the young man ran out of breath. Kloret gave another hand signal, and one of the guards stepped over to the young man and straddled him. Then he rammed his spear down through the young man's body, so hard it pinned him to the beach like a butterfly on display. The scream he let out was something out of a nightmare. The young woman would have collapsed if her lover hadn't moved so she could lean against him.

Kloret swept the other prisoners with his chilly eyes. "He's going to die slowly, but you'll die even more slowly if you don't answer my questions."

"Kloret," Blade snapped. "You're right. It doesn't matter what these people have done. At least it won't matter to you, when the Emperor learns about this. You'll lose your office for amusing yourself this way, and if the Emperor—"

"Which Emperor, Blade?" said Kloret. Again he laughed. It was the most discouraging laugh Blade had ever heard. It hinted at all sorts of secret knowledge that made him the complete master of the situation.

Kloret shook his head. "I doubt if Thrayket will ever learn about anything. He's dead." Fierssa jumped as if she'd been stabbed, and Blade found it harder than usual to keep his own self-control. "As for Harkrat—Blade, I think you know better than to hope he'll be in a position to take any vengeance for you, let alone these worms here."

He faced the two Friends. "My daughter has already told me a good deal of what I want to know—"

"That's a lie!" Fierssa shouted. One of the spearmen drove the butt of his weapon into the small of her back. She gasped and fell to the ground.

"You didn't make things any easier for your friends or for yourself," Kloreth told his daughter. Then he turned back to the others. "I need to know certain things about the work of the Friends. First, who were those traitors who ran off into the darkness?"

The two lovers looked at each other. Blade was silent. If Thrayket was dead and Harkrat was likely to be blackmailed into silence by the threat of revealing his secret there wasn't much to be done. His own chances of survival were not going to be particularly good, and the Friends of Mythor were doomed. He'd better keep his mouth shut, since every time he opened it seemed to put a greater strain on the desperate courage of the Friends. There wasn't much left for them except to die with dignity, so he could at least let them do that.

In the end, Blade's keeping silent didn't make much difference to the lovers. Nobody could have died with dignity after what Kloreth had done to them. He kept at them even after it was obvious they weren't going to talk, and then until they couldn't talk, only scream. Even after they could no longer scream the work went on, with steel and fire and cords and bare hands. It didn't stop until life was gone and the two lovers were sprawled in the middle of a patch of foul and bloody sand.

Blade felt himself sweating in spite of the chilly sea breeze, and Fierssa was obviously staying on her feet only by a heroic effort. Blade still had one faint hope. The screams of the two lovers must have been audible a mile away. Perhaps Kloreth's rank or his armed guards could drive off any inquisitive passers-by. But perhaps not, and in any sort of a fight or confusion, Blade and Fierssa might at least have a chance to escape. They'd be fugitives in a Gohar sliding steadily toward civil war, but that was better than ending up sprawled on the sand like the two Friends.

Then out of the darkness to the west came a gurgling cry. The sound was barely human, and after the nightmare of the last hour it was possible to believe it wasn't human at all.

Some vengeful ghost or monster from the depths of the sea could be on the prowl, awakened by the screams.

Then the cry came again, and with it the sound of shuffling footsteps. A third cry, and a lurching human figure appeared on the edge of the firelight. Two guards ran up to it and dragged it closer.

It was one of Kloreth's guards, one arm dangling useless while he used the other to press together a gaping wound in his stomach. His face was a mask of dried blood from a deep scalp wound.

Kloreth stepped forward. "What happened?"

Lips moved under the blood. "The—traitors. Caught us—got out—and—I'm only—one—"

Fierssa gave a cry of delight and Blade felt like shouting himself. So the Mythorans were not only clean away, but they'd killed all but one of the men sent after them. And if they'd got away, they might be able to call friends and—

Kloreth stepped close to the guard, then his sword was in his hand. The firelight danced along the steel as he raised it over his head, then slashed downward. The guard collapsed onto the sand, his skull split

open.

Before Kloret could turn away from the corpse, Fierssa moved. She leaped forward, her hands free and reaching for the knife on Kloret's belt. She snatched it, struck with all her strength at her father's back, and screamed in rage as the knife point struck metal and leather under his robe. Kloret turned, shouting for the guards, his sword raised to strike. A second time Fierssa was too quick. She pressed the point of the knife against her ribs, then flung herself to the ground, driving the knife into her body. She writhed and kicked for a moment, then relaxed in death as Kloret bent to roll her over.

The Prime Minister stood up, and the look on his face made Blade quite sure his last moment was here. With that matter settled, he found it easy to concentrate all his attention on finding a way to take Kloret with him. Death would put an end to all the man's plans, and—if Blade could no longer save himself or the Project, he could at least save—

Fire exploded in Blade's head, as something heavy smashed down on his skull. The fire spread and swelled, blinding him as he fell, then swamping all his other senses so that he barely felt the sand grains against his skin.

At last the fire turned into blackness, and the blackness swallowed Blade.

Chapter 12

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Waking up a chained prisoner with a splitting headache is never pleasant. When you haven't expected to wake up at all and aren't quite sure that you're alive, the experience is also confusing. Blade hadn't been so disoriented and uncertain since his first few arrivals in Dimension X.

He was chained by the ankles and wrists to damp wood gritty with sand. Around him he could see grayish darkness, and overhead still more darkness with a blurred rectangular patch of blue in the middle. He smelled musty decay, human filth, and spoiled fish, and heard a distant background murmuring.

Blade decided he had to try forcing his mind to work and his senses to focus on the world around him. If they worked, well and good. If they didn't, he was either seriously injured and in deep trouble, or dead and in another world.

Blade wasn't sure which of the last two conclusions would be more unpleasant. On the whole, he suspected he would be better off dead. If he was alive but helpless, he would still be within reach of a man planning to kill him as painfully as possible, without being able to defend himself very well. If he were dead, on the other hand—

Then he realized that he was analyzing the situation with his usual care, if not with his usual speed. So his mind was working—perhaps not well, but working nonetheless. He was definitely not dead.

However, the world around him remained as confusing and hard to define as before. Blade wondered if he had a mild concussion. He closed his eyes, leaned back, and winced as his throbbing head struck something solid a little too hard. He kept his eyes closed while he breathed slowly and deeply and used certain Yoga techniques he'd been studying over the last year. Originally he'd studied them with an eye to reducing the stress load of the transition into Dimension X. The apparent success of the KALI capsule made that unnecessary, but Blade kept up the exercises all the same.

Under the influence of the Yoga and the fresh oxygen pumped into his system, the pain in his head began to fade. So did other pains he hadn't noticed before. His ears began to sort out the background murmuring into the creak of wood, the clatter of metal on metal, and the sighing of wind. When he opened his eyes again, his vision was clear enough to tell him where he was.

He was in the hold of a small merchant ship at sea, with a light breeze blowing. On deck the cook was signaling that a meal was ready by banging his spoon against the pot. Blade's chains ran through iron shackles on wrists and ankles, and were hooked to massive iron rings set into the planks. Blade tested his freedom of movement. He'd be able to stand up or lie down, feed himself, probably even bathe. He wasn't a gorilla, and nothing less could break free.

The clinking of Blade's chains as he tested them brought a face peering over the edge of the hatch. It was broad, bearded, and remarkably uncurious.

"Unh, you're awake."

"Where am I?"

The sailor laughed and started to turn away, then stopped, turned back, and spat down into the hold, just missing Blade. "Doesn't matter where you are, diver. You won't be with us long. Shell Island's the place for you." He looked at Blade for a moment, as if waiting for the prisoner to start screaming or begging for mercy. Then he spat again, missed Blade again, and vanished.

Blade leaned back and ran what he'd learned about Shell Island through his memory. It was a nearly desert island about five days' sailing from Gohar. It was far enough from the western shore of the Sea so that escape to land was impossible without a boat. It was also in shallow water, surrounded by reefs with only one navigable ship channel through them to the open water.

The same shallows supported rich beds of tissue-shells and pearl oysters, and schools of the small mollusks that produced most of Gohar's valuable dyes. No single place in the Empire produced so much wealth, or was so feared by those who didn't share that wealth.

Like Devil's Island or Australia, Shell Island was a place for dangerous criminals the Goharans didn't execute. At any given time, several thousand men and women lived there.

Some lived longer than others, but few survived more than five years and still fewer lived out their sentences and returned sane and healthy to Gohar.

The convicts of Shell Island lived by diving for shells, netting dye-mollusks, extracting the tissues, dyes, and pearls, and sending them back to Gohar. All the work demanded either strength and endurance or skill and care. If you were neither strong nor careful, you didn't last very long. If the guards didn't kill you for sport, your fellow prisoners often did. If no human being killed you, the sun, poisonous sea snakes, sharks, starvation, drowning, and fevers had their turn. If you lasted long enough in spite of all the dangers, you would probably go insane and stumble off a cliff some night as you wandered around raving.

Blade had to admit that Shell Island wasn't his idea of an agreeable destination, but he also remembered what he'd said to Khraishamo. Shell Island wasn't escape-proof. He wouldn't let it be.

He soon learned that he couldn't do much toward escaping while he was aboard this ship. The crew clearly had strict orders to ignore everything a prisoner on his way to Shell Island might say or do. None of them had even heard that any such being as a "Man from the Future" was in Gohar. Blade tried to explain himself, but only convinced most of the crew that he'd already gone insane.

"Won't last two weeks on the island," said the captain, shaking his head. "Waste o' food to take him there at all." But orders were orders, and the captain was going to deliver Blade to Shell Island or sink to the bottom of the sea trying.

At the same time, the crew knew how to handle dangerous prisoners. They fed Blade fish and porridge and gave him water twice a day. Once a day they threw buckets of saltwater over him, and rubbed oil on his skin where the shackles chafed it. Otherwise they left him strictly alone. No one with keys or a weapon ever came within Blade's reach. Two men with spears held ready to throw stood by every time he was fed or cleaned. After the first three days Blade decided he wasn't going to get anywhere until he reached Shell Island. It might be no better, but it certainly couldn't be any worse than this ship.

He did learn one useful fact by listening to the crew talk. Kloret hadn't lied. Thrayket IV of Gohar was dead, and before the ship returned from Shell Island he would be buried in the Imperial Tomb along with three hundred years of his ancestors. From the captain on down, the crew were quite irritated at having to miss the funeral. They were partly consoled by not having to miss the coronation of His Radiance Harkrat II, with all the feasts and gifts and dancing in the streets while the public fountains ran with wine.

If Harkrat lives to be crowned, thought Blade, then decided that was being too pessimistic. Kloret might be ready to plunge Gohar into civil war if he thought it would give him advantages he could gain no other way. As long as he thought he could control the prince by blackmail, he would use other and safer methods of accumulating the power he wanted.

One thought of Kloret led to another. For the first time Blade began to wonder why he was alive and on his way to Shell Island, rather than dead and dropped into the sea with stones tied to his body. He knew he'd be guessing, but he also knew he had to think through what Kloret might have in mind for him. Against a man like the Prime Minister, it wasn't safe to sit and wait for facts to drop on you out of the sky.

Thrayket was dead, and there would be confusion in Gohar even if Harkrat took the throne without any delay or trouble. No one would be likely to notice that the Man from the Future was gone, at least until he failed to show up at the funeral and the coronation. Harkrat and Elyana would probably notice it, but Kloret had his ways of keeping them silent.

When Blade's absence finally was noticed, Kloret would claim complete innocence of any knowledge, or perhaps hint that Blade had fled for dishonorable reasons. Kloret could do his best to blacken Blade's reputation by accusing him of rape or theft of something valuable, which would conveniently turn up missing. Harkrat and Elyana and their supporters might not swallow the Prime Minister's story, but wouldn't dare call it a lie either.

So Blade would be out of sight, for most people out of mind, and discredited in the eyes of many of those who remembered him. No one would be able to trace him to Shell Island, since the sailors of the ship carrying him didn't know who he was.

Meanwhile, he would be alive on Shell Island. So Kloret wanted him alive, and Blade could think of at least three good reasons why this was so:

One. Other Englishmen might come to Gohar, learn what happened to the Historian Blade, and take a gruesome vengeance. Kloret couldn't be sure this was actually likely or even possible, but he couldn't be sure there was no danger at all. Kloret would prefer to play it safe, so that if he ever faced a squad of angry Englishmen with death rays, he could say with perfect truth: "My hands are clean of the blood of Richard Blade."

Two. Kloret might have hopes of using Blade in his future plottings, or winning him over as an ally. He might think that a promise to make Blade co-ruler of Gohar once he'd usurped the throne would overcome Blade's scruples. Being able to claim that the Man from the Future saw clearly that he, Kloret, was destined to rule Gohar would be helpful.

Three. If he couldn't get Blade's help, he might still persuade or frighten Blade into telling him about the future of Gohar. Above all, he'd want to know what would happen in Mythor. Live Blades may not talk, but dead Blades cannot.

Kloret wanted him alive, and that meant his chances of survival on Shell Island were fairly good. An active, tough man, diving day after day and week after week, could earn more than enough to keep himself healthy and alert. If he didn't make enemies among the guards or his fellow prisoners, he could last as long as he'd need to.

Blade suspected that he would need no more than a few months. He hoped it would be no more than a few weeks. There wasn't much time to lose if he was to escape in time to help Harkrat and Elyana.

Chapter 13

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Shell Island was only five days from Gohar if the winds cooperated. On Blade's voyage they didn't, and it took his ship ten. About noon on the ninth day Blade heard men moving on deck, and the ship drifted to a stop. Then a boat came bumping alongside and loud-voiced men scrambled aboard. The pilot to guide the ship through the twisting channel to Shell Island was aboard.

All that afternoon the ship tacked back and forth, masts and rigging creaking and groaning and the sailors cursing at the extra work. As the sky began to turn red, they gave Blade the largest meal he'd ever eaten on board—meat, a huge bowl of porridge, bread with oil and spices, even some dried fruit. He couldn't help thinking of "the condemned man's last meal," but in spite of this he fell asleep more easily than he'd expected.

Blade awoke with another painful headache, a dry mouth, salt-caked lips, and a stomach rumbling with hunger and quivering with nausea. He felt as if he'd been on a truly awesome binge and was now paying the price in the form of an equally impressive hangover.

Unfortunately, there was gritty sand and small pebbles under him, a hot sun blazing on his bare skin, and a salt-scented wind blowing across his body. Not far off sea birds were crying, and waves rolled in on a beach.

Blade turned his head so that he wouldn't be dazzled by the sun, then opened his eyes. Even then he couldn't see anything for a while. Finally he saw that he was lying at the foot of a sand dune on the narrow gravel and sand beach between the dune and the water. Small waves splashed and died on the

sand twenty yards away.

The sand dune cut off Blade's view toward the land, but to seaward he could make out a line of white as waves broke over a half-submerged reef. From the position of the sun, it was midmorning, a few hours before noon.

He'd been drugged at dinner, then dumped on Shell Island during the night. At least he couldn't see any reason to believe he wasn't on Shell Island, and he was certain he'd been drugged. He sat up, tried to stand, and found that his legs wouldn't stay under him. The movement made his stomach rebel, and up came the remnants of last night's dinner.

Now his stomach felt better, though not his head. Gradually the headache also faded, and the second time he tried to stand he found he could do it. He still decided to stay where he was for a little longer. The prisoners of Shell Island were often hostile to newcomers until they'd proved themselves in a few fights. Blade knew he might have to fight the moment he left the shelter of the dune, couldn't afford to lose, and wanted to be completely fit.

He stretched out on a patch of the softest sand he could find in the shade of the dune and tried to relax and breathe deeply. Now he found himself wondering why he'd been dumped here, on an isolated beach of Shell Island. Normally prisoners for the island were taken to a fort on the southern tip and registered before they were turned loose. The Goharans were advanced enough to have invented bureaucracy and bureaucrats who insisted on keeping useless statistics.

It occurred to Blade that he might be more useful to Kloret if he wasn't registered. If nobody except his fellow prisoners, who wouldn't know who he was, knew that he was on Shell Island, this reduced the chances of any of his friends or any of Kloret's enemies tracing him. Of course the ship's crew might be a link between Gohar and Shell Island, so those sailors were probably doomed. If ever there was a believer in the rule "Dead men tell no tales," it was Kloret.

Blade wondered how Kloret would manage to dispose of the sailors, but found it hard to concentrate. The sun was getting warmer, the fresh air after days in the musty hold was delicious, and the sand under him was softer than the dirty planks. He also hadn't got all the drug out of his system.

He looked at the sand dune, and it seemed to blur and waver. It probably would hide him for another few hours of sleep. Even if it didn't, he was in no shape to fight. Blade's ferocious survival instincts could recognize an impossible proposition when they saw one.

He shifted position until he was almost comfortable, and was asleep almost at once.

He woke up with a bare foot prodding him gently but persistently in the ribs. He found that most of the drug was out of his system and all his senses were normal again. He was trying to decide whether to play sick or show signs of life, when from somewhere above him a voice spoke.

"Ullo, ullo, man from the Sea. What do you here?"

The voice was a woman's, rich and deep, with an accent Blade recognized as Mythoran. He sat up and found himself staring at a pair of magnificent breasts, supported but hardly concealed by a narrow band of rawhide. He stood up and stepped back, to survey the owner of the breasts from head to foot.

For a Goharan woman, she was almost a giant—nearly six feet tall, and big-boned as well. She'd been eating well enough not to lose her figure, but there wasn't any fat on her. There was plenty of muscle, though, smooth and supple under a brown skin further darkened by sun and wind and soot. Her face was long, with high cheekbones, and framed in sun-bleached light brown hair. She wore a wider strip of rawhide around her waist, and sandals of what looked like snakeskin.

She looked more like a queen than Elyana ever would.

Then Blade noticed that the regal beauty was marred by an ear with a piece gouged out and a broken nose. There was also a faint scar along the left side of her chin, and an ugly one across her right shoulder and down onto the breast. On her right thigh was a broad patch of puckered scar tissue. The little finger on her left hand was missing the last two joints—Blade stopped cataloguing her injuries when he realized she saw what he was doing.

"What does the other fellow look like?" he asked, smiling.

"That long tale, not for telling here," said the woman, unsmiling. "Can you walk with me?"

"Yes."

"Good." She pulled a sharpened length of bone out of her waistband, and kept it in her hand as she stepped back to stand behind Blade. "We go now."

Blade found that he could walk, but still wasn't quite ready to think of running. The long-legged lady behind him wouldn't have much trouble catching him. That drug must have been powerful!

He tried to make polite conversation as they tramped across the sand dunes, without success. He did find that the battered Amazon's name was Rhodina, and told her his name. That was all. Perhaps Rhodina wasn't unfriendly, but she was certainly not giving anything away.

They covered nearly a mile across the dunes without getting out of sight or smell of the sea. Finally they came to a rough shelter of driftwood tied together with rawhide and covered with seaweed. Rhodina told Blade to sit outside until she called him, then pulled aside a rawhide curtain at the entrance and vanished inside.

For a little while Blade was glad to sit and rest. Then he decided to disobey Rhodina. If they were going to be together for more than a few hours, she was going to have to trust him more than this, and he was going to have to get a weapon. Anything else would be foolish. If she didn't trust him, he could always take a weapon and clothing and move on. He got up, went to the shelter's entrance, and pushed his way in through the curtain.

He caught Rhodina at a disadvantage. She was pushing her waistband down her legs to step out of it, leaving herself naked. All she could do for a moment was scream: "Blade! Get out of here!"

Then she grabbed for her bone knife. Blade found himself within reach of a better weapon—a foot-long chunk of wood set with shark's teeth. He snatched it up, met Rhodina head-on, and cracked her across the knife hand with the back of his weapon while gripping her other wrist. She dropped her knife, and tried to punch Blade in the groin. He turned enough to ride the blow without losing his grip on her wrist. Then he used his judo to throw her. She went down with a crash, knocking out one support of the roof and bringing part of it down on her. She lay there, spitting out oaths and seaweed.

Blade picked up Rhodina's knife, held it by the point, and handed it back to her. "Here. If you want to stick it into me, that's one thing. If you want to feed me like the Emperor and take me to your bed, that's another thing. But you'd better decide if you want to trust me or not."

He knelt down, within easy striking distance, and started picking the pieces of the roof off her. He kept a watchful eye on her as he did, and noticed she made no effort to grip her knife. Her hands lay in her lap, clenched so tightly the knuckles were turning pale.

"Why didn't you—?"

"Kill you? You hadn't tried to kill me. You'd only done something annoying."

Rhodina made a disgusted noise. "No man on this island be such a fool. They don't kill women. Use 'em."

Blade laughed, and saw Rhodina cringe. Her lips trembled slightly. "You don't—care for—" She couldn't get the rest of the words out, but her hands moved over the scars and injuries.

Blade knelt down beside Rhodina, kissed her on the lips, then kissed the scar on her shoulder. "Rhodina, you're magnificent, beautiful, desirable—everything any man could want." He sensed a desperate need for reassurance under the harsh manner.

"Blade ... ?" It was half a sigh.

He kissed her again, and realized that if he did it a third time he might not stop. He sat back and smiled. "Rhodina, I'll prove how much I desire you some other time, not now. The rest of that roof looks like it's about to come down on us even without any help."

Rhodina sat up and shook her head, then combed the last of the seaweed out of her hair with her fingers. "Good, Blade. I think you're a right sort of man. Don't hope to bed me, though. I—he should be back in a few days. It's that he's not back now, has me all—confused, frightened, what you call it. He was—is—first man I could trust. Always before, men ... " She shrugged, as if there was nothing more she needed to say.

So Rhodina's lover was missing, and this had affected her judgment. A perfectly reasonable explanation, but: "If you'd said this before, Rhodina—" He broke off as her face set in an expression of fierce pride. This woman wouldn't admit fear or loss unless you put her on the rack-or showed some human sympathy for her.

"Anyway," Blade continued, "If you want me to move on—"

"No. Stay. Need someone, until—until he comes back or I know he's dead. If he comes, he and we decide. If he doesn't, maybe you can stay?"

"Gladly." Blade wasn't being polite. This battered, brave Amazon woman was likely to be a better friend and ally than he could expect to find anywhere else on Shell Island.

"Good." She stood up, still naked, but now completely indifferent to it. "You're right. Time to put the roof back before anything else."

While they were putting the roof back together, Rhodina told Blade about her life and how she'd come to Shell Island. As he'd guessed, she was a Mythoran, and her life had been grim at best.

She was a prostitute, the daughter of a prostitute and the granddaughter of a small Goharan merchant exiled to Mythor for debt. She'd never known her grandfather, but knew the kind of man he'd been and what had happened to him.

"He got a shop back, and thought he'd do good for my mother and her brothers. Then there was a fight in the shop. A Goharan soldier got hurt. The judge said he was being kind when he took the shop away. Kind! Goharan kindness!" Rhodina spat on the sand at the thought.

Her grandfather never recovered from this new blow to his pride, his hopes, and his finances. His sons had to leave school and become common laborers. His daughter ended up a prostitute. Rhodina didn't know who her father was, other than that he must have been a near-giant.

"Mother was little. I was a big baby. She nearly died when I was born, and had to get work as a maid in a trader's house. A Mythoran. Lived seven years, and did good for me too."

Rhodina's mother didn't do well enough for her daughter to keep the girl off the streets when she turned fourteen. She did leave her with a small amount of money and a vast hatred of Gohar, Goharans, and Goharan rule over Mythor.

"Don't say Mythorans always sweet and good," she said wryly. "I no damn fool. But half our trouble is Goharans or fights with the bastards."

"That's how you picked up some of your damage?" asked Blade.

She nodded. She'd been big for her age, so she was able to start dealing with the higher-paying customers that much sooner. She hadn't known what she was getting into at first, but she soon learned. She didn't go into details about the learning, and Blade didn't ask. Obviously there were more than a few sadists among the Goharan officers and nobles.

While recovering from one beating, she'd been cared for by a retired prostitute whose husband had been involved in the Mythoran conspiracy against Gohar. One night he'd simply disappeared, but after being interrogated, raped, and beaten, his wife was released. She'd promptly taken her husband's place among the rebels, and a few months later found herself nursing Rhodina. Even at seventeen Rhodina didn't need much persuasion to join the rebels.

For three years, Rhodina was one of the most trusted messengers for the Mythoran rebels. She went all over the city and its surrounding territory, even into the farming country far inland, along the frontier with the Maghri. Then she was arrested, fortunately on a mistaken charge of theft which had nothing to do with her work for the rebels. Apart from the routine rape and beating, she wasn't even interrogated. But she'd been arrested three times before, so as a four-time criminal she was sent to Shell Island.

"I was glad they didn't talk about the rebels," she said. "If they started that, I'd be finished, one way or another. But Shell Island—not much better. You got just as sure here, even if slower."

This was particularly true for women. There was only one woman for every four men among the prisoners on the island. Most of the women were quickly taken over by one of the stronger bands of prisoners, and rented out to the rest of the men. A few women found a single strong protector, and until he died or was murdered they enjoyed a halfway decent life. Those who refused either fate died quickly, from mass rape, beatings, or starvation.

"Don't know which would have happened to me," said Rhodina. "One of them for sure. Somehow, I got to Shell Island wanting to be—well, not serving men any more. So I wouldn't go to any of the gangs."

Fortunately she found a protector almost at once, a man she described as "big enough to take two regular men and knock 'em together." In spite of his immense strength and vitality, he was as alone and even more despised than she was. This drew them together at first, and afterward she found that he was also kind to her.

"Don't know if he's like that to everybody. Prob'ly not. But woman who's alone like he is—she's different. I couldn't have done better."

Rhodina's protector used his strength and skill in diving to bring in so much shell that he was able to bribe the guards into letting them live alone in this hut by the shore. The guards of Shell Island could be bribed into almost anything, except giving a prisoner a weapon or letting him escape. He'd gone out on a trip to a particularly dangerous reef ten days ago, and she hadn't heard anything from him or even about him since.

"Too damned long, he's gone," she said. "And too damned much to happen to him. Not just the snakes and fish, but enemies he's got too." So she hadn't been thinking too clearly or feeling too kindly toward the world when she found Blade asleep on the beach.

"All forgiven?" she asked, kissing him. It was a sisterly kiss, but holding the promise of something more if the right time ever came.

"All forgiven," said Blade. "Now, is there anything for dinner? I'm afraid I'm hungry."

Rhodina sighed. "'Fraid you'll just have to stay hungry. I was going to swim out—place I call Fishmonger's Reef, 'cause you can always get some fish there. But I found you, and—"

"All right, all right. It's my own fault that I'm going to bed hungry. No harm done, and I can help you fish tomorrow."

"Thank you."

By now it was getting dark. In spite of all the hours he'd slept under the influence of the drug, Blade found he was ready to sleep some more. He gave the newly repaired roof a final inspection, then said good night to Rhodina and lay down on the opposite side of the hut from her.

He was glad Rhodina hadn't asked for details of his crimes and sentence to Shell Island. Apparently his being on the island at all was in his favor, and his treatment of her was enough to make him trustworthy. That was good. He didn't want to have to tell her any elaborate lies, not when sooner or later he'd want to tell her the truth.

He'd want to do more than that, eventually. He'd want to ask her to escape with him and lead him to the rebels in Mythor. He still wanted to do his best for Harkrat and Elyana.

Blade was awake well before dawn, and found the wind blowing so hard he wondered if it would be safe to enter the water. The waves on the shore rumbled and boomed, and out on the reef they threw spray high in the air.

Rhodina came out of the shelter, to stand naked in the wind and look over Blade's shoulder. She laughed. "This wind's a teaser. Goes down by daylight, and water's all right by noon."

She was right. By noon the wind was dead and the waves were dying. Rhodina brought out the fishing gear—a spear, two lines with hooks, a sack of bait, bone knives, knee and elbow pads for protection against the coral, and a deflated fish bladder.

"For holding up the fish, not us," she said. "You can swim good?"

"See if I'm still with you when we get to the reef."

They stripped off their clothes and plunged into the water.

Blade would have been ahead of Rhodina if he'd known the water better. They were neck and neck when they finally climbed out onto a ledge of dead coral. At low tide it was only a foot below the surface. A few yards away, the waves rolling in from deeper water splashed against the reef.

They spent the whole day there, dropping the baited hooks into the water, then standing by with the spear and knives to finish off anything which took the bait. They pulled in five fish, one of them weighing nearly twenty pounds. Rhodina seemed not to notice that all five were bleeding rather freely into the water.

"What about the sharks?"

"Oh, them. Don't come inside the reef on this tide. No way in for the big fish."

Blade couldn't help remembering that people had been killed by sharks no more than four feet long, but decided there was no point in mentioning it. Also, he was more than hungry enough to risk a few sharks.

Toward midafternoon Blade saw one of the lines tighten much more violently than before. He grabbed it just before it pulled free from the chunk of coral where he'd tied it. Whatever was on the other end of the line promptly started to run away with the line, nearly pulling Blade into the water. It was obviously far larger than anything else he'd caught all day. Grimly he settled down to play the fish until he could land it safely, painfully aware of the line already gouging his fingers and palms as he manipulated it.

Blade's hands were beginning to bleed when the fish finally gave up the struggle and let him haul it in. It was nearly ten feet long, slim-bodied, with a broad tail and a three-foot bony spike jutting from its head. It reminded Blade of a Home Dimension swordfish. It also reminded him of Rhodina's words.

"The big ones never come inside the reef on this tide, eh?" he said with a smile.

She looked sharply at him, until she realized he was joking. "I told you what I knew. First time I've ever seen a brooga or anything like it in here by day. It's good eating though, enough for all of us. If ... if ..." She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands against her face. Then she said almost fiercely, "No if.

He'll come back. I know it. He wasn't meant to die here."

Blade took her hands gently in his. "And if he doesn't, I swear I'll find out how he died. If I can, I'll avenge his death. Even if I can't, I'll stay with you and protect you as well as he did."

"Not easy—do as good work as he did. But—thank you." She took a step forward, pulled her hands free, and put her arms around him. Her head drooped, until it was resting on his shoulder with her cheek against his. Blade put his arms around her, trying to keep his hands still. He was very much aware of the warmth of her body against his, the yielding firmness of her breasts, the smooth, salt-scented skin under his fingers, the graceful curve of her back down to the cleft between her buttocks

She laughed and murmured in his ear, "Why not?" As he realized what she meant, she gripped him by the shoulders and pulled herself up on tiptoe. He bent his knees until he was nearly squatting. Then he straightened up, sliding himself up between Rhodina's welcoming thighs.

They both gasped in the moment of joining. Then it was all they could do to keep moving and stay together and not fall down into the water all at once. Blade vaguely wished he could shift position, or let go altogether and run his hands over more of Rhodina, kiss her breasts, kiss some of her scars to show her once and for all that they didn't repel him, let her do the same to him, take him in her mouth—

But they couldn't do any of these things. They were joined and they had to stay joined. Even so, it was immensely satisfying, right through to the moment when Rhodina moaned and slumped half-conscious in Blade's arms. He staggered and tried desperately to keep his balance with her weight all on him, and then his own climax was coming and he lost the battle. They both went down with a splash, and the waves washed over and around them until they struggled up to a sitting position, laughing as they coughed and spat out mouthfuls of sea water.

Getting their catch to shore was hard work after their pleasure on the reef. Rhodina blew up the fish bladder as soon as she caught her breath, and that took care of the smaller fish. The brooga was another matter. It sank after death, and weighed a good eighty pounds. Blade wasn't going to abandon it, though, and not just because it was many days' good eating. That three-foot spike would be a useful weapon.

Eventually they used the fishing lines to tie the brooga to their belts. Then they stepped into the water and swam toward shore, with the big fish dangling between them. It was slow going, with the fish weighing them down. The wind was rising again, and several times Blade went under unexpectedly. Fortunately the same wind and waves gave them a badly needed extra push toward shore. Soon enough they reached shallow water, and after that it was easy. In a few more minutes they stepped out on dry land, Blade with the brooga slung over his shoulder and Rhodina carrying the bladder and its load of smaller fish.

They walked fast toward home, and as they came over the last sand dune Blade stopped abruptly. There was a faint yellow light shining from inside the shelter. Before he could warn Rhodina to be cautious, she let out a cry of delight.

"He's come back! I knew he would!"

Then she was running down the face of the dune toward the shelter. Blade realized she might be running headlong into danger. They didn't know who might be in the shelter. Yet he certainly wasn't going to abandon her now. He shifted the brooga to his left shoulder and drew his knife with his right hand. He was just about to run after Rhodina when a massive figure appeared at the entrance to the shelter.

"Khraishamo!" Rhodina screamed, dropping the fish as she dashed up to the man and threw herself into his arms.

Blade stopped. There was just enough light for him to be sure. Rhodina's lover and protector was the Pirate Folk chief Khraishamo, the same man he'd captured in the battle aboard Blue Swallow.

After a moment, Blade recovered. This meeting was good luck, and no doubt about it. If the seed he'd planted in Khraishamo's mind about escape from Shell Island had already taken root—

No. Better not hope for too much. Blade started down the slope toward where Khraishamo was now holding Rhodina close, murmuring small reassuring noises into her ear. He did not sheathe his knife.

Chapter 15

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Blade was approaching the shelter when Khraishamo raised his head, looked past Rhodina, and saw Blade approaching. He pushed the woman aside so violently she fell to the sand, leaped forward, and embraced Blade. For a moment Blade wasn't sure whether the pirate was greeting him or attacking him. He was quite sure that either way his ribs and shoulders were going to be smashed by the pirate's massive arms.

Then Khraishamo held Blade at arm's length, kissed him on both cheeks, lifted him into the air, and dropped him.

"Blade, I told you the Goharans would say you weren't of them and send you here! And I was right!" He laughed wildly, and the eerie sound floated away on the sea wind. More quietly he said, "Welcome to Shell Island."

"I suppose I should say thank you," said Blade. "But I don't plan to stay here any longer than I have to. How are you? Rhodina told me her lover and protector was something out of the ordinary, but she didn't tell me that—"

The pirate turned to Rhodina and glared at her. "Didn't tell him? Still ashamed of having a Bloodskin lover?" He sounded genuinely angry. Blade noted that Khraishamo now spoke adequate Goharan, although he'd picked up a Mythoran accent from Rhodina.

Rhodina glared at her lover. "Leave off, Khraishamo. You know what you are to me. You know too what most Goharans would say learning it. You wanted him to beat or even kill me for going with a Bloodskin?"

"He's not Goharan, my lusty love. He's—"

"Not Goharan? He told me he was exiled for—"

"I'll tell you, if you'll stop interrupting me." He put one hand gently but firmly over her mouth. "Blade's a man from the future, a thousand years from now. He's sent back here by his people, to see how we lived. Then he'll go back."

Rhodina swore a few lurid Mythoran street oaths. "You never told me that he was a man from the future, you—" Then she turned to Blade, still glaring. "And you never told me—"

"I never told you any lies, either," said Blade. "I said I was exiled from Gohar because of a quarrel with Kloret, the Prime Minister. That's perfectly true. I just left out some of the details."

Rhodina threw her hands up in mock despair, then burst out laughing. "Enough, enough. Don't know whether I should kick or kiss the both of you. But tell me everything now, please."

"We'll do it," said Khraishamo. "But we'll do it better with some food in our bellies. Go and do up some of those fish, woman!" He slapped her on the rump. She aimed a kick at his groin but he sprang aside with a laugh. "What? Spoil your own fun would you? Or has Blade got other weapons besides his sword? O—ha—you're blushing! Don't worry, I won't kill him. He's got blood-brother rights to all that's mine."

Laughing, Rhodina picked up the fish and went off to one side of the shelter. Khraishamo looked soberly at Blade. "You know that's true, don't you? You can ask for anything, I give you, and I hope I can do the same with you."

"You can," said Blade. "But I agree with you—let's save the rest of the talk until we've eaten."

Brooga wrapped in seaweed and baked over a driftwood fire was a gourmet dish. By the time dinner was over, Blade, Khraishamo, and Rhodina had made a notable dent even in the eighty-pound fish. With his knife Blade cut off the fish's spike and stuck it in the sand behind him, then settled down to exchange stories with Khraishamo.

"So Thrayket is dead?" said the pirate, when Blade was finished.

"You're thinking it might be just a rumor Kloret spread?"

"If the man's ready to do what you say—"

"He is, but he's not a fool, either. He'd have to be one to lie about Thrayket's death while there was any chance he'd be caught in that lie. No, Thrayket's dead."

Khraishamo's face twisted into a demon's mask. "Not good. Not one damned bit good! If Kloret moves fast enough, Harkrat's got to let him keep what he grabs or else fight him."

"Kloret's likely to move that fast, from what I've seen." Blade had been very careful not to tell his new allies the deadly secret of Harkrat's impotence and the hold this gave Kloret over him. He'd given the impression that Kloret's strength lay in his ruthlessness and his ability to strike without warning.

"So we just move faster," said Khraishamo. "Off this damned island, to start with. Then—"

"On to Mythor," said Blade. He turned to Rhodina. "Once we've escaped from here, we'll be safe only among people who haven't anything to lose for new crimes against Gohar. That means the rebels—your friends. Can you lead us to them?"

Rhodina frowned. She'd been pale and unusually quiet while Blade and Khraishamo talked. Now she sighed. "I have to. But—I swear, Blade, if you're not talking true and end up turning against—"

"Rhodina! You've heard what he did for me? Would a man like that betray his best allies? Or are you calling me a liar?"

"No, but—oh, I'm sorry, it's just that—" She closed her eyes, forcing herself to speak calmly. "It's too much happening, too quick."

"And it's going to get worse before it gets any better," said Khraishamo, laughing and patting her on the shoulder. "What's more, there's not a damned thing you can do about it."

The pirate turned back to Blade. "You're planning to help the rebels, Blade? What about this changing the future, doing something to England and you?"

Blade hadn't expected to find Khraishamo raising the question of time-travel paradoxes. It increased his respect for the man. Fortunately it didn't catch him without an answer ready.

He looked at both Khraishamo and Rhodina. "Do I have your word of honor that this will stay a secret?"

Both nodded.

"Good. This is something I haven't cared to tell anyone else since I came here. Mythor is going to be independent. At least—"

Rhodina let out a shriek of delight.

"At least there's about nine chances out of ten it will win, sooner or later. I've compared what I've learned about this time with what we know in England. Somewhere along the line, Mythor becomes its own master. I don't know when, and I don't know that it's because of a successful rebellion. But I do know that I'm not taking a dangerous risk, helping the rebels."

Rhodina was now crying for sheer happiness, but Khraishamo still looked skeptical. Blade went on. "Also, there's a good chance I couldn't do anything to myself or my England."

"Even if Mythor won only because you helped?"

"Yes. I wouldn't change the history that produced my England and me. I would start a whole new history, like a new branch starting on a tree. The theory goes that all the possible things that can happen have happened, and they all exist side by side, like—"

Khraishamo held up both hands. "Enough, enough. I understand. You don't need to hurl all your Historians' wisdom at me. You aren't going to vanish in a puff of smoke if you help the rebels win. I hope you're right, Blade. I'd hate to be saying death-prayers for you."

That brought the conversation to a halt, while Blade and Rhodina laid more driftwood on the fire. When they started talking again, they talked of how to escape from Shell Island. Khraishamo was optimistic. He'd come to the island with Blade's words firmly in mind, and kept his eyes and ears open. If he had more time to look around—

"We don't have time," said Rhodina firmly. "What Blade says means the faster we're gone the better."

Blade nodded. "None of the guards or the other prisoners know me by sight, or even that I'm on the island. That means I can disguise myself as a guard."

Khraishamo frowned. "I don't see how we can get a guard's—" Then he stopped as Blade started to explain his plan. He listened in silence, then slowly nodded.

"Broogas do attack men. It'll look all right. But so do other things. They'll be around when we're out on the reef, waiting for the guard boat. You think it's worth it?" Blade nodded. "Just wanted to be sure you knew the dangers."

"Going to be a lot more dangerous for a lot more besides us if we don't," said Rhodina.

Khraishamo stood up. "Blade, maybe you could keep watch for a few hours? I think we'd better start—"

"I understand."

The pirate pulled Rhodina to her feet and put his arm around her waist. A moment later the curtain over the shelter's entrance closed behind them. Blade laid out several pieces of fish close to the fire, so that they would smoke-dry during the night. Then he moved to where he could lean back against the sand dune and sit with a fish spear across his knees.

Even if he hadn't promised to keep watch, he wouldn't have got much sleep. Rhodina's welcome home to Khraishamo was not quiet, and it went on for hours.

Chapter 16

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A wave rose to Blade's chest, then sank down and rolled on past him. He easily stayed on his feet, but the tide was definitely coming in. The water was already deep enough to let sharks in through the reef. In another hour he and Khraishamo would have to tread water. After an hour of that, they might as well swim back to shore and hope nothing caught up with them on the way. They'd be tired enough to make it too dangerous to attack a guard boat, even if one came by.

In the darkness Blade heard Khraishamo cough. He looked toward the sound but could see only a vague shape. If he hadn't known, Blade couldn't have told if it was alive or not, let alone whether it was human. The combination of soot and fish oil they'd smeared on themselves made good camouflage. Hopefully it would also repel hungry fish.

"If it stinks to the fish like it does to me, they won't come near you," Rhodina said after she finished smearing them both. Now she waited on shore, ready to load their gear aboard a captured guard boat if Blade's plan worked.

And if it doesn't work? They could certainly try to ambush a guard boat two or three more times before Khraishamo had to go out on his next fishing trip. Each time, the chances of their being spotted by the guards or attacked by fish increased. After that Khraishamo would have to go back to work, and Blade couldn't lay the ambush alone even if he'd been willing to abandon the pirate chief. By the time Khraishamo returned, the secret of Blade's presence on the island might be out. While they could try to escape without his being able to masquerade as a guard, the odds would turn against them.

Even tonight someone might come along the beach. Then if Rhodina couldn't explain what she was doing

there, she'd have to fight.

"Fight anyway, if you don't come back," she said to Khraishamo. "I make an end here, not go back to being thrown around, among all the men. Make an end of a few guards, too. Animals!"

Blade turned back to look along the shore and stiffened. A faint reddish-yellow glow showed in the blackness. It was the color of the lanterns carried by the guards, but for a moment Blade couldn't tell whether it was moving along the beach or in a boat. Then he saw that it was rising and falling in a rhythm possible only if it was aboard a boat.

For some reason the guard boat was rowing its rounds inside the reef tonight, rather than just outside it. That could make the escapers' work even easier. Khraishamo moved closer to Blade, and they whispered together briefly. Then they slipped into the water and swam silently toward shore, on a course to intercept the approaching light.

It grew steadily larger, and now they could see a second, smaller light in the stern of the boat. They could also count the guards in the boat—four of them, unfortunately. They still had to keep any from escaping to give the warning. That would be a disaster for all of them, and it wasn't much consolation to Blade that Klore's wrath would probably descend on the guards who killed him. He intended to avenge the Prime Minister's victims, not be avenged by him!

It was time. "All right," said Blade. He gripped Khraishamo's shoulder. "Good luck."

"And to you." The pirate dove out of sight, silent and hopefully invisible. With his lungs well filled beforehand, he could stay underwater a good five minutes, then surface still ready to fight.

Blade was supposed to be noisy and visible. He started thrashing wildly, churning the water into foam and shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Help! Help! Over here! Help!" He made his voice sound as panic-stricken as he could. The wind was behind him, so his words easily reached the guards. He saw the boat come around on a new course, but didn't dare stop shouting. He wanted those guards to come straight on without thinking about possible traps, until Khraishamo could reach them.

"Help! Help! I'm bleeding! Get me out of the water, you fools!" Now he was putting not only panic but authority into his voice.

A guard stood up in the bow of the boat, holding the lantern and looking down at Blade. "How'd you get here?"

"Damned boat sprang a leak! Went into the water, and sharks got the others. Don't know why they didn't get me too."

"All right, all right. Don't have a fit." Two of the guards hauled the sail around until it was slowing the boat down. The guard in the bow perched the lantern on a seat and knelt down.

"Hey! Haven't seen you around here. I think—"

"Think after you get me into the boat, you idiot! Or do you want to be in the middle of a feeding frenzy?"

That got the guard into action. He didn't want to be in the middle of a school of sharks ready to attack

anything in sight, including a boat. He reached for Blade with both hands. As he did, Blade saw Khraishamo's head suddenly appear above the opposite gunwale of the boat.

Blade shouted again, this time a war cry, and pulled hard on the hands reaching out for him. The guard went headfirst into the water, his mouth open with surprise so that he gulped in water and starting choking. Before he stopped, Blade pulled the man's head back with one hand and stabbed him up under the chin with the knife in the other. The bone point reached the man's brain and he went limp without a struggle.

Meanwhile Khraishamo was climbing into the boat, fishing spear in one hand and brooga spike in the other. One guard flung himself straight at the attacker and was neatly impaled on the spike. He went overboard, knocking the bow lantern with him. Blade heaved himself into the boat and joined the pirate against the other two guards.

The first one was foolish enough to attack Khraishamo with nothing but a club. The pirate blocked his wild swing, then lifted him into the air by the neck and one leg. The boat rocked wildly as Khraishamo held the guard over his head for a moment, then smashed him down on the deck with a gruesome crunch.

Khraishamo took just enough time with all this to leave himself open to the last guard's attack. Or at least he would have been open to it, if Blade hadn't been ready. He met the guard's short sword with his own knife, blocking the man's attack. Then he chopped the man hard across the side of the neck and as he went down chopped him a second time across the throat. They couldn't afford to take prisoners, and Blade didn't want to get any blood on the guard's clothing. They'd already lost two of the guards overboard, and they'd really need three sets of guards' clothing for their masquerade.

As the boat stopped rocking wildly, Blade saw that Khraishamo's first victim was bobbing only a few yards away. Blade was swinging himself over the gunwale, ready to drop into the water and go after the body, when Khraishamo bellowed: "No, Blade!"

A moment later Blade saw the high black fin cutting the top of a wave just beyond the body. Then another fin broke water beside the boat, only a yard from Blade. He hastily rolled in over the gunwale, landing in the bottom of the boat as a mouthful of six-inch teeth snapped shut where his foot had been seconds before.

Now there were fins, tails, and snapping jaws all around them. The dark water began to turn pale with foam as torpedo-like bodies sprang ten feet clear of the water and fell back. Khraishamo hastily doused the second lantern, and Blade pulled the sail around until it caught the wind again. Slowly the boat gathered headway, and the sharks seemed willing to let it go.

Gradually the splashing and snapping died away astern. Apparently the two bodies hadn't leaked enough blood into the water to drive the sharks into a true feeding frenzy. Khraishamo spoke for both of them when he said, "Good thing those bastards didn't come along a couple of minutes earlier."

Blade nodded. "We'll have to keep watch while we're loading the boat."

They found Rhodina without any trouble, and she was as eager to go as they were. In fact she was about to swim out to them when Khraishamo's desperate shouts warned her to stay on land. So she waited until the boat grounded in knee-deep water, then splashed out to them with the first armload of gear.

They loaded quickly, without lighting a lantern, then shoved off again. A few hundred yards out Blade

slipped the other two bodies overboard, then set sail for the reef. The onshore wind made it a slow business beating out to open water, but it also raised the tide over the reef. They easily slipped across the mass of jagged coral heads. Long before the two bodies could have reached shore, the boat was heading on what Blade hoped was a southerly course.

They only ran for an hour before they found a sheltered patch of shallow water where they could anchor and light the lantern. Even during that hour, Blade was as alert as a cat on the prow for the first sign of breakers ahead or the first scrape of the boat's planks on a reef. The guard boat drew much less water than any seagoing ship, so it could find navigable channels where ships would run hard aground. On the other hand, its light hull would split at the touch of rocks and reefs a heavier ship could shrug off.

Besides the danger of rocks and shoals, there was the danger of losing their way. They had to bear south and east, across the shallows and out into the open Sea. Any other way would bring them into Goharan territory, or even worse, into land held by the horsemen of the plains.

"I'd rather cut my throat and get it over with quick than face them," said Khraishamo. "We know them too well. They kill all strangers, and not slowly." He was quite certain that a few men had escaped from Shell Island, only to reach the wrong shore and die horribly among the horsemen.

So they'd have to wait until daylight came, to show them clear water and let them navigate. That was the reason for the masquerade in guard's clothing. They couldn't hope to get clear of the waters around the island without being sighted. A guard boat crewed by three nearly naked people would certainly be suspected. A guard boat crewed by people in guards' clothing would look perfectly normal.

Fortunately the guards of Shell Island were chosen for size. Blade found one guard's outfit an easy fit, and Rhodina managed to get into the other. There was nothing to fit Khraishamo, but he didn't care.

"I'm not going to pass as one of you, no matter what I wear. Best I lie down in the bottom of the boat when anyone comes in sight and you cover me up. If they don't come close enough to see these"—he squeezed Rhodina's breasts and she made a face at him—"she'll make a better man than I will. If they do come that close, we're finished anyway."

Blade nodded. He didn't have anything to say that would make it easier for them to get clear of the shallows, sail fifteen hundred miles in an open boat, land without being detected, and reach the rebels of Mythor.

Once they'd done that, the really hard part would begin.

Chapter 17

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Dawn. The fifteenth since their escape from Shell Island. No different from the last five, as far as Blade could tell when he woke to face it.

He woke reluctantly, as soon as he realized the night hadn't brought the rain they so desperately needed. He hadn't reached the point of refusing to wake in the hope that sleep would turn peacefully into death.

Three more days without water would see the end of him. Rhodina wouldn't last that long. Khraishamo could last a day or two longer than Blade, because in an emergency his body could cope with drinking

salt water better than the two humans. That wouldn't be enough to save him without rain.

A splash from over the side, and Khraishamo reappeared dripping. With the sun and the lack of drinking water, he needed to bathe in the sea two or three times a day. Fortunately he still had the strength to do it. When he lost the strength he'd die of thirst before he could die a more painful death from his skin drying out, cracking, and bleeding.

Rhodina muttered feverishly in her sleep as Khraishamo climbed into the boat, but didn't wake up. Blade looked at her, then at the pirate chief, and they both nodded. It would be better to let her sleep as much as she could, since there wasn't anything else they could do for her.

And the voyage from Shell Island to Mythor had started so well! It was a waste of strength to curse sheer bad luck, but Blade felt like doing it anyway.

They pulled up their anchor as soon as dawn let them tell direction, heading east and slightly north. Finding a channel through the reefs and sandbars would be a matter of luck rather than steering any particular course. Steering slightly north would keep them as far as possible from the Goharan ships bound to and from Shell Island.

In spite of this precaution, they were sighted twice. Once it was a single-masted merchant ship, which came lumbering up and hailed them.

"You our pilot?"

"He's on his way," replied Blade. "We're looking for a boat with four men in it. They didn't come back last night. Orders are to cover every channel."

"If'n you haven't found 'em by now, you're not going to find 'em in one piece."

"I know that," shouted Blade. "You know that. But does the commander know that?" The sailors laughed, then went forward to lower the anchor. The captain stared at the boat so long that Blade began to suspect something was wrong, then: "Good luck."

In an hour the merchant ship was hull down astern. In two hours it was gone and a Goharan galley was coming up rapidly to starboard. She would have been a much more formidable proposition than the merchant ship, but she passed half a mile off. The men on her deck waved, Blade and Rhodina waved back, and the galley drew quickly away.

As soon as she was safely out of sight, Blade changed their course to nearly due south. "Just in case the galley talks to the merchant captain and smells something rotten," he said. They ran south until evening without sighting any more ships, then anchored for the night with the wind from the open Sea already blowing over them. At dawn they set sail again, and by noon they were safely away from the last of the shallows, heading southward across the Sea.

They had to gamble that the gear from the shelter and what they found in the boat would be enough. The prisoners of Shell Island were strictly forbidden to have any sort of boat gear, including water jugs, oars, and so on. There was no hope of bribing a guard for any without instantly arousing suspicion. Stealing some might be possible, but it would be risky, and almost certainly take more time than they could afford.

So they gambled, and at first it looked as if the gamble would pay off. There were two jugs of water in the boat, and they had their own fishing gear. At this time of the year rain wasn't common, but in an

emergency they could drink the blood of seabirds or the body juices of fish.

"The only way we can't get those is the Sea drying up," said Khraishamo. He should have added—"Or not being able to catch them in the first place."

They didn't worry about their fishing gear at first. They were more worried about bad weather and being sighted by Goharan ships. Summer storms were rare but when they came they could be savage, littering the shores of the Sea with the wreckage of ships and the bodies of sailors. Goharan ships were also rare at this time of year in the middle of the Sea. When they sailed at all, they usually crept along the eastern shore to catch whatever land breezes they could. Even galleys hugged the shore, landing every few days and resting their rowers.

The guard Blade pulled overboard took all the arrows in the boat with him, so there wasn't much they could do to the seabirds. They were luckier with the fish—until on three successive days they lost both their hooks and the fishing spear.

Suddenly dying of thirst was no longer a possibility but a real danger, coming closer each day. They turned east, willing to risk being sighted by Goharan ships in the hope of reaching land and finding water.

"If we find only a small merchantman, perhaps we can capture it," said Khraishamo.

"And a galley?" said Rhodina, then answered her own question. "Never mind. A quicker death than thirst, for sure."

Unfortunately they sighted no Goharan ships on the first two days, and on the third day the wind died completely. The sea turned to glass, blazing under the sun until even Blade was half-dazzled. Rhodina's tan didn't keep her from getting a murderous sunburn, and Blade found himself turning red and peeling. They both would have started wearing clothes if the sunburn hadn't made it too uncomfortable.

The third day of the calm, the last of the water ran out. Now their only hope was rain, which seemed unlikely, or a lucky encounter with a Sarumi ship, which didn't seem very likely either.

"We don't know the eastern Sea that well," said Khraishamo. "But that's where all the ships worth catching sail in summer. So we pull the ships up, caulk, rig, paint, harvest the crops, salt down the fish—"

"I understand," said Blade.

"I swear you have nothing to fear," said the pirate chief. "If the Sarumi do find us, I'll pledge my life to see you and Rhodina in Mythor before autumn."

"But they won't be finding us," said Rhodina. Her voice was dull and her eyes were half-closed. "Even HemiGohar couldn't find us now."

Waking on this hot morning, Blade couldn't help wondering if Rhodina might possibly be right.

Dawn on the sixteenth day. Blade was on watch, but dozed off for a moment. When he awoke, he found Rhodina half out of the boat, mouth open and gulping salt water. He pulled her back into the boat. She started to sob, but she was too dehydrated for any tears to come. Blade held her until the fit of hysterics passed.

"Blade, Blade," she murmured. "This—the end. You and Khraishamo—to go on, you need water. Kill me—drink my blood. No!" she said as Blade stiffened in uncontrollable horror at the idea. "No. You must."

"We must not," said Blade, desperately hoping that Rhodina hadn't gone completely mad. "Without you, we couldn't get to the rebels. Without getting to the rebels, it's a wasted trip even if we live."

"You must live, even so. You—"

Khraishamo cursed them for waking him and sat up. Before Rhodina could say a word, Blade explained what she'd suggested. Khraishamo's look of horror matched Blade's own, then he bent and kissed Rhodina on each caked eye.

"Rho, Rho, silly Rho," he said. "Blade's right. Without you alive at the end of the voyage, we might as well jump overboard right now. We need Blade, too, because he knows all the secrets of Gohar, including some he hasn't told us."

"And we need Khraishamo's strength and skill with boats, and we'll need him to speak for us if the Sarumi do find us," said Blade. "We each of us need the others. So we're going to Mythor together, or die here together."

"Yes," said Khraishamo. He took Blade's right hand and Rhodina's left. "All for one, and one for all."

Blade repeated it, forcing himself not to laugh, and then Rhodina gasped out the words. Blade wondered what the creator of *The Three Musketeers* would have said if he'd heard their famous oath from Khraishamo's lips. Certainly a pirate chief who wasn't even human, a battle-scared young whore, and a traveler from another Dimension were as unlikely a trio of musketeers as you could hope to find.

Dawn on the seventeenth day. A seabird landed on the gunwale. Confident that none of the three sprawled bodies in the boat could harm it, the bird made the mistake of folding its wings. That was its last mistake. A quick snatch, a squawk, a twist, and Blade had the bird in hand, its neck neatly wrung.

They gave Rhodina the blood to drink and rubbed the fat on the worst of her sunburn. Then Blade and Khraishamo divided the flesh. It was gamey and reeking of fish, but they were past caring.

Dawn on the eighteenth day. The sea was as flat and the air as heavy as ever, but the sky held a bronze tinge and the sun was nearly invisible even though there weren't any clouds. Khraishamo sniffed the air.

"This might be hatching a storm," he said. "And it might not."

"If it doesn't—" began Blade, then found he didn't have the will to finish the sentence out loud. He could finish it in his thoughts, though.

Another day, and Rhodina will be dead. A few days after that, and we'll join her. Khraishamo and I are already too weak to capture a merchantman if she did pick us up. We'd have to lie. He didn't feel very hopeful about lying convincingly. In fact, he'd never felt so nearly hopeless about survival in his life. He

kept going purely on the principle that the nearly dead sometimes live, while the completely dead don't come back.

Then he felt a puff of wind on his cheek. He blinked, and when he felt a second puff, he sat up. Then he felt a third, and Khraishamo was sitting up, and a fourth.

After the fourth puff it was a steady breeze. Khraishamo threw himself into movement, sponging off Rhodina and checking the sun-baked sail and rigging while Blade manned the tiller. The pirate seemed torn between joy and uncertainty.

"If this wind holds, it means a storm. But a storm maybe means going from no water to too much."

"We can face that," said Blade. "And if worse comes to worse, I'd rather be drowned than sun-baked."

Khraishamo frowned. "Don't joke like that, Blade. Not out here." He pointed to the northwestern horizon. It was turning from bronze to a sullen slate-gray. The wind was now blowing strongly enough for the ripples on the water to start turning into waves. As the sail was filled, the boat began to leave foam in its wake.

Another hour, and Blade might have danced for joy if that wouldn't have upset the boat. The sky turned completely gray, almost black, with the clouds pressing down on the sea as if they wanted to crush the boat. Out of the clouds came a downpour so fierce that for a while Blade was afraid they would have to start bailing. Suddenly there was all the water they could use.

They filled the pots, drank them empty, and filled them again. They wrung out the drenched sail and used the water to wash their clothing. Then they wrung out their clothes over their sun-dried, salt-caked skins. They drank the pots empty again, then filled them and poured them over Rhodina. They even gave her a full pot to wash out her hair.

When she was finished with that, she had the strength to stand, holding onto the mast. She stood there as the wind rose and her hair began to fly about her, a naked, magnificent storm goddess. Blade knew he'd never forget the sight of her in that moment.

Then she had to sit down and hang on, because the wind went on rising as the rain slackened. Before long Blade wouldn't have tried dancing for a million pounds. He'd have gone overboard before he could take three steps. Besides, he wasn't feeling quite so cheerful now. He remembered that summer storms on the Sea could blow like hurricanes. There wasn't enough room for them to build up gigantic waves, but to small-boat sailors that wasn't an important difference.

Blade looked around him. It was becoming impossible to tell where the sky ended and the Sea began. Waves were already nearly ten feet high with the wind peeling their crests off in clouds of spray. Water roared under the boat and the wind roared in Blade's ears. He found he had to shout to make Khraishamo hear him.

"How does this blow look to you?"

"It could get a lot worse. It probably will, too. But at least it's taking us the way we want to go."

That was true. The gale would drive them toward the eastern shore of the Sea. It might blow out before they reached Mythor, or it might drive them ashore before they reached the city. Meanwhile, it was giving them all the water they could use, as well as protection from Goharan ships. Blade shouted to

Khraishamo again.

"We don't need to worry about Goharans any more. The merchant ships'll all be too busy to pay attention to us, and the galleys'll all be heading for shelter."

Khraishamo nodded. "Let's hope we can do the same if we have to."

Blade looked up at the sky without loosening his grip on the tiller. It could hardly be much after noon, but already the day was as dark as late evening.

Chapter 18

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In the chronicles of Gohar, it was called the Storm of Thrayket's Passing, because it started blowing on the day of the temple rites in his memory. It had various other names among the other peoples around the Sea. None of them ignored it.

None of the sailors caught at Sea could ignore it either, but many of them didn't live long enough to give the storm a name. They could only go down into the Sea, cursing the gods as salt water filled their mouths for the last time.

The Goharans, the Mythorans, and the other cities and kingdoms who had ships on the Sea lost ninety merchantmen and fifteen galleys. More fishing boats went down than anyone could ever count. Even the Sarumi lost some fishing craft and a few war vessels, swamped at sea or driven onto the rocky north coast of Sarumland. They also had crops washed out, huts blown down, and food spoiled by the ton.

On the other hand, the rivers between them and the plains horsemen swelled to raging torrents. Three thousand horsemen gathered to raid the Sarumi were caught by a flash flood, and the bodies of men and horses were strewn along the river banks all the way to the Sea. The Sarumi suddenly found themselves free of enemies on land, their enemies at Sea weakened, and their own fleet intact.

As the Sarumi realized this, the storm blew itself out. After five days of wind, gray skies, and waves the size of houses, there was blue sky and soft breezes. Only the surf still roared in on the eastern shore, carrying with it planks, beams, masts, oars, barrels, and bodies.

On the third day of the storm, Blade began to wonder if Khraishamo was right. Perhaps they were going to die from too much water instead of too little. The wind blew nearly a full gale every hour of the day and night. All around them the Sea rose into waves twenty feet high, and overhead gray clouds raced madly past. The nights were an experience Blade wouldn't wish on his worst enemy, with the waves turned into ghostly monsters, always threatening to swamp or overturn the boat.

Blade's muscles were stretched and twisted to the limit, his eyes became salt-reddened pits, his clothes rotted on his back, his brain screamed for sleep. Khraishamo and Rhodina were no better off, and several times the woman seemed about to collapse. Somehow she always managed to find a little more strength and keep going.

Fortunately the boat was just the right size for the three of them to handle, superbly well-built, with a high

freeboard made higher because she was lightly loaded. She rode up and over nine waves out of ten, and while the continuous rising and falling made Rhodina deathly seasick, it also kept them from being swamped. There were no leaks worth mentioning, in spite of the worst the waves could do, and they could easily bail out what came aboard in spray and rain.

Meanwhile, the mast and sail not only held but drove the boat along at six and sometimes eight knots, faster than Blue Swallow, as fast as a war galley rowing in to ram. Where they were going Blade wasn't entirely sure, but they were going toward it fast. Fortunately Khraishamo knew just about everything anyone could know about handling boats, Blade wasn't far behind the pirate, and Rhodina soon became a valuable hand on the ropes. When she wasn't flat on her back or bent over the side with seasickness, she was in good health and spirits. There was plenty of water, they were too busy to eat even if they'd had any food, and the storm didn't frighten her nearly as much as the prospect of a slow, agonizing death from thirst.

By the evening of the fourth day, Khraishamo's very rough dead reckoning had them closing the shore rapidly. They shifted their course more to the southward, in order to keep offshore during the night. Running at high speed onto an unknown coast in the darkness would be an unnecessarily complicated way of committing suicide. The wind rose, though, and they found they had to make more headway to the east than they wanted to avoid broaching to and being rolled over by the waves.

None of them tried to sleep that night. They pulled on all their wearable clothing; belted on their knives, and sat while the boat plunged on through the roaring darkness.

Dawn came, showing them a high black cliff looming dead ahead. "The Black Head of Ryga," said Khraishamo grimly. "Not the worst shipbreaker on the coast, but bad enough to do for us." The surf beating against the foot of the cliff was throwing spray fifty feet into the air. For a few minutes the only question in Blade's mind was whether he was going to drown or be smashed to pieces on the rocks.

Then Khraishamo noted that the current along the shore seemed to be setting them ever so slightly to the south. "Not much, but the Black Head's not wide. We make a little southing, and there's a good beach. Come on and haul."

Khraishamo steered, while Blade and Rhodina hauled away with a will. A few more minutes, and Blade saw that the Black Head was no longer looming closer and closer each time he looked. They were still near enough to be drenched by the spray thrown up at the base. In a few minutes there was six inches of water in the bottom of the boat from the spray, and Rhodina started bailing furiously.

Gradually the deadly cliffs slipped away astern, while Rhodina struggled with the bailing pots, Khraishamo gripped the tiller, and Blade kept both eyes on the sails and both hands ready to trim them. A little while longer, and there was open water to port, with a low, hilly shoreline just visible over the wave crests and through the spray and mist.

It was then that the mast let go. With a rifle-shot crack it snapped off about a foot above the base. The pressure of the wind in the sail turned the mast into a club, flailing about wildly before the sail tore loose from the yard and flew off on the wind like a seagull. The yard whipped around, catching Rhodina in the back as she emptied a pot over the side. With a wild shriek she overbalanced and fell into the water.

Khraishamo let out a roar which drowned out the wind. There was rage, pain, and grief in the cry. Blade scrambled aft to grab the tiller as Khraishamo stood up in the stern-sheets. The pirate let out another roar as a wave lifted Rhodina's head into sight and showed her swimming desperately. Blade was just reaching for the tiller when a larger wave than usual swept in. The boat heeled sharply, as Khraishamo's

standing weight affected its stability. Blade shouted: "Sit down, you fool!"

He was a breath too late. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the boat which had carried them safely so many miles across the Sea rolled over to port. Blade flung himself clear as it capsized completely, just in time to avoid being caught underneath. His foot struck hard against the boat's upturned bottom, then it was gone, sunk or swept away.

Once he was clear of the boat, Blade didn't fight the Sea. He knew that a good swimmer can make the water support him rather than swallow him, simply by not exhausting himself. He hoped Khraishamo and Rhodina knew this, but also knew there was nothing he could do for them except stay alive himself.

The current which had saved them from the Black Head still flowed, and it carried Blade southward as the waves pushed him toward shore. The combination of current, wind, waves, and shoaling water made for a choppy, steep Sea. Several times waves breaking over Blade swallowed him up or drove him deep under. Once he was sucked so far under that he began expecting every moment to hit bottom. That time he had to fight his way to the surface and reached it with the last breath in his lungs.

The fight cost him a good deal of strength, and he began to realize that the long open-boat voyage without proper food had taken more out of him than he'd thought. Getting sucked under again this way could be the end, and so could having to battle the waves for more than another few minutes.

Gradually, Blade saw the hills along the shore grow clearer each time he rose on a wave, and the water around him turned brown with sand churned up from the bottom. He saw chunks of wood, clots of weed, a dead body that wasn't Khraishamo or Rhodina. At last he slid down into the trough of a wave and struck bottom painfully hard, then rose, struck again, somehow managed to keep his footing, and plunged forward until his legs gave under him and he fell face-down on the damp sand.

After three weeks, he'd reached land.

At first he felt he could use another three weeks of lying here quietly to rest and recover. Then his judgment got the better of his aching muscles and joints and pulled him to his feet. He staggered forward until he was above high-tide mark, then saw that beyond the beach was a forest of scrubby, windblown trees. He kept moving until he was safely inside the trees, able to look along the beach in both directions but nearly invisible himself.

There was no sign of his comrades, but there was plenty of evidence that other ships had come to grief in the storm.

There was a dark fringe of wreckage along the shore at the water's edge, including dead fish and whales, every possible piece of a ship's gear, and here and there a drowned sailor. The spectacle was sufficiently depressing so that Blade stared at it blankly for several minutes before he noticed that one of the "drowned" sailors was standing up. A moment later the sailor bent and picked up another, then came lurching up the beach toward the trees.

Blade hurried out to meet Khraishamo as he carried a limp Rhodina in his arms toward shelter. The pirate was staggering from exhaustion and also from carrying Rhodina's considerable weight, and his face was once again a demon's grim mask. When he saw Blade approaching, he stopped and lowered Rhodina to the sand.

"She's dead, Blade." If Sarumi warriors ever wept, Khraishamo would have been weeping. "She went under once too often. She's not breathing."

"How long—?"

"Don't know." Khraishamo knelt on the sand beside Rhodina and bowed his head. Blade also knelt, but he took her wrist and felt for the pulse. It was faint and irregular, but it was still there.

Not wanting to get Khraishamo's hopes up, Blade said nothing. He might not get her breathing again at all. Even if he did, there might be brain damage from lack of oxygen. Ignoring Khraishamo, Blade bent over Rhodina, squeezed her nostrils shut, and started mouth-to-mouth respiration. It was some time before the grief-stricken Khraishamo noticed what was happening, then he shouted angrily: "Heh! Leave her alone, you—!"

Blade looked up. "This sometimes saves drowned people in England. Don't hope for too much, but don't interrupt me." That shut the pirate's mouth, and Blade went back to work.

Breathe—breathe—breathe—in an endless rhythm. Blade didn't know how long he'd been at work, and didn't want to guess. Then as he pulled his mouth away from hers, he felt a warm breath on his cheek. He didn't stop the rhythm until he'd felt her breathe four more times, and he didn't stand up until Rhodina's eyes flickered open. At that point Khraishamo let out a wild cry and gripped Rhodina in his arms so fiercely that Blade was afraid he'd stop her breath again.

Blade turned his back and walked a few yards away. He was now quite sure that Sarumi warriors could weep, and his own eyes weren't entirely dry. It was Rhodina's voice that brought him back to her side.

"If you two do all this when I come to life, I won't dare die."

"No, beloved, you don't," said Khraishamo, his voice steady for the first time since he'd carried her out of the water. He stood up. "Let's get her into shelter, Blade. Somebody might come along."

Nobody came along while they were carrying Rhodina into the trees, and after that they didn't know or care. It was enough to be out of the wind, nearly beyond the roar of the waves, with the smell of growing things around them and grass and damp leaves underfoot. After three weeks in a small boat, Blade found that something solid and motionless underfoot felt vaguely unnatural.

After a while, he stretched and said, "Well, we're as close to Mythor as we're going to get by sea. The rest of the trip we do on foot. Rhodina, are there any rebels we can trust this far north of Mythor?"

She nodded. "Not here along the shore, though. Not north of the city. Merchantmen, galleys, they stop here too often, with too many soldiers and too many eyes to watch. In there—" she pointed eastward through the trees—"yes, several."

"How far?"

"Three, four days, if we go fast."

"I don't think we're going to go fast without food and clothes," said Blade. "In fact, I don't think we're going to go anywhere at all until we've begged a meal and some shoes."

Khraishamo nodded. "That's good sense. But how are we going to find someone who won't run away screaming or call the soldiers when they see us?"

Khraishamo had a point. He himself was easily recognizable as Sarumi, and he was also stark naked. Blade wore only a pair of trousers, split to mid-thigh along one leg. Rhodina's costume might have made her a fortune in London as a topless dancer, but here it would only attract unwanted attention.

"I'll beg for the three of us," said Blade. "I can say I'm a shipwrecked sailor—"

"The gods know that's true enough," said Rhodina, laughing.

"Yes. And you two can explore along the shore, to see if you can get clothes and weapons from any of the bodies. I think there are going to be a lot of those." Both the others nodded grimly.

Chapter 19

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Blade found it easy to pass himself off as a shipwrecked sailor, half-starved and nearly out of his wits from hardship and the loss of his mates. In fact, his main problem was not in getting sympathy and help but in refusing offers to put him to bed and nurse him back to health and sanity.

The women were particularly generous. Half of them seemed to already know they'd lost husbands, brothers, or sons in the storm. The other half were sick with fear that a man of theirs caught out in the storm might not be returning. Blade found it easy to carry away more food than he suspected even his half-starved comrades would be able to eat.

He was wrong. Khraishamo and Rhodina emptied the basket Blade set before them down to the last crumb, scrap, and drop of cider. Then the pirate chief belched happily and put his arm around Rhodina. For the first time in many days he looked happy.

"Now I think the next thing we do is sleep."

Blade nodded. He wouldn't have bet a penny on his staying awake another ten minutes. There was no shelter overhead except the branches of the trees, but as long as they were on land and out of the wind Blade didn't care. He also didn't see much point in anyone keeping watch. It would be many hours, perhaps days, before the storm blew out and let normal traffic along the shore start again.

Blade lay down on the opposite side of a thick tree from Khraishamo and Rhodina, and heard them both snoring just before he fell asleep himself.

They awoke in a drenching rain, as soaked as if they'd just staggered out of the sea again. They started off in a drenching rain, begged their breakfast in the rain, ate it in the rain. This went on for every hour of the first two days of their march inland.

Blade knew he shouldn't have been surprised. Storms like this hitting land frequently turned into downpours. That didn't make it any more pleasant to be continuously soaked to the skin, unable to build a fire or even keep food dry for ten minutes, blinded and deafened by lightning and thunder, occasionally menaced by falling trees, chilled to the bone, and always unsure of where he was and which way he was going.

The only consolation was that they didn't have to hide by day, but could march boldly along as fast as the sodden ground would let them. Along the shore there'd been shipwrecked sailors. Inland there were even more people driven from their homes by the storm and the floods it brought. Blade, Rhodina, and Khraishamo were just three more refugees from disaster.

"I suppose I ought to be happy, seeing my enemies suffering like this," said Khraishamo during one brief stop. "But then I remember they're Rhodina's people. The idea that they're 'the enemy' isn't so strong in me anymore."

Blade was happy to hear this. It made it even easier to trust Khraishamo. He still couldn't trust the pirate with his private thoughts about what might follow in the wake of the storm.

Mythor was going to be battered, reeling, ready to be grateful for any help and vengeful toward anyone who inflicted more injury. This would be a golden opportunity for either Harkrat or Klorete to step forward as the generous friend of the suffering Mythorans. If Harkrat was able to move first, he might be able to stifle the rebellion for many years and strengthen his position at home. If Klorete was able to move first, he might either stifle the rebellion—or turn the rebels to his side.

Who would move first? Harkrat had more resources, but he also had all the new responsibilities of ruling Gohar. Klorete might easily sabotage the Emperor's efforts to aid Mythor, delaying them until he himself could step forward to aid the storm-stricken city. The rebels themselves might not wait for any Goharan, but take advantage of the confusion and discontent to strike now. What were the odds on that? Rhodina might have known once, but her information was now the better part of a year out of date.

Three days' marching took them well clear of the coast, up into the hills to the east of Mythor. North of the city, the hills stretched away in a tangled maze of crests and valleys into unexplored wilderness. Farther south, they flattened out into broad plains. On those plains lived the fourteen tribes of the Maghri. They were more civilized than the horsemen across the Sea, who'd driven the Sarumi onto their peninsula. They were also even more formidable in war, and only a little safer to have as neighbors. The menace of the horsemen wasn't yet as serious as the menace of the pirates, so it hadn't played as big a part in Mythor's relations with the mother city. However, there were rumors of a new aggressiveness which might change this.

By the end of the third day's march, Khraishamo threw back the hood he'd used to disguise himself as human, and strode along bareheaded. He said he liked the feel of the rain on his face. Rhodina cheerfully told him that he'd gone mad.

On the other hand, the country was more rugged, there were fewer bridges across rain-swollen streams, and many fewer houses where they could beg food. Blade hoped they'd find some rebel sympathizers before hunger forced them to turn chicken thief to stay alive.

Toward late afternoon on the fourth day since their landing, they were coming down a rocky slope into a small valley. The slope was too steep to support many trees, but at the bottom the forest was thicker. Blade thought it might even give them a dry spot to spend the night. The sun was peeking through the low clouds to the west, but it hadn't been out long enough to dry the ground. They were halfway down the hill before Blade spotted the horsemen riding out of the trees and dismounting.

There were just enough trees on the hillside so that the three travelers could easily get under cover. Khraishamo stayed there while Blade crept down the hill, moving from tree to tree until he was close

enough to get a good look at the horsemen.

They were definitely Maghri. Blade recognized the rough-coated, sturdy little brown or gray horses, the rawhide harnesses, the leather jackets and breeches, the wooden shields with iron or bronze spikes in the middle, the short thick bows and long spiked war clubs.

He also saw something he hadn't expected to see. Stirrups. They were no more than loops of heavy leather, but they should be enough to let a rider use lance or club from horseback and press home a charge. Some unknown genius among these horse people had come up with the invention needed to give this whole Dimension effective cavalry. Blade was certain this little surprise was going to have interesting consequences the first time the horsemen and the Goharans met in a full-scale battle.

He also suspected that this first meeting might be only a few days away. Certainly the horsemen were well inside Goharan territory, and in considerable strength. Blade counted at least two hundred and fifty horsemen, with more coming out of the trees every minute. The Goharan commanders in Mythor were going to hear of them sooner or later, and have to do something about them.

Then Blade realized that the horsemen weren't behaving as if they were in enemy territory. They were dismounting, building fires, butchering and roasting their day's catch, making no effort to set guards or search the forest around them. They didn't even seem to care that their fires were sending up thick clouds of grayish smoke. With the clearing weather, the smoke would be visible miles away.

There might be many reasons for this apparent carelessness, Blade realized. They might know there was no enemy close at hand, they might be relying on their numbers for safety, or their leaders might simply be foolish. Blade knew that many "mysterious" events had a simple explanation: somebody didn't know his job.

There was another explanation, both sinister and plausible. The horsemen weren't on guard because they knew they weren't in enemy territory. They'd been invited to march on Mythor by Prime Minister Kloret.

The more Blade thought about this explanation, the more sense it made. Sooner or later, Kloret would need allies outside Gohar. The riders of the western plains were too barbarous, and the pirates would demand too high a price. The merchants of Gohar would certainly turn against Kloret if he gave the Sarumi what they asked. The Maghri, on the other hand, might ask nothing except a free hand against Mythor. Kloret was the sort of man who would calmly throw away half an empire if this increased his chances of ruling the other half.

By now the horsemen were settling down for the night. It was time for Blade and his friends to be on their way, just in case all the horsemen weren't as careless as they seemed. In the fading light Blade was able to make the trip uphill faster than he'd come down. Without bothering to sit, he told the others what he'd seen and what he suspected.

Both Khraishamo and Rhodina started off by looking at him as if he'd lost his mind. He went on, and gradually both of them began to look as if they might believe him. Blade was even ready to reveal his mission for Harkrat and Elyana if he couldn't convince them any other way. Fortunately this wasn't necessary. Khraishamo stood up and pulled Rhodina to her feet, although she groaned at the pain of half-rested muscles.

"We need to get to the first honest rebel you know," he said. "Never mind how big he is, we want the closest one. Your friends need a warning."

Rhodina nodded, frowning as she tried to call up a mental map of the farms and estates of rebel sympathizers in the area. Fortunately, like many illiterate people, she had an excellent memory. Her time on Shell Island and the ordeal of the escape hadn't weakened it. In a few minutes she came up with the name of Riddart, a wealthy farmer only a day's march away.

Even that was more time than Blade wanted to take, but they didn't have any choice. They were going to have to walk. Blade knew he could steal one horse from the poorly guarded Maghri camp, but probably not three. In any case, Khraishamo couldn't ride. The leg and hip bones of the Sarumi were so arranged that they couldn't straddle a horse. As far as Blade was concerned, it was still "One for all, and all for one," and he wasn't even going to think of abandoning the pirate and Rhodina.

They didn't know exactly when dawn came, because in the middle of the night it started to rain again. They splashed along through puddles and under dripping branches, once more soaked to the skin, stopping only to check their bearings. Fortunately they'd passed through a rocky gorge before the light went, and Rhodina said that as long as they kept going downhill after that they wouldn't get lost. Blade knew that didn't guarantee they would find Riddart's farm in time to do any good, but said nothing, Rhodina was only on her feet by sheer willpower. Blade suspected that she might have asked to be left behind long since, if she'd thought either man would listen to her. Knowing they'd never leave her, she was determined to keep going until she literally dropped dead in her tracks.

Before that happened, Blade swore, they were either going to find Riddart's farm or rob another man's for proper food, clothing, and a riding mule for Rhodina. She deserved more—such as being clothed in silk and waited on hand and foot for a year. But that would be enough to keep her alive until either they found friends or their enemies found them.

Slowly the night gave way to a dreary, damp dawn. The coming of what passed for daylight didn't do much to lift their spirits. That only came when Rhodina recognized a yellow barn with a narrow cart track winding away behind it.

"That's Old Wuga's Stead," she said. "Riddart's another hour down the road."

They moved on, grimly putting one foot in front of another. At last they came to a point where the track widened into a road, and a hundred yards beyond it a point where another road joined it. Rhodina looked down at the hoofprints and fresh horse droppings, and burst into tears.

It did look bad. A large force of horsemen had come out of the side road and moved off toward Riddart's farm. From the droppings, they'd come by no more than an hour ago. Who were they, and what were they doing at the farm?

There were two encouraging facts. There was no smoke visible ahead, and the prints were those of shod horses. The mounts of the Maghri weren't shod. The riders might not be friends, but at least they weren't the enemy Blade now feared the most.

The three now moved forward like a patrol advancing into enemy territory and expecting an ambush at any moment. A mile short of Riddart's farm they left the road entirely and cut across country, using the cover of the woods until they were nearly at the farm. It was bounded by a low wall of piled field stone, and beyond the wall Blade could see broad fields of partly harvested grain. The chimney of the house was smoking heavily, but otherwise Blade saw no signs of unusual activity. All the farm buildings seemed to be undamaged, which was definitely a good sign.

Both Khraishamo and Blade made it clear to Rhodina that she was going to sit down, rest, and wait while they took a closer look at the farm. Then the two men crept out of the trees, and through the standing grain. They came to the edge of the grain and stared at the farm across a broad stretch of bare, black muddy ground.

Then they heard an angry shout. "There they are, the bastards!" Six riders spurred their horses out from behind the farm buildings toward the field.

Chapter 20

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Blade's first instinct was to turn and dive into whatever cover the standing grain offered. Then he realized this would be futile. The horsemen could easily ride them down even in the grain, or circle around and get between them and the forest. There was also the possibility of a lucky shot with their bows.

Then Blade realized that the horsemen were neither Maghri nor Goharan soldiers. They wore the same sort of farmers' and small merchants' clothing he'd been seeing since he landed. All of them had bows, but only one of them had a sword. The others had woodsman's axes or short throwing spears with barbed heads. Rebels?

Blade stood up, waved his arms, held up empty hands, and shouted, "Ho! Hold your fire! We're friends to Riddart and to free Mythor!"

Two of the men reined in their horses and nocked arrows, then the others did the same. Blade wondered if he'd made a mistake that might be his last. Then Khraishamo rose and strode forward to stand beside Blade, roaring at the top of his lungs: "You fools! This is the Man from the Future, Richard Blade of England! Kill him, and nothing will save you from the fury of his people!"

Khraishamo's Sarumi accent was still thick enough so that Blade wasn't entirely sure the riders understood all the words. However, they did understand the anger in his voice and recognized him as a Sarumi. Seeing one of the Pirate Folk in human company this far inland was unusual enough to make them hold their arrows out of sheer curiosity.

Blade used the moment's pause to look at the men again. Yes, they were definitely local men, on the stocky, ugly little horses the Goharans used for back-country riding. Then he spoke.

"I am the Man from the Future, as Khraishamo says. I want to speak to Riddart."

"Riddart's dead," said a gray-haired man in the middle. He looked at his comrades. "I'm his brother Gribbon. Any of you ever hear of a Man from the Future?"

Most shook their heads, but one rider nodded slowly. "Think I did. Heard a story on the waterfront, last time I was in town. Man came out o' the air, onto a ship. Blue Swallow, I think. Fought a bunch of Bloodskins, then went up north to the City."

Blade smiled. "That's exactly how it happened. I'm the man, and this is Khraishamo, the Sarumi chief I captured in the battle. He can tell you—"

"We'll not hear any damned Bloodskin!" said one man, and others nodded. Khraishamo muttered angrily, until Blade gripped his arm and whispered in his ear.

"Easy, friend. It's not worth a fight and getting killed, at least until we know who these people are."

Blade himself was rapidly getting into the mood to pick a fight with somebody, so he sympathized with Khraishamo's anger. Ever since he'd fallen into Klore's hands, he'd been jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, then back again. Now he'd tramped miles in search of friends, to find only a mystery he didn't like. If these people didn't turn out to be rebels, he and his friends might not see another sunrise. Neither would some of the men facing him.

"All right," said Gribbon. "I give the orders here now. You come on in, both of you, and we'll see what's what."

"We've got a third one back in the woods," said Blade. "A woman, a friend of Riddart's. Can I bring her in?"

The man nodded and pointed to three of his riders. "Go with him. Shoot if he gives you a wrong look or isn't telling the truth." The three men rode toward Blade, who turned and started plodding back toward the forest without waiting for them. He found that it was as hard to lift his feet as if they'd been encased in lead boots.

Blade felt considerably better a few hours later. The hospitality Gribbon showed even to strangers was respectable, almost generous. It was far ahead of anything Blade, Khraishamo, or Rhodina had enjoyed since reaching Shell Island.

They were given stew, bread, dried fruit, and ale—all they could eat and drink. It took more than storms or wars to make a Goharan forget his hospitality to guests. Then they had baths, with hot water and strong-smelling gritty soap, and put on clean clothing.

After that they were separated. Two of the servant girls led Rhodina off to a bed in their quarters, while armed men led Blade and Khraishamo to a store room. The room was more than half filled with sacks of grain and sides of smoked meat. Blade also recalled that he'd seen other well-filled store rooms and sheds around the farm. Gribbon's people had laid in far more food than they could ever use themselves, probably far more than they'd produced themselves.

He pointed at the sacks. "Harvest good?"

The men looked at him sharply, and one nodded. "Best in years," he said.

Another added: "Lucky, too. We got it all in before the storm."

Then the men left, locking and barring the door from the outside. Blade and Khraishamo had a candle, a jug of water, a bucket, and nothing to do but wait for their host to make up his mind who they were and what should be done with them.

Blade leaned back against the piled sacks. "Where do we go from here, I wonder?" he said, half to himself.

"To sleep, if you've got the brains of a fish," said Khraishamo wearily. The pirate was not only tired, the ale he'd taken with dinner had affected him more than Blade. The Sarumi seldom used alcohol.

"If I had the brains of a fish here, I'd eat them," said Blade. "I was just asking myself, are we among friends or enemies?"

Khraishamo looked up at the ceiling. "I wouldn't shut a friend up in a room like this, myself." Blade had to agree. There was no window, and the door was made of solid planks several inches thick. The walls were stone, and the ceiling was more planks held up by beams as thick as Blade's body. Short of using dynamite, the only way out of this room was through the locked door.

"On the other hand," Khraishamo went on, "I wouldn't feed and bathe an enemy like he did." He shrugged. "Maybe he can't be sure what we are. So he's holding us until somebody comes along to tell him."

"Either that, or he thinks we're lying but can't do enough harm to be worth worrying about." Blade rather hoped his guess was the correct one. If Khraishamo was right, the three of them would be well treated but carefully guarded. If they were considered harmless and more or less ignored, they might find a chance to slip away. It would be dangerous here if the Maghri in Klore's pay did come storming down on the farm. The filled store rooms hinted that the rebels were gathering in force, but they could hardly be strong enough yet to meet the force of Maghri Blade had seen.

If the worst happened, Blade knew he himself could plunge into the wilderness and survive there until it was time to return to Home Dimension. But that would mean leaving Khraishamo and Rhodina behind—so forget that, he told himself. The Three Musketeers of Shell Island would stand together, win, lose, or die. That was one certainty in all the confusion spreading across this Dimension.

Now that he'd settled this in his mind, the best thing was to go to sleep. In one corner of the room was a pile of empty sacks. Blade divided the pile in two and gave half to Khraishamo. Before Blade could spread out his own sacks, the pirate was sprawled on his, snoring like a distant thunderstorm.

When Blade awoke, he thought at first that a real thunderstorm had come to join Khraishamo's snores. Certainly there was a tremendous din from outside, loud enough to penetrate even the solid stone walls. Then he started picking out individual noises. In the next moment he was completely awake and on his feet.

Outside, horses were neighing, fists pounded on doors, feet thudded on the ground, and men and women were shouting, both in Goharan and in another language Blade couldn't make out. A distant rumble growing rapidly louder told of more horsemen riding up at a gallop. Blade found himself listening for the crackle of flames, then realized he'd heard enough already.

The Maghri were attacking the farm, he and Khraishamo might die like trapped rats, and Rhodina was probably already dead. She might be able to convince the Maghri that she'd be worth more as a slave than a corpse, if she got the chance. She probably wouldn't. If the Maghri were in Klore's pay their orders might be to simply kill everyone who might be a rebel.

Then someone started lifting the bar outside the door. By now Khraishamo was awake. They looked at each other, then picked up a handful of sacks apiece. The sacks wouldn't do much as weapons, but they might serve as shields long enough for them to snatch weapons from the Maghri. After that it would be a

short fight, but Blade was determined to make it a bloody one. He saw the same determination in Khraishamo's eyes.

The bar clattered to the floor, the bolt was thrown, the door started to open, and Blade and Khraishamo got ready to fight. Then Rhodina hurried into the room, a short sleeping robe flapping around her knees and a broad smile on her face. She stopped as she saw Blade and Khraishamo.

"Why are you—? Oh, I see. You thought—maybe the Maghri were attacking. They're here, but they're friends! The people here—they're rebels, and they've promised friendship with the Maghri against Gohar." She seemed ready to start dancing with delight and excitement. "I don't understand it or how it all is, but—"

"I don't understand it either," said Blade. "But then I don't understand most of what's happening in Gohar these days. At least that explains why the Maghri weren't on their guard. They did expect this would be friendly territory." Rhodina nodded, took Khraishamo's hand, and led him out the door. Blade followed.

Out in the barnyard the noise struck Blade like a physical blow. There were three or four hundred mounted Maghri in sight, and more coming every few minutes. On top of all the other noises, Blade now heard the rumble of cartwheels on the bricks of the yard. Several men were hauling carts piled high with grain sacks out of the barn. That explained the stored grain—it was intended to feed the men and horses of the rebels' Maghri allies.

For a few minutes the farm people seemed to forget that Blade and his friends existed. It would have been possible to escape in all the confusion, but things had changed now. They weren't in danger of being slaughtered by the Maghri, and if they could persuade the rebels' new allies to take them along when they moved on—Blade began to rehearse arguments to use on the Maghri chiefs.

He didn't need them. A few minutes later Gribbon came up, along with several armed farmhands and three Maghri. One of them carried a bronze-face shield and wore a chief's headdress.

"Blade," snapped Gribbon. "You and your friends—get ready to mount up. We're moving out."

Khraishamo and Rhodina looked at each other. Then Khraishamo shook his head. "I can't ride," he said. "None of the Sarumi can. Our bones—"

"Can be left behind if you don't ride," said Gribbon. "Either come with us and live, or stay here and be part of the soil. We aren't leaving any Bloodskin spies."

Khraishamo's breath hissed between his teeth. "You're speaking strongly, Gribbon."

"Yes, and you don't deserve it. I've really no time to speak at all." He started to turn away. "If you're not ready to ride when your friends are, be ready to tell them farewell."

"Wait," said the Maghri chief. His Goharan was so heavily accented that without the computer's work on his brain Blade might not have understood him. The chief looked at Khraishamo, then at Rhodina, then at Gribbon.

"The fishman cannot ride," he said. "But we have litters, for the sick and the hurt and the old women. I give him one, if he gives me this woman while he is with us."

Khraishamo and Rhodina started, and Gribbon looked confused. "Yes," said the Maghri chief.

"Fishman—you have good woman. If you are no good to ride, you are not good for her. She needs a man, not—"

That was as far as the chief got. With a scream, Khraishamo lunged at the chief.

"No!" Rhodina's scream was even louder.

Either some last bit of sense or Rhodina's scream held Khraishamo back from killing the chief. Instead his fists smashed into the man's face like twin battering rams. The chief sprawled on the mud and dung-covered bricks, blood running from his nose and mouth.

By now Gribbon had his sword drawn and raised. From the way he was looking at Khraishamo, he would cheerfully have run the pirate through. By now Rhodina was embracing Khraishamo, both consoling him and restraining him. Gribbon couldn't strike at the pirate without hitting the woman.

Slowly the Maghri chief rose to his feet, wiping his nose on a filthy sleeve. He looked at Khraishamo, then drew his knife.

"Back, woman," he said. "Now you will come to Sigluf's tents and stay. This fishman—he will die for my blood." He looked at Gribbon, Gribbon nodded, and the chief raised the dagger.

Rhodina screamed again as Khraishamo threw her off and whirled to face his enemy. Gribbon raised his sword to strike. Blade saw that all of Gribbon's men were too busy watching Khraishamo's coming death to hold their weapons ready. He charged.

One of the men was in Blade's path. Blade swept him out of the way with a karate chop, then closed with Gribbon. The man struck clumsily, leaving Blade half a dozen useful openings. He took the best one, disabled Gribbon's sword arm, twisted the sword loose, then pulled Gribbon around in front of him. The edge of the sword was against the man's neck, right over the jugular vein.

"Gribbon," said Blade quietly. "Order your men to hold back. If one of them so much as blinks an eye, you're a dead man."

"That fool Bloodskin—"

"Give the order, Gribbon." The man couldn't see Blade's face, but he heard the ice in his voice.

"Lower your weapons," he shouted. "Let Blade speak."

Blade lowered his sword, but didn't let go of Gribbon. He looked at Khraishamo. The pirate had Sigluf disarmed and spread-eagled on the ground. The man was struggling to free his hands, but he might as well have tried to free them from iron shackles. Khraishamo was holding on with all his strength.

"Let him up, Khraishamo," said Blade. The pirate looked sharply at him. "Let him up, I said." Blade controlled his voice with care. Privately, he agreed with Gribbon's description of Khraishamo as a fool, but he wasn't going to let anyone else know that. If he and Khraishamo could still work as a team, they might not undo the damage already done, but they could prevent more.

Khraishamo let go of Sigluf and stood back, pocketing the man's knife. The chief seemed too angry to speak coherently, so Blade filled the silence.

"Khraishamo has offered you a mortal insult. Is that true?"

Sigluf nodded.

"Yet I say you gave him an equally great insult first. You said he was no true man, and unworthy of the woman Rhodina. She is far too good for you."

Sigluf sputtered and hissed, then managed to get out some coherent words. "Who are you, to speak to me about this?"

"I am the sworn blood-brother of Khraishamo," said Blade. "His enemies are mine, and his honor and woman I will defend as I would my own."

"You, sworn to a—" began Gribbon. Blade raised the sword again until the rebel leader could see it.

"Gribbon, I didn't ask you to speak." Blade looked around. A good many of the Maghri were crowding closer, obviously interested but apparently not yet hostile.

"Warriors of the Maghri!" Blade shouted, in a voice intended to be heard all over the farm. He used the Maghri language, and Gribbon and the other Mythorans stared in surprise. So did Khraishamo and Rhodina. He ignored them.

"Warriors of the Maghri." He pointed at Khraishamo. "This man is my sworn blood-brother. Your chief Sigluf has offered him a mortal insult. Yet my brother Khraishamo cannot fight your chief in the manner of the Maghri, on horseback. The gods so made him that he cannot ride a horse.

"I, on the other hand, can ride any horse the Maghri may offer me. I stand in my brother's place, and I offer challenge to Sigluf. Meet me on horseback, at a time and place of your choosing, and prove whether you are fit to call Khraishamo ugly names and claim Khraishamo's woman.

"Warriors of the Maghri, what say you?"

What they said wasn't clear, because all of them were talking at once. What they thought was obvious. Blade had their attention and even some of their sympathy. Perhaps not much, but if he'd got any, his gamble might be a winning one.

Sigluf apparently heard what his men were saying more clearly than Blade, and didn't like it. His face twisted, and his hands gripped his belt until Blade thought the heavy leather would tear like paper. Then he spat on the ground.

"I will spit on your body like that, when we have met and I have cut off your manhood," he snarled. "Tomorrow, at dawn."

Gribbon cursed and with a sudden jerk pulled himself free of Blade's grip. He strode over to Sigluf. "No, damn it! We can't afford to wait for you to get your quarrels done. We've got to meet up with the others, and—"

"Blood is between us, and such a quarrel will not wait."

"It must."

"It must not. You dishonor not just me but my—"

"Damn your honor. Is there honor in putting all your men as well as mine in danger?"

Gibbon now seemed to be angrier at Sigluf than he'd been at Blade or even at Khraishamo. It looked as though the argument was going to continue for a while, whoever won. Blade motioned his two friends to step aside with him, into the shadow of the back porch of the farmhouse.

Even in the darkness, Blade could see Rhodina was as pale as chalk. Yet she shook off Khraishamo's supporting hand and faced Blade almost defiantly.

"Blade, why'd you do this? Why save me from someone like him? You know what I've been. You know I've had worse in—"

"I do know. That's one reason why I spoke up. You shouldn't have to face any more trouble like that." Blade's words reduced Rhodina to silence and gave Blade a chance to turn to Khraishamo.

"As for you, my quick-tempered friend—"

The pirate looked on the edge of tears. "Blade, I've put you in danger because I didn't think. What can I say?"

"As little as possible, until we've settled this matter one way or another."

Khraishamo looked grim. "If he kills you, I'll—"

"Do nothing. We'll have to accept the outcome of the fight, or break up this whole alliance between the Maghri and the rebels. The alliance may not do us much good, but it can shake Gohar's rule over Mythor.

"In any case, I don't think it's my friends who have to worry about this duel. The English ride with foot-straps like the Maghri, and so do many other peoples I've met in different ages. I wasn't boasting about my riding."

"It was still a gamble, challenging him in the first place," said Khraishamo.

"Maybe, but I was using my own dice. I don't know much about the Maghri. I do know that people like them are always foolish about duels. Sigluf couldn't refuse my challenge.

"Also, I don't think he's too popular with his own people. A blowhard like that—"

"A what?" said Rhodina.

"Blowhard. You know—a man full of wind, like the storm we went through." The others laughed. "Anyway, a man like that, who insults total strangers and grabs for every good-looking woman he sees—even his own men might like to see him lose."

Rhodina let Khraishamo put an arm around her and pull her against him. "I hope you're right," she said, her mouth muffled against the pirate's broad chest.

Blade hoped so too. He hadn't been lying at any point, but he'd be happier when this quarrel was sorted

out. Damn Khraishamo's temper! There'd been a moment when he was almost sorry he'd used the flat of his sword instead of the edge, in the fight aboard Blue Swallow.

Now Gribbon came over to them, looking like a man who'd just swallowed a large dose of life-saving, foul-tasting medicine. "He'll fight after we meet the others," he growled.

"What others?" said Blade.

Gribbon glared at him. "Don't ask for too much, Man from the Future. Just get yourself ready to move out. I wasn't joking about that."

"And Khraishamo wasn't joking about not being able to ride," said Blade sharply. "Are you taking any wagons?"

"Yes."

"Then Khraishamo can ride in one of them. After what Sigluf said, you can't expect him to use a litter."

"Blade—"

"Gribbon—Khraishamo rides in a wagon, or I go to Sigluf and tell him we'll fight here, tomorrow morning. Take your choice."

Gribbon didn't draw his sword, but he looked as if he wasn't sure whether to commit murder or suicide. Then he growled, "All right. Get in the wagon," and stamped off, muttering to himself.

"You heard him," said Blade. "I'll get you weapons by daylight, but guard your back until then."

"You too, Blade." They gripped shoulders, then Khraishamo and Rhodina moved off toward the barn as Blade turned toward the stables.

Chapter 21

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They were on the move within an hour. Khraishamo and Rhodina sat on the sacks in a cartload of grain, while Blade rode beside them on a borrowed horse. Blade had a sword, a Maghri club, and two spears. He gave one spear to Khraishamo. Gribbon flatly refused to give any of the three a bow and arrows, and Blade didn't think it wise to press the matter.

"He'll do what he calls justice to us," said Blade. "I'm not sure what that will be, so I won't ask for more than we need."

What Gribbon called justice to his three unwelcome guests became clear in the next few days. He gave them enough food and drink, but let them make their own sleeping arrangements, spoke to them as seldom as possible, and didn't lift a finger to protect them from the Maghri. His attitude was unmistakable: "You bastards made trouble for us. I don't dare make trouble for you, but I won't go out of my way to prevent it either."

Blade refused to worry. They knew exactly where they stood with the rebel leader, and they were in no

danger from the Maghri. The warriors made that very clear to Blade, even before dawn on the first day of the march.

Blade's courage in challenging Sigluf made a good impression. Nor did most of the warriors mind that Blade was blood-brother to one of the Sarumi.

"The Sarumi—we hear they fight well," said one warrior. "So it is no shame, being brother to one."

The warriors also had their own opinion of Sigluf. "He fights well, and leads well. I would follow him anywhere in a battle," said another warrior. "In camp, he goes on fighting, with his mouth and—" He pointed at his groin, and all the others laughed. "He takes too many women. If you beat him, and want some of his ... ?"

Blade shook his head. "Thank you, but I don't need his women."

"You share Rhodina with Khraishamo?" Among the Maghri two or three brothers or sworn comrades frequently shared the same wife.

"No. I am from—far away. I will be returning to my home when this war is over. I could not be a good man for a woman of the Maghri." They all admitted that under the circumstances he'd made a wise choice.

Meanwhile, the army of the Mythoran rebels was growing. Blade gave up asking Gribbon for information about the army and its plans, and instead watched it grow while he listened to the men talk. In five days he had a roughly accurate idea of what was going on around him.

To start with, it was a mistake to speak of "the free Mythorans" or "the rebels," as if they were a single group united against Goharan rule. There was one group of rebels among the merchants and craftsmen of Mythor, and another among the farmers inland. The merchants had more money, and it was they who'd made contact with the Friends of Mythor in the north. The farmers didn't have much money, but they had more men and more weapons even without the Maghri.

They also suspected the city people of being unreliable, or at least infested with Klore's spies. They were probably right. Klore would hardly insist on keeping Imperial agents out of Mythor, unless he wanted a free hand for his own people to infiltrate the rebels there. Did he merely want to watch them, or did he perhaps dream of controlling them? That dream, at least, wasn't going to come true, now that the rebels of the back country had taken matters into their own hands.

With the help of the Maghri, the farmers would become the backbone of the rebellion. The Maghri were supposed to be sending nine thousand mounted warriors, and the farmers were supposed to raise more than seven thousand. In all of Mythor's lands the Goharans had only eight thousand fighting men. To resist the Maghri they relied on the aid of the farmers, but the farmers and the Maghri were now allies riding side by side against Gohar's power. Those rebels who would talk to Blade at all were supremely confident of victory.

Blade wasn't nearly as optimistic. The Maghri were brave, tough, and experienced, but followed more than two dozen different chiefs. The farmers were also brave, but not nearly as experienced. They followed one leader, Gribbon, but what he didn't know about warfare would fill a large book. The fight was going to be a bloody one, no matter how it came out.

Blade was even less optimistic when he learned how the Maghri were going to be paid for their support. They were going to be allowed to loot the property of all Goharans and any Mythorans who didn't support the rebellion. To Blade, this sounded like a perfect prescription for a complete shambles. What would keep the Maghri from stealing everything that wasn't nailed down or on fire, and never mind who owned it? What would keep people stripped of all their property from turning against the rebels? And after that, what would prevent chaos in Mythor?

Blade didn't know, and apparently no one else seemed to be thinking of the danger. After getting a few blank or suspicious stares, Blade reluctantly decided to keep his mouth shut. If he could do anything at all, it would only be after the fighting was over.

When that would be, he didn't know. The rebel army was supposed to gather swiftly and secretly, then strike with surprise on its side. Now the storm had turned a good part of the countryside into a sea of mud. Nobody was going anywhere swiftly.

In theory, it would have been wise to postpone the uprising for a few weeks. But autumn was coming on, and they couldn't afford to lose that much time from the campaigning season. Also, the Maghri were already over the border when the great storm struck. Surprise might already be lost. So there was no way for the rebels but forward. Even Blade admitted this.

The storm also did some good. Neither side could move quickly. Also, rumors had it that many Goharan soldiers were now scattered across the countryside, helping victims of the storm. The general commanding in Mythor could barely put five thousand of his men in the field at the best of times. Now he might be able to send out even fewer. The rebels might ride most of the way to Mythor before they had to fight a battle.

Blade's first five days with the army were long and slow. The growing mass of horsemen crawled across the countryside, through mud which sometimes reached the knees of the horses. More than once the carts of the supply train bogged down completely, and everybody dismounted to help the teamsters dig out.

By the end of the fifth day, none of the teamsters would hear a word against Khraishamo or Rhodina. The pirate used his massive strength freely, wielding a spade or sometimes heaving a cart free by sheer musclepower. Rhodina was always ready to lay a fire and heat soup and spiced ale when the carts were ready to move again.

Blade wasn't able to do quite so well, but gradually the Maghri and even some of the rebels came to trust him to deliver messages. He also managed to acquire a bow and quiver of arrows for himself, and a battle ax for Khraishamo.

"It's not quite as good as the one you had aboard Blue Swallow," he told the pirate. "But I'll see that you get one like it when the war's over."

"Thank you, Blade," said Khraishamo. "But it's I who should be giving you a gift of weapons. I owe you more than I can ever pay you in three lifetimes."

"Then don't waste the only one you'll have trying to do the impossible," said Blade. "I won't thank you, and Rhodina will never forgive you for neglecting her." Khraishamo was laughing as Blade spurred his horse back toward the head of the column. He rode a Mythoran horse, but he'd fitted it with improvised stirrups. Some of the Mythorans were doing the same.

Day after day the army marched south, and day after day it grew. A tribe or a war band at a time, the Maghri came in. There were plenty of passes in the hills to the east, and the Goharans had garrisons in very few of them. At every estate, farm, or village, riders and wagons would come out, sometimes only a handful, sometimes a hundred or more. Blade began to suspect the rebels might actually gather the sixteen thousand men of their dreams. Certainly they already had at least twelve thousand.

At the end of the ninth day, Blade heard whispers that the army would turn toward the coast tomorrow. The plan was to reach the coast, then march on Mythor from the south. Many of the farms and estates there were rich, some were in the hands of Goharan sympathizers, and none of them had suffered heavily from the storm. There would be good foraging for both men and horses.

Blade hoped there wouldn't be any surprises along with the good foraging. The rebel army hadn't been attacked, but twelve thousand horsemen were hardly invisible. The Goharan general in Mythor was supposed to be a good man, who might have plans of his own. The rebels hadn't been scouting, and Blade couldn't help wondering if they were going to pay heavily for that mistake.

By nightfall, Blade had more personal matters on his mind. Gribbon sent him a message.

"Tomorrow at dawn, you meet Sigluf in a dueling circle. The fight will be to the death."

Blade went to bed early that night and slept soundly. He'd fought too many duels in too many Dimensions against more formidable opponents than Sigluf to lose any sleep over this one. Nonetheless, he was awake before most of the camp, inspecting his horse, harness, and weapons. By the time other people were waking up, he'd eaten breakfast and was ready for a few last words with Khraishamo and Rhodina.

He gave them his bow and arrows, since Khraishamo had learned to use a bow for fishing on Shell-Island. He still preferred hand-to-hand weapons, and said so. "Also, I don't know if I can hit anything on dry land with this."

"With luck, you won't have to," said Blade. "But it will be good for hunting if you need to get away from here. There's always a chance my luck today will be bad. If it is, I don't know if you can trust Gribbon. Better wait until night, then slip off and head for the sea. The teamsters should help you, and you can hide along the coast until the war's over."

"We'll be thinking about it, Blade, but—"

"You'll do it," he said sharply, then smiled and kissed Rhodina. "Don't let this overmuscled lout get any ideas about avenging me on Sigluf, and don't get any yourself. If I'm dead, I'm dead, and the English will be out one Historian. You people don't have to escort me into the next world."

Then he mounted and rode off toward the open ground where the duel would take place. He hoped he'd convinced them, but from the look on Khraishamo's face he doubted it. Those two gallant, magnificent idiots!

The place for the duel was a circle a hundred yards across, laid out on level ground at the foot of a low hill. Maghri with lances and Mythorans with swords stood around the circle, glowering at each other except when they turned to glower at Blade when he rode up. Blade hoped the duel wasn't going to

cause bad blood between the two allies. He was willing to take risks for himself, but he didn't care to see the whole rebellion against Gohar collapse.

Regardless of what Emperor Harkrat and Empress Elyana might think, Blade was now heartily in favor of the rebellion's success. It had gone too far to turn back. Failure now would mean only a bloody massacre and an embittered people held down by brute force. That would play directly into Kloret's hands. A victorious rebellion in Mythor, on the other hand, might bring Kloret down. It would certainly put a good part of the people and the lands of this Dimension out of Kloret's reach.

Blade reached the dueling circle first, rode out into the middle of it, and dismounted to spare his horse. He'd taken the strongest horse he could get, not worrying about whether it was trained for fighting or not. If it would hold up under him, he would do all the necessary fighting.

Then Sigluf rode up with a terrific rattle of drums and blaring of war horns, along with a large escort. Gribbon was with him. Sigluf rode into the circle without dismounting, while Gribbon told everybody what they already knew.

The duel would be simple. Each man would have a thrusting lance, a throwing spear, and a shield. Sigluf had a sword, Blade a war club, and neither of them had any armor. They would fight until one of them was dead or could fight no longer, and the winner would have the right to kill a disabled loser. They could use whatever tactics they chose, but the first man to go outside the circle three times would be declared the loser.

Blade mounted and waited until it was obvious that Sigluf was going to let him make the first move. Blade spurred his horse toward his opponent and Sigluf swung his mount out of Blade's path, controlling it so that he could hold both lance and spear. Blade had his shield on his left arm and his right hand on the reins. He wanted to get Sigluf to use up as many of his weapons as possible before closing in to settle the fight.

Sigluf cooperated. The arm with the spear went up and back, then forward. The spear flew at Blade. Blade judged its flight, then threw his shield up. The spear hit hard enough to jar his arm from wrist to shoulder, and the head drove clear through the wood and leather to stick out six inches on the back side. If he'd been holding the shield close to his body he might have taken a flesh wound. As it was, he was unharmed.

Before Blade could do anything with his own spear, Sigluf charged. As the chief charged, he swung his shield off his back and lowered his lance into striking position. Blade had barely time to turn his horse and take the lance on his own shield. Once again the shock nearly immobilized his arm, but Sigluf found his lance point jammed in the shield. Before he could pull it free Blade gripped his war club and swung it at the lance shaft. The shaft didn't break, but it cracked and sagged as Sigluf pulled the lance free and backed his horse away before Blade could strike again.

That exchange was the last for a while. Sigluf now saw through Blade's tactics and refused to come close. He was as good a rider as Blade, and his horse was not only better trained but carrying at least fifty pounds less weight. So he easily avoided Blade's rushes. After the first half-dozen failures, Blade decided to wait until Sigluf decided to close again. His horse still seemed as strong as ever, but he didn't want to risk tiring it.

By now it was well past the dawn of another damp, grayish day. On the ground it was clear, but low-hanging clouds laid a blanket of mist and rain on the hills just beyond the dueling circle. Blade realized that he hadn't seen the sun for more than a few hours since the storm caught their boat out at sea.

All the world seemed to have turned gray and damp and seemed ready to stay that way until the end of time. He suspected that a few days of bright sunshine would improve everybody's spirits. It would also dry out the ground and speed up the army's—

Sigluf charged, shouting a high-pitched war cry, shield slung again, head down, and sword held out to one side for a wide slash. Blade jerked his horse around, but Sigluf was on him before he could get ready with either lance or spear. Instead he twisted as far around in the saddle as he could, and struck with the spike of his shield at Sigluf's face.

It was an awkward blow, and Sigluf was able to duck low enough to save his face. But he was wearing a leather cap held on his head by a strap under his chin. The shield's spike caught under the brim of the cap, gouging Sigluf's scalp and jerking his head backward. By sheer reflex he yanked on the reins, making his horse rear back on its haunches. Blade had just enough time to drop his shield, bring his war club around, and strike Sigluf on the chest. The Maghri chief slid backward out of his saddle and over his horse's rump onto the grass. His mount promptly got to its feet and trotted off.

Sigluf staggered to his feet as Blade backed his own horse clear. He still held onto his sword, but with the other hand he was rubbing his chest. His face was twisted with rage, pain, and surprise. Blade knew that since he'd unhorsed the man in fair combat he could now ride Sigluf down. However, he had no intention of killing the man if he could avoid it. Now he also decided against doing anything which would humiliate him. Disgraced but left alive, Sigluf might pay a secret visit to Blade some dark night, knife in hand. Blade felt he already had enough trouble guarding his back in this army.

So Blade kept backing his horse until he was more than fifty feet from Sigluf. He was just starting to dismount, when suddenly a rider came pelting down the hill, shouting in a shrill, almost hysterical voice: "Goharans! The Goharan riders are coming! Ten thousand of them are coming over the hills!"

"The Goharans!" shouted someone in the circle.

"We're caught," said another, a Maghri. Then, more loudly: "We're doomed! Flee!"

Blade swung himself back into the saddle, lifted his spear, sighted on the warrior who was shouting in panic, and threw as hard as he could. The spear flashed across the dueling circle and struck the man in the chest as he started to turn. He choked, clutched at the spear shaft, and fell on his side.

Blade rose in his stirrups and bellowed, "I'll do the same to the next bastard who starts crying like a coward! There aren't ten thousand Goharans in this whole land. They've sent enough to be dangerous, but only if we run. If we stand and face them like warriors, we've nothing to fear worse than a warrior's death!"

Blade's first shout froze everyone around him. His next words got them moving again, but not in the wild panic that might have developed if he hadn't spoken. They were gathering together, pulling out weapons, and looking around for the enemy rather than for the best way to run.

"Sigluf!" Blade shouted. "Get on your horse and warn Gribbon. I'll command here until we find out what we're facing." The Maghri chief stared at Blade for a moment, then nodded and ran toward his horse. Blade saw Khraishamo and Rhodina standing among the Mythorans and rode over to them.

"Both of you—get back to the wagons! Have the teamsters pull them into a circle and get inside." That would give the teamsters and their animals some protection. It would also give dismounted Maghri and Mythorans a defensible position for a last stand, if it came to that. Blade hoped it wouldn't, but there was

no point in hoping until he'd seen what the Goharans were actually sending against the rebels.

He spurred his horse toward the hills, and the men around the circle parted in front of him. Some of the Maghri were mounted by now, and six of these joined him. Blade reined in to let them catch up. This gave him time to realize that he might be starting his last ride, scouting in the face of an army with only six companions.

However, as is so often the case in war, somebody had to do the job, and Richard Blade was the man on the spot.

Chapter 22

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The enemy came to Blade even before the dueling circle was completely out of sight behind him.

A seemingly endless column of Goharan horsemen was cantering out of one of the wooded passes. At least two thousand were already in sight, with more coming on fast. The leading riders were moving six and eight abreast, and all of them carried bows and swords. At the end of the horsemen a red banner flapped in the damp air.

After that, Blade decided he'd seen enough. The leading riders would soon be within bowshot. Now that he had accurate news, the next thing was to get it back to the rebels. The Goharans had managed almost complete surprise, but even a few minutes' warning to the camp would save a good many lives. Blade cursed the rebels' refusal to send out scouts.

Suddenly the leading riders broke into a gallop, with drums thudding behind them. Blade shouted to his companions and all of them put spurs to their own horses. The wild chase went down the hill in a rush. The horse of a man riding with Blade slipped on the grass and went down. The rider rolled free and rose to his feet unhurt, but now he was within bowshot of the Goharans. Blade saw arrows sprout like a porcupine's quills from the man, then he vanished under the thundering hooves of the enemy.

Blade lost two more men as he rode back to join the main army, and several arrows came unpleasantly close to him. The Goharans were gaining, but as they did their leading ranks were getting ragged as each rider spurred his horse to the limit.

If the Goharans had been equipped with spurs and able to press home a boot-to-boot charge with lances, the rebel army would still have been doomed. The few minutes' warning Blade gave them wouldn't have been enough. He found the camp still in a frantic confusion, with riderless horses dashing in all directions and horseless riders chasing them.

The Goharans were horse archers, with their curved swords for close work. They had to shoot until the enemy was broken, then charge. At least all their books said this was the way to fight a battle, and their general seemed to be going by the book.

Somehow Blade didn't wind up sprouting arrows when the Goharans behind him opened fire. The arrows came down all around him, and a solid curtain of them seemed to fall on the man just ahead. Screaming men and screaming horses went down by the dozens, thrashing wildly, the flailing hooves killing men who'd survived the arrows. Blade pulled his horse around to the left and rode clear across the front of the rebel army. Goharan arrows pursued him all the way and finally caught up with his horse as

he reached the end of the line.

The horse screamed, reared up, and fell sideways, blood gushing from its nose and torn throat. Blade leaped clear, hit the ground on all fours, and didn't bother standing up until he was a little closer to his friends. He rose to his feet only a few yards from where the teamsters were struggling with their wagons.

"No, Blade. You should stay on your feet, like us!" It was Khraishamo. He was standing beside an upturned barrel of ale, stuffing Rhodina into a scale-mail jacket. "Get one of these for yourself too. This isn't the kind of battle for walking around bare as a frog."

Blade knew that perfectly well. He was just about to point out that Khraishamo was equally exposed, when suddenly Rhodina screamed.

"Those dirty, horse-dung stinking bastards! They're running out on us!"

Blade's eyes followed Rhodina's pointing finger, and he joined in Rhodina's cursing. As fast as they mounted up, the Maghri were streaming away to the rear and vanishing in the hills to the east. None of them were galloping, but very few of them were staying. It wasn't a panicky flight, it was the orderly withdrawal of an army that is simply refusing to fight.

Blade stopped cursing and turned to the people around him. Some of them were also cursing, while others were looking toward the rear again. Many were too furious to either speak or move. He jumped up on top of the ale barrel and shouted to everyone who could hear: "So the damned Maghri have run off? Well, we're not going to run. We're going to show those bastards that we're better men. And we're going to show the Goharans the same!" He pointed at the horsemen. They were all gathered now, and a glance gave him a rough estimate of their strength.

"There aren't more than four thousand of them," he yelled. "We still outnumber them, and they're a long way from home. We stand here and beat them, and that's the end."

"And if we don't beat them?" someone shouted.

"Then we'll die like men, with something to be proud of! Do you think the Maghri are going to be happy after what they've done today?" Blade wasn't sure he was making sense. He wasn't even completely sure what he was saying. He only knew that he had to say something to pull the rebels together, and if it succeeded, so much the better. He and his friends weren't going to retreat, whatever anybody else did, and he didn't really want this to be Richard Blade's Last Stand.

The sudden disappearance of the Maghri seemed to be confusing the Goharans. They were all lined up and ready, a man in a golden helmet out in front, but not moving. The arrow fire slackened, then Blade heard shouted orders and it stopped entirely. Were the Goharans short of arrows?

That was an encouraging thought, but it was only a guess. Silence was falling over the battlefield, and in that silence Blade found his voice carrying from one end of the rebel line to the other.

"Dismount and shoot from on foot. Men with spears and swords, pull the horses back. Archers, aim for the enemy's horses. They've got a long walk back to Mythor!" Horses were bigger targets than men, and a Goharan soldier on foot this deep in a hostile countryside would be lucky to get back alive even if his side won today's battle.

"Hurry, damn—!"

Then the head of the ale barrel caved in under Blade. He plunged chest-deep into stale ale, making everyone who saw him double over with laughter. Khraishamo helped him climb out, coughing and spitting out ale, while all along the rebel line men started obeying Blade's orders.

As the Goharans sat on their horses and watched, Blade began to realize he'd done a good job. The Goharans were either short of arrows or saving them to deal with the Maghri once they'd smashed the rebels. They weren't going to stand off and use a hail of arrows to break the rebels before closing in. On the other hand, they couldn't just charge in. Without stirrups, a Goharan leaning out of his saddle to cut down a man on foot standing his ground would risk tumbling headfirst under the hooves of his own horse.

If he'd had any money, Blade would have placed a sizable bet that the Goharans would make their attack on foot.

After milling around for half an hour, the Goharans began to organize their attack. They dismounted, and some started leading the horses to the rear, out of bowshot. The rest drew their swords, rested them on their left shoulders, lined up, and waited for the order to advance.

It came. The general in the gold helmet rode out in front of his men, waving his sword over his head. He pointed it toward the rebel lines, shouted something in a high-pitched voice, then sat on his horse as his men charged past him toward the enemy.

Most of the rebels were also short of arrows, with only a single quiverful apiece. They'd expected to get more from the Maghri, who were now riding merrily off with their arrows and everything else they had. Most of the advancing Goharans also wore scale mail shirts, which provided more protection than anything the rebels were wearing.

So the advancing Goharans weren't shot down by the hundreds. The best archers among the rebels opened up first. By the time they ran short of arrows the range closed to where it was hard to miss. With wounded men dropping out at every step, the Goharans advanced steadily, their line growing more ragged as they did. Blade realized the Goharans weren't used to holding formation while fighting on foot. Perhaps he should have kept a few hundred men mounted, to take advantage of this fact? Probably, but it was too late to make such a big change now, with the hand-to-hand fighting about to start. His battle plan was working fairly well for something dreamed up on the spot.

Khraishamo now had an ax in each hand and was tramping back and forth across the circle of wagons. As he moved he encouraged the people around him with gruesome descriptions of what would happen to the Goharans if they dared to get close. Beside him walked Rhodina, looking like a Valkyrie in her armor. Khraishamo's end of the rebel line was in good hands. Blade started to walk along the line toward the center, where they might need more leadership. He hadn't seen Gribbon since word of the attack came, and couldn't help wondering if the rebel leader might have fled with the Maghri.

Then the Goharan advance struck the rebel line, and Blade had too much else on his mind to think about Gribbon.

The discipline, the armor, and the long slashing swords of the Goharans gave them an edge in some places. Rebels began to go down, skulls split open, arms lopped off, chests gaping-ghastly wounds which made their comrades turn pale but didn't make them run. In places the Goharans drove bulges into the rebel line, but they didn't break through.

Meanwhile Goharans were also going down. Wounded rebels who fell often found themselves under the swing of the Goharan swords. They stabbed upward with their own swords and knives, swung clubs at kneecaps and shins, bit and gouged if they didn't have any other weapons. Goharan soldiers fell on top of their victims and rolled over and over in desperate bare-handed struggles. The ground became covered with thrashing bodies, and Goharans coming up to join the battle had to pick paths around or through them.

In other places the rebels had enough men with spears to form pike-walls. Sometimes they invented the formation for themselves on the spot, at other times it was Blade shouting orders and pushing men which got them into position. In either case the result was a strong point in the rebel line, where the rebels had a longer reach than the Goharans. The Goharans could go around the flanks of the pike-walls, to be sure, but those flanks got fewer and fewer as the rebel line tightened up.

Blade helped defend one of those flanks himself. He'd just finished showing a boy who couldn't have been more than sixteen how to hold his spear when seven or eight Goharans raised a shout and charged straight at him.

"Get out of here!" Blade shouted at the boy.

"No." He stood, holding his spear with the grip Blade had just showed him. Then he stepped forward and thrust hard. A sword cut missed his spear and the point drove into a Goharan throat. Before the boy could pull back, one sword chopped through his spear and another nearly took his head off. He dropped, spurting blood and still clutching three feet of his spear.

This left the Goharans to face a thoroughly enraged Blade. He feinted with his sword at the man who'd killed the boy, then closed to blind another with a dagger slash across the face. He blocked a descending sword with his dagger, losing the weapon in the process but bringing his sword around to cut off the attacker's sword arm. Then he stepped back, caught up a fallen spear, threw it straight at the man he'd blinded, and hit him in the chest. Two more Goharans had the courage to try pulling their dying comrade out of Blade's reach. All that courage brought them was a quicker death.

Then rebels were coming up all around Blade, pulling him back to safety while they moved into position on the flank of the pike-wall. Blade wiped his sword on a dead man's clothing and went back to being a general instead of a fighter.

Now the rebel line was holding nearly everywhere, but the Goharans were still pressing it hard. In a few places Goharans broke through and headed for the horse lines. Blade shouted for archers to shoot these intruders. If they managed to stampede many of the horses, it would be the rebels who'd have trouble retreating from this battlefield. Granted, they would be in friendly territory, but—

It suddenly occurred to Blade that two could play at this game. The rebels' archers weren't doing much in the fight now, because the fighters were now too mixed together for safe archery. But if a few hundred of them mounted up, slipped around to within bowshot of the Goharans' horses, and let fly? ...

Blade started walking along the rebel lines, speaking to every archer he found who wasn't already using some other weapon. There weren't as many of these as he'd hoped. The rebel line was slowly falling back, leaving more and more men on the ground. Each time a man went down, someone had to take his place, and slowly the archers were being sucked into the hand-to-hand fight.

Blade managed to scrape up about eighty men with bows and full quivers. He led them toward the horse lines and watched them mount, then gave them their orders. "Move fast. Don't shoot at anything except the horses. Hit as many of them as—"

He stopped, because a low rumble was floating over the battlefield from beyond the hills to the east. Everyone else was hearing it too, and as the rumble grew louder, the fighting died down. Heads turned toward the hills—then Maghri drums sounded, and the whole rebel army exploded in wild shouts of joy and surprise.

The Maghri came over the crests of the hills on a wide front, moving at a trot. As they started downhill they broke into a canter, the fastest pace they could manage on the wet ground. Blade saw at once they were heading straight for the Goharan rear. A moment later he saw they were going to reach the Goharan horses long before the Goharan soldiers could run to them.

Blade grabbed the bridle of the nearest free horse and swung himself up into the saddle. Then he shouted to the mounted archers.

"It looks as if the Maghri are going to do our work for us. Follow me!"

Blade remembered leading his mounted archers toward the rebel flank. He had some vague idea of getting a clear shot at the Goharans as they broke and ran. Then the whole battlefield dissolved into a chaos of running, fighting, screaming, and dying men, on horseback, on foot, and on the ground. He had only a few clear memories of anything happening after that.

—Seeing Khraishamo lead the teamsters and the other rebels who'd fought from the wagons out into the open. The pirate really deserved the name Bloodskin now. He was spattered from head to foot. His two axes still swung like scythes, reaping Goharans at every step.

—Seeing Goharans dropping their swords and going down on their knees to beg for quarter. Some of them were lucky enough to find a rebel or one of the Maghri in a good mood.

—Seeing a big bearded man on foot trying to rally his men, shouting, grabbing them, even beating at them with the flat of his sword. Blade rode in through the mob of Goharans and slashed downward with a captured Goharan sword. Only when a golden helmet fell off the dead man's head did Blade realize that he'd killed the Goharan general.

After a while the chaos began dying down, with only little knots of fighting men scattered here and there. Somewhat later, the fighting stopped entirely. Rebels on foot rounded up the prisoners, collected the dead, salvaged usable weapons and equipment, and started preparing dinner and tending the wounded. Rebels on horseback joined the Maghri in riding off to track down enemy fugitives and find the Goharan camp if they could.

"I think there will not be many who ran from this battle," said Sigluf when he rode up to Blade. "But we should go out and look for others who may be coming."

Blade resisted the temptation to point out that if scouts had gone out before the battle, the Goharans wouldn't have surprised the rebels in the first place. As far as he was concerned, his quarrel with Sigluf was over and done with.

So was Gohar's only field army in Mythor, as it turned out. Stunned and bewildered prisoners talked

freely, and Blade was able to fill in the details they didn't give. General Kaurget, the man in the golden helmet, knew that Gohar couldn't face a long war against the rebels. As soon as he heard the rebels were gathering, he assembled four thousand picked mounted men and rode inland. When he learned that the rebel army was close at hand but apparently not on its guard, he decided to strike quickly. It was a gamble, trusting to surprise and discipline to offset three-to-one odds. With a little more surprise or a little less stubborn courage, the gamble would have been a success. Even then, without the Maghri attack the Goharans might have been able to retreat safely. There was more than enough glory to go around among the victors. Blade hoped this would reduce bad blood and bad tempers between the Maghri and the rebels.

There was also an open road to Mythor itself, if they didn't waste any time.

Chapter 23

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It was nightfall before Blade heard that Gribbon was dead of wounds he'd received early in the battle. Nobody seemed to be willing to take command of the rebels. So Blade simply walked around, giving orders until people started obeying them. "Easiest way of promoting myself I ever found," he said afterward. No one cared now whether or not he was the Man from the Future. Everyone knew what he'd done in the day's fighting.

When he was satisfied that the prisoners and wounded were going to be provided for and the rest of the army would be ready to move tomorrow morning, Blade went in search of Khraishamo. He found the pirate sitting in his tent, Rhodina beside him, and Sigluf in the middle of apologizing.

"It is not good to say anything against a warrior like you," said the Maghri chief. "It was bad that I ever did it. I will not do it again. I will make this promise before all the warriors if you ask it."

"I won't ask it," said Khraishamo, signaling Blade to sit down. "But Blade may ask more. He fought for me, and that gives him some right to speak."

Blade smiled. "Sigluf, you are also a fine warrior. So I won't ask anything more from you now. I will ask something for the future, though."

"What is that?"

"The next time you have some complicated battle plan, tell us about it. It was a good idea, pretending to retreat so that the Goharans would be drawn into a battle, then riding around to take them in the rear. It would have been even better to tell us about it first.

"If you ever do something like that again without telling us, I'll challenge you again. And then I will do my best to spatter whatever you use for brains all over the grass."

Sigluf took the good-natured threat as Blade intended. "I see now that your people are warriors I can trust. I will not hide anything from them again. Let us drink to the many more victories we shall win side by side."

They drank. "This is the last ale from the barrel Blade fell into this morning," said Khraishamo. "So we know it's fit for warriors to drink." He put an arm around Rhodina, and it was obvious to Blade that he

wanted to be alone with his woman.

Blade didn't mind. It had been a long day, and he'd have to be up at dawn tomorrow if he wanted to get this army on the road by noon.

In fact, Blade didn't wake up until it was full daylight, and when he did it was the sound of the army moving out which woke him. On his first day as a Mythoran general, he found himself having to miss breakfast and ride furiously to catch up with the men he was supposed to be leading. Everyone except Blade had a good laugh over this.

The allied army marched on Mythor, the Maghri on the right and the rebels on the left. A stroke of luck solved the problem of paying the horsemen. The abandoned Goharan camp was quickly discovered, and in it a large sum in gold and silver. Apparently the Goharans had expected to be able to buy allies. Blade gave two-thirds of the gold to the Maghri, in return for a solemn promise not to loot either Goharans or Mythorans. The Maghri were delighted with the arrangement, the rebels somewhat less so, but Blade was able to persuade everyone after a good deal of argument.

In four days the army reached the sea and turned north along the coast. They spent a day gathering supplies for men and horses, then pushed north. Blade didn't have to urge anyone to hurry now. All he had to do was ride at the head of the army, as the long line of horsemen thundered north past estates, farms, fishing villages, and gaping or cheering men and women.

They met no Goharan soldiers on the road, and little resistance of any sort. The undermanned garrisons of the little coastal forts shut their gates, hurled stones and curses at rebels who rode too close to the walls, and did nothing else. A few desperate Goharan landowners tried to arm their tenants and fight, but at least half of these foolish men were cut to pieces by the weapons they'd handed out. None of the others delayed the advancing army for more than a few hours.

No one expected the allied army. The last thing most Goharans had heard was word of the advance inland. A few knew that there'd been a battle, but no one seemed to know that Gohar's best troops in Mythor were either dead or prisoners. Sigluf and Khraishamo took great pleasure in spreading the news, and in warning people that they were now at the mercy of the rebels.

"Mythor will be free," said the pirate. "You can't change that. All you can do is get yourself killed by making a stupid fight, or live and try to make the best of it. Why be stupid?"

This argument was particularly convincing when backed up by the sight of the long column of grim, ragged horsemen, with their dusty faces and bright weapons.

On the last day, even the horses seemed to catch the eagerness of their riders. The entire army went pounding north at a steady trot. They rode on through the night, and as the eastern sky turned gray rode up to the landward wall of Mythor.

Like Gohar, Mythor wasn't intended to stand attack by land. The nearest enemies on land were the Maghri, and they were a long way off. Before they could ever reach Mythor, the soldiers and the people inland would unite to stop them. Now the inland people were riding side by side with the Maghri against a nearly defenseless city.

A few guards tried to hold the gates. Archers picked off some of them, and climbing the walls on improvised ladders disposed of the rest. All the gates were open in half an hour, and the riders poured into the streets of Mythor, shrieking, screaming, shooting arrows at anything moving, and calling to the

Mythorans to come out and meet the men who'd given them freedom.

Along with the city, the riders scooped up nearly a thousand sailors on shore leave from a fleet of Goharan galleys in the harbor. They'd reached Mythor only three days ago, and in spite of rumors of trouble the admiral let his men go ashore.

"Long trip, even if we did miss the storm," one sailor told Blade. He didn't seem particularly worried over being captured. "Degyat's not the sort to keep men shut up just for a rumor, so—"

"Degyat's your admiral?"

"Admiral of the First Fleet, anyway. Second Fleet's coming along any day, and then you bastards aren't going to have everything—"

"Thank you. Which galley is Degyat's flagship?"

When Blade learned this, he sent out a messenger under a white flag, to ask the admiral to receive him in two hours. Then he gave a few sharp orders to the rebel army about acting like liberators, not conquerors. After that he bathed, shaved, and put on clean clothes for the first time in nearly two weeks, and had himself rowed out to Degyat's flagship.

Degyat flew his flag in one of the big two-banked galleys, anchored in the middle of the First Fleet. Blade counted thirty-two other galleys. The young admiral met him by the aftercastle, and invited him below.

When they were alone, Degyat said bluntly, "I'm not planning on holding you prisoner. But I'd like to ask you why I shouldn't?"

Blade didn't smile. "Because if I don't come back, my men will kill all your sailors we caught on shore."

"That's what I thought. Well, I'm sure you know that you're in a strong position for now. I'm also sure you've learned that you won't be in it for long. The Second Fleet is coming south, with nearly a hundred ships under Kloreit."

"I see. Did he get word of the rebellion or—?"

Blade stopped as he saw Degyat's face harden. The man was obviously determined not to give Blade any unnecessary information. Blade didn't entirely blame him, either. Degyat might be an enemy of Kloreit, but he was also a loyal servant of Gohar's Emperor, facing a leader of rebels against the Empire. They were both in a position where they could not be friends even if they weren't willing to be open enemies. Unfortunately Blade had a war to run and an army to lead. He couldn't afford to put up with even delaying tactics.

"Degyat," he said quietly. "I can not only have your men killed. I can block the entrance to the harbor and then starve out or sink all your ships. I don't have to do this. I don't really want to do it. But I will, if you don't answer my questions. I'll have to assume the worst, and do whatever I can to protect my own men and keep Mythor free."

A long silence. Blade realized that Degyat no longer looked like a young man. The last few months couldn't have been an easy time for him, with Thrayket's death bringing things to a boil. And then the long-feared Mythoran rebellion on top of it!

The silence went on, until Degyat broke it with a sigh and a bitter laugh. "All right, Blade. Kloret didn't expect the rebellion to come this soon, or to be this successful. He's not after you. He's coming south to meet the Bloodskins."

"The Sarumi? Since when has Gohar needed a hundred and thirty ships against them?"

"Since Kloret decided to sail against their homeland and root them out for all time."

So Kloret was planning on a major campaign against the Pirate Folk. If he won, the first great victory of Harkrat's reign would be his. Everyone would remember that, particularly the merchants whose ships would now be safe. Grateful merchants could give him all the money needed to buy soldiers. If Kloret succeeded in destroying the Sarumi, Harkrat would probably be his next victim.

Blade smiled grimly. "And he's been expecting to use Mythor as a base?"

"Of course."

"Then the rebellion is going to be a nasty surprise for him." Degyat also smiled. As loyal as he was to Harkrat, the idea of Kloret's rage at learning of such a blow appealed to him.

For a moment Blade considered the idea of negotiating with Kloret the use of Mythor as a base for his fleet, in return for his recognition of its freedom. Then he decided against it. Kloret might not be trustworthy even while the campaign against the Sarumi was underway. He certainly wouldn't be trustworthy afterward, when he was the ruler of Gohar in all but name. He would turn around and try to bring Mythor under Gohar's rule again. Blade wouldn't suffer—he'd be back in Home Dimension by then—but his friends would be in deadly danger.

Blade also remembered Fierssa and the Friends of Mythor. He wanted Kloret's blood for their deaths!

"Degyat," said Blade. "I'm not going to ask you to betray the Emperor. Believe me or not, I still call myself Harkrat's friend, and I hope to have a chance to tell him this myself. I will ask you not to make things more difficult for Mythor. In return—"

"How?"

"Don't try to sail out of the harbor, stir up trouble in the City, or send messages to anyone outside."

"That's all?"

"For now. In return, we'll treat the men we hold well, supply you with food and water if you need any, and care for your sick."

"And when Kloret comes?"

"When Kloret comes, we'll accept any of your men who want to stay and join free Mythor. The rest can go where they will."

Degyat clenched his fists and said, looking down at the table before him, "Many will stay. The men of Mythor have always been eager to serve in the fleet, and some Goharans have women here."

"I thought so," said Blade. "Degyat, I'll say this, whether you believe me or not. No one in Mythor wants a long war with Gohar, now that we're free. We'd rather make a treaty between equals, and share the trade of the Sea and Ocean between us."

Degyat was silent for so long that Blade thought the meeting was over. Then the admiral said, his voice not quite steady: "What about the Sarumi?"

"What about them?"

"I might as well tell you. We captured one of their ships on the way south and persuaded the crew to talk. They are gathering all their ships and men to sail against Mythor and its coast. They think the storms have thrown everything into confusion, so they'll have easy pickings."

"They won't," said Blade. His decisive tone made Degyat start. "I have a suggestion. If the Sarumi fleet arrives before Kloret's, let's sail against it together." The admiral looked at Blade as if he'd suddenly grown a second head. "I mean it. The Sarumi are the common enemy of Mythor and Gohar alike. If your ships and mine join to defeat the Sarumi, it will show them they can't gain anything from this rebellion. It will also show certain people that Mythor's rebellion is no danger to Gohar. The two cities can be friends even now."

Degyat shook his head like a man half-stunned. "Blade, I . . ."

"You don't need to decide now," Blade said, rising. "We'll gather all the Mythoran ships and fighting men we can anyway. If the Sarumi come, and you decide to sail with us, we'll return your men. We'll even send some of our archers aboard your ships." He held out his hand and Degyat took it mechanically. "Think it over. This rebellion may not be an end, but a beginning."

As he was rowed back to shore, Blade found himself desperately hoping Degyat would decide to join Mythor against the pirates. It would reduce the danger of a long war between the two cities, and that in turn would strike a heavy blow at Kloret. In fact, it would do more to upset the Prime Minister's plans than anything else except killing him outright.

Blade also hoped that Khraishamo could forgive him, for planning what could only end in the final defeat of the Sarumi.

During the next ten days, Blade heard nothing from Degyat and had no chance to sit down with Khraishamo and talk about the future. He was too busy keeping the peace between the two factions of the rebels, the farmers and the city merchants.

One city merchant spoke for many of his fellows when he told Blade: "We don't mind the farmers raising the rebellion when they pleased and winning the big battle. We're grateful. But we're not going to get down on our knees and kiss their asses, and they seem to want us to!"

The farmers were equally blunt in saying that the merchants had been weak, some of them perhaps even in Goharan pay. Several times this exchange of insults led to brawls, and once to a fatal stabbing.

Fortunately everyone on both sides seemed to accept Blade as a reasonably impartial mediator. Very few cared whether he was a Man from the Future, but everyone knew that he had courage and common sense. Also, the Maghri kept their promise not to loot and usually stayed outside the city.

"We do not love to live with stone all around," said Sigluf. "We stay close to the grass if we can. It makes us stronger in a fight."

"Also in bed?" said Blade, and Sigluf laughed. The Maghri chief was now regarded as something of a conquering hero, and had his pick of the women of Mythor. He very seldom slept alone.

Blade went on. "Will you be willing to come aboard the ships and fight the pirates if they come? Your archers will be a great help."

Sigluf nodded. "Yes. For our friends, we come. But the Great Water must be quiet."

Blade could see the chief's point. If the Sea was rough, the Maghri would probably be too seasick to know one end of an arrow from the other.

The biggest help in uniting the two factions of the rebels was the menace of the Sarumi. Blade had the feeling that not everyone believed the pirates were actually going to come. On the other hand, nobody was willing to risk being unprepared if they did. Many hoped to negotiate with Gohar, but no one believed it would be possible to negotiate with the Sarumi.

"They're right," said Khraishamo, when he heard two merchants talking it over. "This is too good a chance for the Sarumi to miss, and it's one that won't come again." He shrugged. "We'll just have to take them as they come."

"They, Khraishamo?"

The pirate smiled and gripped both of Blade's hands. "Ah. You've asked yourself, 'Does Khraishamo want to fight his own people.' "

"Yes."

"I have sailed away from the Sarumi, Blade. The winds will not blow me back there again, even if I wanted them to.

"That temper you've seen—it led me into a quarrel with certain powerful warriors. I went out with my three ships to win a victory and make myself a chief that others would support in that quarrel. Instead I lost the three ships and most of the warriors aboard them.

"So I have no home in Sarumland. Once I was not sure I wanted to seek one elsewhere. Now I have found it, among Rhodina and her people. So why shouldn't I defend my new home?"

The next night Khraishamo invited Blade to dine at his house in Mythor. Most of the rebel leaders took over the homes of Goharan officers who hadn't returned from the great battle, and Khraishamo was no exception. He'd even hired a cook and a maid.

Food was scarce in Mythor, but Khraishamo still did his best to keep up a Goharan standard of hospitality. It was a memorable meal, and Blade couldn't help noticing how relaxed and comfortable Khraishamo and Rhodina looked. They might have been happily married for years.

By the time dinner was over, it was raining heavily. Blade accepted Khraishamo's invitation to stay the night, and made his way upstairs to an attic bedroom. He'd just finished pulling off his clothes when there

was a knock on the door.

"Blade? Can I come in?" It was Rhodina's voice.

"Certainly."

Rhodina pushed the door open and came in as Blade hastily snatched up his sleeping robe and pulled it around him. Rhodina was wearing a robe too, a short one which barely came down to her knees and left shoulders and arms bare. She laughed when she saw Blade covering himself. "No, no, Blade. Less, not more." Blade frowned. She saw the frown, caught his meaning, and nodded. "Khraishamo knows I'm here. In fact, he told me to come."

"Told you?"

"Blade, you're not going funny in the head, are you? Khraishamo told me to come and say good-bye to you. We're going to get married."

"Somehow I'm not surprised. I was just thinking that you two looked like an old married couple."

"There won't be any children. I was sick two years ago, and I can't have any. But there ought to be plenty of orphans after this war's over. We can do right by them."

She kicked the door shut, then pulled the bolt and stepped toward the bed. As she did, she unknotted the belt of her robe, then shrugged it off her shoulders. It slipped to the floor, and the moonlight played all up and down her bare body as she turned slowly in the glow from the window over the bed.

Blade found the words coming slowly as desire rose to choke him. "Rhodina, you and Khraishamo—"

Rhodina lay down on the bed beside him and put an arm around his waist. "Blade, you're about the best man I've ever met, next to Khraishamo. But you've got a trouble like all the rest. You talk too much." Then she twined the fingers of the other hand in his hair and pulled his head down between her breasts.

Blade hadn't been planning on saying much—just that Khraishamo and Rhodina living together in Mythor might help make peace on the Sea. Everyone could see that the Sarumi weren't dangerous animals. But as Rhodina's arms went around him and her warmth and her perfume swallowed him, Blade realized that she was right.

This was no time to say anything at all.

They would have slept until noon if two urgent messages hadn't arrived for Blade.

One was from the captain of a ship just arrived in Mythor. He'd sighted a whole fleet of Bloodskin ships two days north of the city, nearly been taken, but escaped in a rain squall. He thought the Bloodskins were bound south.

The other message was from Degyat, a short letter.

Blade,

I have heard that the Pirate Folk are coming. I agree that our ships and men should fight side by side against them. I will meet you where and when you wish, to talk more of this.

Chapter 24

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The sea was flat and oily, and ships were everywhere. From the masthead of the galley *Lioness*, Blade could count nearly three hundred ships in sight. The *Sarumi* had at least a hundred and twenty, seventy were from Mythor, and ninety were in the Goharan Second Fleet under Kloret.

The Goharans hadn't been there until a few hours ago. Then they'd come up over the horizon, running fast and free, Kloret's banner flying from the two-decked galley in the lead. Mythor's strange fleet—of merchant ships and Degyat's galleys—was already on its way out to meet the *Sarumi*, so Kloret slipped in between them and the city. There'd been a bad moment, as the Mythorans watched for signs that Kloret was landing troops to attack the city. The city was well-garrisoned compared to what it had been, but its walls were still too weak to stand against a determined attack from the land side.

Instead, Kloret's ships paraded back and forth across the mouth of the harbor, as if Kloret was waiting for something. Then the wind died, which turned out to be a blessing. It gave all three fleets an excuse to do nothing until their admirals figured out exactly what was going on.

The Mythorans were still the worst off. They couldn't move against the *Sarumi*, since half their strength was sailing ships. These were crammed with Maghri archers, but couldn't move until they got a wind. Also, they couldn't be sure that Kloret wouldn't attack them once they were engaged with the pirates. To be sure, the other half of their strength was Degyat's galleys, and the Prime Minister probably wouldn't attack the First Fleet simply for joining with Mythor's rebels in a battle against the common enemy. On the other hand, Degyat was one of the Emperor's most trusted men, and any plausible excuse to destroy him might be enough for Kloret.

In other circumstances, the uncertainty might have been amusing. Nobody in the Mythoran or Goharan fleets really knew what the other might do. The *Sarumi* at least could be sure that the other two fleets were their enemies, but they couldn't be sure the two would act together.

Mythor's fleet lay in three lines, the sailing ships in the middle and the galleys on either side. Five miles toward shore lay Kloret's fleet, and five miles farther out to sea lay the *Sarumi*. Aboard *Lioness*, Blade and Khraishamo were making a brief inspection tour, since there didn't seem to be anything better to do.

Lioness moved slowly down the line of sailing ships. *Peacock*, Sigluf's ship, was coming up. Her deck was nearly empty, except for the normal number of guards and sailors. Good. The *Sarumi* couldn't board without getting close, and if they got close they were in for a nasty surprise from the archers.

Blade didn't see Sigluf among the men on *Peacock*'s deck. He picked up the leather speaking trumpet and shouted down, "Where's the chief?"

"Asleep," came up faintly from below. Blade laughed. Sigluf had spent last night saying farewell to all his Mythoran lady friends. He'd finished his work first, though—getting three thousand Maghri with bows and war clubs aboard the ships of the Mythoran fleet. Sigluf had a right to sleep late.

Blade turned, to scan the horizon in a complete circle, then stopped with his eyes toward the land. A new squadron of galleys was coming up to join Klore's fleet. In the lead was an even bigger galley than the Prime Minister's. At this distance even Blade's eyes couldn't make out the banner, and he wasn't certain of the galley's color. It certainly looked like Harkrat's King Bull, though.

He hadn't heard that the Emperor was joining his fleet before Mythor, but if he was, the fighting might take some interesting directions. Blade swung himself over the railing of the top and into the rigging, calling for Khraishamo as he scrambled down to the deck.

The pirate met Blade as his feet struck the deck. "Have our battleflags hoisted, and pass the word to the rowers to keep their weapons handy. I suspect we'll be doing more fighting than rowing in this battle."

"It's starting?"

"I'll be surprised if it doesn't in another hour. The Emperor may be joining Klore's fleet."

"The Emp—"

Blade put a finger to his lips. "Yes. At least I think I recognize King Bull. Harkrat's arrival may get Klore moving. If it does, the Sarumi will have to attack before the two fleets can join against them."

Khraishamo nodded. "We'll be moving up to the head of the line?"

"There will be plenty of fighting all along the line. No one will question our courage if we stay here. I want to be where I can watch Klore's movements. The man himself, not just his fleet."

Khraishamo showed all his teeth in a grin. "I won't ask what your plan is, Blade. But if you need me at your back—"

A shout came from the masthead. "Hulloooo, the deck! The Bloodskins are getting underway toward us!"

Blade's eyes met Khraishamo's, and he smiled. "Thanks. I may need you very badly."

The lookouts all along the lines had seen the same thing. Blade heard their shouts and saw men running on the decks while battleflags appeared at the mastheads. They still hung limply in the still air.

From far away, a faint murmur reached Blade's ears—the drums and flutes of the Sarumi as their ships got underway.

For the moment, Blade's biggest and nearly only job was to keep track of what everybody was doing. Khraishamo could give any urgent orders aboard Lioness and the other ships would be fighting their own battles. So he scrambled aloft again, and reached the masthead just as the Sarumi's tactics became clear. Their fleet was dividing itself into two lines, to pass down both sides of the Mythoran fleet.

Blade watched the maneuver with the eye of an experienced sea fighter and realized that the sheer numbers of the Sarumi were going to handicap them. They were good sailors and shiphandlers, but until today they'd never needed a system of fleet tactics. They could handle three or four ships as a unit, but not two columns of sixty or more.

This meant the Sarumi couldn't possibly beat the Mythorans, at least before the Goharan fleet came into action. After that the Sarumi could either die or run. Blade didn't much care, as long as they didn't beat the Mythorans. If a large part of the rebels' fighting strength was destroyed today, Kloret might find the temptation to finish them off too much to resist.

The battle took shape slowly. This was inevitable, when the same men were going to have to row their ships into action and then fight all day. That was another advantage the Mythorans had—they could wait for the enemy to come to them. Apart from Lioness only half a dozen galleys had their oars out, and even these were only using them to hold position.

Minutes crawled past, giving the impression of being hours. Blade kept looking at the sun, always surprised that it wasn't past noon or even getting toward twilight. Damn it, he told himself. You've been in too many battles to start getting nervous over this one. You don't even have much responsibility when the fighting starts.

Strictly speaking, this was true. It would be a battle of every ship for herself, and Blade was sure the Mythorans, Goharans, and Maghri all knew their jobs. But driving off the Sarumi was only part of today's work. In fact, it was the less important part. All the Sarumi together were less of a menace to this Dimension than one man, Prime Minister Kloret.

More minutes. The Sarumi seemed to want to get into a position to attack the whole Mythoran fleet at once. That was fine with Blade. The longer the Mythoran fleet's horde of Maghri archers could stay hidden, the better.

The morning haze was burning off as the sun rose higher. Now the sunlight blazed from the sea until Blade had to shade his eyes in order to see anything at all. Over Mythor faint curls of smoke rose from forges and watchfires along the walls. Even if Mythor could defend itself on land, Blade hoped it wouldn't have to. Such a battle would be even bloodier than one at sea, leave deeper scars, and make peace between the two great cities of the Sea far more difficult. He hadn't joined the Mythorans to start a perpetual war in this Dimension.

Blade blinked. Was it just a trick his half-dazzled eyes were playing on him, or were the Goharan ships moving? He blinked again, looked away, and then looked more carefully, searching for Kloret's ship.

The Goharans were moving. He could see the foam their oars were leaving behind, and their battleflags fluttering at mastheads. They were moving almost as raggedly as the Sarumi, with little clusters of ships following their own paths. Kloret's ship was well out ahead of one cluster, bearing off to port. The big ship Blade thought might be King Bull wasn't moving yet.

The Sarumi came on, the Goharans came on, the Mythorans stayed where they were and waited. Blade's grip on the railing tightened until he felt splinters of wood forcing their way into his skin. Suddenly the flutes and drums of the Sarumi started to die away. Then one pirate ship after another put her helm over and bore down on the Mythorans. It was a remarkably well-done maneuver, considering how badly the Sarumi had done up until now.

Then suddenly one of Degyat's galleys was on the move, wheeling to present her ram to a pirate ship. She couldn't work up much speed, so her ram blow missed the enemy's hull. But as she slid along the enemy's side, the ram ploughed through the pirate's oars. Blade could imagine the screams and cracking wood. Then the galley's deck turned dark, as the archers swarmed up from below—mostly Maghri, but with Mythorans and Goharan sailors mixed in with them. Blade saw a faint haze flickering over the deck

of the pirate ship as the arrows came down. Then the pirate ship was blundering on, the movements on her deck now strangely confused and erratic. Even from where he was, Blade could see the pirate's deck slowly turning red under the dead and the dying. Against this many archers striking all at once, the Sarumi tactics of lying down on the deck wouldn't be much help.

If Blade had used a radio, he couldn't have done more to get all the captains in the Mythoran fleet to act together. Every Mythoran ship in sight of the first fight started spewing out archers. As fast as their neighbors saw what was happening, their archers came up too. In five minutes every Mythoran ship was blazing away as fast as her archers could shoot, and most of Degyat's galleys were underway.

The trap was sprung, but a little too soon. If the Sarumi admirals could order their ships clear in time, they still might get most of them away. The Goharans were coming on steadily, but not fast.

Degyat's flagship rammed a Sarumi, then found herself grappled by two more. Boarders swarmed over the decks of all four ships, even the one sinking under their feet. It was hard to tell what Degyat's archers might have done before the close action started, and now Degyat's men were badly outnumbered. Then the galley backed free, Degyat's banner still flying, leaving smoke pouring up from one of her attackers. Blade saw tiny figures leaping overboard from the galley, and hoped they were Sarumi and not Degyat's sailors.

Blade saw other rammings, farther off. He also saw Sarumi ships drifting helplessly, so many men dead or wounded that the survivors couldn't handle the ship. Sometimes Sarumi ships would come alongside their crippled comrades and pass towlines. Other times they would be ignored until one of Degyat's galleys came up and rammed or boarded.

After a while it was impossible to pick individual combats out of the vast sprawling chaos of fighting men and ships. Blade couldn't tell who was winning. The Sarumi had the edge in number of ships, and they were certainly driving in their attack hard, but they didn't have the edge in number of men and they didn't have archers.

So far there were no enemies within easy striking distance of Lioness. Blade looked to see the Goharans beginning to spread wide, to surround the other two fleets. Kloret's galley was still in the lead, and the other big galley was looking more like King Bull every minute.

Then Blade heard Khraishamo calling from the deck: "Blade! Come down! We're getting underway, and the masts may go when we ram."

Blade realized that he'd forgotten this and swung himself into the rigging. As he climbed down he saw both battleflags in place, Khraishamo's white claw on black and his own golden sword on blue. If Kloret wanted to find him, the Prime Minister knew where to look. He'd done his best to set himself up as bait. Now it was time to pull his weight in this battle.

As Blade's feet touched the deck, the galley's oars started moving and her archers began climbing up from below. They'd have targets before long. Blade pulled off his helmet, mopped his forehead, put the helmet back on, and tightened the chin strap. Then he went forward to join Khraishamo on the foc'sle.

The galley's captain chose as his target two Sarumi ships swinging wide around the end of the Mythoran fleet. They were leading five more, and Blade saw Khraishamo looking astern of Lioness.

"Want to see if anyone's following us?"

The pirate laughed. "You might say that. Fighting seven-to-one's fine for the reputation, but it makes too many widows."

That reminded Blade that Khraishamo and Rhodina hadn't been able to hold their wedding. Rhodina wouldn't even be a proper widow. Blade hoped that for her sake either he or Khraishamo would return from this day's fighting.

The oars rattled and splashed, and the archers shuffled back and forth across the deck, checking their bows, greasing their bowstrings against the salt air, and muttering to comrades. Some pulled biscuits and salt fish out of their belt pouches and ate a few bites, but most weren't hungry. Blade did a quick inspection of the weapons of the men who would fight at close quarters, boarding or fighting off boarders.

"Damned archers, getting all the glory and none of the danger," said one man with a mace.

Blade slapped him on the shoulder. "Say that after this day's over, if you still think it's true."

Lioness heeled slightly as the helm went over to put her on course for the first of the Sarumi. The enemy's oars churned up foam, pulling it out of Lioness's path. The galley's captain swung the ram toward the second enemy ship.

This one seemed willing to make a stand. Her oars trailed, and her men poured up from below. As fast as they reached the deck, they lay down, pulling shields and rolled-up sails over them. The Sarumi ship drifted to a stop, squarely in Lioness's path.

Blade realized what the enemy captain was trying to do. He was deliberately inviting a ramming, to immobilize Lioness and let his own comrades swarm around her and board her. Blade leaped down from the foc'sle and ran aft toward where the galley captain was standing by the men at the tiller. He had to be warned about the trap.

Then the drummers started pounding out the furious ramming stroke, the archers crowded forward, and the rowers hurled themselves against the oars. Blade turned back. It was too late. Carried away by blood lust for an easy prey, the captain was going to plunge into the trap.

Lioness's archers ran to either side and a few of the more ambitious ones nocked arrows and shot. Blade saw two men fall overboard from a Sarumi ship. On the one ahead, Blade saw the men pulling back from the side toward the galley, gripping swords, spears, and two-handed axes.

Blade scrambled up on to the foc'sle. Behind him came a dozen archers, and behind them Khraishamo, waving an ax and cursing the whole world impartially. The archers drew away from him, apparently uncertain which side the Bloodskin friend of Blade would really be on. Blade was about to say a few words to them about this when he saw the Sarumi ship looming closer. Some of the pirates on her deck were making obscene gestures at Lioness.

"Hang on!" Blade shouted.

Before he could follow his own order, Lioness ploughed into the Sarumi ship at full ramming speed. Everyone who wasn't hanging on to something went sprawling, then the lightly built foc'sle collapsed. Blade and Khraishamo and all the archers fell to the deck in a cloud of dust and a confusion of splintering wood. Some of the archers were hurt, and their screams would have been deafening if the crashing and crunching of Lioness's ram hadn't drowned out every other sound. The deck under Blade heaved and tossed as if the galley was caught in a whirlpool.

The unwounded Sarumi aboard the rammed ship were on their feet at once. Then grapnels darted across to hook Lioness's railings, and the Sarumi themselves followed. Blade, Khraishamo, and the archers found enemies swarming over them. For a moment they were actually in danger of being trampled to death. Then the Sarumi found room to use their weapons. More than half the archers died where they lay, and those who got up didn't last much longer unless they had a close-combat weapon.

Blade and Khraishamo were a different matter. The pirate chief was the first up, and even when he rose he wasn't attacked. Apparently the other Sarumi didn't know quite what to make of seeing one of their own people aboard a human ship. Then Khraishamo punched one of the boarders in the stomach, heaved a second overboard, and went to work with his ax. In five strokes he killed four enemies and cleared a circle around himself and around Blade.

Blade used this chance to spring to his feet, stabbing upward into the stomach of a boarder as he did. A Sarumi came at him and got in too close for Blade to use his sword, so he used the knife again, this time in the throat. Then Blade made his own fighting room, stood back-to-back with Khraishamo, and also went to work.

In five minutes the wreckage of the foc'sle was covered with dead and dying Sarumi. Blade and Khraishamo had enough room to fight, but the boarders had no room to get past them. Other Sarumi took to the water, swimming alongside Lioness and trying to board her amidships. The archers picked off some in the water and the rowers from below knocked more on the head as they climbed up.

Enough Sarumi made it aboard to interfere with the archers. The hail of arrows from Lioness slackened and two other Sarumi ships started creeping in toward her, ignoring the dead and wounded on their decks. Meanwhile, Lioness's ram was still wedged deeply in the side of the first enemy ship. Blade felt the deck under him begin to tilt toward the bow as water poured into the rammed ship, and saw that she was already lower in the water. If Lioness didn't back clear, she might go down with her victim, but all her rowers were now up on deck fighting for their lives. Blade started to look around for an ax, an iron bar, anything for chopping or prying the two ships apart before they sank in their deadly embrace.

As he searched, he looked to starboard for the first time since the ramming. The Goharan fleet hadn't closed the distance as much as Blade would have expected—except for one ship.

Kloret's big galley was bearing down on Lioness and her victim, oars flashing at nearly ramming speed and her ram completely buried in a rainbow of foam. It was hard to tell if Kloret planned on actually ramming Lioness, but he certainly had a perfect excuse to close in. From a distance, it must look as if Lioness was already in Sarumi hands. He could ram or send a boarding party, and in the confusion it would be easy for Blade to be "accidentally" killed.

However, two men could think of that idea. Blade would be at a disadvantage, because at first he'd have only himself and Khraishamo. Kloret would have his whole galley's crew. On the other hand, two fast-moving men with speed and surprise on their side could do the job.

Nobody was coming across from the rammed Sarumi ship now. The few men left on her deck were

trying to get the wounded in shape to swim before the ship went down. Khraishamo was also dealing with the wounded Sarumi around him, muttering a few words over each one, then bringing his ax down. The expression on his face made Blade reluctant to speak to him. And what would Rhodina say if he dragged Khraishamo into this adventure and the man didn't come back? Nonetheless, he needed Khraishamo's help. He couldn't trust anyone else.

At a hand on his shoulder the pirate spun around, eyes blazing, ax coming up by sheer reflex and stopping just before it came down on Blade's head.

"Khraishamo. Our next enemy isn't Sarumi." He pointed to the approaching galley and the flag at its masthead.

"Ah."

"Coming right into our hands, too." He spoke quickly, summarizing his plan in a few sentences. Khraishamo nodded, then started strapping his ax to his belt.

"No. Sword and knife only. The ax will weigh you down too much." They were going to have to swim like fish, then possibly climb like monkeys.

"All right."

Blade looked to starboard again. Kloret's galley was heading straight for Lioness. Now she could hardly avoid ramming if she wanted to. It was time for him and Khraishamo to get over the side, before anyone aboard the approaching ship recognized them.

Lioness's bow was now down so far her deck was only five feet above the water. Khraishamo swung himself over the railing and lowered himself into the water. Blade followed. Then both of them took several deep breaths and plunged under, heading toward the rammed Sarumi ship.

They dove completely under the sinking ship. Looking up, Blade could see barnacles and waving weeds on her keel, timbers cracked and planks bulged from the ramming, and the dim shape of Lioness with her ram embedded in the enemy's side. Looking downward, Blade saw only a greenish darkness. The sea here was no more than sixty or seventy feet deep, but the water was murky with silt churned up from the bottom by the recent bad weather. Blade saw a number of large fish moving slowly in the dimness, and hoped none of them were sharks attracted by the noise of the battle and the scent of blood.

They popped to the surface on the far side of the ship, nearly amidships. Both Blade and Khraishamo kept their heads low as they breathed. They didn't want to be spotted by the people on the ships, who were now shooting arrows and throwing spears indiscriminately at the swimmers.

Another dive, and they swam aft along the side of the rammed Sarumi. Air was beginning to bubble out of her through ruptured seams as she sank lower and lower. They came up under the overhanging stern of the ship. For the first time in several minutes they could see Kloret's galley. She was still driving in at nearly full speed, her decks packed with archers and soldiers. Blade could make out Kloret himself in gilded armor, standing by the break of the foc'sle.

Now it was impossible to doubt that Kloret was headed for Lioness, and hard to doubt that he was planning to ram. Both Mythorans and Sarumi stopped fighting, to stare at the massive green hull driving down upon them. Then the archers on Kloret's foc'sle let fly, some of the starers fell, and the rest scrambled wildly for the railing.

Kloret's rowers trailed their oars, and a moment later his galley rammed Lioness. The smaller galley was thrown nearly on her beam ends, and the foremast went over the side to crush swimmers in the water. Her ram twisted free of the planks of the Sarumi ship, and air poured out in great bursts of foam as water poured in. As the Sarumi ship's bow disappeared below the surface, Blade and Khraishamo took their bearings on Kloret's galley, gulped air, and dove.

Kloret's flagship was so large Blade saw its shadow in the water the moment he went under. It was easy to keep a straight course toward it, then surface alongside. Khraishamo surfaced beside Blade, his knife already drawn. He gripped a trailing oar with one hand, pulled himself up until he could reach the leather seal of the oarport, and slashed away with the knife.

In three cuts, the leather was gone. Blade put both hands on the port sill and hauled himself up until he could look in. As he'd expected, three grim faces stared back at him. Two were Sarumi, one was human, and all three were pinched with starvation and exhaustion. All three men were chained to the bench under him, and both of the Sarumi had fresh lash marks across back and shoulders.

For two men to attack Kloret's galley would have been madness even in the middle of a confused and desperate battle, except for one thing. Most of Gohar's galleys were rowed by free men who could double as fighters. The work of rowing the big two-deckers was too brutal to let a rower also remain in shape. So the big flagships carried their fighting men on deck, and were rowed by two or three hundred chained Goharan and Sarumi slaves. Blade intended to unchain the ones aboard Kloret's ship.

He shifted his grip, then heaved himself completely out of the water. One of the Sarumi stopped staring and gave Blade a hand. Blade practically flew through the port and sprawled across the knees of the three slaves.

"Huh, what gives here?" came a shout almost in Blade's ear. It was an overseer who'd run aft between the benches. Blade coughed and choked, pretending to be half-drowned, until he saw that the man was within striking distance. He also saw that the overseer carried a bunch of keys at his waist.

Blade rolled off the knees of the galley slaves, fell to the deck, gripped both the overseer's ankles, and jerked his feet out from under him. He fell with a crash and a surprised yell, then let out another kind of yell as Blade chopped him across the throat. With one hand Blade drew his sword, with the other he picked up the keys and handed them to the nearest slave.

"Get yourself loose."

An arrow whistled past Blade and struck a slave on another bench. He screamed and fell to the deck, nearly rolling under Khraishamo's feet as the pirate climbed in through the hatch. He spotted the archer standing amidships and nocking another arrow, snatched up a wooden bucket, and threw it as hard as he could. It didn't hit the archer but it spoiled his aim. Before he could shoot again, Blade and Khraishamo were on him. The archer went down and didn't get up again. If he wasn't dead from Blade's sword, he certainly died as the first of the freed galley slaves swarmed over him.

Blade and Khraishamo charged ahead of the slaves, their swords and knives slashing a path through the guards. They didn't bother killing, just knocked the guards down or disabled them and left them for the galley slaves.

The lower deck of Kloret's flagship quickly turned into an inferno of blood, weapons, and screaming or dying men. Bench after bench of slaves set themselves free. As word of what was happening reached the soldiers above, they swarmed down the main ladder. Blade and Khraishamo stationed themselves just out of bowshot, one on each side of the ladder, and tackled the soldiers as they came down.

Blade put his sword into a soldier's throat, then jerked the weapon free to parry a club swung by a second man. The soldier with the slashed throat reeled off, into the arms of the galley slaves. The man with the club was good. He and Blade stood toe-to-toe for nearly a minute before Khraishamo ran the soldier through from behind. Khraishamo left his position to do this, though, and two soldiers got off the ladder on to the deck. One of them stepped on a dying slave, who bit him in the ankle. The soldier screamed and fell against his comrade, knocking the man against the stairs and making him drop his sword. Another slave snatched up the fallen weapon and attacked both soldiers.

At last the flow of soldiers down the ladder slowed, and Blade noticed that among the slaves Sarumi and humans were fighting side by side. He saw a blond-bearded man trip a soldier so that a pirate could stamp him into the deck. He saw two Sarumi pull a soldier off a human's back with their bare hands, both taking wounds in the process.

If you'd been a slave aboard this ship, it didn't matter whether you were human or Sarumi. You were a friend.

Then the soldiers stopped coming down the ladder. Khraishamo was only a moment behind Blade as they both scrambled up the ladder to the ship's middle deck. As they came up through the hatch, they dropped to the deck and rolled one to either side: Several arrows smacked the deck where they'd been. Then they were up and charging the archers.

The middle deck of the galley was clear except for two hatches and the three masts, and completely covered over. It provided a sheltered place for the soldiers and sailors to sleep, cook, and wait for battle. Most of the soldiers and sailors were either on the upper deck fighting or down below getting killed by the galley slaves. Blade and Khraishamo went to work on the few left, closing in to avoid being targets for the archers.

An archer was trying to block Blade's sword with his bow when Khraishamo shouted.

"Blade! It's him!"

Blade whirled. There was only one man aboard this ship Khraishamo would call "him."

Kloret was hurrying down the ladder from the upper deck, wearing gold-scaled armor and with silver-armored guards on either side of him. As his foot touched the deck, Blade snatched a fallen spear from the deck, fended off the clumsy lunge of a soldier, aimed for the Prime Minister's groin, and threw.

One of the guards leaped forward, throwing himself in front of his master. He took the spear in the thigh, howled in pain, and reeled. As he reeled, he crashed heavily against the Prime Minister. Kloret was in the act of drawing his sword, and had only one hand free to fight for balance. It wasn't enough. He stumbled on the raised edge of the after hatch, let out a scream of sheer terror, then vanished down the hatch with a clatter and a crash.

There was a moment's silence, while everyone on the main deck stood paralyzed. Then an animal howl from fifty throats rose from the hatch, followed by a single man's gurgling scream. Blade started looking for the nearest ladder to the upper deck. He didn't need to worry about Kloret anymore. When a man

falls into a pool of hungry sharks, you don't need to watch each bite they take out of him to know he's dead.

Blade didn't bother with looking around once he reached the upper deck. He dashed for the railing, Khraishamo beside him. In fact, the pirate reached the railing first, in spite of his short legs. He plunged through a splintered gap, and Blade heard a clean splash from below.

As Blade reached the gap he had a vague impression of a second large ship looming up at the edge of his vision. Then he was springing out into midair, and at the same moment he felt a sharp blow in the left buttock. Then he felt the stinging impact with the water, and was thrashing downward and outward to get away from Klore's ship.

For a long time the world was only green water and dim shadows. Some of them looked unpleasantly like sharks, but none of them came close enough to let Blade be sure. Then he popped to the surface, sucked air into bursting lungs, and saw Khraishamo rise like a dolphin beside him. Directly in front of them loomed a huge blue galley, with Harkrat's banners flying from all her masts.

Blade and Khraishamo swam toward King Bull, trying to look harmless. The galley was lying on her oars. Blade reached the ends of the oars, ignored a dull ache in his left buttock, trod water, and shouted: "Ahoy, Your Radiance! It's Blade of England and Khraishamo, a friend."

Somebody on deck let out a strangled squawk, like a chicken with its neck being wrung. Then a rope ladder snaked down the galley's side.

"I guess they believe you," said Khraishamo.

"Maybe," said Blade. "At least it's too big a lie for two ordinary slaves to think of!"

They climbed up the ladder, and on deck Harkrat met them. He was wearing full armor, and looked ten years older than when Blade last saw him. He'd also lost a good deal of weight, but that was an improvement.

The Emperor looked Blade up and down, while on either hand his guards and councilors fidgeted and muttered about his spending time on these madmen. Then: "By HemiGohar, it is Blade!" He looked at Khraishamo. "And this is the Bloodskin—"

"Sarumi," said Blade.

"You haven't changed," said Harkrat. "All right, this is Khraishamo. Welcome aboard, and—oh, excuse me." He reached around behind Blade and tugged. Blade felt the dull ache in his left buttock turn into a sharp pain, and then Harkrat was holding up a bloody arrow.

"This was sticking out of your arse when you climbed on board. Hope you've got a good story how it hit you there." He looked from Blade to Khraishamo and back to Blade. "And maybe a few other good stories too. Go on below to my cabin. This time we've got something better than Blue Swallow's ale."

Chapter 26

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Harkrat sent a doctor to treat Blade's wound, but didn't come below himself for several hours. Khraishamo wanted to spend the time on deck, but found that even with the Emperor's blessing he drew too many peculiar looks. So he came below again.

They were into the second jug of wine when the Emperor rejoined them. He chased out all the servants, poured himself a cup, and gave them a brief summary of the rest of the battle. It was definitely a victory for the odd alliance of Goharans and Mythoran rebels, but not a complete and final disaster for the Sarumi. Sixty of their ships were able to break off the action and flee. The Mythoran sailing ships couldn't pursue, Deyat's galleys had lost too many men, and the Goharan admirals were slow to grasp what was happening. Harkrat hadn't cared for that, and he'd gone aboard a few of the other flagships to tell them so.

"It didn't help much, though," he said, emptying his cup and pouring it full again. "By the time I got those bastards awake, the weather started going bad on us. Looks like there's another storm brewing, so we're heading back for Mythor. Bit of a wind blowing, though, so we can rest the rowers."

Blade and Khraishamo looked at each other. The escape of about half the Sarumi was good news for both of them. Khraishamo could be happy that hundreds of warriors who'd once been his comrades would live to fight another day.

Blade was happy for a different reason. If the Sarumi remained a menace for a generation or so, they would force Gohar and Mythor to keep peace with each other. The two great trading cities of the Sea wouldn't care to waste men and money fighting each other as long as they needed to protect their ships from the Pirate Folk. That, however, was not a reason the others in this cabin would appreciate now.

Harkrat refilled Blade's and Khraishamo's cups, called for more wine, then glared at Blade. "And now, Man from the Future, it's time you told me what you've been doing these past few months. If it isn't a good story ..."

"It is," said Blade, and started telling of his adventures, straight through from his first night with Fierssa to the death of Kloret at the hands of the galley slaves. At times Harkrat asked for names Blade wouldn't supply, but Blade always refused, until the Emperor burst out: "Damn it, Blade! You can trust me. I want to know these people so I can honor them or at least talk to them. I'm not interested in lopping off anybody's heads, not now. Mythor's made its rebellion and that's an end of it. Now our job's to get together, Mythor and Gohar, and work out a peace we can all live with."

"You say that," said Khraishamo. "What about others in Gohar?"

"What others?" said Harkrat. "I'm Emperor, and if they forget that I'll remind them. Nobody to help them, either, now that Kloret's dead."

So Blade went back and filled in the details he'd left out, then finished his story. By the time he'd done this, the new wine had arrived. He found he wasn't thirsty.

Harkrat was. He drank off what must have been his fifth or sixth cup, then said sharply, "You've done a lot, Blade. Most of it's been good. What made you think you could do it without making trouble for your own future?"

Blade smiled. "I didn't mention this before to anyone"—a little white lie which would do no harm—"but I did know that Mythor was going to become independent. So I knew that the rebellion by itself wasn't likely to destroy the future, England, and me. As for all the things I did to make that rebellion come

about—well, I'm still here."

Harkrat laughed. "You are, and HemiGohar be thanked for that. If you haven't gone completely over to the Mythorans, I'd like to have you with me when we sit down and talk. You've got more of a head for that kind of thing than anyone I can trust except Elyana, and she couldn't come. She's expecting another child."

"She's well?"

"Oh, yes. She thrives on breeding. Sends you her love and all that sort of thing." Harkrat suddenly seemed very interested in the decorations on his wine cup, and after a moment Blade understood why.

Elyana's fourth child would be Richard Blade's. A few months from now, a son or daughter of his would be born into the Imperial family of Gohar. What sort of a future would it have?

A bloody sight better one than it would have had if I hadn't put Kloret down, Blade thought.

The Emperor's hopes of having Blade by his side in the peace negotiations with Mythor were disappointed.

Degyat was badly wounded in the battle, and three days later he died. A week after the battle he was buried in the cemetery outside Mythor, while Harkrat, Blade, and virtually every other notable on both sides watched.

"We'll see he gets a proper monument, Your Radiance," one Mythoran merchant told Harkrat. "An admiral of Gohar, who died to save Mythor—his memory will build a bridge between the two cities."

"Damned long bridge to reach from one end of the Sea to the other," said Harkrat, but Blade could see that he was moved.

Harkrat and Blade walked away from the grave side by side. They walked slowly, the Emperor matching his pace to Blade's. Blade was slowed down not only by his buttock wound, but by the ceremonial robe he had on. It was a rather awe-inspiring garment, elaborately woven together of a dozen shades and thicknesses of shell-tissue. It was decorated with pearls at the throat, cuffs, and waist, and further decorated everywhere else with shells worked into complicated patterns. It was as heavy as a suit of armor and nearly as stiff, definitely not the best thing for a man with a sore rear end to wear.

However, the Mythorans had searched their warehouses and shops, then stripped them of tissue, dyes, pearls, and shells. Two dozen seamstresses labored night and day, with Rhodina almost literally cracking a whip over them, to get the robe done before the funeral. It was a gift of honor from a grateful city, so Blade was going to wear it and comfort be damned!

The sun came out as they walked toward the horses and litters, making Blade's robe seem to glow. Harkrat laughed. "You're going to be pretty hard to miss in that. And it won't be the last gift, either. You're going to get something from me, and the merchants of Gohar will probably thank you for fighting the Sarumi, and that horse chief—what's his name?"

"Sigluf."

"Sigluf wants to honor you, I hear. You're going to have more gifts than you know what to do with. How are you going to get them all the way back to England?"

Blade didn't answer at first, because he was thinking of something which might come from a short talk with Sigluf. If the Sarumi had turned pirate because of pressure from the horsemen to the west of the Sea, what would happen if that pressure was reduced? Suppose a Mythoran fleet carried an army of Maghri across the Sea, to attack the western horsemen and take them off the backs of the Sarumi? Could the Sarumi then become peaceful seafarers?

At this point Blade realized his ideas were running a long way ahead of the facts, and Harkrat was staring at him. He remembered the Emperor's question.

"I'll have to see about that when the time comes," he said. "I'll give Khraishamo and Rhodina any I have to leave behind. They'll take good care of the gifts."

"I should imagine so," said Harkrat. Now they were coming up to the horse lines and he slapped Blade on the shoulder. "Don't let your arse hurt too long. We've got to get in some hunting to break all this talk."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Those were Blade's last words to Harkrat. He walked slowly toward the curtained litter he was using until the bearers saw him. They took position on the handles, and Blade reached to open the curtain.

As he did, he felt suddenly dizzy. He had to grip the roof of the litter to keep from falling. Then the dizziness turned into a distinct throbbing pain in his head, not severe but completely familiar. The computer was calling him Home across the Dimensions.

Blade tore open the curtain as the pain in his head increased. He heard cries of surprise from the bearers as he fell across the cushioned seat inside. With a desperate effort he pulled the curtain shut behind him. Then he was sinking down through the cushions and the seat. For a moment he seemed to be held in midair a foot above the grass.

Then everything was gone.

Chapter 27

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Blade put his empty glass back on the sideboard and started rummaging in the closet for his raincoat. So far today he hadn't needed it, but London weather got no more trustworthy with the years.

"Oh, by the way, Richard," said J from his armchair. "That brown suitcase in the closet is for you. There's something of yours in it."

Blade pulled out the brown fiberglass suitcase with a Ministry of Defense insignia on it, then opened it. Inside was his ceremonial robe from Mythor, the pearls and shells catching even the dim light of J's study.

J laughed softly at the surprise on Blade's face. "We were at our wit's end to find something to do with it. It was hardly of much scientific interest, and the value of the individual pearls and shells would hardly be worth the trouble of tearing it apart. Also, it's quite lovely, and I felt it would be rather a crime to destroy

it.

"It was Lord Leighton who suggested we give it to you. After all, the—Mythorans—gave it to you, so why not let the gift stand? I doubt if you'll be able to do more than wear it to a costume party, but we think you're the right person to have it."

"Do you think there's any security risk?"

J shook his head. "There's nothing on it which looks noticeably different from Home Dimension materials. Chemical analyses don't show enough difference to give anyone a clue either. That was a surprise, but we checked it out thoroughly. Anyone who sees the robe hanging in your closet might wonder about your sexual preferences, but they certainly won't have any other proof."

"That's certain enough. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Richard."

Blade went out, and when he reached the street he discovered, not much to his surprise, that it was raining. He hailed a cab and stood on the curb as it rolled toward him, suitcase in one hand and briefcase in the other.

It would be pleasant to have a souvenir of this last trip, other than his memories. It was rather a pity he hadn't been able to stay a few more days, to help Harkrat in what inevitably would be infernally complicated negotiations!

Most of the work was done, though. The Sarumi were no longer an immediate menace, Mythor was free and prepared to defend its freedom, and Kloret was dead. There was still the problem of sending the Maghri home, the question of Elyana's child, and Harkrat's refusal to declare an amnesty for the slaves of Kloret's galley. Blade suspected that while Harkrat wouldn't declare an official amnesty, those who'd managed to escape wouldn't be hunted very vigorously.

There was also the grimmer memory of Fierssa's death. It hadn't been entirely in vain, but Blade would have liked her around to see the victory she fought for.

And there was Rhodina, now settling down with her Sarumi husband in the house in Mythor they planned to fill with orphans. All his memories of her were good and warm, and not just the memories of their last night together. She was one of the finest women he'd ever met, and he envied Khraishamo his opportunity to get to know her better over the years.

For a moment, which lasted much too long, Blade desperately wished that Rhodina or someone like her was waiting for him at his flat.

Then the cab pulled up to the curb. Blade had to stop wishing, swing the suitcase in, and follow it himself.