
Killer Plants of Binaark

Blade Book 33

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

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In a white-painted room two hundred feet below the Tower of London, three men looked at a piece of wire.

The piece of wire was about three feet long. It was curved into an S and lay on a scarred wooden table. The three men looking at it were an odd trio.

The man who seemed to be in charge looked like a cross between a gnome and the mad scientist in a cheap horror movie. He limped, his skull was bare except for a few wiry tufts of white hair, his unnaturally long arms ended in blotched and gnarled hands, and his filthy laboratory smock didn't conceal his humpback. The eyes peering out at the world through thick-lensed glasses seemed to miss very little.

The second man was elderly, gray-haired, flawlessly dressed, and held himself as straight as a soldier. He had a look of gentle melancholy on his long face, and his wide gray eyes hinted they'd looked on more secrets than most men.

The third man sat on a rickety wooden chair turned back to front, which creaked under his weight. He was dark almost to the point of being swarthy, with thick black hair and bushy black eyebrows which met over a large nose which had been broken more than once. He wore an expensively tailored suit, but something about him would have made armor and a broadsword more appropriate. He was over six feet tall but so solidly built that he looked shorter, and there was enormous power in him. Now it was controlled and leashed, but it was always ready to be released at the command of the brain behind his two large, deceptively sleepy eyes.

The first man was Lord Leighton. His humpback, polio-twisted legs, and eighty years didn't keep him from being one of the most creative scientific minds alive.

The second man, known only as J, was head of the secret intelligence agency MI6A. Whenever professionals in the intelligence business talked about the great spymasters of the twentieth century, they mentioned J.

The third man was Richard Blade. He was the only living man who could travel into other Dimensions and return alive and sane.

Richard Blade hadn't always been a traveler into the unknown world they'd appropriately named Dimension X. He began his career as a field agent for MI6A. J picked the young Blade straight out of Oxford and saw him become one of the best men in his demanding and often deadly profession. He'd also seen Blade become the only man in the profession of inter-Dimensional Travel, even more demanding and much deadlier.

Blade's new career began as the subject of one of Lord Leighton's experiments. If a powerful human brain was linked to a powerful computer, what would happen? Leighton expected a combination of human and electronic intelligence able to work marvels.

What he got was Richard Blade shot off into nowhere. Fortunately Blade came back, then and every time since. He'd come back with his share of scars, of course, and sometimes by the skin of his teeth. He still came back alive and sane, and no one else had ever done this.

Unfortunately, about all he could do was take expensive round trips into the unknown. This wasn't for lack of trying on the part of Lord Leighton, or for lack of money and cooperation from the British government. Prime Ministers knew perfectly well that a new British Empire might come into being if Dimension X travel was perfected. They'd provided millions of pounds to finance Lord Leighton's successive brainstorms and protect the secret of Dimension X. So far the return on all this money and effort had been rather modest. If you caught him off his guard, even Lord Leighton would admit this.

"We're worse off than Alexander the Great," the scientist had often grumbled. "He only had one Gordian knot to undo. We've got two. We have to find somebody besides Richard who can survive the trip. We also have to learn how to send our people to the same Dimension more than once."

"Yes, and Alexander ended up cutting the Gordian knot with his sword," J had replied. "I rather doubt if we'll be able to adopt such a straightforward method."

When Leighton said over the telephone that he might have part of the solution to both problems, it brought J and Blade to the Tower of London as fast as Blade's car would carry them. "Not that I expect miracles," said J as Blade's Rover sped through the foggy streets of London. "But he did sound rather more excited than usual."

The Special Branch men on guard at the Tower passed them at once. They, then rode down in the elevator and walked along the main corridor of the Project complex, past the electronic monitors that guarded its secrets. At the end of the corridor was the white room where Lord Leighton waited for them with three feet of blue-gray wire.

Now Blade and J stopped looking at the wire and looked at each other. Blade picked up the wire, straightened it out, and tested it against the edge of the table. It cut easily into the wood.

"New alloy, I suppose," he said in a carefully neutral voice.

"You don't recognize it, Richard?" said Leighton. "Of course you wouldn't. Perhaps this will refresh your memory." He pulled a crumpled sheet of notepaper out of the breast pocket of his smock and handed it to Blade.

Blade read it. "This is the formula for one of the alloys from Englor."

"Yes. Our scientists haven't been able to produce it in large quantities—too expensive. But they've managed to produce thirty pounds or so that are well up to specifications."

One of the strangest Dimensions Blade ever visited was one where an alternate England called Englor fought for its life against alternate Russians called the Red Flames. This Dimension was a mixture of the completely familiar and the weirdly different. One of the most notable differences was in metallurgy. Englor used a number of alloys that made most of the ones in Home Dimension look like plastic. Blade came back from Englor with the formulas for three of those alloys. Metallurgists had been breaking their tools, budgets, and hearts ever since trying to reproduce them.

"It's good news, of course," said J. "But precisely what does it mean for the Project?" He was always a trifle more ready to talk back to Leighton than Blade.

"We discovered something about the metal the formula didn't show," said the scientist. "It's not affected by electricity. Something about the molecular structure lets electrical currents through as if the metal wasn't there. It can't possibly disturb an electrical field."

Blade's eyes lost their sleepy look. "Then I could wear anything made of this metal without disturbing the electrical fields during the transition to Dimension X."

"Precisely," said Leighton. His voice took on something of a lecture-room tone. "As you know, the basic problem of the transition has always been creating a completely even, completely identical electrical field over and around Richard for each transition. We solved part of the problem by building the KALI capsule, after we eliminated the initial failings of the system."

J and Blade looked at each other again. Those "initial failings" had in the end killed thirty-two people, let a deadly peril into the world from Dimension X, and very nearly destroyed the Project. As it was, most of the new self-programming KALI computer was so much junk, and only the seven-foot capsule that enclosed Blade like a coffin remained from that particular experiment.

"But wearing something into the capsule—that would disrupt the electrical field all over again," said Blade.

"Unless it was made of this new alloy. I've got here—" Leighton rummaged in all his pockets "—no, I forgot it. But I made a sketch of a suit of the wire you—or another traveler—could wear, reinforced at the crotch, joints, and soles of the feet. We'd start off with a coarse mesh, then tighten it up until you'd be going through practically wearing a suit of armor. After that we could start adding equipment—a knife, a folding bow, fishing gear, a slingshot."

Leighton had obviously been thinking matters through quite systematically. Blade nodded. "It sounds very much worthwhile, sir. But I can see at least two problems.

"First, the suit is going to have to be easy to take off and put on without help. Second, it's going to have to be cheap enough so that I can afford to lose it or even throw it away if necessary."

Leighton frowned. "I don't imagine either will be impossible. But may I ask why these are problems at all? Do you like romping naked through strange Dimensions?"

Blade laughed. "Hardly. But consider that the suit is going to be centuries ahead of the technology of

most Dimensions. They may think technology that is too advanced to understand is magic. Magicians sometimes get an unfriendly reception. I've had better luck with my 'traveling warrior' or 'exile' cover stories. I'd like to be able to strip off the suit and hide it any time it would spoil my cover."

"I see your point," said Leighton. "In any case, I wasn't proposing to suit you up for this trip. Nor are we yet ready to try sending another person into Dimension X. It will take a few weeks to make the alloy into enough wire—the stuff's fiendishly hard to work, as you might expect. I was thinking of starting this time by gluing this piece onto your skin and sending it through with you."

Again Blade and J looked at each other. Both minds held a single thought: Leighton becoming cautious and conservative? Either he's gone round the bend or the age of miracles isn't over yet.

Both Blade and J realized that an alloy-wire suit and equipment would increase Blade's chances of survival in Dimension X without making it more dangerous to get there, and it would also increase the survival chances of some other Dimension traveler. However, such a man or woman, even if he or she was as tough and sane as could be, would still lack Blade's positive genius for surviving bare-handed, bare-skinned, and bare-witted in the strangest environments. Thus, Leighton's caution was admirable.

"Very good, sir," said Blade. "I'll have no objection to being wired up."

It was a feeble pun, but Leighton seemed to think it called for a drink. In fact, they eventually decided it called for quite a few drinks. However, Leighton served excellent brandy, which didn't leave even the faintest trace of a hangover. Blade was entirely clear-headed the next morning when he glued the wire to the inside of his left thigh and climbed into the KALI capsule for his thirty-third journey into Dimension X.

Chapter 2

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Blade got the worst headache he'd had in several trips into Dimension X, but that wasn't the fault of the KALI capsule. He landed at the top of a steep bank, lost his balance, rolled down, and banged his head against the tangled roots of a large tree at the bottom. The world danced around him, and he wasn't sure if the singing he heard was from birds in the tree or from inside his own skull.

Blade crawled deep into the damp, musty shadows under the tree, lay down on a mat of leaves and needles, and breathed deeply until he could sit up. Then he tested all his limbs and joints to make sure they were working, and propped himself up against a root until the headache began to fade. When he felt his head there was a tender spot, but no swelling, no bleeding, and definitely none of the symptoms of a concussion. That was good news. A mild concussion could have disabled him for a couple of days. A bad one could have left him defenseless for weeks. Blade had always accepted the fact that a disabling injury on his way into Dimension X might be the end of him. Since there was nothing he could do about it, he stopped worrying. He'd learned very early in his career with MI6A that unnecessary worrying was a dangerous luxury.

Now that his worst problem was solved, he checked the wire. It was still in place on his thigh. Gently he peeled it loose and wound it around his left wrist like a bracelet. Where it had been was nothing except a red mark from the glue. So far Lord Leighton's experiment seemed to be working.

Blade saw that he'd landed in a sort of tropical rain forest. Except for the steep bank where he'd fallen, there were trees everywhere, with moss hanging from their branches and flowering vines wrapped around

their trunks. The spreading branches overhead made such a thick canopy that the ground was clear of everything except dwarfed ferns and bloated blue-white fungi the size and shape of soccer balls. Blade picked up a rotten branch and experimentally prodded one of the fungi. It promptly disintegrated into a cloud of foul-smelling powder. He hastily stepped back and mentally wrote off the fungi as a source of food.

In spite of this unpromising start, Blade doubted that a forest so heavily overgrown would be short of food or water. He'd never landed in a Dimension where the biochemistry was so different that he couldn't eat and drink enough to keep alive. He also hoped he never would. It was difficult enough encountering hostile aliens and managing to return intact to Home Dimension, without worrying about starving to death, or growing so weak that somebody or something could kill him.

The branches overhead did let in enough light to tell him that the sun was shining, but not to let him tell directions from it. However, unless the law of gravity didn't apply in this Dimension, water still flowed downhill. If Blade also went downhill he'd be more likely to find water. With water and a reasonable amount of almost any sort of food, he could survive as long as he had to.

Blade stretched his arms and legs to their limits and shadowboxed briefly, then did karate exercises until his head started complaining. He didn't want to lose water by working up an unnecessary sweat. He might not find a stream or pond for at least a couple of days.

Blade laughed. He'd come to take surviving under improbable conditions for granted, because the skills that made this possible were now so much a part of him that he seldom had to think about them. How would an observer have looked at him, casually marching as naked as Adam through something that didn't look much like the Garden of Eden?

How would he have looked to Zoe Cornwall, even if he'd been able to tell her how he made a living, instead of being gagged by the Official Secrets Act?

He'd met some women who had all the survival skills he had, and it was possible they might have been able to travel with him to other Dimensions, but Zoe hadn't been one of them. She was lovely and warm and intelligent, but definitely someone who could survive only in the heart of modern civilization.

Blade was different. He could survive on the fringes of civilization as a spy or far beyond it in Dimension X. In fact, he was more at home in such places. That was a big difference between Zoe and him. In the end, would it have been too big a difference for a happy marriage? Blade wondered.

Then he put the question firmly out of his mind. It was both depressing and supremely irrelevant. Zoe had died a grim, lonely death in a far Dimension, killed by the monstrous Ngaa, and Blade had never seriously contemplated marrying anyone else. By now, it was more likely than not that he'd die a bachelor. In the improbable event of his living long enough to retire from Project Dimension X, he'd be too old and set in his ways to make any woman a good husband.

Blade picked up a stout branch to use as a club, then studied the forest for the best way to go. "Downhill" was away from the slope, but otherwise there didn't seem to be much reason to choose one direction over another. He shouldered the club, picked the widest gap between the trees, and started walking.

Blade must have arrived in this Dimension no later than mid-morning of a long day. His mental clock was fairly accurate, and he guessed it was a good eight hours before the light started to fade. By that time he'd found a stream that widened at one point into a clear, deep pool. He drank until he was no longer thirsty,

then examined the mud on the bank of the pool for signs of any animals large enough to be dangerous. One kind of footprint showed unmistakable claws, but it was small. That didn't completely reassure him—Home Dimension leopards were no more than half his size and weight, but one of them could tear him to pieces. Blade plunged into the pool and swam around until all the sweat was washed away and the itching and stinging from thorn pricks and insect bites faded.

By the time he climbed out of the pool, the fading light told him it was time to find a safe place to spend the night. There was still nothing edible in sight, but he could safely go several days without food as long as he had enough water. Remembering those claw marks, he studied the trees on the far bank, then swam across the pond and started climbing the largest one. The rough bark gave him plenty of foot- and hand-holds, and also did some work on Blade's skin. Before long Blade felt as if he'd been rubbed all over with fine sandpaper.

The tree was a giant, taller than its neighbors, with the crotch between its main branches at least a hundred feet above the ground. The last light of sunset showed Blade a sea of treetops, stretching away endlessly almost everywhere he looked. Toward the west and southwest the treetops seemed to change color. They looked golden-orange instead of green, but that was probably a trick of the sunset light.

To the northwest a cliff nearly a mile high leaped straight up out of the trees, with a range of rugged mountains curving away into the distance beyond it. Blade studied the mountains, and his brief thoughts of climbing over them rather than tramping through the jungle vanished. The cliff would be impossible without rock-climbing gear, and most of the summits beyond it showed snowcaps. Climbing over those mountains in his bare skin would mean nearly certain death from frostbite or exposure.

The sun had dipped below the horizon now, and seemed to be sucking the rest of the light after it. Blade pulled down all the leaves within reach and spread them out to make a thin cushion between his skin and the bark. Then he stretched out and fell asleep.

The bird chorus which greeted the dawn jerked Blade awake so violently he nearly fell off his perch. Some birds whistled, others screeched, whooped, boomed, or chattered. There was even one that sounded so much like a London fire engine that Blade found himself looking around for signs of smoke.

When he looked west he stared. It hadn't been a trick of the light! The trees there blazed golden-orange in the dawn. Were they flowering trees, like Home Dimension's dogwoods or cherry trees? Blade doubted it. The color was too solid and there was too much of it. Blade tested his muscles, then crawled off his perch and began climbing down the tree.

By the time he reached the ground the bird chorus was dying away. There was still a long day ahead of him and he could be sure of hitting the golden-orange trees sooner or later. They'd stretched halfway across the western horizon.

Five hundred yards brought him to a small spring. He drank, then set off again. He was so eager to satisfy his curiosity about the trees that he had to force himself to slow down, so he wouldn't work up a sweat or lose his direction. He remembered one of his early instructors in MI6A telling him, "Mr. Blade, you've got enough bloody curiosity for half a dozen cats. I only hope you've got as many lives!"

Blade tramped past an endless succession of gnarled trunks. At last he came to a trunk that was thick and smooth, and he was sure that he had found the trees he'd been looking for. The gold-orange color was definitely in the leaves—and what leaves! Most were at least six feet long and half that wide, and

some were twice as big. All of them stuck out from the branches as stiffly as if they'd been made of solid wood. The canopy they made overhead was so dense and so brightly colored that Blade felt as if he'd stepped into a vividly dyed circus tent.

Once he'd got used to the spectacle of the leaves, Blade started noticing other details. The branches and trunks of the trees seemed to be covered with blue-black rubber rather than bark, and they twisted and curled in ways Blade didn't like. Hanging from some of the branches were immense seed pods, larger than the KALI capsule. They seemed to be completely covered with short, bright green hair.

From the bases of the blue-black trunks, a dense mass of creepers stretched toward Blade. They didn't have any seed pods, but otherwise they looked like a ground-dwelling version of the trees. Halfway to Blade they thinned out and disappeared among the ferns and grass, but Blade suspected they stretched considerably farther.

Suddenly he was very careful where he put his feet. There was something unnatural about the plants here. The colors, the leaves, the seed pods, the creepers Blade could have accepted any one of them, but together they gave him the impression of something dangerous.

Something went chirrr among the creepers, and three shiny green beetles the size of Blade's hand crept out into view. He took a cautious step, relieved to see something living among the trees. His relief vanished as he saw more beetles crawling over a whitened skeleton and chopping off pieces of bone with their pincers. The skeleton looked like a huge bird's. Blade saw a curved beak and a four-clawed foot.

Blade held out his club and prodded the undergrowth. He would almost have preferred something jumping out at him, but nothing happened. He took a step forward, prodded again, step, prod, step, prod... He found each step a little harder than the one before, but he'd be damned if he was going to turn aside from a bunch of circus-colored plants!

Seven steps, eight, nine. The club came down again—and with the speed of striking snakes, three of the creepers reared out of the undergrowth. They wavered in mid-air; then, before Blade could pull the club back, two wrapped themselves around it. When Blade pulled, the creepers pulled harder. The wood split with a sharp crack, the creepers curled back with half the club, and Blade lurched backward holding the other half.

As he fought for balance, he couldn't watch where he stepped. His foot came down on another of the creepers. It writhed like a drunken boa constrictor, then wound itself around Blade's left leg. Another creeper lashed the air, then curled around his right thigh. Blade tried to pull free, but it was like trying to pull free from a pair of steel cables.

Whatever came next, it would not be a quick escape.

Chapter 3

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Creepers were writhing and twisting toward Blade from all directions. They seemed to move faster the more he struggled with the ones holding him. He tried standing still. The new creepers also stopped. Blade gave an experimental heave, and they came on again. This time he not only stopped moving but held his breath. The creepers stopped, and by the time Blade had to breathe again some of them were lying down. He stood motionless until all the creepers except the two wound around his legs were limp

and quiet. Those two, however, still clung as if they'd been glued in place.

Apparently the creepers judged their prey by the amount of resistance it put up. The more it struggled, the bigger it was, and the more creepers came to hold it. Hold it for what? If it was something that came at the prey so fast they had no chance to avoid it, there wouldn't have been a need for the creepers. The creepers themselves were tight enough so that they might cut off his circulation if they held him long enough, but otherwise they weren't particularly uncomfortable. Blade carefully kept his arms crossed high on his chest. The creepers didn't reach more than four feet into the air, so his hands and arms were free.

Out of the corner of one eye he saw ripples and twitches in the trunk of the nearest tree. Cautiously raising his head, he saw a branch as thick as his body starting to curve downward, lowering a seed pod at least eight feet long. As the pod descended, the leaves in its path moved out of the way. Some folded themselves double, others tilted up on edge or bent back.

The seed pod was ten feet above the ground and twenty feet from Blade when it started to open like a pair of jaws.

The stench of acid and rotten meat hit Blade like a blow. His eyes watered and he blinked. Then he saw that the edges of the pod's jaws were lined with folding six-inch spikes, barbed and dripping with foul-smelling juices. As more and more of the spikes unfolded, the pod began to remind Blade of a shark's mouth.

He would rather have been facing the shark. Now he knew what the plants' technique was: immobilize prey with the creepers, then bring the pods down to kill, swallow, and digest. He wasn't sure he was going to survive to use this knowledge.

Cautiously Blade flexed one leg. Four creepers jerked spasmodically. One lashed out and struck him in the chest, inches below his crossed arms. Obviously the pod's being on the way wasn't affecting the creepers' reflexes. Even more obviously, the last thing he could afford to risk was having even one hand immobilized. If he could hold the jaws of the pod open long enough. . .

The branch writhed, then thrust the pod slowly toward Blade. He wondered how many of the plants' victims had sealed their fate at this point by panicking and arousing the creepers again. He forced himself to stand completely motionless, not blinking, barely breathing.

As the pod drew closer, Blade wouldn't have wanted to take a deep breath anyway. The stench from the open jaws was like that of a sewer crossed with a chemical plant. Blade was afraid he'd vomit and trigger more of the creepers into action.

Still closer. The inside of the pod was lined with slimy gray-green tissue, speckled with whitish patches and gobbets of half-digested flesh. Blade couldn't see anything like a throat. Apparently the nutrients were absorbed from the prey directly through the walls of the pod.

If the pod continued its slow approach, Blade was now sure he could grip the jaws. If it dropped on him suddenly, he would need precise timing and also quick movement, which might send the creepers into action again at the worst possible time. Either way he needed to be ready. A joint at a time, Blade uncurled his fingers. A finger at a time, he raised his hands. A muscle at a time, he stretched his arms out to either side. Some of the creepers twitched faintly, but none of them went into action. Slowly he raised his arms above his head. He hoped the pod didn't have any way of learning that its prey was abnormally large and quite ready to defend itself to the last.

Apparently the pod depended completely on the net of creepers. It came on steadily, until it was no more than a yard out of Blade's reach and a foot above him. A drop of its digestive juice fell on the back of Blade's hand, stinging like a bee. The ghastly stench was all around him. Now the lower jaw was within reach, but Blade still waited. Grabbing the lower jaw alone might simply snap the upper jaw shut on his hands.

Then the pod began a slow-motion lunge toward its prey and Blade went into action. With one hand he gripped the upper jaw and with the other he felt for a hold on the lower one. He found one of the spikes and snapped it off. The empty space gave him a firm handhold on the lower jaw, and just in time. The branch holding the pod jerked, but the slimy lining of the pod rippled and the jaws tried to snap shut.

It took all of Blade's strength to hold them open. Fortunately his two hundred and ten pounds was all muscle and bone, trained and conditioned, and his endurance was something of a legend even among the hardened field agents of MI6A. The jaws of the pod closed about four inches, then stopped. The sweat popped out on Blade's forehead and chest. His muscles rose in ridges, but he held the jaws. His lungs cried for air until he had to inhale even the foul air from the pod, but he held it open.

The jaws quivered and jerked, still trying to close, with more strength than Blade could have imagined in any plant. They still didn't close, and finally the pod gave up the fight. The plant must have discovered that something wasn't going right. Blade had won his first victory. He also realized that it was a temporary one. He had to get free of the plant before it found some new way of attacking him. It might pull the pod back, then bring it in again where he couldn't turn to face it without triggering the creepers. It might order the creepers to drag him down, or bring in a second pod.

He wondered if he was overestimating the intelligence of the plant. He also decided that even if he was, he was doing himself no harm. The combination of trunk, creeper, and pod was unlike any plant he'd ever seen or heard of, and so was its behavior. It was better to assume nothing.

Blade now realized that although he'd been moving a good deal while holding the pod open, the creepers hadn't responded. Did the pod's apparently having a firm grip on the prey make them relax? Cautiously Blade wiggled one toe, then two. Next he shifted one foot, and finally he flexed one knee. He felt like a paralyzed man trying to move, but he didn't dare risk anything more drastic. That would risk breaking his grip on the jaws of the pod.

Still no sign of movement from the creepers. Blade repeated his whole series of movements, this time ending by flexing both knees. Both the creepers and the pod remained inactive. So far so good. The next step had to be disabling the pod, and the best way seemed to be sheer brute force. Blade took several deep breaths, then partly relaxed his arms without loosening his grip on the jaws. The pod closed another six inches. Then Blade put all his strength into one tremendous push.

For a moment the pod resisted. It was like trying to tear open a safe's door with his bare hands. Blade's heart pounded against his ribs. Then something banged like an enormous shotgun. The two halves of the pod flew apart. The sudden release of all tension threw Blade forward into the creepers.

He thought he'd jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. But the creepers around him were writhing and striking out wildly, not trying to reach and hold him. Even the two around his legs were loosening. Overhead the branch was writhing and thrashing, tossing the two dangling jaws.

Blade dug both hands into the soft jungle earth, then jerked both legs. The right leg came free at once, and the left leg came free after a second jerk. Then he flung himself into a somersault that would have won him a medal in any gymnastics contest. Here it saved his life by landing him beyond the reach of the

creepers.

He landed hard, knocking the wind out of himself and once again slamming his head into a root. The roots in this jungle seemed to be jumping out at him. Then he heard a high-pitched whine in his ears. He shook his head gently, but the sound only grew louder. He'd just realized the whine wasn't inside his head when it turned into a shrill scream, like a great animal crying out in pain.

The scream faded briefly, then rose again until Blade wanted to clap his hands over his ears. All the creepers were writhing like a nest of maddened snakes, and one jaw of the pod dangled by only a few shreds of fiber. Yellowish fluid was dripping from the torn edges. Where it struck the leaves of the creepers below they turned black and brittle.

The plant was screaming.

The thought struck Blade with such force that he took two steps backward. This time he watched where he put his feet. He backed against the gnarled trunk of a normal, sensible tree, and leaned against it until the screaming finally died away. Then relief at his escape and memories of the stench from the pod finally hit Blade's stomach. By the time his stomach was empty, even the creepers were still.

None of Blade's later encounters with the killer plants taught him quite as much as the first one. On the other hand, none of them were nearly as dangerous.

The more he learned about the plants, the more Blade was certain that they were a unique order of living creatures, with some qualities of both plants and animals. They had trunks and branches and leaves, but no bark. They had leaf tissue and wood, but also fibers of something very like muscle and vessels filled with the yellowish acid that seemed more like blood than sap. They had none of the senses except touch, and that only in the creepers and the pods, but somewhere they had the vocal organs to produce those appalling screams. Only the mature plants screamed, and Blade never got close enough to one to find out how the plant did it. He got close enough to younger specimens to learn a good many other things.

The plants seemed to go through three stages. Freshly sprouted, they were no more than a foot high, with creepers spreading out a yard or so to either side and kill-pods the size of walnuts. In this stage they seemed to get most of their food by photosynthesis and ate nothing larger than insects. They looked harmless, even cute; something to decorate a fashionable greenhouse or the lobby of an expensive hotel.

In their second stage, the plants were still not dangerous to a full-grown human being, but anything smaller was safer staying away from them. The main stalks grew six feet high and as thick as Blade's thigh. The creepers spread out forty or fifty feet in all directions, and the branches, which resembled giant tendrils, developed kill-pods the size of watermelons. Eventually these tendril-like branches reached upward and outward, growing the large, golden-orange leaves. At this stage also the plant developed a whole new set of pods and creepers to trap and eat birds. The creepers on the ground could be so nearly invisible that Blade walked into them several times and always worked up a sweat getting clear.

In the third stage, the killer plants were perfectly capable of dealing with a man. They still had to get most of their nourishment like normal plants, because Blade couldn't imagine that there were enough large animals in this jungle stupid enough to wander into the creepers. Nonetheless, the killer plants were superbly equipped to feed on any animal available. The creepers could restrain a horse and the pods could very nearly swallow one. If one pod couldn't engulf the whole prey, a second or even a third would descend and go to work.

The mature plants came in two forms. There were those that formed the solid groves like the one Blade

had first entered. Some of these groves were a mile or more on a side. Then there were the solitary "rogue" plants—not as spectacular as those in the groves but a good deal more dangerous. They sometimes sent their creepers out as much as a hundred yards. Their climbing branches reached upward and outward for nearly as far, carrying the huge pods with them. One of the rogues could make a patch of jungle the size of a football field deadly, judging from the number of bones Blade saw. Nothing that got within reach of the creepers of a mature plant seemed to get out again, except for the bone-eating green beetles. They crawled around among the creepers as if they were ordinary grass.

Other than the plants, Blade found nothing really dangerous in the jungle as he tramped west. Or at least he found nothing really dangerous to a large, strong man in top physical condition, continuously alert, and ready to eat or drink almost anything that would keep him alive.

Blade suspected that the average backpacker from Home Dimension might have lasted no more than two or three days.

Three times Blade saw the animals that left the long-toed clawed footprints. They were catlike, with long tails, smooth grayish-blue coats, enormous tufted ears, and pale green eyes. The largest of them couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds, but half that weight seemed to be claws and teeth and the rest muscle and sinew. They still weren't ready to attack something the size of a man unless provoked, and Blade was careful to avoid provoking them.

The plants did make Blade's progress much slower than it would have been without them. He didn't dare travel by night, or even on cloudy days when there wasn't enough sunlight to reveal lurking creepers. He also had to zigzag back and forth through the jungle among the groves and the rogues. On some days he covered ten or twelve miles on the ground to make a mile toward the west.

Meanwhile his beard and hair grew, his skin turned black with dirt and plant sap, he collected a dozen insect bites and thorn pricks each day, and he lost enough weight so that his ribs began to show. By the time he saw the plants begin to thin out ahead, he knew he must look more like something escaped from the monkey house at the zoo than a human being. However, he didn't plan to start worrying about how he might look to the people of this Dimension until he was safely out of reach of the killer plants.

Chapter 4

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On the morning of his twelfth day in the Dimension of the killer plants, Richard Blade sat on the bank of a river washing his feet.

Yesterday he'd seen what he hoped would be the last of the plants, and also the first signs of intelligent life in this Dimension. One sign was a trail beaten through the last of the jungle by hooves and bare feet. Another sign was a tumbled heap of moss-covered logs, once a fair-sized house. Blade was relieved. By temperament he was a rather solitary man, but there was a such a thing as being too solitary.

Besides, a journey to Dimension X spent wrestling carnivorous plants and climbing hills in his birthday suit would produce nothing likely to increase enthusiasm and support for Project Dimension X. Blade agreed with Lord Leighton that politicians tended to be shortsighted about the need for basic research. He also agreed with the politicians that scientists like Lord Leighton often expected the ultimate value of their projects to be taken on faith.

Blade stood up, stretched, and waded farther out into the river. It was too beautiful a day for worrying about Lord Leighton's running battle with the politicians. The sky was clear, with only a few puffs of cloud, and the sun was almost hot. The river was washing away the filth of his days in the jungle, and the hills on both banks of the river were a healthy green, with none of the man-eating plants anywhere in sight.

Blade had to wade nearly out to the middle of the river before it reached his waist. He dove and rose several times, splashing happily like a porpoise, then started scrubbing off the jungle filth with handfuls of sand from the bottom of the river. By the time he'd scrubbed off all the filth, he felt as if he'd also taken off the top layer of skin, but he didn't care.

From a hilltop on the bank behind him he'd seen that the river flowed from south to north. To the north it joined a larger river about a day's march farther on. To the south Blade had seen what looked very much like the ruins of a bridge and a town or at least some collection of structures far too regular to be natural. Whichever way he went, he'd have plenty of water, and there were probably fish in the river.

He decided to take another look, now that it was full daylight. He climbed out of the water, shook himself like a dog, picked up his club, and walked toward the hill. He'd covered about half the distance when three of the gray cats seemed to spring out of the ground almost at his feet. A single glance told Blade they weren't wild. Each wore a leather collar decorated with brass and soft leather protectors on their legs.

Just as clearly, they were trained to hunt, and right now they were hunting Blade. One crouched in front of him, just out of reach of his club, growling and digging its hind-claws into the ground as if it was about to leap at his throat. While the first cat held his attention, the other two loped around to his right and left. They could attack him from both sides at once, and move almost as quickly to cut off his retreat to the river.

The first thing Blade did was put down his club slowly and carefully, with no sudden moves to startle the crouching cat in front of him. The club wouldn't make much difference against three of the cats working together, and it might provoke their masters, who couldn't be far away.

Again moving slowly, Blade crossed his arms on his chest. Then he heard the thud of hooves from beyond the hilltop. A horse neighed sharply, and four riders came trotting over the crest and onto the slope facing the river. Blade had plenty of time to study them as they approached. Their mounts sounded and moved like horses, and perhaps their ancestors had been horses, but they definitely were different from horses in England. Their tails were long and bare, with only a tuft of brown hair, their ears were hairy and even longer than a mule's, and their hooves divided into four toes ending in stubby claws. Their enormous eyes were a blue so dark it was almost purple. All four wore elaborate muzzles of boiled leather.

Two of the riders were men, wearing boiled-leather jackets and helmets and carrying long knives and twelve-foot lances. The other two were women, wearing soft leather shirts and knee-length leather trousers that admirably displayed excellent figures. They carried shorter lances and bows slung across their backs. One of the women was a short, snub-nosed blonde; the other was tall and brown-haired with a vaguely Oriental look.

The brunette whistled sharply to the three cats, and they sprang away from Blade. The blonde spurred her mount forward, swinging her lance down so that when she reined in its point was only a foot from Blade's chest.

"I hadn't expected such good hunting here," she said. She was smiling, but Blade didn't find the smile reassuring with the steel point so close. "How long have you been here, and who among the Elstani sent you?"

Her language was high-pitched and full of sibilants but reached Blade's mind as fluent English. He knew his reply would come out in the woman's language. The transformation of his brain so that he could understand and be understood by the people of each new Dimension was still one of the mysteries of Project Dimension X. Blade was willing to live with the mystery, considering how often it had saved his life.

"I have been here since dawn, and I call none among the Elstani master. I am a warrior from a distant land called England." A good cover story in this or any other Dimension was always as true as possible, but he decided to say that he'd left his heavier gear behind in the ruined city, then lost his clothes while bathing in the river.

One of the men cursed, and his cursing was echoed by a snort from his mount. He rode up to Blade and drew his silver-mounted sword. Blade saw elaborate engraving on the blued steel.

"Lying to Tressana of Jaghd is not wise for anyone, man. For spies from Elstan, it is very foolish. Do you want a good death, or—?" The sword twitched.

The blonde woman—Tressana?—held up a hand. "A moment, Curim. You are not of Elstan, you say?"

"No."

Well-groomed blonde eyebrows rose skeptically. Then the tall, brown-haired woman rode up and looked down at Blade. "Your Grace," she said to the other woman, "it could be so. Certainly few men of Elstan are so tall, and I have never seen one with a beard like that."

"Looking for some new toy for your bed, Jollya?" said the swordsman, with a coarse laugh. The brown-haired woman glared at him, and Tressana held up her hand again.

"Silence, both of you. Whatever he is, this man is no fit audience for your quarrel." She turned to the second man. "Fayod!"

"Yes, your Grace?"

"Ride and bring the others." She pulled a ring out of a pouch at her belt and tossed it to the man. As he rode off she turned back to Blade.

"Man of Elstan or stranger, I hope you have some notions of honor. Will you swear not to try escaping until my hunters come?"

"I swear it," said Blade, spreading both hands in a peaceful gesture. He grinned. "I doubt if I'd have much hope of escaping anyway." He pointed at the three cats now sitting quietly to one side. One was washing a paw in the self-absorbed fashion of cats of every size in every Dimension, but the other two still had their eyes on Blade. "Even if I could hope to kill the three of you, they wouldn't leave much of me."

Jollya smiled. "You are no fool, whatever else you are." She'd looked rather forbidding, but the smile transformed her. Unlike Tressana's smiles, Jollya's reached her eyes.

Blade sat down, keeping his hands carefully in sight. After a moment Tressana thrust her lance point-first into the ground, dismounted, and tied her mount's reins to the lance. Jollya and Curim remained mounted.

Blade did his best to relax. He'd be under the women's protection unless he did something stupid, and he wasn't going to take any chances. The Jaghdi appeared to be at least half civilized, and they might be interesting. In any case, he'd rather trust himself to almost any human beings than to the killer plants of the jungle behind him.

Chapter 5

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Blade resisted the temptation to try making polite conversation. These people suspected him of at least one serious crime: being a spy for Elstan, whatever and wherever that might be. Silence might teach him nothing, but it would be far less likely to provoke Curim or her Grace, Tressana of Jaghd. In spite of her small escort and casual manner, Tressana behaved like someone who expected to be obeyed. If she wasn't the local monarch, she was certainly someone of sufficiently high rank to be a good friend and a dangerous enemy.

At Tressana's order Curim dismounted, but he didn't sheathe his sword or take his eyes off Blade. Tressana sat down cross-legged in the grass and unhooked the top of her shirt. Blade approved the view. He also noticed that the short trousers left bare two tanned, dimpled knees, with an ugly scar running across the right one. She pulled a knife out of one boot and a whetstone from her belt pouch, then started sharpening the knife. She whistled tunelessly as she worked.

Jollya was the busiest of the three. She went to each of the mounts and unbuckled their muzzles. Then she pulled three large hams out of the saddlebags and threw one down on the grass in front of each animal. They had chewed the hams down nearly to the bare bones when the rest of the Jaghdi hunting party arrived.

There were at least a hundred mounted men and women, a dozen large wagons, a string of at least fifty spare mounts, and more of the hunting cats. Blade was glad he hadn't tried to escape from his first captors. A band this size could quickly have run him down.

About twenty of the riders were women, dressed and armed like Jollya and apparently taking their orders from her. Another twenty men seemed to obey Curim. The other riders were probably huntsmen or servants. The wagons were elaborately painted, and each was pulled by four hairy, slab-sided animals that reminded Blade of a cross between a dairy cow and a goat.

All the wagons had leather canopies except the one in the lead. Its canopy seemed to be yellow silk, and at the rear a tall pole supported a green banner showing a winged black helmet. Tressana and Jollya mounted again and urged him toward this wagon with precise flourishes of their lances. Blade suspected they were both showing off their skill at his expense, but the skill was real. Both rode as if they and their mounts had one mind and one body, and handled their lances as deftly as if they'd been knitting needles.

In the back of the silk-canopied wagon a man was sitting. At first he seemed to be almost as old as Lord Leighton, with stiff white hair fringing a nearly bald skull and bushy white eyebrows shading deep-set eyes. At a second look, Blade saw that the man could hardly be more than forty, and his body was sound and whole, although softened by too much food and too little exercise. The eyes were black, and

instead of Lord Leighton's sharpness they had a cloudy, vacant look.

"My dear one," Tressana said. "Look what I have here."

"Eh?" The dark eyes focused slowly on Blade. "Oh. A man, with no clothes on."

"Yes. I found him."

"Good for you."

"Thank you, Manro."

"Is he of Elstan? Is he?" Manro's voice had the eagerness of a child wanting to know if there will be ice cream for dessert.

"Oh, I think he might be. I found him like this, where our people don't go."

"They don't go—?" Manro seemed to be trying to grasp an idea just beyond the reach of his wits.

"No. They don't. Do you remember? You gave the order yourself last year."

"Ah, yes. It was a good order. I remember now." Blade wondered if Manro could remember as much as his own name.

"Yes," Tressana continued, "and the Jaghdi love you and obey that order. So a man who comes where we found this one may be of Elstan."

Manro struggled to get the next question out. "You-you-know-don't-sure-he is Elstan?"

"He says he is not. Indeed, he is very tall for an Elstani. May I have the right of First Justice upon him, until we are sure?"

Tressana had to repeat the question three times before Manro would answer. Then he nodded. "Yes. Yes, pretty Tressana. You have First Justice on the man."

"Thank you, my dear." She leaned out of the saddle and patted the man on the cheek. The expression on her face would have turned Blade's stomach, if it hadn't already been turned by the rest of the conversation between Tressana and her half-witted husband.

Tressana turned in her saddle and signaled to Curim. He rode forward, and Blade saw that he was carrying something like a large dart in one hand. He waved it, and Blade saw that the point gleamed darkly with some tarlike substance. Before Blade could react, Curim raised his hand and threw the dart.

It sank deep into the flesh of Blade's left buttock, and he wanted to yell out loud with both pain and surprise. He also wanted to drag Curim out of the saddle and break every bone in the man's body.

He'd taken two steps toward Curim when suddenly his legs felt weak and his head began to spin. Curim laughed. Blade took one more step, then fell face down into the trampled and dung-spattered grass and passed out with Curim's laughter in his ears.

Blade's first sensations on waking up were dizziness and nausea. Fortunately he was lying down and his stomach was completely empty, so neither sensation did any harm. He lay quietly until he could get a better picture of his position and the world around him.

The first thing he noticed was that the length of wire was gone from his wrist. He briefly cursed the Jaghdi.

Losing the wire meant losing a good part of the value of the experiment of carrying it into Dimension X. Also, there was the matter he'd mentioned to Lord Leighton, about advanced technology looking like magic. They might be even more suspicious of him after they discovered that nothing they had could cut, work, or melt the wire.

Blade was lying among wooden boxes and empty sacks in the back of a wagon. Both ankles were shackled and the shackles were fastened to the wagon bed by a length of chain strong enough to hold a gorilla. Now that the Jaghdi had him, they obviously intended to hold on to him. They also intended to keep him alive for whatever "First Justice" might be. The wound in his buttock was not only bandaged, but padded so heavily that he could almost sit comfortably on it. He'd been bathed and rubbed down with some sort of perfumed oil, and there was a bowl of porridge and a leather bottle of water within easy reach. He wasn't hungry, but he drank half the water before looking around him again.

The wagon was parked facing the west and a glowing red sunset. Against the glow Blade saw the silhouettes of several more wagons and, beyond them, mounted sentries trotting back and forth. He couldn't see out the front end of the wagon. All around he heard the sound of neighing and grunting animals and smelled smoke, animal dung, and roasting meat. Voices murmured, sometimes rising in song, and once someone started beating a small drum.

As the drum died away, a tall, shadowy, mounted figure seemed to materialize in front of Blade. He saw a lance and a helmet silhouetted against the sunset, thought of Curim, and was glad his hands were free. Then Jollya's voice said:

"Blade?"

"Yes. I'm here. In fact, I'm likely to stay here for a while."

She laughed. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if you do so. But you're under Tressana's protection now, so you don't need to be afraid of Curim."

Her tone irritated Blade slightly. "What makes you think I'm afraid of Curim?"

"If you aren't, you aren't enough of a warrior to spot an enemy when you see one. And if you're not a warrior, then you're a liar, even if you're not of Elstan. And if you're a liar, why should I come here to talk to you?"

"I'm not going to try guessing your reasons for doing anything, Jollya."

"Wise of you." The sarcasm was unmistakable.

Blade ignored it. "So Curim is my enemy. Are you going to tell me something I don't already know, such as what you are?"

"You won't take Curim's word that I want you for my bed?"

"I wouldn't take his word for the sun rising in the east," said Blade, laughing. He was enjoying the verbal fencing, although he knew he'd have to be careful not to reveal too much about himself.

The laughter seemed to irritate Jollya. "Are you a lover of boys, then?"

Blade would have laughed even louder if he hadn't been afraid of being overheard. "When I want company in bed, I take a woman. But that doesn't mean I expect your company there."

She thought for a moment, then said, sounding almost relieved, "I believe what you have told me about yourself, even if you lied about your camp in the ruins of the city."

Blade realized he was on very delicate ground and was being warned about it. "I hid my camp very well. It is not my fault that you couldn't find it."

"It is said by some that there was no camp."

"Foolish men will say all sorts of things."

"So will desperate men, Blade."

"Also tree."

Jollya was silent for so long that Blade wondered if she had anything more to say. Then she spoke quickly, in almost a whisper.

"Blade, I do believe that you are not of Elstan. The metal of your bracelet makes me sure of that. It is not—"

"You have it?"

"Yes. I said I wanted to show it to my father. He is Keeper of the Animals, but there was no one here to speak for the Keeper of the Stones. Also, this wire is neither animal nor stone, so any of the Keepers could really claim it."

Part of this speech might as well have been in Arabic for all Blade could understand of it, but he was relieved to know that for the moment at least the wire was in safe hands. He'd worry about getting it back later.

"Thank you, Jollya. There is a warrior's honor in you." He didn't mind letting her know that he was grateful. She might not be his friend, but she seemed at least to be the enemy of his enemy Curim.

Another long silence, then she spoke in a strangely subdued voice. "Thank you, Blade. I—that—my father—" She gave up the struggle for words, dug in her spurs so violently that her mount squealed, then rode off at a trot. Blade knew that he'd said something right, but wished he knew what it was. Right now, though, the best thing for him to do was get some more sleep.

Blade drank the rest of the water, piled some sacks under his head and his wound, then fell asleep quickly. The wagon was a more comfortable and secure sleeping place than any he'd found in the jungle.

Blade rode in the wagon for three days and caught up on a good deal of the sleep he'd missed during his trek through the jungle. During the day he listened carefully. The men and women around him talked as freely as if he was deaf, but the wagon ride came to an end just as he was beginning to understand something of what was going on in this Dimension. He'd played the same game with captors in many different Dimensions and often saved his life with what he learned. This time what he learned made him feel he'd read a book with every other page torn out. There were two lands in this Dimension, or at least two everyone knew about. There was Jaghd, where Blade was, and Elstan, on the other side of the forest of Binaark with its killer plants. Although the forest and the mountains on either side of it were almost impenetrable barriers, somehow the Jaghdi and the Elstani managed to conduct a flourishing trade.

Jaghd was a land of plains and forests, and Elstan a land of mountains and hills. The Jaghdi were farmers and stockbreeders, who traded their grain and meat for the metal and jewels the Elstani miners dug out of their native hills. The Elstani were obviously unpopular if not hated among the Jaghdi, but their metals were needed and their jewels valuable. No doubt the Elstani were in the same position when it came to the food they bought from the plainsmen.

Manro and Tressana were king and queen of Jaghd, and Manro was definitely a half-wit. Whether he'd been this way from birth or become half-witted later in life Blade couldn't learn. In any case, Tressana was definitely the real ruler of Jaghd. She seemed to be respected rather than loved, particularly by the men. One thing in particular she'd done to make them suspicious was to form a body of armed and mounted young women, who served in her personal guard. Jollya was apparently the leader of the Women's Guard, and Curim was the leader of the men. Most people thought Jollya was brave and a good rider, but some said she'd got her post by sleeping with the queen and most of the others said she'd got it because of her father, the Keeper of the Animals.

A Keeper seemed to be a combination of priest, professor, and cabinet minister, and Jollya's father was one of the more respected Keepers. He'd probably be one of the more important ones too, considering that much of Jaghd's wealth seemed to be in its animals. Blade was satisfied to know that the closest thing he had to a friend so far in this Dimension was the daughter of somebody important.

Jollya didn't come to talk to Blade again during the three days of the trip, but one of her amazons brought fresh food and water every morning. Others rode by to look at him at intervals during the day. Blade couldn't be sure how far the royal party traveled during each day's march, but he knew that the wagon swayed and lurched like a ship in a hurricane. His wound was healing nicely, but he picked up fresh bruises almost every hour from boxes falling on him.

Each evening the caravan made camp by a pond or a stream. The draft animals were unhitched and the riding animals (which were called "rolghas") were unsaddled. All were fed and watered. Hunters rode in with the day's catch, including rabbits the size of small antelopes and several kinds of bird. The meat was roasted over strong-smelling fires of animal dung and roots.

Blade had to sit, drink his musty water, eat his thin porridge, and smell the roasting meat. After his days of grubbing roots and insects in the forest, he felt this was adding insult to injury. By the third evening he would cheerfully have fought Curim for a chance to stuff himself with roast meat and fowl.

On the third evening the caravan made camp by a well with an elaborately carved stone wall around it. In the distance Blade saw the tall chimneys of a town trailing smoke against the sunset.

The next morning Blade was unchained, allowed to wash in a bucket of cold water, then turned over to a squad of soldiers. The soldiers arrived in four chariots, each drawn by three rolghas harnessed abreast. Blade was bound hand and foot, propped up in one of the chariots, and carried off toward the town. The

last thing Blade saw of the caravan was Jollya on her rolgha looking after him, then turning her back and shouting orders more loudly than usual to her women.

On the rough ground the chariots rattled Blade's teeth, but beyond the town they reached a well-made gravel road. The rolghas leaped forward, and the chariots seemed to fly down the road. In seconds the town behind vanished in the dust.

There were other towns for Blade to look at that day as the chariots rattled north, changing rolghas every couple of hours. He quickly learned that the Jaghdi were more than stockbreeders and farmers. They were superb builders. The road itself was a notable achievement for any civilization without modern machinery. Blade had driven on worse ones in England .

Each paddock full of sleek animals had a solid wall of stone or wood. Farmhouses and barns were roomy and sprawling, with thatched roofs, carved wooden shutters, and decorated clay chimneypots.

In the towns the houses were usually smaller, but many had two or three stories, with glass in some of the windows. The roofs were covered with glossy blue or red tiles, and the main doors decorated with iron bands. The streets were paved with cobblestones, and Blade saw sprinkling carts and men with brooms keeping the stones clean. He saw other carts hauling barrels of garbage and human wastes out to fertilize gardens and orchards.

Most of the buildings showed nothing but stone, slate, tile, and wood in their construction. Blade remembered that nearly all Jaghd's metal had to be imported from Elstan. Iron was used where its strength was needed, however, and also where someone wanted to show off his wealth. Judging from the number of metal-decorated houses Blade saw, there were a fair number of wealthy men in Jaghd.

In fact, everything Blade saw gave him the impression that Jaghd was a prosperous and peaceful land. Otherwise the road wouldn't exist and the flourishing towns would be huddled for protection behind solid walls or around massive castles. Blade felt a little safer knowing this.

Not that peaceful and prosperous lands couldn't be unjust or cruel to suspected criminals. The Jaghdi seemed to execute suspected Elstani spies on very little evidence, tearing them limb from limb with teams of rolghas. If he could prove his innocence, though, he'd be much safer in Jaghd than in a land torn by civil war or feudal lords quarreling with their neighbors. There strangers often got knifed in the back simply because no one could be quite sure they weren't enemies.

The chariots rolled on through the night. By dawn there was a red-roofed city larger than any Blade had seen in Jaghd to the south, and a rugged range of hills to the north. When the chariots left the road, they turned toward the hills.

They followed a track into the hills, dustier than the road and much rougher. Blade was alternately coughing from the dust and being thrown violently against the side of the chariot to pick up a whole new set of bruises. At last they came out of the valley in front of a massive square castle perched on a crag. A tower rose at each corner. The gate was made of solid slabs of stone bound and riveted with iron. It was the first purely military building Blade had seen in Jaghd, and he was impressed by the amount of labor it must have taken to build it up here.

It was also the last Jaghdi building he saw for quite a while. The chariots rolled in through the gate, and Blade was untied in the middle of thirty guards with spears. Then the guards led him down a dark winding flight of stairs into the depths of the castle, and locked him in a lightless, airless cell, cold, damp, and dismal.

When the door thumped shut behind him, Blade realized that getting out of prison in Jaghd might be somewhat more difficult than it had been in other Dimensions.

Chapter 6

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Fortunately for Blade, the castle seemed to be almost new. Everything was fairly clean, there were few odors of long-forgotten garbage or long-dead prisoners, and there were only a few rats. He'd been in much worse places, and he was willing to consider staying for a while before even thinking of escaping. An escape attempt was likely to provoke the Jaghdi into doing something much more drastic than simply locking him up. And staying here might give whatever friends he had (Jollya? Her father the Keeper? Tressana herself?) time to arrange for his release. Unfortunately the food was vile, and that made getting out of the prison something he'd have to do sooner rather than later if he wanted to get out at all.

At first Blade wasn't sure he was supposed to eat the porridge they brought him. It didn't look, smell, or taste like anything a self-respecting pig was expected to eat, let alone a human being. He decided that if he didn't eat it, maybe someone would notice this and give him better food. He wasn't going to believe the Jaghdi were planning on starving him to death. Meanwhile the arrival of the porridge at least helped him tell time. Two feedings made one "day."

After four days, Blade reluctantly concluded that he really was supposed to eat the stuff. After six days, he was hungry enough to get it down. At least they gave him plenty of water, and Blade discovered that he could get the porridge down if he held his nose tightly enough. After a few more days of the prison food, Blade would have fought Curim barehanded merely for the right to boil the prison's cooks in their own pots.

He also realized that he was losing weight just fast enough so that if he sat here in the cell too long, he would be too weak to escape, fight, or flee. Blade refused to consider becoming that helpless. He'd have refused even if he trusted the Jaghdi and their curious little queen much more than he did.

To be sure, leaving him here could be an accident or an oversight, from somebody not filling out the proper forms. He'd never encountered any people as civilized as the Jaghdi who hadn't developed something like bureaucracy and red tape. More likely the tangled politics of Jaghd might have made him someone who couldn't be kept alive, but who couldn't be openly killed either. Slow starvation was a sure killer and cheaper than any more drastic methods.

Everything depended on whether he was supposed to get out of here alive or not. He could only guess about that. In theory Blade disliked guessing as much as Lord Leighton did. In practice he knew that it was often the only alternative to lying down and letting the world roll over you like a steamroller. Blade disliked that even more than guessing.

On the eleventh day only three guards came with Blade's food and water. Two carried long knives and one carried a bow. After the guards left, Blade exercised to test his strength. He decided he could wait seven more days and still be able to fight three guards. If he waited much longer than that he'd be so weak he wouldn't be able to fight anyone and he'd have to assume he was being starved to death. He accepted that the odds against him were extremely long, but he had every intention of getting out of this prison alive. The people who expected to come in some morning and throw his body out with the garbage were going to get a nasty surprise!

Instead, it was Blade who got the surprise.

On the fifth day after he'd worked out his timetable for escaping, "breakfast" arrived with no less than six guards escorting it. For a moment Blade thought the guards suspected him and braced himself for a fight to the death here and now. Then he saw that three of the men weren't prison guards. Two wore helmets and knee-length blue robes over leather shirts, and carried short spears. They seemed to be escorting the third man, who also wore a blue robe, but his was knee-length and embroidered in red at the throat and cuffs. The third man stepped forward into the full torchlight. He was a head shorter than Jollya and pudgy rather than lean and athletic, but the face was unmistakable. Here was Jollya's father, the Keeper of Animals.

Blade knew no more than before about what made Keepers important in Jaghd, but the fact that one was visiting him was encouraging. He wasn't out of danger by any means, but if he kept his wits about him he would no longer face a choice between slow starvation and an escape attempt that might be suicidal.

The prison guards raised their torches higher and the Keeper stepped through the cell doorway. One of his escorts pulled the door shut, but did not lock it. Before the door was shut Blade saw both of the escorts stationing themselves between the door and the prison guards. Each of them looked tough enough to fight all three guards at once.

Blade relaxed his unarmed combat stance but didn't sit down. He doubted he could pretend to be humble or submissive well enough to fool this man. The Keeper looked soft until Blade saw his eyes. They were anything but soft, and like Jollya's eyes they seemed to miss very little. After another moment's silence Blade decided to go over to the attack.

"Did Jollya ask you to come and see me?"

The Keeper's eyebrows rose. "Jollya?"

"Your daughter, I believe."

"How do you know that?"

Blade smiled. "I don't know your name, but the face is familiar. It's Jollya's."

The Keeper fingered his chin. "You see clearly. Did she share your bed?"

It was impossible to tell what answer the man wanted here, so Blade decided to tell the truth. "No. I was chained in the back of a wagon all during my journey here."

"That might not have stopped my Jollya." The unreadable expression vanished for a moment, replaced by the weary look of any father with a wild, uncontrollable daughter. "I think that—no, I think I will ask you a few more questions before I answer any of yours."

"That is your privilege."

"It is also my pleasure. I am Sikkurad, Keeper of the Animals of Jaghd. One of my pleasures is to learn what I can about the world beyond Elstan and Jaghd. Do you have Keepers in your distant land of England?" Blade wasn't sure whether Sikkurad pronounced the last phrase with a skeptical note in his

voice or not.

"We have men who do all that I have heard the Keepers do. But each does only part of a Keeper's work."

"I see. Did one of these men send you on your travels, or are you roaming the world for pleasure?"

"I was sent by two men, who each do part of a Keeper's work." He smiled at the prospect of explaining Lord Leighton and J in terms the Jaghdi would understand. "One is a very learned man, who seeks new and better ways of counting." That would do for a description of a computer expert. "The other is an old warrior, who was once mighty in battle but now guards the first man." J had killed a number of men in hand-to-hand combat in his own days in the field.

"Were they also your teachers?"

"Yes." That was the truth and probably the answer Sikkurad was expecting.

"I thought you had been taught in a way no man in Jaghd has been since—in a way unlike any man in Jaghd today. You seem to think like a Keeper, but you also seem to be a man of war." He pointed at several of Blade's more prominent scars.

"Did Jollya tell you this?"

"Why do you think so much of Jollya, Blade? Does she interest you?"

"As a woman?"

"Yes," the older man said.

Blade's annoyance was not entirely an act. "I will answer that question when Jollya herself asks it, at a time and in a place where I can prove just how interested I am in her. This would not be the time or place, even if you were your daughter. As it is, you are merely taking time away from more important matters and I do not like long talks that go nowhere. Do you have so much time? Or will those guards on the other side of the door later find a way to hear what we say, and tell the queen? I wonder if Her Grace, Queen Tressana, would approve of all the things you are saying to me?"

That was something of a shot in the dark, but it hit the target. The Keeper winced and bared his teeth, and sweat broke out all over his pale forehead in spite of the chill of the cell. There was the longest silence of all. Then he laughed, although he sounded more nervous than amused.

"Very well. I want to hear you tell me why I should believe you are not a spy from Elstan. I want to hear your own words, including things you might not tell the queen."

"And if I do this?"

"Then you will have me as a friend."

"What will you do to prove that friendship?"

"Give you a chance to show the queen that you are not a spy from Elstan. Once she is satisfied, she will let no one punish you. She may even reward you. Although I'm not sure what is worse: her rewards or

her punishments." He shrugged. "That is as much as I can do now, even with all my power as a Keeper."

"Or it is as much as you will do, for a stranger who may not live to be of any use to you."

"You have a sharp tongue."

"I am merely being honest."

"Very well," the older man said. "So—tell me how you came to the borderland of Jaghd, without passing through Elstan or even hearing of the country."

Blade told a tale of coming through the mountains, dressed in warm clothing he'd left in that well-hidden camp in the ruined city. He went on to tell of entering the forest of Binaark and of his grim struggle with the killer plants.

"You would have done better to go on across the mountains," said the Keeper. "Our sentries watch the passes, but they are more merciful than the killer plants. Only very desperate men or those who hope to escape all detection come through the forest of Binaark. You say you were neither kind."

"I wasn't. But I didn't know what lay in the forest. By the time I found out, it was too late. Backward or forward or sideways, the plants were waiting for me."

Blade finished his cover story quickly, but by the time he'd finished Sikkurad was smiling with real pleasure and admiration.

"Blade, you have survived an ordeal that kills nine men out of ten who face it. The plants have done their work since—since there was Jaghd to the west of them and Elstan to the east. Would you be willing to face another, smaller ordeal to prove that you are not of Elstan?"

"That depends on the ordeal. Something which you might call less dangerous than the Forest of Binaark might kill me more surely than the plants."

"I doubt it, Blade. Your willingness to do what I ask would be like swearing to the truth of your story. All I am asking you to do is fight three of the queen's guards in a contest to prove you told the truth."

"Men guards or women?"

"Only men. Would you strike at a woman, Blade?"

"If a woman takes up arms, she should have the same chance as a man to prove her skill and courage."

Sikkurad hooted with laughter. "If you say that to Jollya, she'll fight her way to your bed."

"Before that can happen I need to find out more about what you are asking me to do in this contest. Do I fight on foot or on a rolgha?"

"You can ride?"

"Yes."

Sikkurad's eyes widened.

"In England we have animals called 'horses.' They are somewhat like the rolghas. If I have a few days to practice with the rolgha I will be riding in the fights."

Sikkurad nodded. "I shall see what I can do. If you were to fight on rolgha-back, no one could doubt you weren't of Elstan. I've never yet heard of an Elstani who could ride better than a drunken pig."

"I see. Well, I can do better than that."

"I hope so. However, you will indeed need practice if you have never mounted a rolgha before. The war-trained ones are rather spirited."

Blade suspected this was a considerable understatement. "I will fight any three men of the queen's guards on rolghas as long as I have good weapons, a good mount, and time to practice with them. Oh, and I'll need one other thing before going into this fight."

"Yes?"

"A few days of good food. I don't insist on the right to beat the prison cooks. I do refuse to fight anyone after experiencing their cooking."

"I don't blame you at all," said Sikkurad. He smiled. "That also can be arranged. The—"

Something thumped against the outside of the door three times. Apparently it was a signal for the Keeper. He raised a hand to Blade in a farewell salute, then turned and slipped out the door as it opened. The lock clinked back into place.

Blade sat down. The Keeper was clearly playing some fairly deep game of his own, and wanted Blade in it. Did he want an ally or a pawn? It was too soon to tell. At least Blade would have taken the first step on the road out of this damned cell, wherever it might lead him afterward.

Chapter 7

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Blade looked out across the hundred yards of grass where he would fight to prove himself, then reached up and adjusted the sweat band around his forehead. Queen Tressana's hunting lodge lay on the bank of the Adrim, the great river that linked Jaghd with Elstan. The damp heat and the ripe smells from the river reminded Blade of the forest of Binaark.

That was about all the two places had in common. In the forest he'd been a hungry, naked stranger, surviving by his wits, in constant danger, hardly knowing where he was going or what he might find when he got there. Here on the bank of the Adrim he was no worse than a prisoner on parole, with a chance to rise higher if he won the day's fighting. He was well fed, well armed, well mounted, and facing human opponents instead of the implacable killer plants.

Of course winning today wasn't something to be taken for granted. It would also probably throw him headfirst into the tangled politics of Jaghd, but he could live with that. Compared to the Soviet KGB or the American CIA, most of the intriguers and plotters he'd met in Dimension X were hardly more than children. Dangerous children, to be sure, but still children. They didn't have the perverted ingenuity or the

vast resources of modern nations and their intelligence agencies.

Blade's rolgha whinnied softly. He turned to his mount, checking the saddle, stirrups, bridle, and above all the muzzle. He remembered Sikkurad's words when he was showing Blade the rolgha.

"You see that brand? This is a rolgha from the queen's own stables. She loves her rolghas more than she'd love her children if she had any. She will expect this one back unhurt."

"Then why is she risking him in this fight at all?"

"Because she also breeds the best rolghas in Jaghd, and wants you to have one under you today."

"Do you know why?"

"No. And I probably would not tell you if I did."

The warning tone was unmistakable. Blade knew he was in no position to look a gift rolgha in the mouth, whatever reasons the queen might have for making the gift. "All right. Now what are the rules of the fight?"

"You leave the muzzle on and do not strike at the other man's mount. For honor's sake your opponents must do the same."

Blade wasn't going to trust something as fragile as the honor of unknown opponents too far. He'd make sure that his rolgha's muzzle stayed in place just as long as those of his opponents' but not a second longer. Now when he examined the muzzle, he paid particular attention to the slip knots fastening it in place. With two quick tugs, Blade could release the knots, let the muzzle drop to the ground, and leave his mount free to use its teeth. Those teeth made stallion duels among rolghas fights to the death more often than not and made even a rolgha mare a match for any of Jaghd's predators.

By the time Blade finished his inspection, the rest of the spectators for the duel had arrived. Although Queen Tressana was with them, they arrived with neither fanfare nor ceremony. No doubt the queen considered this a holiday rather than a state occasion.

Thirteen men under Curim and ten women under Jollya escorted the queen and led several pack rolghas. A discreet distance behind the royal party rode Sikkurad with half a dozen of his guards. The guards looked as tough as the ones who'd been with him in the prison, but Sikkurad rode like a sack of potatoes. Even from a distance Blade could make out the relief on the Keeper's face as he slid clumsily out of his saddle.

The queen sat down cross-legged while the guards unloaded the pack animals, set up a tent, and spread out a picnic lunch. Blade signaled to his own guards, who'd been with him since he left the prison the week before. Then he swung himself up into the saddle and rode at a walk over to the royal party.

Curim ran toward his mount as he saw Blade on the move. But Jollya was still in the saddle, and she spurred her rolgha into movement and reached Blade well ahead of the other captain.

"Blade, be careful," she whispered fiercely. "The three men you'll be fighting are Curim's picked killers. He uses them to deal with his enemies in the guard. They've never been beaten."

"When was the last time the royal guards of Jaghd fought a battle?"

Jollya stiffened as if he'd slapped her. Blade realized she'd taken the words as an insult rather than a request for information about the level of experience he might be facing. He mentally cursed his own careless tongue and Jollya's thin skin. Before he could say anything else, Curim rode up. She didn't quite turn her back on Curim, but the way she held herself told Blade she would have liked to.

Blade looked past the two captains at Queen Tressana. She was smiling, and there was a naked look of pleasure in the wide blue eyes. Blade had the feeling that if the two captains had quarreled openly she'd have been licking her lips, and if they'd come to blows she'd have been applauding them impartially.

No, that's not quite right. That would wreck her guards, and she's not foolish enough to pay that price for her fun. But she still looks much too fond of games for my taste.

Blade looked around. His own guards were now riding up behind him. There was no chance of making a break for it, not with more than two dozen armed guards in sight and the nearest cover nearly three hundred yards away. If the chances of getting clear had been only a little better, Blade would have considered clapping spurs to his rolgha and trying to leave the Jaghdi and all their plots behind.

Tressana rose, brushed grass and insects off her trousers, and walked up to the three riders. "Are you ready, Blade?"

"Yes."

"Very good." She waved to Sikkurad, who also rose and came over. Queen and Keeper together would be the witnesses to Blade's oath, and would be two of the four judges of the fight. Curim and Jollya would be the other judges. Blade ran the words of the oath through his mind one more time, then took a deep breath and spoke.

"I am Richard Blade, warrior of England, no man of Elstan and no enemy to Jaghd. This I swear by the Lord of the Sky and the Lady of the Grass, by the Highest Powers of my own land, and by my own steel and my own blood.

"To prove these words, I shall submit to the Judgment of Steel and Blood. I shall fight three combats against three opponents chosen by the judges of today. If my oath is a true one, let the victory in all three combats be judged mine. If my oath is false, let my steel fail me and my blood stain the Lady's grass beneath me."

He'd thought of adding an offer to fight all three men at once, but decided against it after hearing Jollya's warning. Three men weren't necessarily a match for one unless they were a team trained to fight together. If his opponents were Curim's personal goon squad, they might be trained that way. After the fight, I owe Jollya something special for that warning. Somehow he no longer doubted he would be alive to thank her. He knew the dangers of overconfidence, but that didn't keep him from feeling better than he had since he entered this Dimension. A few days of good food and a chance to hit back had done most of the work. Blade grinned and shouted to the men guards, "All right! Who wants to be the first to see the doctors?"

The Jaghdi fought as they did because they were excellent riders, who had powerful mounts under them but little in the way of metal weapons. They had bows and shields that used no metal, lances and arrows that used metal only at the tips, and even swords that used surprisingly little. They wore armor of wood and leather; metal was used only for the fastenings or the breastplates and helmets of the very wealthy. Their rolgha harnesses used very little metal other than the heavy bits, and their saddles used none. The leather the Jaghdi got from their endless herds wasn't entirely a substitute for the metal they had to import,

but along with wood it was enough to give them a highly effective cavalry.

Their short horsebows could kill an unarmored man at a hundred yards, their lances were among the best Blade had ever handled, and their shields were light and tough. The swords usually consisted of a four-foot length of wood with a metal edge two inches wide riveted into a groove on one side. They reminded Blade of the swords of the Aztec Indians, which had obsidian chips instead of metal to give them an edge. All-metal swords were rare, a sign of great wealth or high rank. From where he sat on his rolgha Blade could see only two metal swords, one of them Curim's and the other Jollya's.

Of course, the metal-edged swords were much lighter than they'd have been if they were entirely made of metal, and they were useless for a backswing or a conventional thrust. But they were well-balanced, and were very good for a slash from the back of a rolgha. Blade had also used his knowledge of kendo and singlestick fighting to work out ways of using the swords as clubs. He hadn't practiced too much, for fear of revealing his knowledge, but he was sure he could spring a surprise or two on even the best Jaghdi opponent.

Blade's first opponent was so far from the best that he wondered if the man had been told to sacrifice himself in order to make Blade overconfident. However, it seemed unlikely that any man would have volunteered or could have been ordered to make such a fool of himself and nearly get killed as well.

Blade knocked the man's shield aside on the first pass and did it again on the second. He also nearly broke the man's arm, so that on the third pass the man rode in without his shield, sprained arm dangling, and put his entire trust in his lance to win back the advantage for him.

This gave Blade his biggest challenge of the whole fight: how to win without killing. It would have been much easier simply to thrust his lance into the man's chest, but he didn't want to. Blade hated killing unnecessarily even when it was safe to do so. He also doubted that it would be entirely safe to kill one of Curim's friends.

Blade was sweating from more than the heat of the day as he and his opponent spurred their rolghas toward each other for the third time. The man was coming in faster than before, with clods flying up from his rolgha's hooves. He grew larger and larger, until he was Blade's whole world. Then Blade's point moved through a six-inch arc as the other man's lance smashed into Blade's shield.

The Jaghdi's gamble very nearly paid off. Blade was jarred from head to foot, his shield arm screamed in protest, and if his feet hadn't been firm in the stirrups he would have gone out of the saddle. But his own lance caught the lacing at the man's left shoulder and sent him flying over his mount's rump. The man parted company with his lance in mid-air and came down with a thud, his good arm under him. He cursed, struggled to his feet, tried to raise a hand to wipe rolgha dung and dirt off his face, then screamed at the sudden pain.

With both arms disabled, the man could do nothing but give up the fight and stumble back to where the doctors waited. He cursed Blade all the way, and Blade knew he'd made another enemy. He also knew that he'd made a highly favorable impression on all the judges except Curim. The guard captain was surly and growled at Blade:

"It would have been a fairer fight if you'd thrown away your own shield after he lost his."

"Perhaps," said Blade. "But I not only want to win these fights. I want to win them and still be fit to give good service to Jaghd and its noble queen afterward. If the gods do not wish this, let them pass their judgment." He looked at the queen.

Curim glared and took a deep breath to reply, but Tressana spoke first. "No doubt they will, but first we need to pass ours. I say Blade wins."

"And I," said Jollya and her father almost together.

"Well, Curim?" said the queen. She was still smiling, but it was one of those smiles that didn't reach the eyes. "Do you call Blade the winner?"

"Oh, yes. I have to say so. But I'll be surprised if I have to say so again."

"I think you'd better get ready to be surprised, Curim," said Blade. He had no doubt the captain was glaring again as he turned his rolgha and rode back out onto the field, ready to meet his second opponent.

Chapter 8

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Blade's second opponent was a bigger man than the first, and rode the largest rolgha Blade had ever seen. If they'd been in a real battle or even a less formal duel, the size of the other man's mount would have given him an advantage. A good Jaghdi rider could sideswipe an opponent's mount with his own, leaving the other man at least dismounted, sometimes pinned under his own rolgha. Since this trick was often rather hard on both rolghas involved, it was clearly out of the question when one of the rolghas was from Queen Tressana's stables.

Blade's second opponent kept his distance, and the three passes with the lance went by quickly and harmlessly. Most of the leather covering was stripped off Blade's shield, but otherwise he was in good shape. The bout with swords, however, was another matter. The Jaghd was an expert swordsman, and unlike some of the guards he could use his sword one-handed. In fact, he'd practiced until his right arm and shoulder were noticeably more developed than his left. He made his sword dance about Blade's ears as if it were no heavier than a bamboo pole.

Fortunately Blade's rolgha was as well-behaved as he could have hoped, and Blade's arms were even stronger than his opponent's. Otherwise the Englishman might have taken a disabling wound early in the sword bout. He did have to spend the first few minutes on the defensive, sizing up his opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Meanwhile the sun was getting hotter and the sweat streaming down made the leather of his armor begin to turn black. From behind him Blade heard shouts which might have come from anyone, sarcastic remarks unmistakably from Curim, and once a strangled scream which must have come from Jollya.

The two fighters swung their rolghas in tight circles, until a patch of grass twenty yards across was trampled almost completely flat. The guardsman sometimes shouted insults or curses, but Blade saved his breath and fought in grim silence. He knew he could stand on the defensive for a while longer, perhaps even long enough to wear out his opponent's sword arm. That would take a while, and also use up strength Blade suspected he'd need for his third opponent. He had no way of guessing who that might be, but knowing Curim he would be surprised if the man wasn't the most formidable of the day's opponents. He decided it was time to use his Home Dimension skills with the sword. Revealing them now would warn the third man, but that was less dangerous than letting this fight drag on much longer.

As he circled away from his opponent for the twentieth time, Blade dropped his sword hand behind his shield and shifted his grip on the sword. His opponent apparently noticed nothing. All he did was ask loudly how Blade would like his manhood served up to him after the fight.

Then Blade dug in his spurs, his rolgha leaped forward, and his sword came up into position for a thrust. The other man was good enough to understand what was happening. He started raising his shield and turning his mount but didn't do either in time. The hardwood tip of Blade's sword swept in over the top of his opponent's shield and crashed into his jaw. It was only a glancing blow, so it broke the man's jaw instead of his neck.

The guardsman was still full of fight. Cursing as well as he could with his broken jaw, he spat out bloody teeth and hunched down so that his shield covered as much of him as possible. The only easy targets left for Blade were the man's helmeted head and his sword arm.

If Blade hadn't felt his rolgha steady as a rock under him, he wouldn't have risked the next attack. But he now trusted his mount almost as completely as he did his own body. He rode in again, and this time he thrust hard at the small target of his opponent's right wrist. Blade's sharp eye and perfect coordination did half the work, and the sword tip with Blade's weight and the speed of his rolgha behind it did the rest: The guardsman screamed at the pain of his smashed wrist and his sword dangled uselessly, although he somehow managed to keep a desperate grip on it. He obviously wasn't going to swing it again.

Blade turned half around in the saddle, straightened his left arm, and flung his shield away. Then he gripped his sword with both hands feinted to draw the guardsman's shield down, and brought the wood side of his sword down on the man's head. The man's eyes rolled up in his head and he toppled out of the saddle into the grass.

Rolghas who suddenly lost their riders could become dangerous. Blade gripped the other rolgha's bridle until he could be sure the beast wasn't going to trample its fallen rider underfoot. Then he let it go, and rode back toward the judges as several guardsmen rode out to pick up their fallen comrade.

This time Curim admitted that Blade was the winner without the queen's prompting, and even with a faint smile on his face. Blade didn't trust that smile. He would rather have seen the guard captain in a blazing rage. The smile indicated that whatever plots against Blade might be hatching today, they were mostly Curim's.

All right, what could the guard captain be planning for the third fight? Blade thought about this as he sat on the grass drinking lukewarm, mint-flavored water from a leather bottle. The fight would be out in the same open field as the first two. If there'd been any snares or pitfalls prepared, he or one of his opponents would almost certainly have already stumbled into them. So the trick would probably involve striking from a distance, and that meant archery.

Would one of the guards shoot because he "thought Blade was trying to escape?" Possibly. Or would some friend of Blade's third opponent "go mad" and shoot? That wasn't at all impossible. The man who did the shooting would be doomed, of course. If Curim didn't have to kill him to show how clean his hands were, the queen would do the job. So the archer would have to be a good shot but not very intelligent. How likely was it that there was such a man among the guards today?

Quite likely. Blade had few illusions about the ability of most people to believe what they wanted to believe, rather than what made sense. He'd been called a cynic for this attitude, but he preferred to call it common sense, at least in his profession. Certainly it had saved his life a good many times, whatever you cared to call it.

The best way to deal with this sort of trick would be to win suddenly, catching Curim and the archer by surprise. It would also help if he could win while he was so close to his opponent that the archer would be afraid of hitting his comrade if he shot. That should delay things until the fight was over, and then it would be too late for Curim to do anything today. Blade knew he would have to go on watching his back all the time he was in this Dimension, or at least in Jaghd, but he was used to that.

Blade ate some biscuits and fruit, then drank more water. He didn't want to risk a stomachache by eating a heavy meal, but he badly needed the water. Normally he was as nearly immune to heat as anyone not born in the tropics could be, but he wanted to take no chances. Today the temperature must be close to a hundred, the dampness along the river made it worse, and there wasn't a breath of wind. Even Tressana and Jollya were beginning to wilt, and Sikkurad looked as if he'd sell his soul for a bath and a cold drink.

Blade was glad he'd been careful when he saw his third opponent. The man was the biggest of the thirteen guardsmen, taller than Blade and just as heavily built. He looked almost too big for his rolgha to carry through the fight without tiring. On the other hand his rolgha was starting fresh, while Blade's mount had already carried him through two fights. As far as Blade could see, he and his latest opponent would be a nearly perfect match. If the man had any weaknesses, it would take time to discover them, and time was the one thing Blade knew he couldn't rely on having.

Oh well, anyone who thinks hand-to-hand combat can be neat and tidy doesn't live long enough to learn otherwise.

Blade mounted and rode out into the field at a walk, to spare his mount. His opponent followed at a trot, with Curim and several of his comrades cheering him on.

Blade reined in when they reached the circle of trampled grass, but the guardsman simply pulled his rolgha around in a circle without stopping. Then he dropped his lance into striking position and spurred his rolgha up to a canter. Blade rode to meet him, and they came together so hard that both lances were smashed into splinters.

Both shields were still intact, however, and neither man was the worse for the shock. So one of Jollya's guardswomen rode out with fresh lances for both men, and they came at each other again. This time Blade's thrust was better placed. His lance tip caught in a split in the leather covering of his opponent's shield, jerked the shield out of position, and nearly pulled the man out of his saddle. For a moment the guardsman was completely unprotected. If Blade could have drawn his sword he could have ended the fight then and there, but the man went by too fast.

On the third pass with lance and shield, the guardsman's rolgha was only trotting, and the rider hardly tried to thrust at Blade. He crouched behind his shield, holding it so firmly that Blade's lance broke again and for a moment his right arm went numb all the way to the shoulder. He felt as if he'd thrust at a stone wall.

As the guardsman drew his sword, Blade trotted his rolgha around in circles, desperately flexing his arm to get it back into fighting shape. He was annoyed to realize that he hadn't got back all the strength he'd lost in the jungle and the prison, and the fighting had taken more out of him than he'd expected. It was too bad that he not only had to win this fight but also had to make a good show for the judges, and also guard against Curim's treachery.

Blade decided to make his move at the first decent chance he got. The guardsman was probably

stronger than he was right now, but Blade knew he'd still have two advantages. One would be surprise; the other, the fact that the Jaghdi had no system of unarmed combat.

Blade drew his sword, but carefully loosened the straps on his shield so he could discard it with a single jerk of his arm. Then he shouted, "Come and be butchered, son of a sow!" and spurred his rolgha at the man.

Blade's opponent did the same but didn't notice that Blade was pulling on the reins at the same time as he dug in the spurs. Blade's rolgha whinnied and started to buck in confusion, but Blade kept it under control. The guardsman rode in at a canter, shield raised to meet a thrust, sword raised to come down on Blade's head or shoulder. He made the fatal mistake of concentrating completely on what he was going to do to his opponent, ignoring what his opponent might be planning to do himself. So he rode up to Blade without noticing that Blade's rolgha was almost standing still, a steady platform for launching any sort of attack.

As his opponent's sword came down, Blade exploded into action so fast and furiously that even those who saw him could only figure out afterward what he'd done. His sword dropped to the ground, his shield arm straightened suddenly, and his shield flew like a thrown discus at the guardsman. It flew high, crashing into his sword so that its slash went completely wild. Blade had nothing to fear from the sword as he hurled himself forward, gripping his opponent's shield with both hands.

Blade's rolgha squealed and bucked wildly. If the guardsman had thought of letting go of his shield, Blade would have dropped to the ground and would have probably lost his life as well, trampled to death by one of the rolghas. Instead the man froze in surprise, giving Blade all the time he needed. Blade swung himself up onto the back of the other rolgha, let go of the shield, got the man in a hammerlock with one arm, and chopped at the side of his neck with the other. As he felt the man go limp, he hurled himself to one side, to get clear of both the rolgha's hooves and his falling opponent.

All the spectators were shouting and screaming as the two men hit the grass. Somehow the guardsman sat up, and as he reached for his dagger Blade lunged for him again. He had to admire the guardsman's toughness, but that made it all the more important to put him down and keep him down. This fight wasn't going to be over until the other man was unconscious.

Then above the shouting Blade heard Curim's voice bellowing, "No, you—!" Blade didn't hear the whistle of the arrow, because he shouted, "Get down, you fool!" to his opponent, then threw himself as far as he could. He landed rolling, and as he rolled he heard the guardsman let out a throat-tearing scream.

When Blade raised his head he saw the guardsman sitting as if he'd been turned to stone, an arrow driven into his left eye and blood trickling from his nose and mouth.

Then he slumped sideways, kicked twice, and lay still. Curim hadn't been able to stop his archer in time.

Blade was never really sure why he stayed out in the open field, a perfect target for more arrows, instead of catching one of the rolghas or running toward the judges.

He thought it was because he knew the scuffle among the spectators meant there would be no more arrows, but he also suspected it was because he wanted to honor the guardsman's courage, and arrows be damned! Blade bent over his fallen opponent, straightened his legs, and crossed his arms on his chest. He retrieved the man's shield and put it over his face. Then he picked up the man's dagger and thrust it into his own belt. Finally he rose and walked slowly toward the spectators.

As he approached, both men and women stepped out of his path. Curim looked away, the archer held by four guards buried his face in his hands, and even Tressana turned slightly pale under her tan as she looked at Blade. Her voice was hoarse as she spoke to her guard captain.

"Curim. This was your work, wasn't it?"

It was the captain's turn to go pale. Tressana raised her hand, and five of the guardswomen turned their rolghas and lowered their lances. Blade stood quietly, his hands at his sides. In spite of his rage, he knew that a single wrong word or movement could set off a bloody fight. He might die in it, and even if he didn't Tressana could be killed. Then there would be chaos in Jaghd.

"Well?" Tressana's voice cut like a whip. Curim swallowed, then nodded. The queen laughed. Blade had seldom heard such unpleasant laughter. Then she smiled, without warmth. "Curim, I do not know what you thought to accomplish by this. I will not ask, either. I will simply give you a choice. Slay the archer now with your own hands or lay down your post as captain of the Men's Guard."

Curim never had a chance to obey or refuse. The archer let out an animal roar and with desperate strength tore himself free of the men holding him. He hurled himself at Curim. Blade was in the man's path and acted almost by reflex. He reached into his own belt, drew the dead guardsman's dagger, then thrust upward at the archer. The man's leather armor deflected the point upward, but only from his heart into his throat. Blade jerked the dagger free and the archer staggered a few more steps, then fell and lay still. Blade wiped the dagger on the dead man's breeches, then raised it hilt-first in salute to Tressana.

"Your Grace, this was a more fitting end for the archer. I killed him with his comrade's dagger. Now his comrade can rest easy, although he himself was not blameless in this affair."

Blade's words set all the guards murmuring and whispering, except for Curim. He stood, trying not to look at either Blade or the queen, until Tressana spoke again.

"So be it. I will say that justice has been done, and will say no more of this. Curim, you still have your place, but it would be best if you kept out of my sight until I say otherwise."

"But—"

"You will obey." Tressana made a pointed gesture at the guardswomen all around. Some of them now had their bows in their hands. Curim growled something which it was probably well nobody understood, mounted his rolgha, and rode off. When he was out of sight Tressana dismounted, held on to her stirrup for a moment, then turned to Blade.

"Blade of England, why did you take it upon yourself to deal out First Justice to the archer?"

"I did not take it upon myself, Your Grace. It was thrust upon me by the fool himself." He pointed at the dead man.

"You could have stepped aside and let him slay Curim."

"Then I would have been guilty of Curim's death."

"This worries you, after Curim sought your life by treachery?"

"If I let him die, his men would want my blood, and there are many of them. Why should I make more enemies than necessary?"

"Blade, I could still almost believe that you lied about not being of Elstan. They have a way of fighting without weapons much like yours. But to defeat three of our guardsmen—well, even if you are not of England, you are certainly of no land under any sun which has ever shone on Jaghd or Elstan." She laughed again and rested one hand lightly on Blade's shoulder. She had to reach up rather a long way to do so.

At this point one of the guards collapsed on the grass, overcome by the heat. The doctor hurried forward to help him, and behind the doctor came Sikkurad. He also looked as if he would like to faint, but his voice was steady.

"Your Grace, the gods have shown us that Blade is not of Elstan, and that Curim is—"

"Never mind Curim, Keeper. You are claiming your reward for proposing this test of Blade?"

"Yes." Blade noticed that unlike Curim, Sikkurad was able to meet the queen's eyes. "I would ask Blade to take guest-right in my house, while you find a place for him."

"Such a warrior should be a guest among warriors, not in the house of a Keeper."

"He should also be at a safe distance from Curim, at least for a month or so."

"That also is true. But—" Blade half expected her to say, "But you will obey." Instead it was the queen who looked away, and the Keeper who looked at Blade.

"Will you accept my house and all within it for a month, Lord Blade?"

"I will."

"Good." He hurried off, to help the doctor with the sun-stricken soldier. The queen's back was still turned to Blade, and he risked a quick look at Jollya. She seemed to feel his stare and turned slightly to look back at him. Unmistakably, she winked. Blade smiled, and resisted the temptation to laugh.

He might have rejected Tressana's friendship or even made an enemy of her by accepting Sikkurad's hospitality.

On the other hand, he suspected that he would learn more, and be in less danger, in the Keeper's house. Sikkurad could certainly answer most of his remaining questions about this Dimension, and the Keeper's guards seemed to be honorable men even if Curim, their captain, was not.

He also looked forward to seeing more of Jollya.

Chapter 9

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Neither Sikkurad nor his daughter turned out to have as much time for Blade as he'd hoped. Sikkurad's duties as Keeper of the Animals forced him to travel all over Jaghd, although he hated riding and groaned

aloud at the thought of a day in the saddle. As for Jollya, rumor said that the queen was finding all sorts of new errands for her, to keep her away from her father's house and thus away from Blade.

Blade had plenty of time to listen to this rumor, and to all the others going around. He had nothing to do, in fact, but eat four meals a day, run, swim, exercise, and get back the rest of his strength. After a week of this he was becoming irritable from sheer boredom. He would cheerfully have taken one of the servant girls to bed, or gone into Sikkurad's library of books, scrolls, and parchments to start learning about Jaghd on his own. Unfortunately the servant girls were curiously reluctant to approach him, although he heard admiring comments about him when they thought he wasn't listening. The library was simply forbidden territory, guarded by six or eight of Sikkurad's household fighters who were as deaf as fence-posts to all Blade's arguments.

Without the rumors, Blade might have started feeling that he was simply in another, more comfortable, prison. Instead he was able to put the rumors together into a picture of how things were going in Jaghd. He could have done a better job if he'd known a little more about the history of this Dimension, but he could be sure of one thing: Jaghd was getting ready for war against Elstan.

There could be no other explanation for all the tales of rolghas and draft animals being gathered, metal hoarded for weapons, new soldiers recruited and trained, hard bread and salt meat piled up high in the storehouses. If half these tales were true, the war might even break out while Blade was still in this Dimension.

That explained why everyone was so ready to see spies under every bush and behind every door. It didn't explain how the army of Jaghd was supposed to get over the mountains that lay between it and Elstan. Blade had seen just enough of the mountains to agree that they were completely impassable to any large body of men. The only other ways to invade Elstan were by boat up the Adrim River, or through the forest of Binaark itself.

The Adrim was navigable only two months of the year, and in those two months the Jaghdi and the Elstani did all their trading. The rest of the year it was either too shallow, too fast, or jammed with ice which flowed down from the river's source in the mountains. An army coming up the Adrim would find the Elstani ready for it. After a month or two it would be completely cut off from its homeland, trapped by the water level, the currents or the ice. The army would have no supply source and the Elstani would only have to hold out for that month and a little longer, then round up the starving survivors of Jaghd's fighting men. The fact that the Jaghdi were all cavalry and that their rolghas ate ten or fifteen pounds of meat a day made matters even worse.

As for marching through the forest of Binaark—no one had ever led an army through it. The killer plants were dangerous enough to a man on foot, where a single slip could kill him. But an army of men, even though they were armed, equipped, and trained until they had at least a fighting chance against the killer plants, could never make it through the forest. Any army would need baggage and draft animals, as well as untrained servants, teamsters, and laborers. A Jaghdi army would need thousands of rolghas. There was no way of getting all these vulnerable targets past the killer plants. Sending an army into the forest of Binaark would make the Charge of the Light Brigade look sensible. A third of the army would die among the killer plants, a third would die of starvation and disease, and the Elstani would hit the survivors over the head as they staggered out of the forest.

The idea was ridiculous. There was no other word for it.

Sikkurad finally called on Blade late one hot afternoon, when Blade had just finished running two miles. The sweat was pouring off him but he knew he had all his strength back now.

"Lord Blade, I would speak with you;" said the Keeper. "In my library."

"I would like to bathe before I—"

"Your life may hang on what I have to tell you." Sikkurad's voice was low, so that only Blade could hear him, and his face was even paler than usual. Jollya had a tan any fashion model would have envied, but her father remained as pale as a mushroom no matter how much he rode in the sun.

The Keeper's words were so melodramatic that Blade would have laughed if it hadn't been for the man's tone and expression. "Something to do with the queen?"

"Yes."

Blade rose and followed Sikkurad into the library. Inside he sat down on a leather-covered bench, while the Keeper pulled a heavily-padded inner door into place behind the main one.

"No one can hear us now. I trust my guards in most things, but I will not trust even them in this matter."

"Very wise."

Sikkurad frowned. "Blade, do you think the queen wants you in her bed?"

Blade had to assume that this pointless question was meant seriously, but found it hard not to laugh. "I'd wager my manhood on it."

"You may be wagering your life."

"Perhaps. But I've wagered it before without losing it."

"Not against Tressana of Jaghd. For a woman she is something terrible. She frightens even Keepers who have fought in war." Sikkurad pulled at his hair in a distracted manner.

This time Blade had to fight down anger. If he had to sit here until Sikkurad got his nerves under control and started making sense, they'd be here all night. He stood up.

"Sikkurad, do you remember what I said in the prison? I do not like long talks that go nowhere. You seem to want to tell me something of great importance about Queen Tressana. Something where my life may even be at stake. But so far you have told me nothing. Now tell me quickly, or I am going to go and take my bath."

"You would not get past my guards."

Blake tried to bluff. "Perhaps not, unless I took you a prisoner."

Sikkurad swallowed but shook his head. "That would not save you or stop them, even if I died. And if I died, how would you learn what I am about to tell you? Without learning it, how could you help our people? Blade, I think you will not let a chance to do much good pass simply because you do not like the way I talk. You are skilled in war, but you will work for peace as well."

Blade sat down, smiling. He'd expected his bluff to fail, but not quite so thoroughly. Sikkurad's courage might be well hidden under all the roundabout talk, but it was definitely there. So was an exceptionally keen eye for other men's strengths and weaknesses. Blade would have been happy to see Sikkurad's words—"you are skilled in war, but you will work for peace as well"—carved on his tombstone, in this or any other Dimension. He decided to listen to the man no matter how long-winded he was.

"I will work for peace when I can. But right now it seems that Jaghd is preparing for war against Elstan."

Sikkurad started. "You know? Who told you?"

Blade explained how he'd listened to the rumors, and gradually the Keeper relaxed. Then he sighed, and began talking in short, jerky sentences. "You're right. Tressana's war is coming. How soon, we do not know. Not too soon, because she has asked you to the palace. It will need time, time for her to learn your ways, deal with Curim, have her guards accept you. Jollya would be happy to see you leading the men."

"No doubt," Blade murmured politely. This would all make sense if he listened long enough.

"We must let you go. Now. So you must learn all you need to know here, today. We don't have the rest of the month. Tressana will be suspicious if we take it." "We?" Sikkurad charged on as if he were deaf. "You must learn how Tressana will deal with Elstan. Everything depends on that. If she will join their strength with ours, well and good. If not, something must be done."

"About what?"

"Tressana's war, of course."

"Why the hurry?" It began to sound as if Blade was to spy on the queen. If that was so he wasn't going to refuse completely, but he'd be damned if he'd let Sikkurad hustle him! Trying to do intelligence work in a hurry was usually unsuccessful and sometimes disastrous. "The Adrim won't be navigable again for months, and if you're going through the mountains—"

"Oh, we won't be doing either. We're going through the forest of Binaark. "

Blade ran the incredible words back and forth through his mind several times. After a moment he decided to believe in the simplest explanation: Sikkurad had said it and meant it.

"How?"

Sikkurad pulled down a scroll from a pigeonhole in one of the cabinets, unrolled it on his desk, weighted down both ends, and motioned Blade to join him. Blade saw that the scroll was a map. Then Sikkurad began to speak. After listening for a few minutes, Blade understood a good deal more about the history of this Dimension. He even understood how the army of Jaghd was planning to march through the forest of Binaark.

As Blade suspected, this Dimension had once been devastated by war. Nuclear weapons, chemicals, and bacteria had all been used freely, and not just once but several times over the course of a century. In Jaghd this was called the Time of the Burning. In Elstan it was called the Time of the Dead. Among the barbarian tribes to the west of Jaghd it was called the Time when the Gods Slept.

"No doubt there are other lands where it is called other things," said Sikkurad. "The world before the Burning was much larger than it is now. But we know nothing of those lands and the men who may have survived elsewhere. Indeed, until Tressana came to rule Jaghd, only the Keepers did not fear to learn about the people of other lands."

Blade nodded. The idea that a stranger must be an enemy runs deep in most people. If the people are the survivors of a nuclear war the fear runs even deeper than usual. If Tressana had done anything to fight that fear, she had done at least one good thing for her people.

How long ago the Time of the Burning was, no one could be sure. No way of accurately dating it was known, even to the Keepers. Certainly much of the damage from the war had disappeared, but not all. Wide stretches of land were still blighted, particularly in Elstan. Strange and sometimes terrible mutations were not unknown among men and animals, and quite common among plants.

"The killer plants of the forest of Binaark were one of those mutations?"

"Yes. They grew quickly after the Burning, and bred true."

Blade also learned from the keeper that by the time the survivors on either side of the forest recovered from the burning, the killer plants stood between them. The mountains were completely inaccessible half the year and impassable for trading purposes the rest of the time. The Adrim could carry any amount of trade, but only for two months out of the year. Slowly but surely, the survivors to the east and west of the forest became two separate peoples.

On their plains, the Jaghdi became stockbreeders and farmers, with rich fields and herds. In their mountains, the Elstani became miners and metalworkers. Among both, there were men with the duty of passing down what knowledge had survived from before the Burning and, if possible, recovering what had been lost. The Jaghdi called these men the Keepers; the Elstani called them Masters.

In Jaghd the Keepers were experts in the biological sciences, including stockbreeding, plant grafting, medicine, and organic chemistry. They were also skilled builders in stone and wood. In Elstan the Masters knew just about everything there was to know about mining and metalworking.

In both lands the knowledge was very much rule-of-thumb—neither the Keepers nor the Masters had rediscovered the scientific method nor the advanced technology of their predecessors. That didn't mean their knowledge couldn't be taken seriously. Blade knew that the Roman Empire had worked rather well for several centuries with out anything resembling the scientific method or modern-day technology.

The generations went by and turned into centuries. The trade between the Jaghdi and the Elstani became essential to both, although each tried to get the best of the bargain. The Jaghdi sold the Elstani only sterile animals if possible; the Elstani preferred not to sell the Jaghdi finished metal weapons. Both understood that as long as Binaark and its killer plants stood between them, neither could do much to change the situation.

"It seemed willed by the gods," said Sikkurad. "Indeed, there are some who believe that the killer plants are the gods. Once these people even made human sacrifices to them. It will be interesting what they say when our army marches through 'the home of the gods' in the forest."

The Keeper went on to explain that more than any other person in Jaghd, it was Queen Tressana who'd started the Jaghdi on what might be the road to the conquest of Elstan. She'd married Prince Manro when she was only fourteen, five years before he came to the throne of Jaghd. Two years after being

crowned, he became seriously ill. After a while his body recovered, but his mind never did.

"Did Tressana have anything to do with the illness?"

Sikkurad started, even though they were as secure as possible from prying ears. Then he shrugged. "That is a question not often asked these past ten years."

"I know. But it is one I need answered. A woman who will have her husband poisoned to destroy his mind—"

"I understand. Tressana has shown that she could do such a thing now. Whether she could have done it then—and whether she had the opportunity to do it even if she had the will—no one knows."

Blade would have liked to know more, but he was glad to learn that Sikkurad wasn't the sort of man to peddle gossip or boast of knowledge he didn't have.

So Tressana was a childless widow at twenty-one. Within a year she was ruling as Queen of Jaghd in her own right, the first woman ever to do this. Ruling queens weren't exactly unlawful in Jaghd, but no one had ever expected to see one. The women of Jaghd were supposed to bear the children, manage the houses, and no more.

"It's different in Elstan?"

"Yes."

Among the Elstani, women could do everything except fight in war, and since the Elstani seldom fought wars this hardly mattered. There were even women Masters in Elstan. Why the two peoples were so different, Sikkurad couldn't explain. It had been this way as long as the Jaghdi and Elstani were two peoples.

"And it will probably always be this way, no matter how many young women Tressana puts in armor and sends riding off on rolghas!" growled Sikkurad. For a moment the Keeper was only a sad father whose hopes of a brilliant career for his daughter had been dashed.

In fact, forming the Women's Guard was about the only really surprising thing Tressana had done. She'd taken her share of lovers, of course, and she'd occasionally been cruel, but these were traditional privileges of the rulers of Jaghd. After a while most people got used to the idea of a woman ruling them, even if they didn't like it. It helped that Tressana gave wise judgments when she knew the facts, appointed honest officials when she could find them, lowered taxes when she could afford it, and generally worked hard and well at the job of ruling Jaghd.

Five years of this was enough to seat her firmly on the throne of Jaghd. Then she gathered the Keepers in secret, and told them she wanted a way of taking an army through the forest of Binaark. She didn't care what it was or how they found it or what it cost. She wanted it.

"It is time to undo the work of the Burning," she said. "And for more than that. It is time for Jaghd and Elstan to be one people."

It was three years before Tressana got what she wanted, even though the Keepers worked harder than ever before. Some worked in the hope of great rewards; others worked in fear of horrible punishments. But eventually they discovered that the secretions of a gland in the bone-eating green beetles gave off a

distinctive scent, which suppressed the attack reflex of the killer plants. Would a man giving off the same scent also be safe from attack? Probably. But that meant finding some way of synthesizing the secretion, or at least its scent. There wouldn't be enough beetles in the whole forest to protect more than a handful of men.

Sikkurad was proud of the work he'd done in searching for a synthetic scent. He talked about it so long that Blade began to worry about their being interrupted by visitors or guards. Then suddenly he realized what Sikkurad was really describing, and stopped worrying about anything else. Sikkurad was describing the rediscovery of the scientific method. He wasn't using words like "experiment" or "result" but he was certainly describing them clearly enough. Blade wondered if Queen Tressana would ever realize what a gift she'd made to her people and her world, or how she'd pushed civilization in this Dimension an enormous step forward. Now it hardly mattered whether her planned invasion of Elstan succeeded or not.

Or did it? Sikkurad was going on, describing how hundreds of gallons of the synthetic scent were now being made at a time. A wad of cloth soaked with the scent and worn around the neck would protect a man for nearly a week. Two or three would protect a rolgha or a draft animal. There was already enough synthetic scent to protect thousands of men, with more being made every day. As soon as the harvest was in, the Jaghdi would be able to march through the forest and surprise the Elstani.

"We think the scent is still a secret. So even though the Elstani may know that we prepare for war, they don't know how. They will be ready for us to come up the Adrim, or over the mountains. They will leave the forest unprotected, as it has always been. That may mean the end of them."

"The end of them?"

"Yes, perhaps. We do not know what Tressana plans to do with the Elstani when she has defeated them. Does she intend to make them one with the Jaghd people, as she has said, or does she intend to make them slaves? We want you to learn this."

"Who is 'we'? And it's too late not to tell me," Blade added sharply.

"The Keepers. Or at least seven of the twelve."

"I thought so." There was no reason to refuse the request, but he still wanted to know more. "Why should Tressana tell me anything about her plans which isn't common knowledge?"

"She has summoned you to the palace, Blade. That means she is impatient to have you in her bed. Women say things in bed they do not say elsewhere."

"Not all women."

"Most women. And I suspect that very few could resist you."

Blade ignored the flattery. "A queen might. Tressana isn't the sort to babble just because she's been served well."

Sikkurad laughed. "Probably not. But I think you have been summoned for more than keeping her happy in bed. Curim is not going to be captain of the Men's Guard much longer. He is brave and a good fighter, but his foul temper has made him enemies even among his own men. You might find yourself the new captain of the Men's Guard."

"And then?"

There was no mistaking the desperate sincerity in Sikkurad's voice. "Learn what she plans for the Elstani, Blade. Learn whether she will accept them as free men, or wants them all made slaves. We do not know. We must learn, before the army marches into the forest."

Suddenly Blade began to understand what was making Sikkurad desperate. "If she wants to make slaves of the Elstani, that means killing their leaders. And their leaders are the Masters."

Sikkurad almost giggled with relief. "Then you understand? You are with us? You are not deceiving me? If you are..." He apparently couldn't think of any punishment awful enough for Blade if he was lying.

Blade shook his head. "I am on the side of the Keepers. If Tressana wants to slaughter the Masters of Elstan, she ought to be stopped. Too much knowledge which both peoples can use would die with them."

Particularly now that the Keepers have just rediscovered the scientific method. With the two peoples and everything they know united...

It would save this Dimension generations, possibly centuries, on the way back to being a modern civilization. Blade knew he'd do anything he could to help things along. He also suspected that he'd be risking a knife in the back from people who didn't understand what he was trying to do.

Chapter 10

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This was all Blade learned from Sikkurad. The Keeper obviously had more to say, but was too afraid of making his household suspicious by staying in the library with Blade long enough to say it. At times the Keeper seemed one of the bravest men Blade had ever met. At other times he seemed ready to start at his own shadow. Blade wondered which would get him first, Queen Tressana or an ulcer.

Blade had learned enough, fortunately. He now knew what he had to listen for and most of what he had to guard against. Sikkurad might have told him a little more about Queen Tressana herself, but would it have been reliable information? For all his intelligence, the Keeper obviously had trouble accepting women who ruled or rode into battle. Jollya would probably be able to tell him more about Tressana, but when would he be able to talk to her? When he did, could he avoid getting Jollya dangerously involved in the Keepers' plotting? Even if Tressana didn't become suspicious, what about Curim? He might be willing to attack Jollya as a way of attacking Blade.

Blade considered all this while he took his bath, then put it firmly out of his mind. If there were any answers, he'd find them more easily after a good dinner and a night's sleep. This might be the last dinner in quite a while he could eat without having to worry about poison in his food, and the last night he could go to sleep without barring his door against assassins.

Dinner was so good that Blade couldn't entirely avoid stray thoughts of "the condemned man's last meal." He ate soup, roast lamb, and honey cakes, washing everything down with plenty of good red wine. He finished the meal with a cup of herb-scented tea, then went back to his room.

He'd just finished locking the door and was sitting down on a footstool to pull off his boots when he heard a low growl from outside the shuttered window. Before he could move, the shutters flew open as if they'd been hit by a cannon ball. With a snarl one of the hunting cats sprang down into the room.

The wine at dinner hadn't slowed Blade's reflexes. He drew his knife with one hand and snatched a heavy candlestick off the table with the other. He wasn't sure whether this would stop an attack or provoke one, but he wasn't going to face one of the cats bare-handed!

The cat saw Blade's readiness and crouched, tail lashing ominously and wide green eyes glowing. Blade saw that the cat wore a leather collar with Sikkurad's house badge on it in silver thread, and also another badge he didn't recognize. The cat snarled again and Blade braced himself to meet its spring.

Then a voice came from behind the curtains around the great bed. It sounded sleepy and angry at the same time.

"Hoyo, no! Didn't I tell you about this man?"

It was Jollya's voice. Before Blade could wonder what she was doing here or what she was talking about, the curtains flew open. Jollya leaped out at him as gracefully as her pet.

She was barefoot and bareheaded, with her hair unbound and flowing down over her shoulders. Otherwise she wore her full riding leathers, with a knife so long that it was practically a short sword in her tooled and studded belt. She looked so formidable that Blade found himself measuring the distance between himself and his sword.

Then the cat flowed out of his crouch, padded over to Jollya, and rubbed against her ankle. She bent down and scratched him behind the ears. He started purring, sounding like a badly tuned outboard motor. His eyes closed to slits, and his tail stood up as straight as a flagpole.

Blade put the candlestick back on the table, belted on his sword, then turned back to Jollya.

"Why are you here?"

"To see you."

"About what?" His voice was deceptively mild. He was in no mood for either mysteries or practical jokes.

She swallowed. "I had to see you. You are going away tomorrow, to—to Tressana."

"How did you know that?" Blade said sharply.

"My father told me." Blade breathed more easily. Jollya went on. She was nervous, and her words tumbled over each other the same way her father's did. "I came home this afternoon. He met me, told me about you then. I had to see you. I waited until everyone was at dinner, then climbed up the vines. No one saw me. Hoyo followed me. I hope no one saw him."

"That doesn't tell me why you came in the first place." There was always the obvious explanation for an attractive woman coming to a man's room and hiding by his bed. However, when the woman was fully clothed and carrying a large knife, the obvious explanation might not be the true one.

"I—" She swallowed again. "I needed to speak to you about—Tressana." Blade said nothing. He merely looked at her until she looked away. He thought he saw tears in the corner of each eye. It seemed that the obvious explanation for her being here really was the true one. It was hard to mistake the look in her eyes and the way she held her body. Any other questions Blade might want to ask the girl could wait.

Blade put down his sword and knife, then stepped forward. Jollya stood motionless as he approached, as he reached her, and as he took her in his arms. Then she stiffened so violently that for a moment Blade wondered if he'd made a mistake. A moment after that her hands were running up and down his back with clumsy enthusiasm, and her face was tilting up to meet his. She didn't have to tilt far, even though she was barefoot and he was wearing boots.

Blade quickly stopped noticing details like that. Jollya was still clumsy, but her enthusiasm grew like a fire in dry grass. She gripped his shoulders, the small of his back, his buttocks—anywhere she could get a firm hold to pull herself against him. Her lips roamed everywhere they could reach, from the corners of his eyes over to his ears, then down to his lips and his throat.

Blade returned all her passion with more skill. He would have let his own enthusiasm run wild too, but there was still room in his mind for the thought that Jollya might be a virgin. He wanted to be easy, gentle, tender, letting her set the pace as long as possible.

When she started squeezing his erection between her thighs, he wondered how long he could continue to go slowly. He knew that if he didn't take her clothes off now, he would be tearing them off a little later. Although he nearly groaned with the frustration, he pulled away. His hands went to the top hook of Jollya's riding tunic, and slowly undid it. A second hook, and there was bare tanned skin running down to the beginning of the cleft between her breasts. Blade kissed the cleft, tried to slide his fingers in under the leather, discovered he still didn't have room, and undid the third hook.

Releasing the third hook seemed to release a spring in Jollya. She pulled free of him so violently that the fourth hook snapped off. Then she jerked the tunic over her head. Under the tunic she wore a linen shirt that clung so tightly that it was almost more erotic than her bare skin. It also clung so tightly that she couldn't jerk it off the way she'd done with the tunic. She fumbled with it, until Blade knew that it was desire rather than fear making her clumsy. He gripped the shirt at the throat with both hands and tore it down to the waist.

Jollya had almost a fashion model's body, tall and large-boned, with not too much flesh covering the bones. Her breasts looked much better bare than they did clothed. Blade did more than look. He stroked and kissed and fondled them until the large dark nipples jutted out like miniature lance joints against the palms of his hands. Jollya closed her eyes, wound her fingers into Blade's shaggy dark hair, and moaned softly.

When Jollya started shaking all over, Blade knew she was as ready as she needed to be. So was he. In fact, by now he was afraid he'd be almost too ready. He turned his back on Jollya and tried to make a long slow business of pulling off his clothes.

It didn't help much. When he turned back toward the bed Jollya was lying there on her back, completely naked. Her hair spread out across the quilts like a dark glossy fan, her legs were slightly apart, and her eyes were half-closed. At that moment they reminded Blade very much of the hunting cat's eyes. Suddenly he was on fire all over again. He had to force himself not to simply hurl himself onto Jollya and lose himself in the welcome her body promised. Instead he lay down and started to caress her, starting with her breasts but planning to go on to the rest of her.

Suddenly Jollya rolled toward him, gripped him by both shoulders, and pushed him hard down into the quilts. Blade didn't have time to resist, even if he'd wanted to. He could only grip Jollya's arms to pull her down on to him. The moment he was inside her he knew that she was no virgin and that she was incredibly ready. Blade heaved upward with his hips, going all the way into her. At the same time he pulled her down until he could stroke her breasts.

Silently Jollya exploded, heaving up and down on Blade until he was feeling pain as well as pleasure. Her breath rasped and hissed, but she bit her lip so hard that blood came and the screams and cries stayed inside. Then she fell forward onto Blade, so limp that she didn't even try to resist when he slid out from under her. Her eyes were shut, and stayed shut until she felt Blade entering her from above. Then they opened wider than ever, as she clamped her arms around Blade's shoulders and her legs around his hips. She was eager to take him any way she could get him.

Blade didn't try to hold back this time, and before long he couldn't have held back if he'd tried. Jollya's nails clawed at his back, her tongue was a tiny flame dancing along his throat and over his face, the musk of her body was an exquisite perfume. When she cried out he was so close to his own release that he barely heard her. Then he was pouring himself into her, so furiously and for so long that it seemed life itself might go out of him into her. He felt dangerously helpless as he rolled off her, but a quick look told him that there was no danger from Jollya. She lay as if she'd been stunned. Blade didn't quite fall asleep, but it was a while before he moved or heard anything.

When he was clear-headed again, he saw Jollya resting her head on his thigh, her rather sharp chin digging into his flesh. He cupped her chin with one hand, stroked her hair with the other, and smiled.

"All right, Jollya. Did you come here just for this, or for something more?"

Jollya sat up so abruptly she nearly fell out of bed. "I'm not a prostitute, selling my body for favors from men," she snapped. She tossed her head angrily, so that her hair flew in a dark cloud.

"I didn't say you were a prostitute. I wanted to ask what comes next, because we may not have too much time. That cat of yours may have been seen and followed, even if you weren't. We'll have even less time if you don't keep your voice down."

Jollya stiffened, took a deep breath, which did interesting things to her breasts, and clenched her fists in her lap. She sighed, and seemed to be trying to control her giddiness, but she was unsuccessful and gave a soft laugh which turned into something suspiciously like a giggle.

"You're right, Blade," she said, finally becoming serious. "I should shut up. And I should have caged my cat." She hesitated. "You are going to spy on Tressana for my father, aren't you?"

"It isn't your affair." Blade suspected she had her reasons for wanting to know, and they might even be good ones. He also knew that the fewer people who knew a secret, the better—particularly when the secret's getting out might kill them.

"Are you no better than a man of Jaghd after all?" she said angrily. "One who thinks women are only a little better than slaves or rolghas and can't be told anything of importance? You didn't seem to be like that a few minutes ago."

"I'm not," said Blade, as sharply as he could without raising his voice. "England itself is ruled by a woman. I merely object to talking about matters which could get me killed to people who don't have to know about them."

He sat up and gripped her by both shoulders until she had to turn and stare at him. Before she could resist, he went on more gently, "I'd also ask you not to be so thin-skinned and quick-tempered if you're going to jump into some sort of plot. If anyone can get you angry this easily, they may be able to get your secrets out of you as well. I suspect that could get you killed too, and I don't want that." He kissed her, and felt her relax slightly. He kissed her throat, and felt her not only relax but reach up to embrace him. He stopped himself there, remembering his own warning about their not having too much time.

Jollya slid out of his embrace and lay back on the bed. "True enough, Blade. I'll try, but... Well, you can have my life story some other time. For now, I must tell you that my father and I are not the best of friends. He has never approved of me being one of Tressana's guards, and I have always suspected him of being cowardly, greedy and deceitful. Some of his fellow Keepers don't think much better of him than I do. I want to help them, and at the same time show my father what I'm made of."

"Would you explain?"

Jollya explained herself clearly and intelligently. Blade could almost see the woman in need drop away and the warrior take her place. It was mildly disconcerting, and he suspected it would be thoroughly unnerving for most Jaghdi men. Maybe that explained why Jollya had found so few satisfactory lovers that she was both inexperienced and desperately hungry.

Sikkurad was the leader of the Keepers in opposing Tressana if she wanted to destroy the Masters of the Elstani. His fellow Keepers were willing to trust him up to a point, particularly since he now had Richard Blade, the English warrior, working with him to find out Tressana's real intentions. They weren't willing to trust him completely, though. They were afraid his courage might fail him in a crisis, and also that he might use his information against his fellow Keepers.

"The Keepers want to share the new empire with Tressana. They're afraid my father wants most of the Keeper's share for himself."

Blade nodded. A man who sometimes seemed to be frightened of his own shadow was an unlikely candidate for that kind of lust for power, but not an impossible one. Mouselike little men sometimes made formidable tyrants.

"So they want to be sure of learning everything your father learns, and just as quickly?"

"Yes."

That meant learning it from Blade. If Jollya was able to convince Blade that he should tell her everything he learned, she would probably be richly rewarded. Sikkurad would also be furious, which would make Jollya happy and wouldn't bother the other Keepers.

"I'll be happy to work with you," he said. "No, wait!" he said, as she started bending over to kiss him. "I will, as long as Tressana does intend to slaughter the Masters of Elstan and enslave their people. I won't risk my life or help the Keepers overthrow the queen otherwise. And I certainly won't do anything against the queen just to help you in your quarrel with your father."

In the darkness Blade could see Jollya wince. Then she said quietly, "Blade, I wouldn't ask you to do anything else. I would die to defend the queen, or even kill you. But—she must not be allowed to make slaves of the Elstani. So much good will come of making them friends; She must not!"

"I agree, I agree," said Blade, laughing softly. "You don't have to convince me." He sat up and took Jollya in his arms, and her lips came up to meet him. This time they both let things take their natural course, not caring any more about how much time they might have. So it was quite a while before they got back to discussing how Blade should send his messages to Jollya.

Jollya was planning to give Blade one of her hunting cats as a farewell present. The cat, named Lorma, was Hoyo's mate and she'd been taught to see Blade as a friend, defend him as she would Jollya, and obey any of Blade's orders. The cats were intelligent creatures and they could easily carry messages. Between bouts of lovemaking, Blade and Jollya worked out a simple code of marks that could be cut on Lorma's collar. To anyone else, they'd look like natural scratches.

"I don't trust my father too much more than I do Queen Tressana," said Jollya. "The hunger for power makes men—and women—treacherous. So the more we can keep hidden from my father, the better."

"Including this?" Blade ran his hands lightly down her back and squeezed her firm buttocks.

"Especially this," she said, bending over so that her nipples brushed Blade's chest. He pulled her down on top of him so that she sprawled clumsily for a moment. Then she pulled free, gripped Blade's erection in one hand, and started gently nibbling on it.

When they'd first made love, Blade felt in Jollya a great deal of enthusiasm but not much experience. He thought she might need some teaching, and even welcome it. By morning, Blade wasn't completely sure who was teaching whom.

When they saw the room turning gray, they knew it was time for Jollya to leave. She rolled out of bed and began pulling on her clothes. "Do you want me to give you that wire bracelet?" she said as she pulled her tunic over her head.

"Yes." Now that he was no longer a prisoner, he could keep it as safe as she could. More important, he could keep it out of reach of the Keepers. The fewer opportunities the Jaghdi scientists got to study it, the better.

She reached into one boot and pulled out the wire, wound tightly around a wooden rod. Then she bent over the bed, kissed him soundly, and turned away. Blade managed to stay awake until she'd vanished out the window.

Chapter 11

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It seemed to Blade that he'd barely fallen asleep when the high-pitched tooting of Jaghdi trumpets and the thud of drums woke him. He peered through the shutters and saw a line of cavalymen and chariots bearing the royal badge trotting into the courtyard. The queen's men had come for him.

The house servants came for his baggage while he was still dressing. They also brought the cat Lorma and tethered her to the foot of the bed with a braided silk leash. She seemed to be rather doubtful about the whole business, but lay quietly and even purred when Blade spoke to her and scratched her head. When he untied the leash from the bed and led her out into the hall, she went as obediently as a well-trained dog.

The whole courtyard was hazy with dust kicked up by the rolghas and chariots when Blade and Lorma came down. He saw Sikkurad on the balcony over the main door, but there was no sign of the Keeper's daughter. She was probably still asleep, and Blade rather wished he could be too.

The commander of the party stepped forward. He was obviously someone with high rank, wealth, or both. The fine tooling and heavy metal fastenings of his armor were visible even under their thick coating of dust. He was about to greet Blade when he caught sight of Lorma.

"Lord Blade, is that yours?"

"She is now."

"You know she was Warlady Jollya's hunter?"

The commander seemed ready to be suspicious. Blade's talent for lying with a straight face came to his rescue. "She was. But Sikkurad decided I should have a guest gift. He chose Lorma."

"I don't imagine Jollya liked that much."

"She didn't. But she obeyed."

The commander laughed. "Good! Time Sikkurad started reining in that mad bitch of his. Oh, she's good enough in a fight, but what good's a fighting woman?"

"I suppose that depends on where she does her fighting," said Blade, grinning.

The commander laughed again. "You might say that." He raised a hand in salute to Blade. "I'm Efroin of the Red Band. I'm to take you to the palace. We've got your baggage. Will you ride or do you want a chariot?"

Blade would have preferred a chariot, but after his duel with Curim's guardsmen he had a reputation for toughness to maintain. "I'll ride."

A spare rolgha was led forward, and Blade mounted. Lorma climbed into one of the chariots and lay down on top of Blade's baggage. Then the drums and trumpets sounded again. Blade looked up at the balcony. Sikkurad was still there, but now he could also see Jollya peering out through the shutters. Then she pulled her head back quickly, before her father could turn and see her.

Efroin seemed to have orders to get Blade to the palace as fast as possible. The rolghas swept along at a bone-shaking trot, while the trumpeters cleared the road ahead and a cloud of dust hid it behind. By noon Blade was wishing he'd chosen a chariot. He was saddle-sore and half asleep, caked with sweat and dust, and his mouth felt as if it were packed with hot sand. Sheer determination was about all that kept Blade in the saddle until the first stop. When he dismounted it was a moment before he was quite sure his legs were going to hold him up. The only consolation was that his fellow riders didn't seem to be in much better shape.

He felt better after lunch, and by the time they reached the palace Blade and Efroin were the only two riders who didn't seem ready to collapse. The rolghas, Blade noted, were gray with dust but apparently ready to go on for hours more. They must have a good deal more endurance than horses, who would have collapsed from thirst and heat if pushed this hard on a hot summer day.

Green-clad servants led Blade through a labyrinth of streams, gravel paths, and carefully shaped hedges to a surprisingly small whitewashed stone building. Blade was reluctant to believe that this was the palace or even the guest house, until he saw that the doors, shutters, window gratings, front stairs, and roof decorations were all made of iron or brass. Nobody but the monarch could have afforded such a display of metal. Blade saw that Lorma had food and water, refused a meal for himself, and fell asleep across the foot of his bed without even taking off his clothes. His last thought was that if he'd done nothing else today, he'd learned how to keep a rolgha going at a good speed on a long march. This might turn out to be a useful skill.

The royal palace of Jaghd was a whole series of small buildings scattered through a park nearly a mile on a side, rather than a single large building. This let the kings practice the Jaghdi national hobby of building, and also do most of their entertaining outdoors. Jaghd had a mild climate which reminded Blade of Southern California, so he wasn't surprised to find its people fond of outdoor living.

The building where Blade had three luxurious rooms contained a number of suites which were reserved for high-ranking officers and nobles, either stationed at the palace or visiting it. Blade never met any of the visitors, but he did meet several of the officers. One of them was Curim, and at first Blade suspected Tressana was playing another of her little games: putting Curim and Blade together like two fighting cocks in a pit, and taking to her bed the one who came out alive.

If the queen was playing games, Curim had sense enough not to play along blindly. He didn't exactly embrace Blade like a long-lost brother, but he made it clear he wouldn't make the first move against the Englishman.

"I'd hold back even if you hadn't saved my life. I'm not your friend and you're not mine, but why be enemies? We'd just be playing into the hands of a certain party, who gets much pleasure from watching men battle it out." There was no need to mention who that "certain party" was.

It undoubtedly helped that Blade was in the officers' quarters rather than in the queen's bedroom. It also probably helped that the suits of armor and weapons sent over for Blade were not nearly as elaborate as Curim's. They were well made and serviceable, but they didn't have the richness of Curim's. In a land where fighting men showed their rank and wealth by the quality of their fighting gear, that meant Curim was still a good deal higher in Tressana's favor than Blade. As long as this was so, Curim had every reason to stay at peace with Blade. And as long as it would keep his back safe, Blade was just as willing to wear the less elaborate armor.

After a week, Blade was beginning to find life boring, and to wonder what came next. He seemed to be spending most of his time in this Dimension waiting for someone else to tell him what to do. He didn't like waiting around, especially when he had some important work to do.

In order to break the boredom, Blade willingly accepted Curim's invitation to a masked party in one of the open-air pavilions. "Not a big party, you understand," said the guardsman. "Forty, fifty people, everyone masked. That way, everyone can do more of what they want to do." The expression cut Curim's face left no doubt of what he wanted to do. Blade was tempted to ask him what the queen would say about this kind of party, but knew what the answer would be even if the guard captain was feeling friendly enough to tell him. Everyone knew about Tressana's fondness for good company in bed, and most people accepted it, just as the queen accepted it in her subjects.

No doubt Tressana would tell Blade what she wanted when she wanted it, and not before. Once again Blade felt angry at having to wait for someone else to act before he could get to work. At this rate he'd be snatched back to Home Dimension before he even got to the queen's bed. That would leave the

Keepers without their spy, Jollya without a weapon against her father, and the Project without any results from this whole mission. No, that wasn't quite right—there was the wire. But that was a pretty small return for the amount of work involved in sending Blade into Dimension X.

Blade decided to forget about the pressure of time and concentrate on having a good time at the party.

The smell of roasting meat drifted through the line of trees from the open-pit hearths on the far side. Blade walked down a gravel path with a wooden plate of meat and cheese in one hand and a leather cup of wine in the other. He'd taken them from pots and barrels everyone else was using, so he wasn't worried about poison.

Couples passed hand in hand, and so did men playfully chasing women who weren't trying to run very fast. From beyond the bushes came squeals, sighs, and grunts as other couples entertained themselves in the protecting darkness. It was warm enough to go naked outdoors, and the smoke from the fire was keeping away the insects.

Blade felt like chasing someone himself, but wasn't sure if it would be a good idea. Tressana didn't care about the virtue of the palace women any more than she did about her own, but she might resent a wandering eye in a man she'd brought to the palace for herself.

Blade drained the cup and turned back from the path to the wine barrels, half sunk in a pond to cool them. He wore heavy linen trousers and a sleeveless black leather vest, with a black silk mask that covered his whole face all the way back to the ears. He knew he looked more like a motorcycle gang member than a warrior, but this was party dress for the palace guards.

Another couple approached, the man bare-chested and the woman wearing only a jeweled loin guard and a lot of veiling that threatened to blow aside every time she moved. Blade stepped aside to let them pass, and nearly stumbled over a woman sitting under a bush, arms clasping her knees.

She was small, hardly more than five feet tall, and Blade wondered if she was even full grown. It was hard to tell, because she wore a silvery-green robe from ankle to neck and a black hood that hid her from the neck up. As she saw Blade standing over her, she looked up. Blade thought he heard her laugh.

"You're the traveling warrior, Blade of England, aren't you?"

Blade checked to see if his mask had slipped. This time the woman definitely laughed. "You'd have to bleach your skin and shrink a hand's breadth to really disguise yourself." Either the hood muffled her voice or she had a cold.

She stood up. "Blade. Time for a woman?"

Blade smiled. He appreciated such a direct proposition. He also decided to accept. Caution be damned, and Queen Tressana too! Unless he was losing his virility, he'd be able to give the queen as much as she could hope for even if she summoned him tomorrow morning. Tonight he'd finally do something for himself, without waiting for someone to give him marching orders!

"You're a grown woman, not a girl?"

The body inside the robes stiffened and he heard a hiss of breath, like an indignant snake. "You're going

to regret that remark, traveler Blade. I'm as much of a woman as you are a man, if not more."

This, Blade reflected, was quite possible. Finding out for sure would be pleasant. He found he was already mildly aroused by the anticipation. The woman's sharp eyes noticed this. She stuck her fingers through the lacing of Blade's trousers, and for a moment he thought she was going to lead him away by his penis. Then she pulled her fingers out, hooked them over his belt, and led him off into the bushes.

She led him a long way, past couples so busy on the ground that they ignored everything else, to an isolated pavilion by a large pond. The pavilion had a grass floor surrounded by a low stone wall. Blade was surprised to see that the roof and its supporting pillars were of iron—another display of wealth by some long-dead king of Jaghd.

The moment they entered the pavilion, the woman let go of Blade and started undoing the brass brooch that held her robe together at the throat. The brooch thudded to the grass, and with a quick shrug of her shoulders she made the robe rustle softly down into a heap at her feet. Blade stared. In spite of the darkness he could see she was wearing white trousers with an open crotch that left her whole pubic area bare. The pale triangle of hair was framed by another triangle of embroidery.

She came toward him, without removing her hood. Blade wondered if her face and legs were scarred or deformed. Certainly there was nothing wrong with what he could see. Her arms and shoulders were tanned and rounded out with firm muscles. Her breasts were small but nearly perfect, and her nipples had already risen.

Blade was still pulling off his pants when the woman reached him. She knelt before him, adjusted her hood to clear her mouth, then took his erection between her lips and went to work with determination and skill. Blade gasped and tried to reach down to her, but she gracefully ducked her head without letting go of him. He gave up trying to touch her and concentrated on fighting for control. Somehow he knew that he had to hold on as long as he could, and not just for his own pleasure in prolonging the delicious agony. He had the distinct feeling that he was being tested, and he was going to pass the test or collapse trying.

Before long the woman realized she wasn't going to break Blade with her mouth alone. She began running slim, skilled fingers up and down the insides of his thighs and into every other place she could reach. Blade's gasps turned to groans of agony, but he held on. The woman was beginning to fight for breath herself when Blade finally gave up the struggle. She didn't try to swallow the hot jetting, but wiped her mouth on her hood and squatted silently until Blade had spent himself completely.

As Blade finished, something went rrrrip beside him. He was instantly alert, in spite of the warm fog of contentment filling his mind and body, and he looked down. The right leg of the woman's snug white trousers was split from knee to crotch. She was pressing her thighs together, trying to conceal the suddenly exposed skin. Blade couldn't see what she was ashamed of. Her white skin looked smooth, clean, and warm. He wanted to touch it, and found his erection beginning to return at the thought.

Then the moon came out from behind a cloud, and silvery light flooded the pavilion. Blade got a good view of the woman's bare thigh. A dark line ran down it and across the knee—a line that looked remarkably like a scar.

Suddenly a chain of thoughts linked up in Blade's mind, like a string of firecrackers going off. The woman was small and blonde, with a scar on her right knee.

Tressana.

It could hardly be anybody else. Her Grace, the Queen of Jaghd, was taking advantage of the masked dinner party to test Blade. Blade wondered if he'd passed the first part of the test. He was also determined to turn the tables and do a little testing of his own, now that he knew the woman he was dealing with.

Before Tressana could move, Blade was picking her up. She was less than half his weight, so he could pick her up as easily as a child. In fact he managed to hold her with one arm while with the other hand he tore at her trousers until she was naked from her neck down to her knees. The effect was strange and incredibly erotic. Blade found that he was completely ready, and decided not to wait any longer. After all, he was manhandling a queen, and if he didn't keep her too busy moaning to call for help things might become too lively for comfort.

He thrust into her, supporting her with one hand under her tight buttocks and the other across her back. She gasped at the first penetration, stiffened, then started heaving herself back and forth so furiously that Blade nearly dropped her. At last he pulled her hard against him, her lips nuzzling his ribs, while she twisted and jerked her hips without moving the rest of her body.

Blade found it easy to outlast Tressana, although it was hard to keep her from shrieking out loud when her release came. He managed to keep one hand over her mouth until her spasm passed, and then she went so limp he was afraid he'd suffocated her. The limpness lasted only until she realized that Blade was still inside her and still good for more. Then she threw her arms around his shoulders so fiercely that she drove all the breath out of him. For a woman of her size, Tressana was incredibly strong. She began to move again, and Blade was willing to let her do all the work she could. Making love in this position for long was a strain even for someone of his size and strength. Also, he was beginning to have to think about controlling himself.

Blade didn't lose control until Tressana had writhed and twisted twice more. By then they were both so slippery with sweat that Blade had trouble holding the queen, and she was holding on only by digging her fingernails into his skin. He didn't even feel the pain. He felt nothing except the woman in his arms and himself deep inside her, until his own release came like an explosion.

Blade stayed on his feet even after that, but he could no longer hold Tressana. He half-lowered, half-dropped her to the ground. Her knees buckled so that she would have fallen if he hadn't put his arms around her and held her against him.

Then she started shaking violently. Blade wondered if it was cold, fear, or anger. He hoped it wasn't anger, even though he knew he could take Tressana and a good many Jaghdi with him if the worst happened. Then he heard a small snort, after that a giggle, and realized that Tressana was fighting desperately to control her laughter.

Blade decided to help her. He gripped the bottom of the hood with both hands and ripped. The black cloth came apart and Tressana's blue eyes blazed out at him. Her face shone with sweat and her hair was damp and tangled as if she'd been using it for a mop, but those eyes held him. Then she grinned, the grin turned into another giggle, and the giggle turned into wild laughter. Before she could be overheard, Tressana snatched the torn hood from Blade and stuffed it into her mouth to muffle the laughter. Then she collapsed onto the grass and lay there writhing and rolling back and forth, completely out of control as she laughed herself weak over the success of her own joke.

Blade would have felt more like joining in the laughter if he hadn't heard the note of hysteria in it. He hoped it was just the aftermath of their lovemaking that was unbalancing her, not anything more serious.

As the laughter died away, he knelt beside her and started sponging the sweat off her body with her trousers.

Suddenly she sat up and kissed him on the nose. "What was it that told you who I was, Blade?"

"I saw the scar on your knee," he explained.

"There hasn't been anyone telling you about what I like in bed, has there?"

"No. No one talks about it, that I've heard."

"And they won't, if they value their necks." The edge in Tressana's voice was as sudden as a sword being drawn. She sat up and stretched her arms over her head, then stood up and finished wiping herself off.

"Well, Blade," she said when she was done. "You've been tested, as I'm sure you know." Blade was silent. She frowned. "You don't want to know if you passed the test?"

Blade shrugged. "If I have, you'll tell me. If I haven't, you'll kill me. You'll do both in your own good time. Asking you won't change that. It would simply look as if I hoped for favor. I won't do that." He smiled. "You're fond enough of having men eating out of your hand as it is."

She understood the figure of speech and didn't seem to like it. For a moment Blade wondered if he shouldn't drop into fighting stance. Even a woman half his weight could do an embarrassing amount of damage if she took him by surprise. Then she laughed.

"Oh, Blade, I think you've just invented another test for yourself and passed it as you did the first one. You don't beg. I don't suppose you know how, in fact?"

Blade shook his head. "I don't. Part of it is simple pride. The rest is knowing that most of the things you have to beg for aren't worth having in the first place."

That silenced Tressana for longer than Blade had expected. When she spoke again, her voice was shaky. "Perhaps. And perhaps I am too fond of having men at my feet." She giggled. "Of course, I really prefer them in a few other places." She grabbed Blade's right hand and pressed it against those "other places." Then she knelt down and pressed herself against him so that his limp penis dangled between her breasts. When she felt that it was going to stay limp, she frowned and stood up.

"Nothing, Blade?"

He chose to make a joke of it. "Even if I did come from Elstan, I would not be made of iron."

She smiled. "Very well. I'll forgive you. Sometimes."

Blade didn't bother asking what would happen the other times. He suspected he could guess. He also knew he'd done a good enough night's work. He was or soon would be where he could start doing what the Keepers and Jollya expected of him. The job might be dangerous, but he could be sure that he wouldn't be bored while he was doing it. That was more than you could say for nine out of ten spying jobs.

Like other royal favorites before him, Blade never actually moved into Queen Tressana's ballroom-sized bedchamber. In fact, it was several more days before he even moved into her own building. Nonetheless, by noon of the day after the party half the people he met seemed to know of his new status. He doubted if anyone knew the details. Tressana would be more ruthless than usual in guarding the secret of how she had disguised herself and how Blade had discovered her identity. But everyone seemed to have the general picture. Blade felt several pairs of eyes following him every time he went for a walk.

Apart from the looks and a few cautious words of praise, no one made a fuss over Blade's new status. He understood why. Royal favorites came and royal favorites went, and sometimes men who'd passed their first test displeased Tressana so quickly that they were never moved close to her at all. Many people around Blade feared Tressana's displeasure if they hailed him too enthusiastically too soon.

Those who didn't fear Tressana undoubtedly feared Curim. Curim's looks alone would have let Blade know he was in Tressana's favor even if nobody else had done or said a thing. The captain of the Men's Guard didn't wave a sword and shout threats against Blade's life, limb, and manhood. He didn't have to. He simply looked through Blade as if he were part of the air and just as invisible. Sometimes he glared when he thought Blade wasn't looking. He no longer tried to pretend that he and Blade were at least united in not wanting to be Tressana's victims. He was still a victim, while Blade was Tressana's new favorite. They had nothing in common any more.

Blade was mildly annoyed with Tressana for not moving him closer to her as soon as she'd made up her mind, instead of leaving him in the same building with Curim. It seemed thoughtless, although he couldn't see that it put him in any great danger. By missing a few meals Blade managed to avoid eating food that Curim might have been able to get at with poison. This also gave him a lean and hungry look, which Tressana said she liked. As for any open moves, Blade intended to meet any challenge by chopping Curim to bits with the other man's own steel sword.

He was more worried for Jollya. It was even more likely now that she was in danger, if Curim thought he could hurt Blade by striking at her. He might even strike at her to hurt the queen, if he hated Tressana enough not to care anymore what happened to him. Blade was careful to be distant and even mildly hostile toward Jollya whenever they met, giving the general impression that they'd quarreled while he was Sikkurad's guest. She seemed to understand and began to behave as if she in turn had a grudge against Blade for taking Lorma.

Blade also took the precaution of warning the queen one night about what Curim might do to Jollya. He was as casual as possible about it, since his refusal to ask her favors still interested Tressana. He also didn't want to arouse her suspicions.

He wasn't sure he was casual enough. Tressana rolled over in bed and ran her fingers down Blade's torso to his groin. "Did Jollya spread her legs for you in her father's house, Blade?" She held his penis gently but firmly.

Blade shook his head. "I never asked, and neither did she. I don't know why, and now it certainly doesn't matter. What does matter is that if Curim does anything against Jollya, you may have to find new captains for both the Men's and Women's Guards. That might leave you unprotected, and the people around you in danger." He could have added that it would also risk chaos in her army on the verge of a major war, but he wasn't going to show that he knew anything about the war until the queen told him

herself.

Tressana laughed. "I love it when you pretend to be as cautious as Sikkurad of the Animals. It's one of your best jokes." She squeezed his penis, then started stroking it in a friendlier way.

Three days later Tressana sent Blade a steel sword of his own and an escort to bring him to her. Again the escort was commanded by Efroin of the Red Band. Along with the sword he brought a gilded helmet and a suit of armor with a chain-mail loin guard for Blade. Efroin laughed when he saw Blade pulling on the loin guard. "Is yours a royal treasure now?"

"Ask Tressana."

"Thank you, I'd rather die in battle. It's quicker and cleaner. I suspect yours is a royal treasure now, and Tressana always takes good care of the royal treasures."

"I'm not going to complain."

"Not if you're wise." Efroin slapped Blade on one leather-armored shoulder. "Blade, don't throw yourself away on Tressana. You're a fighting man, and I'd like to have you beside me sometime. Don't lose your temper when Tressana loses interest."

"Like Curim?"

"I wasn't going to put it that way, but—yes. He's put himself out of the running for anything except a weighted sack into the Adrim some night. Not that he'll be much of a loss. You would be."

"Thank you."

Blade was glad to have Efroin's praise. The Red Band commander seemed like a levelheaded, honest soldier. He'd be a good friend.

Tressana surprised Blade that night by saying very much the same thing, after she'd summoned him to her bedchamber. She'd greeted him sweaty and smelling of rolgas after a visit to the stables, but eager as ever. They made love twice before Blade was able to suggest a bath. They bathed together in a sunken marble tub almost large enough to be called a swimming pool.

"I'd better not ask too much of you," she said once they were clean. She lay back on the edge of the tub and reached out to Blade, who was still in the water.

"All I can give is yours," he said politely.

"I know, I know," she said. "I don't mean that." She tugged at his hair vigorously enough to hurt. "I mean, I've seen you use other weapons besides the one you use on me. You're good. You're too good a fighting man not to be put to work."

"I could fight against the barbarians," he said cautiously. He knew he might be on the edge of a big step forward, getting the information he wanted and gaining more freedom of movement. Eagerness could still spoil everything.

"Hardly that, Blade. They are not really a problem anymore. Certainly they're not worthy opponents for you. They have no notions of honor, for one thing, and you do. Besides, I'm not going to let you get that far from my bed yet, and I can't go west myself."

Before Blade could think of a tactful way of asking why, she slid back into the water. "Pick me up and let's try it here," she commanded. "That way you won't have to use up strength just holding me."

For that sort of thing Blade always had plenty of strength, even though he was no longer fresh out of Oxford. He sometimes wondered what he would have been able to do then with all the opportunities he had now.

Tressana was no weakling, either, and she used her strength and endurance in other places than the bedchamber. She sometimes spent eight hours holding audiences and reading petitions, then inspected soldiers, visited the stables, attended a state banquet that went on until after midnight, and came home to make love. Tressana was a working monarch, one of the most demanding jobs in any Dimension, and Blade respected her for it.

Blade usually went with the queen when she inspected the soldiers. There seemed to be more of them around every day, with rolghas, draft animals, wagons, and all the other gear for an army. The harnessmakers, armorers, and the fletchers—arrowmakers—seemed to be working all day and half the night. Both the Men's and the Women's Guards had many new recruits, and both Jollya and Curim were too busy training them to have much time for Blade.

This was just as well. The busier Curim was, the safer everyone else was, and Blade had no information yet for Jollya. The war was coming soon and Tressana planned to use him in it, but until she raised the subject anything he said would look too much like prying. In a way he was almost back in the same situation he thought he'd left, waiting for someone else to make the first move. He did have to admit that Tressana's bed was a more comfortable place to wait than the places where he'd waited before.

It was nearly midnight, and one of Jaghd's rare summer rains was falling outside as Blade and Tressana dismounted at the door of a building Blade had never seen before. That didn't prove much, of course. He doubted if he'd seen more than half of the seventy-odd buildings on the palace grounds. But he found himself exceptionally alert as Tressana led him past guards almost too sleepy to present arms to their queen.

He called her attention to this, wanting to break the silence and try to judge her mood from her reply. She smiled. "Oh, it won't matter much longer. They'll learn to stay awake, from harder teachers than I could ever be."

Blade doubted that the Elstani could come up with anything worse than the tortures Tressana could order when the mood was on her, and he was sure that she would see to it that the sleepy guards were brutally awakened. But he nodded politely and followed her into the building. She seemed to be excited herself, as if she were anticipating something more than enthusiastic lovemaking.

Blade followed the queen to the other side of the building, through a narrow door, and down a winding flight of stairs. After a few yards the stairs were cut out of the living rock, not even whitewashed. Tressana looked exotic and out of place here. She wore flared silk trousers, jeweled boots, a snug blue bodice that left her slim waist bare, a purple turban with an ornament of diamonds, and the Queen's Jewels of Jaghd.

These were Elstani jewels, the color of rubies but harder, set in a necklace of heavy gold links, wide bracelets, and two massive earrings. Blade knew how heavy the gold was. Once Tressana made love to him wearing nothing but the Queen's Jewels, and it was three days before the bruises from the bracelets and necklace healed.

At the bottom of the stairs was a whitewashed room. On its far wall was a large map, and under it a wooden table and a chest. Blade looked at the map, and saw that it showed all the known lands of this Dimension. Then he saw a thick red line running from Jaghd to Elstan through the forest of Binaark. A second line ran up the Adrim, but Blade didn't pay much attention to that. He knew where he was now. This was Tressana's War Room.

"So it's war against Elstan," he said mildly. "Forgive me for sounding like an idiot, but how are you getting through the forest of Binaark?" If she was willing to bring him here, she'd hardly hold back any secrets, including possibly the one he wanted to know. Blade was taut with anticipation by now, but hoped he was concealing it better than the queen.

Tressana explained her war plans as she moved about the room, unwinding her turban, taking off her bracelets and necklace, finally undoing her bodice and sitting on the table bare to the waist. Her nipples were taut, but Blade wasn't sure if this was sexual excitement or the chill of the underground room.

The Jaghdi would strike at Elstan with two armies. One would march through the forest of Binaark, under the protection of amulets filled with the synthetic scent which would defeat the killer plants. That army would be mostly cavalry, with only enough men on foot to clear trails and protect the camps. The second army would sail up the Adrim, just as the Elstani would expect. That army would be mostly infantry.

"The Keepers will send their guards, and the cities and towns will send their watchmen," Tressana said. "That will keep any rebellions behind me from growing strong."

"Will these men fight?" asked Blade.

"Oh, well enough. But they won't have much to do. The rolgha riders will do most of the work."

In the valleys between the forest of Binaark and the Adrim lay what little there was of Elstan's farmland, and several of its richest mines. The valleys offered few obstacles to a well-trained rolgha. If the Jaghdi cavalry swept along them all the way to the Adrim, the Elstani would shortly be starving and weaponless. Their army defending the river would be taken in the rear and destroyed. The Jaghdi coming up the Adrim would have no supply problems because even if they were cut off, they could either be supplied by the Jaghdi cavalry or march home through Binaark.

"The war may be over within a month of the time our first rolgha sticks his nose out of the forest," said Tressana gleefully. "In fact, I suspect half the Elstani will die of surprise before a weapon touches them. It's never been any secret that they call the forest a gift from the gods, to keep them from having to become warriors. Well, we of Jaghd are going to show them that the gods can take back gifts from people unworthy to use them." Blade didn't like the shrillness he heard in Tressana's voice as she said this.

The queen slid off the table and came toward him. The desire in her eyes was plain, but so was the bloodlust. For a moment Blade had the sick feeling that if he had to look longer into those eyes he'd fail at the crucial moment. To play for time he caressed Tressana's throat and breasts, then stopped as she

put her hands on the waistband of her trousers. He let go of her, went to the map, and ran his finger along the valleys between the Adrim and the forest.

"Are you sure it's safe to send all your cavalry just riding straight for the river?" he said, frowning in what he hoped was a convincingly anxious manner. "The Elstani could do a lot of damage even if they only rolled rocks down the hillsides."

Tressana hooted with laughter, then looked apologetic. "No, I wasn't laughing at you, Blade. You show you've got a good head for war. It's just that we've known about that problem for years, and also what to do about it."

She joined Blade at the map and he lifted her so she could reach a spot on the map with her finger. "Here, there's an ideal place for a camp. High cliffs at our back, and a river on the other three sides with only one ford. There's room for twenty thousand rolghas and we won't even need to tether them! We'll camp there, send out the riders, and bring in all the prisoners we can."

"And then?" Blade had a sudden cold feeling that he knew. The bloodlust in Tressana's eyes was growing stronger, not weaker.

"For every man of ours they kill, we'll kill one of theirs. Send them to the killer plants, feed them to the rolghas, burn them—we'll think of other ways. All except the Masters. They stay alive until they've told us everything they know. Anybody who kills one of them before that answers to me."

She wriggled out of his arms, sat on the table again, and jerked off the trousers. Then she lay back, legs apart. "Now, Blade, now!" A shudder went through her, as if she were already close to her climax from thinking about the destruction of Elstan.

Blade suppressed a groan, took off his trousers, and did his duty. He actually managed to do it twice. By the time Tressana took him a third time, she was shrieking and laughing and crying out in triumph as if their lovemaking were actually causing Elstan to crumble before her eyes. Blade's movements became a little mechanical, but fortunately Tressana was too far gone to notice.

Chapter 13

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The first thing Blade did when he and the queen returned to her rooms was to make love again. The bloodlust was out of Tressana now, and she was warm and tender, falling asleep peacefully afterward. Blade wished he could remember her like this, when she looked hardly more than twenty, innocent and lovely. Unfortunately he couldn't leave the Elstani at her mercy, and that meant bringing in the Keepers no matter what they might want to do to her. He'd do his best to save her life and perhaps her throne after that, but no more.

So the second thing he did was go back to his own rooms at the other end of the building and wake up Lorma. The queen didn't expect him to stay with her after she fell asleep. He crouched in the darkness, using the moonlight to scratch a coded message on Lorma's collar. Then he buckled it around her neck, told her, "Find Jollya," and watched her scramble out the window and drop to the ground as quietly as a ghost.

The third thing Blade did was to fall into bed and go to sleep.

Lorma was back the next morning, with the mark on her collar that showed Jollya had read Blade's message but that indicated nothing else. Blade didn't worry. Most of what would happen from now on was in the hands of the Keepers. It was back to waiting for him, unless he and Jollya were lucky enough to be able to talk privately sometime soon.

Within a few days Blade was less happy about the waiting. Planning for the war was out in the open now, and Tressana had picked Blade for one of the most demanding jobs.

With fifty picked cavalry, he was to move into the western fringes of the forest of Binaark. All his men and animals would have scent amulets to protect them from the killer plants. They would find the best way of hacking a trail for rolghas and wagons through the forest. When the rest of the army came up, they would teach what they'd learned to the trail-cutting parties on foot, and also guard them at their work. Blade, not Curim, would have the honor of being the first man in Jaghd to take the scent amulets to war.

"It will probably make you enemies," said Tressana. "It's certain that every fighting man of rank in Jaghd except Curim had hoped I would choose him. Also, it will take you out of my bed and even out of my reach for a time. But there is a time for taking pleasure and a time for thinking of the work to be done."

Blade agreed. He only wished Tressana would realize that her desire to enslave the Elstani and slaughter the Masters was a foolish pleasure. If she would just change her mind on that!

He was glad he was going to be in action and well up toward the front. He wasn't so happy about leaving well before the rest of the army. He'd be a long way from the capital, where things might happen very quickly. He'd be in no position to help Jollya, and it wasn't much consolation that he'd hardly be able to help the girl even if he stayed. For at least the fiftieth time since he left Oxford, Richard Blade would have cheerfully sold his soul for a week or two of being able to be in two places at once.

At least he didn't have the job of picking the fifty men, since he didn't know the Men's Guard that well. He had plenty of time to watch Jaghd's army gathering. There would be about nine thousand men in the cavalry force going through the forest. Six thousand infantry would be going up the Adrim. This didn't seem like much to conquer a land the size of Elstan quickly. It seemed even less when you realized that except for the queen's and the Keepers' guards none of the army were "regular" soldiers. Many of them were brave and skilled enough to be formidable in a fight, but they had no permanent organization, little discipline, and not much experience of operating together. They would have been no more than a well-armed mob without the determination of Queen Tressana, the respect they gave a few leaders such as Efrog of the Red Band, and the hope of victory and loot. A man who hoped to have his share of Elstan's wealth in metal, jewels, and slaves might put up with a good deal.

Jaghd's weaknesses weren't going to be enough to save Elstan. True, the Elstani had plenty of weapons, many of them better ones than Jaghd's, but they also had a habit of using those weapons only to settle personal quarrels. They had no enemies on their frontiers, and hadn't had anything deserving the name "war" in centuries. The Elstani were also split up into hundreds of villages and a few farms, and only a handful would follow any one leader. The Masters would probably be obeyed if they all got together and started giving orders, but they'd never done that. The Jaghdi hadn't invaded before, either, and perhaps this new crisis would produce a new reaction among the Elstani, but Blade refused to be optimistic. The Jaghdi were bound to be triumphant, and then Queen Tressana could proceed to destroy the Elstani and their Masters. The Keepers of the Jaghdi were going to have to do most of whatever was done to stop Tressana.

Before going into the forest Blade had plenty of time to fit wooden handles on either end of the wire he'd brought from Home Dimension. When he'd finished he had a handy garrote, easily concealed, quickly brought out, and highly effective for silently strangling people. He wasn't sure if he would need it, but he never passed by an opportunity to provide himself with another weapon.

Three days before Blade was supposed to lead his men off to the forest, Lorma disappeared. She came back the next day with a message from Jollya on her collar. Instead of news of the Keepers' decisions, the message only gave a location—the field where Blade fought the three testing duels—and a time—nightfall that same evening.

Blade was fairly sure that the message wasn't a trap. If anybody had learned the code from Jollya, he would almost certainly have heard about it. Jollya would have told him unless she was dead, and he knew she was still alive.

He wasn't optimistic about what he might learn. Jollya's asking for a meeting could only mean that her message was too complicated for the code to handle. He could only guess what this might mean, but his instincts told him that it was unlikely to be good news. Blade could never explain those instincts in a way that made sense to anyone else, but he knew them too well not to trust them.

It was a clear night except for the usual haze over the river. Anyone watching the riverbank would be able to see a mounted man a long way off. To avoid this danger Blade tethered his rolgha a good half mile from the rendezvous, walked most of the remaining distance, and virtually crawled the last hundred yards on hands and knees. He was holding the garrote ready as he moved, ready to deal silently with any unwanted visitors.

All he found was Jollya, sitting with her back against a tree and apparently asleep. He felt a little foolish, until he saw the tear streaks on her face and the stains on her clothes. Something had badly upset her, and Blade doubted he was so important to her that it was simply his riding off to war.

"Jollya," he said softly.

She started. "Blade?"

"Yes. What's wrong?"

She looked blankly at him, then shivered. "Those damned Keepers!" She made the word sound obscene. "Those incredible fools! They've betrayed us! I could geld every one of them, the useless—"

"Jollya, what happened?" If she went on like this she'd become either hysterical or loud enough to be heard at a distance.

She stopped as if he'd slapped her, then glared at him. He realized she wasn't hysterical, except possibly with rage at the Keepers. That still didn't explain what the Keepers had done. He repeated his question. Now she answered clearly and quickly, and Blade felt the hot night turn cold around him.

The Keepers had decided that they weren't going to oppose Tressana after all. Or at least they wouldn't oppose anything Blade had learned about. They would certainly make sure that the Masters of Elstan wrote down all their knowledge before they were executed, but as for preventing the executions, Jollya had the feeling the Keepers would make a party of the day!

"I think some of them are even more frightened than—than my father. They don't want to risk going

against Tressana. It's her war, and the victory will make her so popular she could probably ask for their lives if they did anything against her."

"And the others?"

"I know what three of them say. They say that if the Masters of Elstan die, the Keepers of Jaghd will be the only men of learning in the world. They will have all the power that comes from learning for themselves. All of it!" She clenched her fists in the grass and tore it up in handfuls.

"And your father?"

Jollya jerked again, then her head bowed. After a moment Blade realized she was crying silently. He put an arm around her shoulders, but she shook him off almost fiercely.

"My father—Blade, I've been a fool! Maybe you have too. My father—oh, Lady of the Grass—" She started crying too hard to be able to speak, and this time she didn't pull away when Blade held her.

Finally she cried herself out and was able to talk again. "My father has more courage than we've ever believed. More courage than all the other Keepers together. He says no to the whole war. He says we can't trust Queen Tressana to do anything after she's won the war. Even if we could, slaying so many men of learning is a crime cursed by the gods. They will punish Jaghd for it, and any Jaghdi who lends himself to it."

Like Sikkurad's statement that the Jaghdi were going to march through the forest of Binaark, Jollya's words were hard to believe at first. Blade had to hear her again, in more detail, before he understood. Then he shook his head. Sikkurad seemed an unlikely man to play hero, let alone martyr, and Blade didn't like to learn that he'd been so inaccurate in his estimate of the man. Being able to judge people was one of his most important skills. Still, Jollya had to be telling the truth. After all these years of quarreling with her father, she was the last person in Jaghd to lie to make him look good.

There was also another question Blade knew had to be answered now. "Did your father say this to his fellow Keepers, or just to you?"

"He certainly said it to me first," said Jollya. She swallowed, then said nervously, "I didn't believe him. I called him a liar to his face, and he—he didn't get angry with me. That was when I started believing him. I don't know if you believe in the stories of a man being touched by the gods. I never did, until now. The way he looked and talked—there was something from the gods in him, and I had to believe that he meant what he was saying."

"That could be," said Blade. "It could also be that this sense of doubt about what has to be done has been in him all along, and you just didn't see it. He loves you, Jollya, even if he can't figure out a way to convince you." Blade badly wanted to do something to reconcile Jollya and her father.

There was a long silence. Then Jollya said slowly, "You could be right. At least I won't say you're wrong. Not until I've talked with my father again." She smiled faintly. "This time I won't start by calling him a liar."

"Good. Has he spoken at all about what he thinks to the other Keepers?"

"I don't know. Even if he wanted to, he may not have had the time."

This might be true; it had been only a few days since Sikkurad learned of Tressana's plans at all. Blade desperately hoped it was true. "If your father hasn't spoken to the other Keepers, try to persuade him not to. If the other Keepers are planning to go along with Tressana's war plans, they may be willing to denounce him to her. She might have no mercy. At the very least you could wind up being held hostage for your father's good behavior."

Jollya hugged her breasts as if she were suffering from a chill. "I know. But after the gods have made him brave, how can I ask him to be a coward again?"

"There's courage. There's also jumping naked into the creepers of a killer plant. Right now your father will do more for everybody by keeping his mouth shut and waiting for a better time." He hoped she'd believe him, because he could hardly tell her the real reason why he expected that better time.

She sighed. "I wish I had always believed in the gods. I might feel easier about their working now, or leaving things in their hands. Will you be able to help us in this? I believe you, Blade, gods or no gods!"

"I'll have to lead my men to Binaark first. If I refuse now, I'll make Tressana suspicious at the very least. Maybe she'd even think I was an enemy. Even if there's no war, the work in the forest ought to be done. Now that we have the scent amulets, the killer plants won't be a barrier between Jaghd and Elstan any more. We'll be able to cut a road through the forest and trade with Elstan all the year around. Everybody will be much better off."

"I understand. But, Blade—come back, whatever else you have to do." She stood up and practically threw herself into his arms. He held her for a moment, then said, "Wait until I'm out of sight before you leave," and turned away into the darkness.

He wanted to make sure that anyone who might have been watching would follow him rather than her. He also didn't want to have to tell Jollya any more lies about his plans. He knew he was good at making up plausible stories; he wasn't entirely sure he was good enough to fool Jollya much longer.

If things worked out as he hoped, he would not be returning to Jollya or even to Jaghd after he'd done his work in the forest of Binaark. He'd be on his way to Elstan, with a scent amulet around his neck and all of Jaghd's war plans in his head.

Blade knew that going to Elstan was a desperate solution, but then he faced a desperate situation. If the Keepers didn't act, nothing could stop Tressana's war. Even if the Jaghdi didn't sweep everything before them as they hoped, many people would die and much knowledge would be lost. Also, Jollya and her father would sooner or later do something to make Tressana turn against them, and that would be the end. The only thing that still could be done against Tressana was to warn the Elstani and hope that this warning would help them to defeat the Jaghdi. After that, wiser heads might prevail in Jaghd. True, the Elstani rulers might not be any better than the Jaghdi, but chances were they wouldn't be worse. And at least Elstan would not be a ravaged wasteland fighting a desperate guerrilla warfare against the Jaghdi cavalry.

As desperate as the situation was, Blade wouldn't have chosen this solution if Tressana hadn't helped him. Blade was really very grateful to her for that help, although he doubted that she would appreciate his gratitude. She'd given him all the details of Jaghd's war plans, so that he could even tell the Elstani where the main Jaghdi camp would be. Then she'd let him go out to the borders of Jaghd, commander of his own band of men. That would make escaping merely dangerous, instead of suicidal. He'd have to ride or walk only a few miles to be so deep into the forest of Binaark that nobody could track him.

Chapter 14

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A hot night followed a day when it seemed that the ground and the forest were going to be baked like a loaf of bread. Blade shifted uncomfortably in his sweat-soaked hammock, hoping that some miracle would bring even a small breeze into the hut.

Nothing happened. The air remained as still and heavy with jungle smells as ever. A night bird called in the distance, and from underneath the hammock came a whimper and a faint series of thumps. Lorma was stirring restlessly in sleep, probably from a dream of hunting.

Blade's hut stood a little apart from the others in the camp on the edge of the forest of Binaark, but it was built to the same pattern. It was ten feet on a side, with log walls, a thatched roof, a narrow door, and a single small window. The door and the shutter were made of roughly dressed planks hung on leather hinges. The whole thing was a good deal more elaborate than Blade would have asked for under the circumstances, but this was the Jaghdi way of doing things. When they had to build, they built as solidly and as elaborately as the tools, materials, and time available would let them.

There were eight huts in the camp, plus an open-sided cook-shed over the fire pit and a log corral for the rolghas. Blade's scouting party had been in the camp for a week now. In two more days they'd be on their way deep into the forest, the first men ever to walk there without fear of the killer plants.

Blade planned to keep right on going until he came out the other side into Elstan. The couriers who'd come into camp every day had brought no news to make him change his mind about that. The army was still gathering, and the Keepers were hard at work giving it the best weapons possible. Fortunately they didn't seem to be coming up with anything new other than the scent amulets.

Blade stretched his arms as far as they would go, then let them droop over the sides of the hammock. He didn't feel any cooler or more comfortable, but the fatigue of a long day was finally catching up with him.

He was beginning to doze when he heard Lorma whimper again, then suddenly fall silent. A moment later she made a low rumbling sound in her throat, not quite a snarl but definitely not a friendly purr. He heard a rustle of dried ferns as she shifted position. Then suddenly there was the unmistakable pad-pad-pad of Lorma's feet as she crossed to the door.

By the time she'd taken three steps, Blade was fully awake. By the time he heard her low growl from by the door, he was sliding out of the hammock. He'd stripped naked and didn't bother dressing. If whatever Lorma was sensing outside was dangerous, speed, silence, and weapons ready to hand were more important than clothes.

He'd pulled the garrote out from under his pillow as he slipped out of the hammock. Next he belted on his sword. By the time he'd finished he could hear what Lorma must have heard first: footsteps approaching the door of the hut.

The door faced the jungle, clear of any of the sentries' paths. That in itself would have told Blade the approaching footsteps might be enemies. Making this nearly certain was the slow, cautious way the footsteps were coming on, as if the men didn't know their way or were afraid of being heard.

The footsteps stopped, and Blade heard whispers. He didn't recognize any words, let alone voices, but he was able to use the time. He pointed at the hammock. "Lorma, go!" The cat padded across the hut and leaped into the hammock. From outside no one could have seen her moving. Her gray coat blended too well with the darkness. Now in the darkness of the hut she gave the hammock the appearance of having someone in it.

The hut door opened inward. Blade found a position where he was hidden completely from the outside and still had a good view of the interior. At least it was as good a view as he could have in the darkness. He wished he had Lorma's night vision, even though his was abnormally good for a man. He also wished that the people outside would get on with their business, whoever they were. He hoped it was Curim and some of his friends, rather than traitors among his own party. That would make a good many things easier, including his own escape. He also suspected Tressana would not hold it against anyone if Curim was caught and killed trying to commit murder.

Then Blade stopped wishing and nearly stopped breathing, because the footsteps outside were coming on. Dry leaves crackled, the door creaked, and three shadowy forms stepped into Blade's view. He heard the unmistakable hiss of an all-steel sword being drawn, and grinned. The only man with an all-steel sword who'd be coming at him like this would be Curim.

Then one of the three assassins uncovered a lantern, and it would have taken a high-speed motion picture camera to record what happened after that.

Lorma growled and sat up. Where Curim and his men had expected to see Richard Blade half-asleep and nearly helpless, they saw two vast green eyes which seemed to glow with their own light. They stopped, stared, and completely forgot about everything else for a vital second. At least it was vital to Blade.

He sprang out from his hiding place, one leap carrying him halfway across the hut. He slammed the door with a flying sidekick from midair and landed to Curim's left. The garrote was already in his left hand. He started to draw his sword with his right, saw Lorma getting ready to spring, and checked the draw. As Lorma sprang, Blade gripped both ends of his garrote, tossed it over Curim's head, drove his knee into the captain's back, and simultaneously jerked the wire tight. It was possible that Curim died without realizing that he was even being attacked. It is certain that he died without making a sound.

Meanwhile Lorma's man was down on the floor, the cat on top of him. This man died a little more noisily than his captain, with chokings and gurgles as Lorma tore out his throat. Lorma jumped back from the blood and turned to help with the third man, but by then her master didn't need any help.

The third man had seen his captain die to his left and his comrade go down under the cat's attack to his right, and he was still trying to figure out what to do with his shortened spear when a large hand descended on his collar. Blade jerked the man around to face him with one hand and with the other thrust the point of his sword up under the man's chin until it reached the brain. Blade had to pull the sword out quickly to keep the dead man from dragging it to the floor with him.

Blade and Lorma stepped back from the three bodies and stared at each other. In the flickering glow from the lantern, the bodies on the floor were distorted into something barely human. The still, hot air reeked of smoke, blood, and even less pleasant things.

At that moment Blade realized he'd killed all three men without a sound that could have been heard outside. What was more, he couldn't hear any voices or sounds of movement from beyond the door. Curim had probably brought more than two men with him, so the others must be waiting outside, to warn

off or if necessary kill sentries from the camp. If they had orders to stay outside unless Curim ordered them in, it would be at least two or three minutes before they suspected that anything was wrong.

Blade's mind was now working at the speed of one of Lord Leighton's smaller computers. Suddenly he knew that those two or three minutes were giving him a golden opportunity not only to escape but to hide the escape completely. The Jaghdi would think he was dead, and not worry about where he might be going or what secrets he might be taking with him.

A moment later Blade's body was working as fast as his mind. Once again it would have taken a movie camera to record the action. Blade bent down and stripped off the armor and clothing of the man he'd killed with his sword. He was the largest of the three. Then he put on the man's armor and clothing, and piled all his own gear on top of the body except for his sword. Amulets or no amulets, he wasn't going to face the forest of Binaark again without a good sharp steel edge in his hand!

All three men had been wearing amulets, but Lorma's attack had smashed the one on her victim. The other two were intact. Curim's was an officer's model, made of gilded brass, heavily decorated, on a silvered chain. Blade had one very much like it. The other man had a soldier's model a plain wooden cylinder, perforated with holes and plugged at the top with a bone stopper, hanging from a length of cord.

Blade quickly exchanged his own metal amulet for the wooden one. Then he put the lantern on the end of the spear and thrust it upward into the thatching of the roof. The dry vegetation caught fire so furiously that it seemed to explode, and Blade had to shield his face with his arms for a moment. The intensity of the fire was encouraging. It made it far more likely that the bodies on the floor would be completely unrecognizable, as long as nobody got inside before the roof collapsed.

Over the crackle and hiss of the flames Blade could now hear voices outside. There were a good many of them, all angry. It sounded as if his own men were coming up from the camp. Time to be on his way. It would be embarrassing to be recognized by his own men while escaping. It would be still worse to be shot down by one of his own archers who'd mistaken him for one of Curim's assassins.

Blade threw open the shutter, looked out, saw nobody close enough to recognize him, then put his hands on the window sill and vaulted out. Lorma followed him and stayed close at his heels as they both headed off into the cover of the darkness as fast as they could run.

They slowed down after a hundred yards, deep inside the trees. Blade picked Lorma up in his arms and carried her as they circled around the camp toward the corral. There were a few killer plants around here, and Blade could protect Lorma more easily if he was carrying her. Although she was fairly cooperative once she understood what was going on, Blade was glad when he could put her down. Eighty-five pounds of cat wasn't the easiest thing for even the strongest man to carry in his arms through a pitch-black forest.

Blade and Lorma came out onto open ground near the rolgha corral. The rolghas were whinnying and snorting skittishly, except for the few kept saddled, bridled, and tethered to the outside railing. Having them ready was Blade's own idea. For emergencies, he'd said. He hadn't lied either. His own escape to Elstan was certainly an emergency.

The blazing hut was now lighting up its whole end of the camp, but it was still very dark by the corral and Blade would not be recognized, even if anyone saw him. Anyway, all the corral sentries and grooms seemed to have run off to fight the fire, and Blade was certain they wouldn't be of any assistance. The fire was going too well.

When the fire did burn itself out, there would be nothing but corpses burned beyond recognition lying in the ashes. Two of them would have the melted remains of officer's amulets. On or around one of them would be recognizable pieces of Lord Blade's armor and weapons. That was another advantage of being in a primitive Dimensions. Without scientific methods of detection, the Jaghdi wouldn't be able to tell that Blade's armor had merely been piled on top of the corpse.

So far Blade's plan to cover his escape was working perfectly. Now to finish the job. He ran toward the corral, keeping low, Lorma running behind him. As he reached the tethered rolghas another hut suddenly spewed up flame from its roof. Sparks from the first hut must have drifted over and caught. The neighing and restless movement from inside the corral increased. Blade remembered that rolghas were deathly afraid of fire. An unsaddled, unbridled rolgha could become completely uncontrollable at the unexpected flare of a torch.

Fortunately the tethered rolghas were still calm enough to let Blade mount one. He gripped the reins in one hand, drew his sword with the other, cut the tether, and whistled to Lorma. She jumped up behind him as she'd been trained to do. Her foreclaws dug into the saddle, while her hind legs, their claws retracted, braced her on the rolgha's rump.

A third hut was now on fire, and Blade remembered how dry and brittle the jungle foliage seemed. There hadn't been rain around here for most of the summer. If the Jaghdi didn't get the fires in the camp under control fairly soon, they might find themselves in the middle of a forest fire.

The light from the fire still hadn't reached the corral. Blade knew he had time to do one more thing to confuse his trail completely. He rode over to the corral gate and his sword came down. The heavy leather thong holding the gate shut dropped to the ground. Then he leaned out of the saddle, dragged the gate open as fast as he could, and clapped spurs to his rolgha.

It jumped forward at a pace that nearly unseated Lorma, who let out an indignant squall. She held on, and in a minute all they could see of the camp was the fires. Before it vanished, however, they saw the first rolghas pushing their way out the open gate and galloping away from the fires. It would be morning before anyone in the camp could mount and ride in pursuit, even if he thought there was something to pursue.

Blade reined his rolgha back to a trot and settled down to guide it through the next few miles of the forest of Binaark.

Queen Tressana looked down from her saddle at Efroin of the Red Band. He looked back up at her, his black eyes as steady as her blue ones.

"So both Blade and Curim are dead?" Her voice was flat, hiding her anger. The disaster to the scouting party hadn't been Efroin's fault. He was showing real courage in bringing the bad news to her. Nothing would be mended by frightening him with a royal rage.

"If they are not, only the gods will be able to find them," said Efroin bluntly. "We found the amulets and armor of both men in the ashes of the hut. They must have killed each other."

"I hope Blade was dead before the fire reached him," said Tressana softly. For a moment she no longer saw Efroin, or anything else. Although Curim had been charming and virile for all his hot temper, after his attempt at murder he deserved exactly the fate that overtook him. Blade was something else. His death

was a loss not just to her, but to Jaghd and everything she wanted to see done.

However, there was at least one thing she could do to make up part of the loss. "Efroin, you've served me long and well. The men will trust you, and I think you could even stay on good terms with Jollya. Would you like to be captain of the Men's Guard?"

"I will have to ask you a question before answering, Your Grace."

Tressana's eyebrows rose. "Are you bargaining with me?"

Efroin smiled. "No. Only scouting out the land, as any good captain should do in war." He lowered his voice so that only the queen could hear him. "What will my duties be?"

Now she understood. Efroin had a wife and four children, and was said to be unreasonably fond of all of them. He would not particularly care to be her bedmate as well as her champion. A pity, in a way. Efroin was the sort of honest man who often made the best lover, if you were lucky enough to find one. Had she used up her luck in that matter when the gods sent her Richard Blade? Probably. Certainly Efroin would not be good company in bed if his heart wasn't in pleasuring her.

"I need a man for war, Efroin. You can give all your attention to your men."

"Thank you, Your Grace. Then I will lead the Men's Guard. Jollya will lead the women still?"

"I have no one else."

He sighed. "The gods send burdens as they will, and men bear them as they must. I will do my best. Do I have your leave to go?"

"Yes."

He turned, and Tressana spurred her rolgha away. She would need men for her bed as well as for the war. But she did not need them so badly that she would turn a good fighting man into a poor lover. A new party of scouts would have to be sent out to the forest, and that would give her plenty of time to pick and test the men before the army had to march.

She pulled off her hat and let the wind blow her hair out behind her as she spurred the rolgha up to a gallop.

Chapter 15

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Blade dismounted as soon as he felt he'd gone too far to be tracked in the morning. He unpacked the supplies in the saddlebags, made a pack of them, then slapped the rolgha on the rump. As it trotted off into the night Blade used his sword to cut a branch for a walking stick. Then he found himself a convenient tree and sat down with his back to it and his sword across his knees to sleep until morning. He knew that the amulets worked, but he'd still rather not trust his life to them for the first time on a particularly dark night. There was also Lorma. Blade suspected Jollya would be able to forgive his joining the Elstani, but never his letting something happen to the cat.

The dawn of a clear day came early. Blade scratched his insect bites, woke up Lorma, picked up his stick, and marched off into the forest of Binaark. Before he'd covered a mile he'd passed straight through the creepers of a small rogue without being attacked. After that happened a few times he found himself whistling as he walked along. It was exhilarating to come back into the forest and thumb his nose at the killer plants.

He was still careful not to let the amulet make him feel he was on a hike on the Yorkshire moors. There were snakes and insects, there was food to be rationed, and there was always Lorma to warn away from even the smaller plants. He also discovered that the amulet didn't let him go through one of the mile-wide groves. They were so thickly grown that even if the creepers didn't attack him it was impossible to get through without hacking his way foot by foot. It was better to walk around, rather than take the edge off his sword when he might need it as a weapon on the other side of the forest. It would take more than the synthetic beetle-gland scent to deal with the groves. They would last until someone in this Dimension invented dynamite or something equally potent.

The amulet also didn't completely suppress the attack reflex in the largest plants, if you waited too long or struggled too hard. The plant would somehow slowly sense that you weren't behaving like a beetle even if you smelled like one. You ought to be investigated, and the only way the plants had of investigating anything was to send out the creepers and the kill-pods.

Such an investigation took place so slowly that an active man with a sharp sword could easily defend himself for hours. It still wasn't pleasant, with the smell from the pods, the acid dripping, and those barbed six-inch fangs. After surviving one investigation only by laying about him with his sword, Blade concluded it was an experience to be avoided. He also knew that it proved that the plants were even farther outside the known limits of science than he'd suspected before. He would have given a lot to be able to take a seedling or even a few seeds back to Home Dimension with him.

In spite of the amulet's limitations, it did speed Blade's progress enormously. He covered in four days the distance it had taken him twelve days to cover the first time. He still didn't travel by night, to avoid blundering into groves or getting Lorma in trouble, but otherwise he was able to tramp along steadily, twelve and fourteen hours a day. The streams were low and the game animals were lean, but with a canteen and a bow he was able to keep both himself and Lorma from going without food.

There was no doubt about it: the Keepers of Jaghd had solved this Dimension's centuries-old problem of the killer plants. The Jaghdi army might have more problems and take longer getting through the forest than they'd expected, but they would get through. It was more important than ever for Blade to get through to Elstan and do whatever he could to defeat Tressana's plan to make herself empress of the world over a pile of Elstani corpses.

And afterward? When and if there was peace between the two countries, Blade suspected that the next step would be to build a road through the forest. A few hundred men with axes could keep the seedlings and the rogues under control. The road could go around the groves until someone came up with a way of destroying them. Then trade and travel between Elstan and Jaghd would go on all the year round, regardless of low water on the Adrim or snow in the mountain passes. After a few generations the two countries would be united more thoroughly than they ever would be if Tressana won. Then there would be nothing to stop the return of civilization to this Dimension.

No, that wasn't quite true. The people in this Dimension had wrecked one civilization by war. It was always hard to tell if people would learn from their mistakes or simply repeat them. There would also be a price to pay for civilization. Blade could imagine the scene a few centuries from now, when a six-lane highway ran along the path he was following now. On either side of it neat suburban lawns would have

replaced the ferns and fungi, and the killer plants would be kept in greenhouses for decoration. No doubt some of the people in those houses would be yearning for "the good old days" of primitive living and the wild forest of Binaark. They should just try walking through it!

Blade was never sure when he crossed out of the no-man's-land of the forest into Elstan. He did know when he first met the Elstani themselves.

Blade mopped the sweat off his forehead with a fern leaf and hoped that the thicket ahead didn't hide a rogue. He didn't really want to take the time to go around it, not after nearly a day without water. Lorma's tongue was already hanging out, and Blade felt as if his legs were turning to lead. The heavy scent of a stand of flowering trees nearby was cloying, almost nauseating.

The rustle of leaves alerted him too late. Suddenly a long rope with something on the end was flying toward him. Then it wrapped itself around his legs as tightly as a plant's creepers, and a sharp hook was digging into his pack. Somebody jerked hard on the rope, Lorma snarled, and Blade sprawled on the ground. His sword was caught under him, and he rolled to free it. Before he could draw, Lorma snarled again, and four men pushed their way out of the thicket.

Blade froze with his hand inches short of his sword. He recognized the men as Elstani. They were all short, none of them taller than about five feet six, and well muscled. Their round heads were shaved nearly bald, but all had mustaches on their broad dark faces. They wore heavy cloth trousers and shirts, with knee-high leather boots and elbow-length gloves in spite of the heat. Two of them were carrying crossbows, loaded, cocked, and aimed roughly at Blade's stomach. The other two were holding the rope, but as they came into the open they dropped it and drew double-edged short swords.

Lorma snarled again and Blade heard her paws scrabbling as she broke into a run. One of the archers let fly with his crossbow, but to his relief Blade heard nothing but the whuk of the bolt hitting a tree. He knew Lorma wasn't running because she was afraid, but because she'd received no orders to either stop or attack. She'd trail Blade and the Elstani until she did get his orders or could figure out for herself what was going on. Meanwhile she'd be safe from those crossbows—and Blade realized that she'd forced one of the archers to disarm himself. If he moved fast enough...

Before he could finish the thought three more archers stepped out of another patch of forest. Blade would have sworn that nothing larger than Lorma could have been hiding there without his seeing it. He wondered if he'd had his mind too much somewhere else, and hoped it wouldn't be fatal. From the grim, implacable expressions on the seven faces around him, it was hard to be optimistic. Blade had seldom seen men who looked less willing to listen, in a situation when talking his way out was probably his only hope.

Slowly he sat up, keeping his hands not only in plain sight but well clear of his body. Instead of trying to unwind the rope from his legs, he looked from one face to another as he spoke.

"I am Richard Blade, a warrior of England. I have been in the service of the Jaghdi, as you—you can see from my clothing and weapons. Jaghd is planning a great war to conquer Elstan. I did not believe in that war, so I have left Jaghd and come to warn Elstan."

Several of the men laughed and one said, "Even if that is true, it will not save your life. We know about Tressana's war. Do you think it could be kept a secret, that an army gathers on the Adrim?"

"No. But the army on the Adrim is not the greatest danger. Another army is gathering, to march through the forest of Binaark and—"

Several of the men laughed again, but others cursed. Blade knew the idea must sound as incredible to them as it had to him the first time, and struggled to find words. He cautiously raised his hand to point at the amulet around his neck. "This makes it possible to march through the forest. The Keepers of Jaghd have learned how to fight the killer plants, so now an army—"

That was the end of Blade's speech, and nearly the end of Blade himself. One of the archers suddenly snapped his crossbow up and shot. He wasn't faster than one of the swordsmen, however. The man's sword flickered out like a striking snake, the point knocking the crossbow up and to one side. A bolt that would have drilled Blade's skull only tore a gash in his right ear. Then in a blur of motion the swordsman knocked the crossbow out of his comrade's hand, kicked the man's legs out from under him, and knelt on his chest with the sword point at his throat.

"I know your pride, Fador'n. I will not call this unlawful, if you lay down your bow for this Cutting."

"Yes, Daimarz."

The man called Daimarz let the other up and turned to Blade. Blade noticed that Daimarz had an ax-shaped badge worked in copper wire on both gloves, and the same ax shape tattooed on his forehead. "Richard Blade, as you call yourself, we can see that you are of Jaghd. As for the rest, you have won yourself a little more life, at least. We will finish this Cutting, then take you to the Masters. If you are telling the truth, it will at least win you the good Stone Death." He sheathed his sword. "Will you swear not to try to escape? Or else you may find yourself wishing for any death before the Cutting is over."

"I will swear that, if you will swear something in return."

"Why should we bargain with you, Jaghd?"

"Who spoke of bargaining? I only wish to know that I am dealing with men who know what an oath is. Otherwise, what do I have to gain by swearing one myself and making things easier for you?"

"There is sense in that," said Daimarz, rubbing the tattoo on his forehead. "Very well, what shall we swear?"

"That unless the cat Lorma attacks one of your men, you will do nothing against her."

Several of the men laughed at that, but Daimarz raised a hand. "No. The gray cats of Jaghd seem to have more than a beast's sense. You will order her not to strike at us?"

"If I see her, yes."

"Good enough. Then she shall not be harmed, as long as you do not try to escape."

The Elstani hurried forward to pull Blade to his feet and tie his hands to a stick behind his back. Daimarz himself tore away the amulet. "This we shall keep for the Masters." He handed it to Fador'n for safekeeping.

Blade swore. "If you'll just test it on one of the plants, you'll see—"

"I see and hear a Jaghdi prisoner who talks too much," said Daimarz. A hand signal made two of the

archers raise their crossbows. "I did not swear to listen to your lies, Blade."

As the men lined up on either side of Blade, he swore again, but silently. The Elstani weren't mindlessly bloodthirsty. They wouldn't kill him outright before he could tell his story to the Masters. But if they refused to test the amulet before it lost its power, he'd have no way of proving that his story was true! The results for Elstan could be just as disastrous as if these men had killed him outright.

Blade felt better about walking into the ambush after watching the Elstani at work for a few days. They were clearly as much at home in the forest as Lorna herself, able to hide so well that neither man nor cat could be sure of detecting them until it was too late.

There were fifteen men in the Elstani party led by Daimarz. All of them were of the Woodcutters' Guild, and they were as tough and well disciplined as soldiers. With their job, they had to be.

The killer plants spread themselves by firing seeds from seed pods hidden high in their upper branches. When the pods were ripe, they were triggered by the rising sun. So the plants tended to spread toward the east, creeping up on Elstan's already inadequate farm and grazing lands like a slow tide. The woodcutters' job was to beat back this tide.

Fortunately they didn't have to deal with the groves, at least not now. There'd been groves established in Elstani territory a century ago, but somehow they'd been successfully attacked since then. Blade had the distinct feeling that whatever they'd used on the groves was something they didn't want to talk about in the presence of someone from Jaghd, even if he was a prisoner.

The seedlings, half-grown plants, and full-grown rogues were enough work for any reasonable man. Dealing with the younger plants was more tedious than dangerous. A single team of woodcutters might find more than a thousand of them in the course of a week's Cutting. It took sharp eyes to pick them out of the surrounding jungle, hoes for the smaller ones, axes for the larger ones, and a lot of muscle and sweat no matter what size they were. The plants were tough as well as prolific.

The rogues were a far more dangerous proposition, even for strong, well-trained men working together in teams. The woodcutters were careful to leave Blade out of sight whenever they tackled a rogue, afraid to let a Jaghd in on their secrets. Blade could still guess most of what happened from listening to the sounds of the fight and what the woodcutters said afterward.

The woodcutters met the rogues head-on. They took their axes and hacked their way into the network of creepers. When the kill-pods came down they stood their ground and turned the axes against them. When the kill-pods were all gone, they advanced still farther, to the base of the trunk. A last few minutes' work with the axes, and the rogue was dead.

Blade didn't need to hear the woodcutters talking to know how many things could go wrong. Under attack, the killer plants could move their pods much faster than the one he'd fought. A man who got even one arm trapped by the creepers could have a pod closing on him before any one could chop a path to him. A man who was unlucky enough to be pulled down was as good as dead. He might have comrades only a spear's length from him, but if they were fighting for their lives against creepers and pods they couldn't help him.

That was why so many of the woodcutters carried powerful crossbows. Half a dozen archers always stayed out of reach of the creepers, bows ready. A brisk shower of bolts could sometimes discourage a kill-pod. If not, a bolt through the head or the heart was a more merciful death than the killer plants gave a man.

Daimarz's band didn't have any dead to mourn while Blade was with them. But one man was blinded by acid from a kill-pod as they attacked a stand of three rogues growing toward each other. That time Blade smelled smoke and something like burning tar near the end of the battle. The men came back with their already dark skins nearly black with soot, and they talked less than usual about what they'd done.

Apart from not allowing Blade to prove he was telling the truth about the amulets, the woodcutters treated him well enough. They gave him enough food and water, and left his hands untied whenever there were enough men around to guard him. He also discovered that even when he was tied the bar and cords were light enough so that he could break loose if he had to. That would look like a violation of his oath, so he didn't plan to do it except in an emergency where he needed both hands free. After he volunteered to help carry the blinded man's stretcher, they left him untied at least half the day.

A drizzling rain was falling as the party set out on the morning of Blade's tenth day with the woodcutters. Everybody was walking a little faster than before, in spite of their fatigue. They were on the way home, with no more work between them and the hot meals they'd be eating tomorrow night. Their packs were light and even the tools they still had to carry didn't seem a burden any more. They would have been moving even faster if they hadn't been trying a new route through some hills rather than around them. It was Daimarz's idea to try out this new route, the sort of thing he did quite often. Since he was the son of the Master of the Woodcutters, he'd come by his curiosity honestly.

Blade didn't quarrel with scientific curiosity, but thought Daimarz hadn't chosen the best time or place to indulge it. His men were tired, their tools made an awkward load, and the best route through the hills seemed to lie halfway up a steep slope. Above was a nearly vertical hillside, below a sharp drop into a mist-shrouded valley, and underfoot slick grass and gluey mud.

The effort of carrying the stretcher on the uncertain footing made even Blade sweat. After an hour Daimarz had him relieved. "I'd rather have my hands free," Blade said as they approached to tie him again. "Where would I go on this slope?"

Daimarz shook his head. "On the slope, nowhere. But down there—" he pointed into the mist "—who knows? You'd be impossible to catch the moment you were out of sight. That might be too much temptation even for an honest man. And no, I won't give you the amulet either."

As soon as Blade was tied up, the march started again. Blade was muttering under his breath, and felt closer to breaking his oath than ever before. He still had to get to Elstan and give the warning, but he'd begun to feel that he might do the job better striking out on his own. Daimarz was brave, honest, and a fine leader, but right now he was also being much too stubborn for his people's good!

One careful plodding step followed another. The rain grew heavier, and it seemed to Blade that the mist in the valley below was getting thicker. Having his hands tied behind him made keeping his balance a good deal more difficult than it should have been. At least the ache in his shoulders from carrying the stretcher was fading.

Blade felt the ground move under him before he heard the cries of the men or the dreadful sucking sound. He threw himself uphill with all his strength, nearly wrenching a shoulder as he landed. The men in front of him and behind him followed his example and came down beside him. Blade was the first to raise his head, hear the cries get louder, and see Daimarz and the first six men in the line slowly vanish into the mist as the rain-soaked hillside slid into the valley.

The rest of the party seemed to be on firmer ground. Blade was relieved to hear the cries of the men

caught in the landslip continuing. Apparently they'd gone down so slowly that they'd been able to keep from being buried alive under the mud. The blind man, the only really helpless one in the party, was still safe. The rest should be able to climb back up.

"Help!" came a terrified shout from down below. "Help us! There's a rogue down here! We've landed in a rogue! Help!" Blade had never heard any of the woodcutters sounding so close to panic.

Chapter 16

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Blade heard the hiss and clatter of weapons being drawn by the woodcutters still on the path. He saw them step as cautiously as cats to the edge of the landslip and look down into the mist. Fador'n was the closest, but even he was staying carefully on firm ground.

Was Fador'n deliberately refusing to go to his leader's aid, taking a horrible vengeance for the disgrace of losing his bow? Then Blade looked down into the valley and reconsidered. Fador'n might be suffering from nothing worse than a loss of nerve. The mist-filled valley was weird and terrifying, an unreal sight which might easily be suspected of hiding even worse things than the killer plants.

Unfortunately it did hide the plants, and the cries of the men caught among the creepers of the rogue were entirely too real. Even if Fador'n got his nerve back in a minute or two, he might be too late. Without Daimarz, Blade's chances of having his story believed in Elstan or even getting to Elstan alive would shrink. So would Elstan's chances of surviving Queen Tressana's campaign. Apart from this, Blade knew he owed Daimarz something for his justice toward Lorma, and for saving him from Fador'n.

Blade rolled over until he was lying on his face, both arms clear of the ground. Then he put shoulder, back, and arm muscles into one tremendous jerk. The ropes dug into his flesh, then the stick cracked like a pistol shot. A second jerk split it in two. Blade flexed life into his wrists and got to his feet.

Fador'n saw him. He yelled, "The Jaghd's escaping!" and dashed at Blade, drawing his sword as he ran. Behind him came a man with a raised ax. Fortunately nobody had a crossbow ready for action. All the bowstrings were carefully packed away to keep them safe from the damp weather.

"Damn it, I want to help them down there!" roared Blade. "Give me the amulet and—" Then he had to leap aside from Fador'n's rush. His effort to be reasonable cost him a gashed forearm. He found himself directly in the path of the axman, with the ax starting down.

All right, if these idiots are more concerned with keeping me from escaping than with saving their friends...

Blade ducked under the downswing of the ax and gave the man a one-two punch in the stomach. He doubled up, vomited, and dropped the ax. Blade caught it in midair and swung it in a wide arc to drive Fador'n back. The woodcutter came in again, too intent on dealing with Blade even to shout for help. The flat of the ax came down on his sword hand. He yelped and dropped his weapon. Blade shifted the ax to his left hand, closed with Fador'n, and punched the man in the jaw. The woodcutter not only fell, he also started rolling down the slope. Blade plunged after him, nearly losing his own footing, and caught up with him just above the mist. He snatched the amulet out of the belt pouch, carefully tied it around his own neck, then pulled Fador'n around so that he wouldn't roll any farther. The man was an idiot, but even an idiot didn't deserve the fate awaiting him at the bottom of the hill.

Blade hefted the ax again, testing its weight and balance. For a five-foot, six-inch Elstani, the ax was a two-handed weapon. Blade found he could easily use it with one hand, thought for a moment of trying to get steel for his other hand, then decided time was more important than an extra weapon. He cupped his free hand to his mouth and shouted down into the mist.

"Halloooo! This is Richard Blade, the Englishman. I'm coming down with the ax and the amulet. Hold on! I'll try to get you out!"

Blade wished he could promise to do more than try, but he didn't believe in miracles. It would take just about that to get all the men out of the rogue's grip. The amulet might still be effective. The stopper was still in and the scent was supposed to be more powerful in damp weather. Would it work against a rogue already triggered into action by seven struggling men? Also, Blade didn't know where the men were, who was in the most danger, or the best route to the base of the rogue's trunk. The mist would make it hard to find out.

Blade started down the slope, cutting back and forth to slow his rate of descent. The last thing he wanted was to lose his footing on the slick grass and reach the bottom sprawling and weaponless. Then he'd be no more than another victim for the robe.

The panicky cries from the mist had died away at Blade's shout. As he entered the mist they started again. Then Daimarz's voice roared out above all the others. "Shut up, the whole damned pack of you! Are you woodcutters of Elstan or women of Jaghd?" A sudden silence, except for a few shouts from above. Blade ignored those. Nobody up there could do anything to him until they'd strung a bow. Even then they might have the sense not to shoot wildly into a mist which hid their comrades as well as the "escaping" prisoner.

As he dropped into the mist, Blade headed to his left, toward the landslip and the fallen men. He heard Daimarz's voice again, shouting, "If there's a pod close to you, shout! If not, stay quiet!" Two men shouted. Blade swore. The mist not only blocked vision, it distorted hearing as well. It was almost impossible to tell where a man was from just hearing him.

Daimarz must have realized the same thing. He shouted again. "Everybody stop moving! I'll keep fighting. That should pull the pods toward me. Blade, can you cut the rest loose while I draw the pods?"

As Daimarz fell silent, Blade reached the outer edge of the rogue's creepers. They were all writhing and twisting like an endless nest of immense snakes, terrifying enough in broad daylight and quite indescribable seen through the mist. Blade could now understand better why the tough woodcutters gave way to panic when they slid downhill into this.

Blade stepped forward into the creepers. Time to find out if the amulet was still any good. He wished it was on a chain rather than a cord. A creeper that wasn't attacking him might break the cord.

Two anaconda-sized creepers wriggled toward him. They rose into the air, wavered, then one pulled back abruptly. The second came on, slapped his thigh almost playfully, then swung wide of him. Blade didn't bother striking at them. He felt like cheering. The amulet still worked!

"Daimarz!" he shouted. "You keep still too! There's no need for you to sacrifice yourself! The amulet works. I can move in and draw everything to me with no danger."

"Blade, I—"

"Stop arguing! I know what I'm doing! This is the beginning of the end for the killer plants of Binaark!"

That produced a dead silence except for the creaking and scraping of the creepers and the distant shouts of the men up on the hillside. Blade took another step forward, and saw another creeper come at him. It stopped just within range, and he cut completely through it with a single blow of the ax. Sap splattered the leaves around Blade but missed him.

Now he could see the first of the seven men ahead, lying under a bush completely tangled in creepers. He was doing his best to hold still, but a kill-pod was already wavering just above the bush. A few more feet and it would be within reach of the man.

Blade picked out the three nearest creepers and cut them off. All the others writhed more furiously than ever. The man yelled as the creepers holding him wrenched at his joints. The kill-pod swept over him and came at Blade. Whatever the creepers Blade had cut were saying, the kill-pod was getting the message that he was something to be investigated.

Blade let the pod come within easy reach. Then he unleashed his ax in an overhead swing using both hands and all his strength. The branch supporting the kill-pod was nearly a foot thick, but the ax went halfway through it at one blow. The branch jerked back so violently that most of the rest broke off. The pod dangled by a few remaining muscle fibers, sap gushed out like water from a hose, and the plant started screaming.

Blade jumped back, cut off another creeper, and tried to shout to the men up the hill. Then he realized they'd never hear him over the plant's screaming. The writhing creepers loosened their grip on the man under the bush. He was still clear-headed enough to realize it, and rolled out of their reach. Then he sprang to his feet and made a dash for safety. He ran straight into Blade, so hard that both men nearly went down. Blade gripped the woodcutter by one shoulder and bellowed in his ear loud enough to be heard over the plant's screaming.

"Tell those idiots up on the hill to stop standing around with their thumbs up their arses! The amulet's working, I tell you. I'll be able to fight the plants, but you men are going to need some help getting back up. Tell them to send a couple of men down the hill, or at least throw down a rope! Understand me?"

The man jerked his head in what Blade hoped was a nod. Blade pointed toward the firm ground, and the man went off as if a kill-pod was snapping at his heels. Blade took several deep breaths, closed his ears to the screaming, and turned back to his battle for the lives of the other six woodcutters.

Blade fought his battle with mist all around him. After a while there was a second mist inside his head, and he stopped remembering details of the fight. He only knew that the amulet still worked, that the ax still cut everything he struck, and that one by one the woodcutters came free of the rogue and staggered off into the mist toward safety. This was enough.

By the time Blade reached Daimarz, he was dripping with sweat and his wounded arm was beginning to hurt. He itched in half a dozen places from tree sap, and his ax was beginning to lose its edge. He was still able to chop Daimarz free of half a dozen creepers and pull the woodcutter to his feet.

The man was bleeding in several places where the creepers had scraped his arms and legs. As Blade steadied him, blood from the Englishman's gashed arm flowed over some of Daimarz's wounds. The woodcutter pulled himself free so violently that Blade thought he might have violated some important taboo. Then the woodcutter looked steadily at Blade.

"So. We have mingled our blood at the first, not at the last. The proper words must still—no, I forgot. When you have saved—how many lives today, Blade of England?"

"I think all your men got clear of the rogue on their own two feet."

"Then, seven woodcutters saved. The words do not matter."

Blade took a deep breath, which cleared his head enough for him to understand and reply. "If you mean we are now blood brothers, I have nothing against it. But I think we should finish off this rogue first. It's—look out!"

A kill-pod loomed out of the nest behind Daimarz. Blade chopped at it with his ax but hit it only a glancing blow as the woodcutter jumped clear. Blade now saw that the kill-pod was moving slowly and clumsily, only a few feet off the ground. He also realized for the first time that the screaming was dying away to a thin piping whistle.

"It is not dead yet," said Daimarz. "But it can no longer do much harm." They stepped back as the kill-pod crept toward them. "I have no right to ask this, because I am at fault in all that has happened today, but—may I have your ax to strike one blow?"

"Certainly, although it's beginning to lose its edge."

Daimarz nodded and took the ax. Then he stepped back, leaped high with a shrill cry, and chopped through one hinge of the pod's jaw. Another leap, another cry, and the other hinge was cut through. The lower jaw sagged limply, and the pod itself drooped like a wilted leaf.

Daimarz handed the ax back to Blade. "Now that I have done as much as I am worthy of doing, the honor of the kill is yours. No, wait!" He raised a hand as Blade shouldered the ax. "I want to have other men watch you do your work. When I lay the tale of you and your amulet before my father and the other Masters, I want no one calling me a liar."

"A good idea." Daimarz seemed to be keeping his head, in spite of an experience which must have been both terrifying and shameful. Blade understood now some of the reason for the hostility of the party to the idea of the amulets. The woodcutters were proud of the courage and skill it took to face the killer plants and beat them on their own ground. If the amulets made it possible for any child to play in the forest of Binaark, that would be the end of their ancient and proud guild. They would be like square-rigger sailors forced ashore by the coming of the steamship.

It took Daimarz a while to persuade or threaten enough of his men into coming back down the hill into the mist and the rogue's creepers. Blade used that time to catch his breath and examine his injuries. Apart from the gashed arm, there was nothing a bath and a good night's sleep wouldn't take care of. By the time four of the woodcutters were gathered behind Daimarz to watch Blade, he felt ready to tackle a whole new rogue.

The mist was beginning to lift, so the woodcutters were able to watch from a distance as Blade strode into the heart of the rogue's creepers. They didn't attack him, but they lay so thick on the ground that he sometimes had to chop a path through them. At last he came to the base of the rogue, a frightening black mass nearly two feet thick. It took him five strokes to chop clear through it, and as he did the plant's dying screams rang deafeningly in his ears. So much sap gushed out that the ground all around him turned to foul-smelling mud, and he had to jump back hastily to protect his feet.

When Blade returned to the woodcutters, they were all cheering, making nearly as much noise as the dying plant. They would have picked him up on their shoulders and carried him up the slope, if they could have stayed on their feet while doing it. Instead they all helped each other back up the slope, to where Fador'n was beginning to sit up and mutter.

Lorma was waiting for Blade on the path. She jumped on him so enthusiastically he nearly went over backward and down the slope again. Then she started rubbing against his legs, purring so loud it was almost a roar. Where had she come from? How had she been able to trail the party all these days, and know the exact moment when it was safe to come out? Blade respected Lorma's intelligence; now he began to wonder if she wasn't telepathic! Perhaps he'd be able to find out some time. For now it was enough to have her back and listen to her purr.

The lifting of the mist showed that the valley ahead was even steeper-sided than it was here. Daimarz decided to turn back. The woodcutters shouldered their equipment, picked up the blinded man's stretcher, and started retracing their steps toward the valley mouth. Fador'n staggered along, bound the same way Blade had been as punishment for his stupidity.

Blade and Daimarz brought up the rear of the party, so they could talk freely. "What can your father, the Master of the Woodcutters, do for the Elstani in the war against Jaghd?" Blade asked.

"Perhaps much, perhaps everything. The woodcutters will serve as the leaders of Elstan in any war, so our word will count for more than any other two guilds together."

That made sense. The woodcutters were in excellent physical condition, and trained both to use weapons and to act together. Blade could hardly imagine any other craft or skill that would produce the same sort of man.

"We don't have much time."

"The guilds may not take much time to come together and agree. Once they hear of the amulets, they will find it easy to believe the tale of the riders coming through the forest."

At least politics couldn't be any worse in Elstan than they'd been in Jaghd. But time was on the side of the Jaghdi, not the Elstani.

"Is there anything we can do about the war without waiting for all the guilds to agree?"

Daimarz frowned. "Two or three guilds together can work to deal with a flood or a plague, without waiting for the rest. The woodcutters would need one other guild at least, but—if you think it may be needed—?"

"I do."

They walked on in silence for a while. Lorma was staying so close to Blade that he had to watch his step to keep from treading on her tail. Blue sky was beginning to show through the clouds overhead.

"A word of warning, Blade. Our women are not those of Jaghd. They know their own minds and speak them. Remember that and listen to them."

"The women of England are more like yours than those of Jaghd," said Blade. "I will feel more at home

in Elstan than I ever did on the other side of the forest. The Jaghdi have a great deal to learn about women, and I fear Queen Tressana is not the one to teach them."

Silence fell again. Blade looked back at the valley, where the mist had now lifted enough to show the ruins of the rogue plant. He hadn't won the whole war back there by defeating the plant, but he might have won Elstan's first battle.

Chapter 17

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Blade won Elstan's second victory by following Daimarz's advice about listening to the women of Elstan. It was easy to listen to Haima Kao, Master of the Guild of Weavers, particularly when she was talking to him in bed.

She was a large woman, heavy-boned and muscular rather than fat, with red hair down to her waist and a hearty appetite for food, beer, and men. She met Blade when he and Daimarz visited her house. Blade wasn't expecting to have a particularly good time and, indeed, wasn't in the mood to be anybody's guest. It seemed to him that the Master Woodcutter's negotiations with his fellow Masters were taking forever, while Tressana's army might already be on the march. Daimarz swore up and down that his father was doing everything that could be done to persuade the other guildsmen to unite with the woodcutters, but Blade continued to wonder.

Haima's lavish banquet improved Blade's temper quite a bit. Their hostess laid on food and beer as though they were all eating their last meal. She talked cheerfully about her work, the inferior skills of the younger weavers, the people intriguing to get her out of the guild's mastership, her late husband, and her lovely daughter Chaia. She talked so long and so loudly that Daimarz, who was normally fond of the sound of his own voice, hardly got to say a word. Blade was amused at his blood brother's growing look of frustration.

During the meal Haima didn't say anything about the war or the negotiations among the Masters. Then at the end of the meal, Haima rose and said, "Here's to a peaceful road through the forest of Binaark, when we've beaten the Jaghdi!" She emptied a quart pot of beer without taking it from her lips. Blade was tempted to change that toast to "If we win," but remembered his manners. What was more, Haima was indicating that at least her guild, if not the others, was willing to unite with the woodcutters in a campaign against the Jaghdi. After a few more toasts to people and things he'd never heard of, Haima turned Daimarz over to her serving girls and took Blade off to her own bed for the night.

She was the third woman Blade had slept with in this Dimension, and he found her in most ways the best company. She wasn't nervous like Jollya, and she wasn't slightly mad like Tressana. She was simply enjoying herself. He enjoyed particularly the fine pillow her magnificent breasts made, and the fact that she laughed when she reached her climax. It wasn't the hysterical laughter of Queen Tressana, but a deep, hearty bellowing. It was as if she was enjoying herself so much that she simply couldn't find any other way to show it.

Afterward they sprawled on the furs before her fireplace and got down to serious business. Haima unrolled a map pricked into deerskin with a hot needle and Blade showed her the planned Jaghdi campaign.

"The army on the Adrim isn't going to be much of a problem by itself," she said. "We can give up the

lowland along the river and hold here with only a handful of men." A work-calloused forefinger stabbed at a narrow pass leading up from the Adrim into the central valleys of Elstan. "The Jaghdi cavalry is the real problem. Solve that and we've won the war." She looked at the mark Blade had made to show the planned Jaghdi camp. "That's the Kettle of the Winds there. We use the cliffs behind the flatland for the Stone Death."

"The what?"

"The Stone Death? Didn't Daimarz tell you?"

Her tone was so accusing that Blade felt he had to defend the woodcutter. "He's been busy, Haima. His father needs—"

"He needs to remember that you can be trusted now. The Stone Death is simple. We take the man to the top of one of the cliffs and throw him off."

"Oh." That explained why Daimarz had called it a "good death." It would be quick, at least.

Haima looked at the map again, then closed her eyes as if she were trying to conjure up a picture of the Kettle of the Winds. "That bitch Tressana has a good eye for land. We can't come at anyone camped on the flats there."

"You could make your own camp there first."

"We might, if we had enough men. Until all the guilds speak with one voice, we couldn't put more than two thousand men there." Blade realized that wouldn't be enough to hold for long against several times as many cavalry. The Jaghdi might not even bother to destroy them, and instead besiege them in their own camp with half the cavalry while the other half continued to march through Elstan.

"If we could just be sure of reaching the camp with enough of the Living Fire—" began Haima irritably. Then she saw Blade's blank expression and swore. "Didn't Daimarz tell you about that either?" She held up a hand to silence Blade's new attempts to make excuses for the woodcutter. "One of these days I'm going to take that boy's pants down and spank him until his ass is red!"

Without any prompting from Blade she went on to describe the Living Fire. Blade recognized it as what the woodcutters must have used on those three rogues. It explained the smoke, the tar-like smell, and the soot on the men. The Living Fire was something like Greek fire or napalm. It was based on "rock oil," it clung where it fell, and water only spread it. A good dose of the Living Fire scattered over the Jaghdi camp would probably make a first-class mess, and if it landed among unsaddled rolghas...

Blade was so absorbed by the idea of panicking the whole Jaghdi army's mounts that Haima had to run her fingers and lips over him for quite a while before he would pay attention to her. When they'd finished this time, she raised herself on one elbow and looked down at him. The firelight playing on her red hair seemed to make her face and breasts glow.

"Blade, how long do you intend to stay in Elstan?"

Blade answered cautiously. "Until I must travel onward, or return to my own land of England. If my queen orders me to return, it is my duty to go."

"And if those orders don't come?"

Blade had the feeling that she wanted to hear him say he'd be staying for many years. He knew that she wasn't the sort of woman to forgive a lie, and that it was impossible to tell how long it would be before the computer drew him back to Home Dimension. Even more cautiously, he said, "It could be several years."

"Ah. Long enough to marry Chaia and give her children, then." Startled, Blade could only nod. Haima went on. "Chaia is beautiful but willful. Those men who do not fear her fear me. Only the most courageous of men would be suitable husbands."

"Is Daimarz one of those men, by any chance?"

She laughed. "You see clearly. Yes. He was the first I would have chosen, as soon as Chaia came of age. But he refused, and said so much against both her and me that he drove away others. Now Chaia is two years past the lawful age, with no husband. If you could take her and give her my grandchildren before you returned to England, I would be sure of a place in the future of Elstan."

"How old is she?"

"She will be fourteen next month."

"Fourteen!" The exclamation slipped out before Blade could stop himself. The idea of playing stud to help Haima continue a dynasty wasn't entirely unreasonable, but making love to a girl of fourteen—!

"Is she too old to be a maiden?" asked Haima.

"Too old?" Blade managed to keep himself from gaping. "No. The law of England says no girl can be made a woman before she is sixteen."

"England is a land of feeble women, or is it that your girls do not have the size and shape of women before they are sixteen?"

"Most of them don't."

"Ah. Ours become women before they are twelve."

She explained that ever since the wars the Elstani called the Time of Death, an Elstani woman was usually mature enough to bear children safely at twelve. She normally married at thirteen, bore her two or three children before she was twenty, then practiced some craft or skill into old age.

This sounded to Blade like the result of a mutation, or perhaps warfare with DNA-altered bacteria. However it happened, it largely explained the position of women in Elstan. They could be both mothers and productive workers in a single normal lifespan. In fact, with the natural advantages its women had, Blade was surprised that Elstan wasn't a matriarchy.

The explanation didn't make the idea of marrying a fourteen-year-old any more appealing to Blade. He frowned, as if he was examining the idea from all sides. Then he said, "What if we lose the war and your daughter is left with children to bring up in Jaghdi slavery?"

"She will kill herself and them before bowing to the Jaghdi," said Haima coldly. "And we shall not lose this war if you agree to take Chaia to wife. If you do, I will join my voice to the woodcutters to unite

Elstan. If we stand together the Jaghdi are doomed."

Blade remembered what Daimarz said, about their only needing the help of one more guild to begin preparing Elstan for war. The weavers and woodcutters might be able to do enough by themselves. Their union would certainly encourage the other guilds to join in. Certainly Haima was promising more and asking less than any of the other guilds so far.

"Then join your voice to the woodcutters, Haima. I will take Chaia as my wife, but after we have won the first battle."

They drank beer and bargained for nearly an hour. In the end they agreed that Blade and Chaia would swear betrothal and exchange rings at once, but the marriage would not be consummated until after the first battle. That was good enough for Blade. He wouldn't have to fight both the Jaghdi and his own scruples at the same time.

"The first thing I'd like to do is go to the Kettle of the Winds," he began. "If I see—"

"No, the first thing you can do is this," she said, guiding his hands to her breasts. Blade didn't think about the war again until he was drifting off to sleep, his head pillowed more comfortably than usual on Haima's breasts. He thought he was standing at the foot of the cliffs in the Kettle of the Winds, but they kept advancing and receding in a cloud of dark smoke, while giant bats swooped down to claw at his eyes.

"How do I look, Jollya?"

"Like a queen riding to battle, Your Grace," said Jollya.

"I should hope so," said Tressana. She gripped her stirrup, and Jollya's hands clasped under her boots lifted her into the saddle. With one hand she held the bridle, while the other rose in a signal to her musicians. The silver horns blared, then the drums joined in, and finally the cheers of the crowd drowned out all the musicians.

Tressana's rolgha caught some of her excitement and began to prance. She reined it in, but couldn't rein in her own excitement as easily. Jaghd was going to war, Elstan was doomed, and she would rule the world!

For the first time she wore metal armor, a helmet, a gilded breastplate, and leggings of silvered chain mail. She still carried her bow, because she would have felt naked without it, but she carried a gold-hilted short sword rather than a lance. She wouldn't be much use in a cavalry fight, but she didn't intend to get into one. With ten thousand Jaghdi gathered in one place, she had to be where she could see everything and give the orders. Few of the commanders would obey anyone but her, and none would question her courage.

Ahead the road stretched yellow and dusty in the sun toward the forest of Binaark. On either side rode her guards, with Jollya at the head of the women and Efrog of the Red Band leading the men. She'd have to ask Jollya how her father was doing. Sikkurad and some of his helpers were riding in the baggage train, to represent the Keepers in the war. Both Sikkurad and his daughter probably knew he'd been chosen because Tressana didn't trust him. She suspected he disapproved of her war, and so it was better if she kept him where she could keep an eye on him. However, as long as both Sikkurad and his daughter did their work in the war, everything they might have done before it would be forgiven. Neither

Keepers nor good fighting women grew on trees.

For Jollya's part, she, like her father, was keeping silent. She remembered Blade's words about keeping one's mouth shut and waiting for a better time. So, like her father, she continued to serve Tressana, biding her time and biting her tongue.

Even the wagons in the rear were moving now, judging from the cloud of dust. Tressana saw the royal banner over Manro's wagon swaying ominously, and sent a rider back to have the pole strengthened. If it fell someone would be sure to call it an evil omen. They'd already said as much about the disaster to the first scouting party.

If she'd only been able to leave Manro behind completely—but neither law nor custom nor common sense would allow it. The King of Jaghd must go to war with his army, even if his mind was useless and his body nearly so. There were also advantages. Far from the palace with its sharp eyes and wagging tongues, some way might be found to complete the work begun so many years ago. If that could be done, and Manro's death blamed on the war... Yes, that was worth thinking about.

The queen's smile broadened as she took her place between her two guard-captains.

King Manro knew that the men standing on the back of the wagon wouldn't let him put his head out and see what was going on. He wanted to do it. It would be like a turtle putting his head out of his shell. He'd seen a turtle do that once, and liked it.

Even if the men weren't going to let him, he knew what was going on. The gods had told the Jaghdi that they must leave their homeland. They were all going, and Tressana was leading them. This was not right. The gods were punishing the Jaghdi by forcing them to find a new home because of all the bad things Pretty Tressana had done. She should not be leading them. This would make the gods even angrier. The Jaghdi would be punished again, even in their new home.

Once he had thought that Pretty Tressana would protect him from everything, even the gods. Now he understood that he himself had to be protected from Tressana. He thought the dark woman who rode with Tressana might do it. What was her name? Jollya? Yes, Jollya—Dark Jollya.

Dark Jollya would protect him in the new land where the Jaghdi had to go.

This time Blade was awake as he stood at the foot of the cliffs in the Kettle of the Winds. The towering cliffs were even more impressive than he'd imagined in his dream. From where Blade was standing, the cliffs were at least a quarter of a mile straight up. Or straight down, depending on your viewpoint. If the flatlands at the foot of the cliffs hadn't been so wide, no enemy could have set up a camp there. As it was, the flatlands were wide enough so that the Jaghdi cavalry would be protected by the cliffs but still be far enough away so that boulders pushed off the top would not reach them. The wide, shallow river protected them from the other three sides. Tressana did have a good eye for land.

Blade turned away from the cliffs and began to walk back toward the camp by the river. It was a good three miles against a brisk headwind. By the time he was getting close to the river he'd considered almost every way of attacking an enemy camped in the middle of the flats. He finally concluded that it couldn't be done unless the Elstani could grow wings.

Thinking of wings made him look up. Birds were soaring over the river and sweeping across the flatlands toward the cliffs, climbing as they went without a flicker of wing. They must be soaring on some fairly powerful updrafts.

Soaring on updrafts. Suddenly Blade was in a hurry. He scrambled across a patch of rocks as fast as he could go without breaking an ankle. When he reached smoother ground he broke into a run and came pounding up to the tent like an Olympic sprinter.

Haima watched Blade testing the direction of the wind with a wet thumb. Then he examined their tent, still without saying a word. Finally she lost patience. "Blade, have you got the itch or something?"

"No. I—Haima, how common are these reeds?" He pointed at the tent. Its poles were made of lengths of reed glued together.

"In some places they grow like grass. There's a marsh a day upriver." She pointed.

"Good. And the wind—does it always blow? And toward the cliffs?"

"Blade, why do you think this place is called the Kettle of the Winds? Yes. What's biting you?"

Instead of answering, Blade took both her hands and danced her around in a circle until she started laughing in spite of herself. Finally she collapsed, still laughing.

"It's good news, isn't it?"

"Yes. There's no way of attacking a camp on the flatlands here unless the Elstani can fly. But with the help of the wind I think they can."

Haima stared at him. Blade knelt down, wishing the Elstani had paper. The gravel by the river was very fine, though. With the point of his sword he was able to sketch his idea well enough to make Haima understand.

Chapter 18

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"All right, people. Grab a wingtip and lift—gently, gently! This thing isn't made of iron!"

"If it isn't strong, Blade, Elstan is in trouble," said Kima, the young woman to Blade's left.

"Blade is in even more trouble," said her brother on Blade's right. "It's a long way down. Ah—how far do we need to go?" He looked down the steadily steepening slope and out into the empty air of the Kettle of the Winds.

"Scared, Borokku?" said Kima.

"Yes," the man replied bluntly. "I haven't done anything to deserve the Stone Death."

"It's better than you'll get if the Elstani win," his sister replied sharply.

"Stop arguing, both of you," said Blade, torn between irritation and amusement. "All I need is for you to hold on while I make the final inspection. Otherwise it's likely to take off on its own."

"Yes, Blade," they said. Then there was no more talking as Blade made his final inspection of the hang glider. He'd used the wing before, testing it on gentler hillsides, but he was very careful now to check for defects. If anything went wrong up here, there was a quarter-mile of empty air between him and the stony ground.

Blade's hang glider was the simplest kind—a triangular Rogallo wing of waxed cloth, with three spars and a pilot's frame made of glued reed. The materials were strong enough but made the glider much heavier than it would have been in Home Dimension. Blade compensated by making the glider considerably larger, to get a satisfactory glide angle with his two hundred and ten pounds aboard. The wing was twenty-three feet from tip to tip, and Blade expected it to carry him off the cliff, clear across the flatlands, and across the river to the far bank. If it did this it should be able to do the same with a one hundred fifty-pound Elstani and enough Living Fire to scare the wits out of any rogha ever foaled!

Blade hoped everything would go well. If it didn't, he would be splattered like a ripe peach on the rocks far below. Elstan's best hope of victory would also be dashed, and much work by many Elstani over the past few days would go to waste.

Haima and Daimarz worked late, helping him pick materials and suggesting design changes. Weavers worked all night waxing what seemed like acres of cloth. Woodcutters did the same, gluing reeds into the twenty-foot poles needed for the glider. There were ten times as many volunteers for the ground crew as Blade could use. Some of them had already tried short flights on easy slopes with the three new gliders.

The other Guilds had still not agreed to join forces with Blade, but at least the weavers and woodcutters had a great deal of faith in him. Their craftsmen could produce more or less anything their materials would let them, if you showed them how, and they did everything Blade asked. These two things made a formidable combination. Blade hoped it would be too formidable for Queen Tressana.

He took several deep breaths, then nodded to the people on the wingtips. They let go and stepped back as Blade began to run. He ran as if he were trying to break a track record, boots thudding on the rock. Already he could feel the air flowing under the wing and the beginning of lift. Then suddenly his boots came down on empty air as the glider rose.

It took off so quickly that the first hundred yards were more dangerous than Blade had expected. The rocky slope was only a few feet below him. A slight miscalculation would bring him back down, probably where the angle of the slope was too great to let him make a safe landing. He'd certainly lose the glider and might go over the edge himself.

He took the risk of dropping the nose slightly, to increase the glide angle and the airspeed. The rock unreeled below him a little faster; then it was gone and there was only empty space below. The voices behind him quickly faded away, and he was alone in the silent sky.

Blade wasn't an expert hang glider, but he'd made more than thirty flights with a Rogallo wing, once staying up more than half an hour. He knew how to fly a glider, how to make one, and how to teach others at least the basics. That was all the Elstani would need for their war with the Jaghdi. If they wanted to continue hang gliding as a sport afterward, they could teach themselves.

He also knew how much pleasure it is to fly without the noise and fumes of a motor, to be one with the

sky, a partner of the winds. Exhilaration took control of Blade so thoroughly that he was half a mile from the cliff before he realized it. Then he forced himself to pay attention to his work. Today he was a test pilot.

It was hard to judge heights on a first flight in new territory, but he estimated that he'd dropped no more than three hundred feet in the half mile. That was a good start. He was trying for a ten-to-one glide ratio—ten feet of forward motion for every foot of descent. That was about twice what you'd normally get with a Rogallo wing. However, nothing less would get him safely across the distance that had to be covered.

He was well out of any updraft at the face of the cliff. That sort of thing was always unpredictable anyway. There was no sign of thermals from the sun heating the rocks below either, but he might be a little high for those. They'd have to get the glide angle they wanted without thermals in any case. They'd be flying into battle at dawn, with the rocks below still mostly in shadow.

For a minute the glider seemed to be flying nearly level. Blade decided he could spare the height to try a turn. Slowly he leaned to the left, and the glider tipped that way. When the nose had swung through a sixty-degree arc, Blade straightened up. Good. The glider was stable in a turn. Even though they'd be attacking a target so large that flying in a straight line would be enough to get hits, they still might need the ability to turn to avoid mid-air collisions or to land safely.

Blade flew on the new course for another minute, until he'd passed the halfway point of his flight. Then he made another sixty-degree turn back on to his original course. He wanted to strike the river at the sharpest possible angle, to get across it as quickly as he could. The river was mostly shallow but it was swift and bone-chillingly cold. It would also ruin his glider.

Now he could see Haima and Daimarz and the others waiting for him on the far bank. The glider seemed to be sinking faster and Blade raised the nose slightly to decrease his speed. He didn't want to come down too fast onto one of the patches of rocks scattered across the flats.

The riverbank was still coming at him too fast, though it looked as if he might get across. That wasn't important today, but it would be vital on the day of battle. Anyone who landed on the Jaghdi side of the river then would have several thousand enraged enemies on him in minutes.

The people on the far side were waving, and Blade thought he could hear Haima shouting. He'd seen her win several arguments by sheer lung power.

The riverbank passed below, and Blade wasn't sure if he had the altitude to get across or not. He put the nose down to increase his speed again. If he hit he'd hit fast, but he could afford to hit the water faster than the rocks.

He crossed the river with no more than six feet of altitude to spare. His boots swept over Haima's head so low that she had to duck. Then he pulled up the nose, the glider stalled, and Blade came down to a standing-up landing just beyond the tent.

Haima barely let Blade get untangled from the glider before she threw her arms around him. Daimarz pounded him on the back while the weaver kissed him.

Tressana popped to the surface and pushed wet hair out of her eyes in time to see Jollya dive off the

bank. Jollya was not as good a swimmer as she was a rider, but she still made a fine sight, her bare tanned body arching through a shaft of sunlight.

Jollya swam across the pond toward the queen, then treaded water while she glanced over the women guarding the banks of the pond. They looked as alert as anyone could be after two weeks of forcing a path through the forest of Binaark. The amulets held back the killer plants; but they did nothing to fight insects and snakes, level the hills and valleys, bridge the streams, or reduce the damp heat and the foul smells of decay.

Fortunately the end was in sight. The scouts five days ahead reported that they'd seen the last of the plants and the first of the Elstani. That meant ten days traveling, perhaps twelve, for the cavalry. Could this be reduced? Every day saved would be a small victory on its own. The faster the cavalry reached Elstan, the less time the Elstani would have to prepare. With speed added to luck, half of Elstan might fall without a battle.

They could move even faster if they left the wagons behind, but that would mean leaving King Manro as well. There would be grumbling and talk of bad omens. Tressana realized they would have to split up, the women staying with the wagons and most of the cavalry rushing ahead to reach the site of the camp. Tressana turned to Jollya. "Jollya, if I send the men ahead, would the women be able to guide and guard King Manro?"

"Oh, yes. He seems to be stronger than I've ever seen him. He recognizes me whenever I pass by, and calls me 'Dark Jollya.' He seems to be trying to say more, but I can't understand it."

The queen hid her irritation. Jollya sounded as if she might be getting fond of the wretched man. And if Jollya couldn't be trusted, could anything be done about her that wouldn't cripple the Women's Guard right in the middle of the war? Also, what if Manro was actually regaining his wits? There was no telling what he might say or do. It was now more important than ever that he not be allowed to live much longer.

Suddenly Tressana was no longer in the mood for swimming. She scrambled up on the bank and started toweling herself dry with quick, jerky movements. She was angry with Manro for living, with Sikkurad for his disloyalty, with Jollya for attracting Manro's attention, and with Richard Blade of England for being dead.

Blade hurried across the beach, ducking as an Elstani swept overhead in a hang glider. Blade recognized Borokku, who'd been in his ground crew on the first flight into the Kettle of the Winds. The young man came down to a smooth but somewhat hard landing, and sat down abruptly. He was up again in a moment, muttering curses but apparently unhurt. Blade helped him get out of his glider, then watched him trot back up the hill, picking gravel out of the seat of his pants as he went.

There were five hundred glider pilots training here in the hills two days' march from the Kettle of the Winds. There could have been three thousand, if there'd been any need for that many or any chance of building that many gliders in time. The five hundred were not all showing great skill, but all were enthusiastic. Those who'd been woodcutters were almost frighteningly casual about the risks they ran.

As he learned more about Elstan, Blade stopped being surprised at Elstani bravery. Daily life in Elstan toughened both the mind and the body. The woodcutters in particular faced an enemy that allowed even fewer mistakes than flying a hang glider. Now everyone was facing the choice of either victory over

Jaghdi, death, or life in slavery. Those who volunteered for hang gliding had the chance of being the heroes of the victory, or at least finding an honorable death.

Blade walked through the cluster of tents that made up the training camp. At a safe distance on the other side Haima and Daimarz were standing next to what looked like a small clay water pot. Then Blade noticed that it had a complicated brass lid with a length of cord sticking out.

"We were waiting for you, Blade," said Haima. "We thought you ought to see this."

"The new fire pot?"

"Yes." Daimarz bent over, struck sparks with a flint and steel lighter, and went on striking them until one landed on the cord. It flared up in a cloud of sparks and smoke. Daimarz hastily signaled a retreat, which Blade joined. There were buckets of sand and urine on hand for putting out the Living Fire, but the stuff had an unpredictable habit of spraying. If any of it fell on a person...

Wssssshhhhhhhh! The pot erupted in a great gout of angry blue flame that shot twenty feet into the air. Gobs of burning liquid came down over a wide circle, some of them only a few yards from Blade and his companions. It was at least ten minutes before the flames died down. Meanwhile the breeze carried smoke to the watchers until they had to step back even farther to be able to talk.

"You're thinking of two for each glider?" said Blade.

"Yes. Some women may be able to carry a third, if their glider is as large as a man's. But most will have two."

Each of the clay fire pots held twenty pounds of the Living Fire. Five hundred gliders each dropping forty pounds of the Living Fire meant ten tons of it on the Jaghdi camp. That might be enough to cremate the rolghas, not just drive them into a panic.

Blade examined an empty pot. He noticed that the fuse was coiled inside the lid, with a few inches sticking out. "How are you going to light it in midair?"

"We aren't. The ones we use in battle will have longer fuses. We'll light them before the gliders go off."

Blade looked hard at Daimarz and Haima. "What happens if a fuse burns too fast?"

Daimarz shrugged. That shrug would have annoyed Blade if he hadn't known Daimarz would be among the glider pilots on the day of battle. He wasn't being casual about dangers other men would be facing.

"Believe me, Blade," said Haima earnestly. "We asked some of the glider pilots themselves. They want to be sure the Living Fire burns what it hits."

Blade would never have asked the pilots to accept this, but if they were willing, that was another matter. Besides, was there really an alternative? Trying to drop the pots into the Jaghdi campfires or blacksmiths' forges would need better flying and better bombing than the Elstani glider force could be expected to give. Or at least better than the glider force could give without much practice in the Kettle of the Winds itself. And, of course, that would be risking the whole victory. The Jaghdi were bound to learn from their scouts reports of war preparations by the Elstani right where the Jaghdi were planning to camp. The enemy might not understand what kind of trap was being prepared for them, but they certainly wouldn't ride blindly into it.

Blade was moved, but tried to strike a light note. "I suppose the woodcutters were the most determined about flying with burning fuses?"

"Of course," said Daimarz. "We have our pride."

"You should have some sense as well," said Haima. "We can't let the woodcutters kill themselves off proving their courage. It will be years before the Jaghdi give us enough amulets so that we can do without the woodcutters and the work they do."

"Years?" snorted Daimarz. "Never, more likely."

Haima shook her head. "I think perhaps the Jaghdi will see reason after their defeat. Not at once, perhaps, but before you and I are too old to get some good from it. I have always felt that when the killer plants are gone, the Jaghdi and the Elstani will start growing toward each other."

"Like a rosebush and a killer plant!" growled Daimarz, shaking his head.

Blade was glad to see that at least Haima realized what might come out of this war for civilization in this Dimension. He wondered if he should tell her about Sikkurad and Jollya, then decided against it. There was no point in raising false hopes by revealing that the Jaghdi keeper and his daughter were sympathetic to the Elstani cause. Besides, there was no telling what had happened to Sikkurad and Jollya. Blade just hoped that the two of them had heeded his advice and kept their mouths shut.

Haima and Daimarz seemed to be settling down for a long argument, so Blade turned away to watch the gliding practice. Two sites were in use, one a hillside for beginners, the other a vertical cliff for the more advanced pilots. The cliff was about three hundred feet high, more than enough to make carelessness fatal.

Eight gliders went off the top of the cliff while Blade was walking toward it. Some of them made rough landings, and Blade sighed wearily. The Elstani were much more interested in how to start a flight than in how to finish it. They also refused to wear heavy protective clothing, saying that the lighter their clothing, the more Living Fire they could carry on the day of battle.

A bunch of damned kamikaze pilots! thought Blade with a mixture of admiration and exasperation.

As he stopped at the foot of the cliff, he saw a ninth glider go off the top. The wing was bright blue, and he knew who the pilot was. Kima, Borokku's sister, had managed to persuade the weavers to use a dyed cloth for her Rogallo wing. There was enough of it left over to make her an extremely brief bikini that she used as her flying clothes. She said she liked the feeling of the wind on her bare skin.

Kima went over the edge at a sharper angle than Blade liked to see. She was a good pilot, but he didn't entirely trust the light cloth she'd used for her wing. She seemed to be straightening out, then suddenly her wing ripped across. She seemed to hang in the air for a moment, as if the cry of horror from the spectators on the ground was holding her up. Then her wing tipped up on one side and plummeted, flapping wildly.

Blade was the first to reach Kima after she landed. She was lying on her side, one arm moving feebly but her legs horribly twisted and one side of her skull caved in. Blade knelt beside her and rested his hand on her unhurt cheek until she died. As he rose, Borokku ran up.

"She's gone before us?"

Blade sighed. "If she could only have fallen in battle..." He knelt and drew a fragment of Kima's glider over her face.

Someone pushed through the circle of people standing around Blade, Borokku, and the dead woman. Blade saw that he wore the sleeveless tunic and boots of a message runner. The Elstani didn't use riding animals, but their strong-legged messengers could relay word from one end of Elstan to the other in four days.

The messenger pulled a scroll out of his belt pouch and handed it to Blade. Blade read it three times, while the others tried to pretend they weren't dying of curiosity.

Blade rolled up the scroll, handed it to Borokku, then turned to his audience. "It seems that the first Jaghdi scouts have entered Elstan," he said. Then he looked down at Kima and drew his sword. "She will not have to wait long to be avenged."

Everyone around Blade started cheering and waving weapons. He wished he could have been promising long life and riches for all of them, instead of certain death for many.

Chapter 19

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The cloud of dust from thousands of hooves rose to mix with the smoke from burning Elstani farms as the main Jaghdi army marched eastward. They had been out of the forest for a day now and were invading the valleys of Elstan, taking prisoners and setting fires to the farms. Some of the Elstani had managed to flee and had set fires to their own storage buildings to prevent the Jaghdi from eating their food and taking their supplies, but many more of the Elstani were being captured. Now the army was preparing to ride farther into the valley, taking more prisoners as they went, and making their camp near the towering cliffs.

Tressana sat on her rolgha, the Women's Guard around her, watching Efroin of the Red Band approach.

He reined in and took off his helmet. "We're well enough started, Your Grace. When will you be joining us?"

Tressana studied Efroin's dusty, sun-reddened face. It was hard to tell if he was questioning her courage, and she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "As soon as the rest of the wagons come up. The Elstani have burned too much for us to risk losing the food in the wagons. Even that won't be enough if you don't keep your men in hand."

"I'll do my best, Your Grace. It would be easier if we had you with us."

"We've talked of that before, Efroin. You will obey."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Seeing the queen's mood, Efroin put his helmet back on and rode back toward his men. Tressana watched him go with the first doubts about her plan she'd felt in quite a while.

Dividing her army still made sense. Eight thousand men would ride on into Elstan, led by Efroin. Two thousand would stay behind under the queen, to gather food from Elstan's remaining farms and protect the slow wagons as they crept out of the forest of Binaark. The Elstani would be too busy with Efroin to attack her.

There also would be no sharp-eyed men around to suspect her plans for King Manro. There was Jollya, and she would have to be replaced if necessary. There were two other women ready to lead the Women's Guard and, Tressana hoped, able to do the work as well. Sikkurad would no doubt suspect the queen after Manro was dead, but he was harmless. He now seemed only to be interested in studying Elstani livestock and all the specimens he'd brought out of the forest of Binaark. It seemed that nothing much short of the end of the world would get his attention, and whatever suspicions Tressana had felt about the Keeper now seemed unnecessary.

In fact, there was no serious danger from anybody with her now. Efroin perhaps would have been another matter. He was both sharp-eyed and honest. Now he would be too busy to think of anything else. She could hope this would last until Manro was dead. If the Elstani were defeated by then, even Efroin wouldn't gain anything by suspecting her. She was safe enough, given enough time and only a little luck. For the hundredth time she wished Richard Blade were still alive. If he were, she wouldn't have needed the luck.

Manro stood by the tail of the wagon, chained by one ankle to the rear axle. He watched the rolghas trot past, kicking up clouds of dust. It made him cough. The women guarding him were also looking at the riders, not at him. He wondered why the women had put a heavy chain around his ankle. The men who guarded him hadn't done that. But at least the women were gentle. They never pushed him or said unkind things to him.

Dark Jollya must have told them to be gentle with him. That was good. It proved she really was his friend, which was even better. He would need a friend to save him from Tressana and whatever punishment the gods would give her. That punishment must be very close now, because all the men were riding away into the new land and leaving Tressana behind. They did not want to be near her when the gods' punishment came.

Manro wished the men had taken him with them. He didn't want to be around Tressana either. But maybe Dark Jollya would be enough. She was only a woman, but a woman could be very strong.

"—by the Soul of the Land, by the Heart of the Steel, and by the Highest Powers of my own land of England, this I swear."

Everyone standing around the fire cheered the ritual four times. Daimarz tossed a small cup of Living Fire onto the blazing logs. The whooosh of blue flame nearly singed Blade's eyebrows, and he was afraid Chaia's long red hair would catch fire. He hastily pulled her back, then she raised herself on tiptoe and kissed him.

He found himself kissing her back. Either Haima's daughter had been acquiring experience behind her mother's back, or she had a good deal of natural talent. It didn't help either that she looked closer to eighteen than fourteen, a slimmer version of her mother. Blade finally reminded himself that she was only fourteen, and that this was only the betrothal, not the marriage.

The kiss lasted so long that everyone was laughing by the time Chaia stepped out of Blade's arms. Haima was laughing the loudest. "Do you still think our women are like those of England, girls until they are sixteen?"

"I may change my mind. I guess I'll know for sure after tomorrow."

"Ah. Yes." The mention of tomorrow sobered her.

Blade looked away from the fire. When his night vision returned he saw a steady procession of shadowy figures passing. Some of them seemed to be weird four-legged animals, with long thin bodies and no heads. Those were bearers, each pair of men carrying a rolled-up hang glider. Other bearers carried the pots of Living Fire in reed baskets on their backs. The glider pilots themselves were traveling light. They would have plenty of work to do tomorrow.

A pilot broke out of the procession and hurried toward Blade. He wore an elaborately tooled green leather belt.

As he came into the firelight, Blade recognized Fador'n. So did Daimarz.

"What are you doing here?" the woodcutter leader growled. He seemed to be doing a lot of growling lately. The strain was telling on all of them, except perhaps Haima.

"I want to ask Blade something," said Fador'n firmly.

"I'll give you something—" began Daimarz, clapping his hand to his sword.

Blade raised his hand for silence. "What is it that you want?"

Fador'n swallowed, and Blade saw that he was sweating. "Blade, I have been wrong in the way I saw you, the man who may save Elstan tomorrow. For this I have been called a fool. I may be that. I have also been called a coward, and I cannot bear that."

"I have never called you a coward," said Blade.

"No, but... Blade, let me be the first man to leap from the cliff tomorrow and throw the Living Fire on the Jaghdi. I beg you—let me prove that at least I am not a coward!"

Blade considered this. The first man off didn't have to be a leader, but he did have to be a better than average pilot. The men following him would have to make much of their judgment of the wind from the way his glider behaved.

"I have never seen Fador'n fly," Blade admitted. "Daimarz, have you?"

The woodcutter seemed reluctant to answer until Haima gently elbowed him in the ribs. "Come on, lad. The man's asked a question. He wants an honest answer."

Daimarz sighed. "Fador'n is a very good flyer. He has sometimes made a complete circle before he lands."

Anybody who could make a 360-degree turn in a three-hundred foot drop was lucky, but he was also good. He wouldn't have all his bones intact otherwise.

"All right, Fador'n. You can be the first."

Fador'n didn't say anything, and he shook all over. Blade was afraid the man was going to kneel to him. Instead he turned and ran back into the procession and the darkness.

Blade and the others around the fire watched in silence until the last of the procession was past. Two thousand men and women were marching off into the hills to a perch on the cliffs above the Kettle of the Winds. Five hundred were the glider pilots, the rest bearers and guards. When the last of the pilots had flown, the rest would come down the hills and take a position to the northwest of the Kettle. There they would stand between the retreating Jaghdi and the main valleys of Elstan.

The glider pilots who survived would join a small army of men on the far side of the river from the Kettle. Five hundred of the army were woodcutters and weavers. The rest were hardly more than a mob, but a well-armed one and very determined. They were the refugees who'd fled before the Jaghdi advance. They didn't have to wait to get word from Masters to fight. They'd seen their houses burned, their livestock driven off, their crops looted. Many had kin to avenge. Tomorrow they would take that vengeance, if the work of the gliders gave them half a chance.

Five thousand men to fight half again that many. It won't be easy, but it won't be impossible. The Jaghdi are all cavalry, and if they suddenly lose their rolghas...

Blade would have been less optimistic if the Jaghdi had brought infantry to guard the camp. But all the enemy's infantry was in the valley of the Adrim, making faces at the Elstani holding the pass above them. The Elstani made faces back, and occasionally rolled rocks down the hills. Perhaps the guilds who'd refused to believe Blade in time to send men south to help him would do some good after all, now that they saw how the war was progressing.

Now it was time to stop worrying and get some sleep.

Blade didn't get to sleep for quite a while, because Haima insisted on making love with almost desperate eagerness. Blade found himself responding in the same way. Either Chaia's kisses had roused him even more than he'd suspected, or he had the sense that this might be the last time he would hold a woman.

The thought made Blade sit up straight. He wondered if he was getting old. A few years ago he wouldn't have been thinking anything of the kind on the eve of a battle. Or was it that his preference for being alone was finally beginning to weaken? Was it possible that he needed companionship more than he ever had before? That was an even more interesting thought.

He lay back under the furs, and fell asleep listening to Haima's breathing and Lorma's purring.

Chapter 20

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The dawn air seemed chillier than usual at the Kettle of the Winds. Blade wondered if this was just his own anticipation of the coming battle, or if the weather was really getting colder. Probably both. He'd talked the Elstani into staking their whole future not only on one battle but very nearly on one weapon. And the year was getting on toward autumn.

Daimarz crawled up beside him, barefoot in order to move silently but otherwise wearing his woodcutter's clothing. Together they looked down the precipitous cliff at the Jaghdi camp, where men and rolghas appeared no bigger than dots. The cooks were hard at work on breakfast, judging from the strings of smoke from the fire pits. One of the night patrols was riding back in with more Elstani prisoners. The day patrols were assembling by the ford, ready to head up the valleys. The patrols looked like insects swarming below.

"Still no sign of the royal banners," said Daimarz. "Curse it! I want Tressana dead."

Blade said nothing. The Elstani desire for vengeance on Tressana made sense from their point of view. The more chaos in Jaghd, the better. But would it be a step forward for civilization in this Dimension? Blade doubted it.

Tressana's not being here left Efroin of the Red Band in command. Blade was certain that after Curim's death, Tressana would have appointed Efroin as captain of the men, and that he would prove a dangerously good battle leader. Certainly he'd done well so far, keeping his men together and sending out patrols. No one could be sure how many Elstani prisoners were in the camp, but there might be more than a thousand already. Blade knew that the Elstani wanted their people safe, and they wanted them safe now.

Heavy breathing and feet scraping on stone made Blade turn around. Fador'n was approaching, followed by Borokku, seven more glider pilots, and bearers carrying nine fully assembled gliders. The gliders were flapping precariously in the dawn breeze, and Blade hoped nothing had been broken carrying them up the cliff. Looking beyond the new arrivals, Blade could see a procession of more gliders, bearers, and pilots winding its way toward him. From a distance the bearers looked like ants carrying leaves.

"Since the gliders are going to be all ready when they come up here," began Daimarz, "do I have to—?"

"Yes," said Blade. They'd argued the point before. Daimarz badly wanted to be among the first gliders to go. A man who'd be obeyed would be needed on top of the cliffs right through the battle, so Blade wanted him to be among the last. Daimarz agreed, and then tried all week to find a way out of the agreement.

Daimarz sighed. "Blade, you're asking a lot in return for just saving my life."

"No doubt."

During this exchange Fador'n was tightening his green belt, and both he and Borokku were checking their gliders. They stood side by side as the bearers strapped the pots of Living Fire onto the carrying straps. Then the two men made their final adjustments and stepped forward to the rock that marked the start of the takeoff run. Blade suddenly found himself more sympathetic to Daimarz. He wished he were on his way too.

Then both pilots were running down the hill. The sound of their boots on stone faded with distance, then died away suddenly as the gliders lifted. They slipped over the lip of the cliff with yards to spare, and swept out into the sky over the Jaghdi camp. Blade let out the breath he'd been holding.

Efroin finished his breakfast of hard biscuits and sour wine, buckled on his sword, and walked out of his

tent unattended. Like Tressana, he disliked taking men away from useful work merely to let a chief make a show.

He walked toward the wall of piled stones that separated the rolghas from the men. Nothing more was necessary here, with the cliffs behind and the steep banks of the river everywhere else. The men who got out of his path looked cheerful enough, although short rations were beginning to thin their unshaven faces. He hoped Tressana would come up soon. That would mean more food for both men and rolghas. It would also mean doing something about all those Elstani prisoners. He didn't dare let them go, he didn't want to just kill them, but he'd be cursed if he wanted to go on feeding them much longer. Every bite they ate meant one less for...

Movement high overhead caught Efroin's eye, then stopped him completely. A winged shape far larger than any bird he'd ever imagined was coming toward the camp from the direction of the cliff. The thing must be larger than a rolgha! That was improbable enough, but there seemed to be a man hanging underneath it, and that was simply impossible.

Then the impossible bird-man was flying over the rolghas, higher than the top of the highest tree. Two black balls dropped from him. Efroin felt his insides turn to ice. Then the balls struck, and two flowers of blue flame blossomed among the rolghas. Efroin heard their screams, and the icy feeling gave way to a flood of nausea.

Lord of the Grass, what do we do now?

Efroin stood amazed long enough for a second birdman to drop his fire among the rolghas. The first one was already passing over the camp, heading toward the river. Behind the first two he saw others, in a long line trailing across the sky to the top of the cliffs. There seemed to be no end of them, and in that line of bird-men Efroin saw terrible danger to his army and the future of Jaghd.

However, nothing is written so that a brave man can't change the writing if he tries. Efroin shouted, "The Elstani are attacking the rolghas! Every man to the corral to mount and get them to the ford! Everyone! Run, you fools, if you don't want to walk back to Jaghd!"

More than a hundred gliders had gone off the cliff. Most of the pilots dropped their loads on the rolghas below. Two-thirds made safe landings on the far bank of the river, and some who'd landed on the flatland side were running toward safety. The woodcutters and armed refugees beyond the river were now out in the open, picking up wounded pilots and trying to salvage the gliders. Most of the gliders would be junk after today, but Blade didn't care as long as their work was done.

Once more he thought briefly of a scene from the far future of this Dimension. A war museum, where the splintered remains of one of the gliders used in the ancient war between Jaghd and Elstan lay in a glass case. People who'd flown to the museum's city in jet airliners would stand around marveling at the courage of their warrior ancestors and wondering why the young people of today were so lazy.

The gliders were now going off five and six at a time. They'd have gone off faster if Blade had let them, but he knew there wasn't room for more than that to make their takeoff runs safely. With Daimarz's help Blade used his voice, his grim face, and occasionally his fists to enforce order. For quite a while he was too busy to pay any attention to what was happening in the camp below.

Then it finally happened—a fuse burning too quickly. A glider and its pilot became a ball of blue flame in

the sky. There was a groan from the waiting pilots around Blade. He thought he could hear the burning man's screams. The ball of fire plunged down, reached out with what seemed sadistic slowness, and touched another glider's wing. The first ball of fire burned itself out as the second flared up, then two charred skeletons were trailing smoke down through the sky. Blade heard another groan around him as they vanished into the smoke rising from the camp.

Blade looked down, to study the scene carefully for the first time since Fador'n took to the air. The smoke made it hard to see details. All that showed through was some of the brighter fires and the shadowy swirling as thousands of panic-stricken rolghas ran back and forth. Some of them broke and ran for the river, trailing smoke or even fire. Some of these collapsed in smoking heaps, others reached the steep bank and leaped. The surface of the river was slowly becoming speckled with rolghas, mostly dead but a few swimming for the far side.

Blade looked at the men around him. The sight of two of their comrades burned alive in mid-air had shaken them. Then he felt a stronger puff of wind on his cheek, a second, then a steady breeze. He signaled to stop the launching of the gliders, and watched as the smoke canopy over the camp slowly broke up. Now he could see dozens of small fires, as well as the handful of larger ones. He could also pinpoint the Jaghdi campfires.

He turned to Daimarz. "We can stop lighting the fuses up here. There are enough fires down there so that we can just drop the pots." Coming down from more than a thousand feet, the Living Fire would splatter far and wide. If it splattered into even the smallest spark, there would be as nice a fire as anyone could ask.

Daimarz passed the word, while Blade signaled his own two bearers. It was time he got into the air himself. With his large glider, no pots, and the rising wind he could stay in the air longer than anyone else, possibly even soar to gain more height and land back on top of the cliffs. It would help to have a report of how things looked from the air.

He also knew that he would have gone even if he'd known he was only going to glide down to the river. He couldn't stand and watch other men die any more than Daimarz could. No doubt it was unfair to indulge himself and keep Daimarz on the ground, but in every war of every Dimension, rank had its privileges.

Efroin knew what was happening now, and also the best way to fight it. He didn't know why it was happening, but that was a question worth asking only if he and his army lived through the day.

The Elstani had found a way of flying like birds, or at least floating down from the cliffs above the Kettle of the Winds like leaves from a tall tree. As they came, they dropped fire among the rolghas, who were going mad with fear. From what Efroin had seen and heard, at least two thousand were already dead or crippled, or had run off beyond any hope of getting them back.

However, if they could save the rest, the army might survive to fight another day. That day might not come this year, but it would come. So Efroin ran back and forth through the camp, until someone was able to saddle and bridle a rolgha for him. Then he continued his work mounted, surrounded by a slowly increasing band of guards. He hadn't pulled on his armor before he mounted, in order not to be slowed down. Now he couldn't take the time, at least not until he no longer had to be everywhere at once. If only Tressana were here!

Efroin rode from the ford to the corral wall and back again, shouting orders for the rolghas to be saddled as fast as possible, for a party of mounted men to go out and ride down the Elstani bird-men who were landing on this side of the river, for another party to support the patrol at the ford.

"Lord Efroin, could I take some of your men to the ford?" asked one noble when he heard this last order. Efroin nodded. He knew that the noble wanted men to help him seize the glory of defending the ford, but didn't care. If the ford was defended, the glory did not matter, and certainly he could spare the men. He waved to the thirty-odd men on his left and watched them ride off after the noble.

His rolgha was beginning to cough from the smoke. He reined in between two tents and dismounted to look for some water. Then a man stepped out from behind the tent. He was naked, dark-skinned, and held a short spear. With more irritation than fear, Efroin recognized an Elstani prisoner. Were they escaping in the confusion?

Then suddenly the spear was not in the Elstani's hand, but sticking out of Efroin's stomach. He looked down at it, then at his remaining guards as they ran past him to cut the Elstani to ribbons. He let his rolgha go. After a moment he felt a dull ache in his stomach, and realized that his feet wouldn't go where he wanted them to.

Then his world was torn apart in pain, and he heard nothing except screams that he vaguely recognized as his own.

Chapter 21

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Blade knew he'd have problems soaring, even with the rising wind, unless he stayed in the updraft along the face of the cliffs. The sun hadn't been up long enough to create thermals from heated rocks on the ground. As long as he stayed close to the cliffs, though, he would be flying a thin line between stalling out at high altitude and crashing into the rock.

Blade made three complete circles in the updraft, twice skimming within a few feet of disaster. He lost only a hundred feet of altitude, but found it hard to pay attention to what was happening below. Fortunately the wind was still blowing the veil of smoke away, so when he could look down he could see fairly clearly. The Jaghdi were scurrying around frantically, but they also seemed to be getting at least some of their rolghas under control.

Then the pilots with unlighted pots started going off the cliffs and dropping their loads. Blade watched the blue flames flare up in a dozen new places every minute. The gamble of dropping the pots unlighted seemed to be paying off. The smoke rose faster than the wind could carry it away, and so did the unmistakable smell of burning flesh. Blade hoped it was rolghas rather than men.

Blade stopped looking down, and instead looked across the river. Some of the woodcutters were moving up to the ford, but not enough to hold it if the Jaghdi really tried to break out. The Elstani would need all the woodcutters and most of the refugees, formed into a battle line.

Time to go on down himself and take command on the ground. The battle was half won, but the second half was going to be much more complicated and dangerous than the first half unless the Jaghdi completely lost their nerve. So far they hadn't shown enough signs of doing that. He swung his glider into a gentle turn until its nose was pointing toward the river, then straightened out.

As Blade straightened out, he heard a distinct pop, just a little louder than the sigh of the wind or the muted uproar from the ground a thousand feet below. Blade waited until the glider was completely set on its course for the river, then cautiously turned his head from side to side. He saw that some of the cloth was pulling loose from the left-hand reed spar. The stitching must have been faulty. Fortunately the Elstani cloth was much stiffer than anything used in Home Dimension gliders. It should hold its shape well enough to keep him safely in the air for a while.

He was still on the horns of a nasty dilemma. Should he lose altitude fast and risk more strain on the stitching? Or should he let the glider descend naturally and risk its coming unstitched high in the air? He decided to risk a natural descent. Until he got over the river, it didn't matter if the glider collapsed at five hundred feet or at fifty. He'd hit the ground much too hard from either height. Blade settled down to steering the straightest course he could, to put the least strain on the stitching from any more maneuvering.

He heard several more pops as the glider bumped and jolted its way over the camp. The sun wasn't creating updrafts yet, but the fires were now hot enough to do so and getting hotter every minute.

By the time Blade was out of the updrafts, enough stitching was gone so that his glider was losing a serious amount of lift. He still had enough control to fly a straight course, but he was sinking rapidly. It was like being on an immense escalator sliding down through the sky. Before he'd covered half the distance between the camp and the river, Blade knew he was never going to reach the riverbank. That wouldn't have bothered him so much if he hadn't seen Jaghdi cavalry riding out of the camp to sweep their bank of the river clean of surviving glider pilots.

If there'd been any large band of gliders visible, Blade might have steered for it. As it was, the pilots who hadn't made it to the river were scattered across nearly two miles of ground. Once a glider was down, it was every man for himself.

So Blade kept his glider on a straight course, trying only to stay out of bowshot of the ground. He didn't entirely succeed—one Jaghd put an arrow through the right corner of the glider. In spite of this, Blade was able to bring his glider down to a safe landing at least fifty yards from the nearest enemy.

He lay down as his glider collapsed around him, then shifted position carefully. Now he could see the nearest Jaghdi and also be ready to get up in a hurry. The four riders were sitting motionless on their rolghas. The smoke was now drifting out over the flatlands thickly enough to make it hard to judge distances.

Blade took only shallow breaths to keep from coughing from the smoke. If all of the riders came over at once, he'd be in trouble. But if one or two came over, and got close enough...

A rolgha neighed as its rider dug in spurs and turned its head toward Blade. The Jaghd pulled his lance out of the saddle bucket but didn't lower it all the way to striking position. Blade lay still, not even blinking as the enemy trotted toward him. The Jaghd reined in just out of lance-reach. He studied Blade, who tried to keep his eyes unfocused and take the shallowest possible breaths. Then the Jaghd made his rolgha step sideways, leaned out of the saddle, and thrust his lance down at Blade.

Instantly Blade snapped himself up to a sitting position and gripped the shaft of the lance at the same time. The Jaghd neither straightened up nor let go of his lance fast enough. Blade tightened his grip and pulled. The Jaghd lost his balance, fell headfirst out of the saddle, and broke his neck.

Blade nearly stepped on the dead man as he gripped the saddle. He swung himself up and into place so

swiftly that the rolgha barely had time to realize its old rider was gone before the new one was holding the reins. Then Blade was putting in the spurs and the rolgha jumped forward, more like a kangaroo than a horse. It was cantering before any of the dead man's comrades even noticed that his rolgha had changed owners. It kept trying to work up to a gallop, but Blade fought it back to a canter. Both visibility and footing were uncertain. He'd managed to avoid breaking his neck in the glider, and didn't want to do the job now in a riding accident on the very edge of safety.

The next moment he wondered just how close he was to safety. An arrow whistled past him less than a foot away. Another struck the rolgha in the leg, but fortunately low down where there was nothing except skin and solid bone. Blade had another fight to keep the rolgha under control, and by the time he'd won, the archer was out of accurate shooting range. Now the smoke was on Blade's side.

He kept the rolgha at a canter as he headed toward the ford. He also let it drift to the right as far as he could, toward the river bank. If he couldn't break through to the ford he could always ride the rolgha off the bank into the river and swim for it.

He heard shouts and neighings around him in the smoke as he rode, but no more arrows came at him. He suspected the Jaghdi were sufficiently confused so that one odd rider more or less looked enough like a Jaghdi cavalry outfit to be deceptive at first glance.

He was more than halfway to the ford when he saw a line of mounted men emerging from the smoke ahead. He turned even more sharply to the right, and someone, thinking he was a Jaghdi, shouted, "Hey! Where do you think you're going! Join us!"

Before the man could shout again, Blade put his head down and his spurs in. There were at least sixty riders in the line ahead, and that was too many. Saving a little time in getting across the river wasn't worth the risk of not getting there at all.

Blade's gallop should have signaled "Enemy" to the Jaghdi archers. As it was, the idea of an Elstani on a rolgha penetrated too slowly to let them shoot while Blade was an easy target. Arrows whistled all around him as the smoke swallowed him up, and two struck the larger target of the rolgha. It screamed and seemed about to go out of control, but Blade once more fought the animal so that it calmed down.

Then he was out of the smoke and riding down to the riverbank. Once again the sheer novelty of a mounted Elstani helped him. It also helped that more than half the Jaghdi guarding the river were looking across to the other bank. Blade was glad to see that most of the Elstani refugees were on the march toward the ford now. Only a thin line remained along the bank, enough to help escaping glider pilots out of the water.

Some of the Jaghdi had dismounted and were standing around a body on the ground, prodding at it with lances. Blade's mouth twisted and he rode on toward the bank, hoping that the fallen man was already past feeling pain. Then he saw the man writhing, and saw that under the blood he wore a green belt.

Fador'n!

Suddenly Blade knew that what made sense and what he was going to do were different things. It wasn't in him to let Fador'n lead the gliders into action, and then leave him to be tortured to death by the Jaghdi! Before he'd finished the thought, Blade's sword was out of its scabbard and his mouth opened in a war cry that made the men around Fador'n turn. Before they could realize they were in danger, he was on them.

It would have been a thoroughly one-sided battle if Blade had dared let his rolgha use its teeth and hooves on the Jaghdi. Unfortunately he couldn't risk having Fador'n savaged or trampled. So he had to keep his distance and use his sword. He split a skull, chopped off an arm, and laid open a shoulder in four strokes, but then another man drove a spear into his rolgha's belly. Blade knew from its scream that it was not only going to die but was likely to go out of control before it did. He threw himself out of the saddle, landing so hard he nearly lost his sword. The Jaghd was more worried about the rolgha than about its rider, and didn't take advantage of Blade's moment off balance. He retreated, dropping his spear and drawing his own sword.

Then Blade regained his balance and raised his sword. The Jaghdi's mouth opened in a scream that died abruptly as Blade's sword came down. The Jaghdi's head toppled from his shoulders and his body fell almost on top of Fador'n. The Elstani tried to get to his feet, looked up at Blade, then fainted from pain and loss of blood. Blade scooped him up and ran for the riverbank. Fador'n's hundred and forty pounds was a small weight for Blade's adrenalin-driven strength.

Blade reached the bank where it was ten feet high and nearly vertical. When he saw that, he didn't even break stride but dove off as arrows started cutting through the air where he'd been. He went almost to the bottom, and lost his grip on Fador'n. The current lifted them both and drove them back together. Blade surfaced with a new grip on Fador'n's collar, just enough to keep the man's head above water. With both legs and the other hand, he struck out for the opposite bank.

Arrows splashed back into the water around them, but the smoke was now creeping out over the river, the two heads were small targets, and the river was already full of the bodies of men and rolghas. Blade finally ducked behind a dead rolgha and treaded water while he caught his breath and examined Fador'n. The man's wounds looked ghastly. But if he didn't die from shock or loss of blood, he still might survive to tell his grandchildren about the battle.

Blade stayed behind the rolgha until the current had drifted them a few hundred yards downstream. There were still Jaghdi on the bank, but the smoke was now pouring out over the river so thickly that visibility was steadily shrinking. Blade drew only a few badly aimed arrows when he struck out again for the safety of the far bank. Then he was beyond the range of the Jaghdi horsebows.

The river was only about four hundred yards wide, but to Blade it felt more like four miles. The cold ate into him and sapped his strength, the letdown after battle did more, and the constant struggle to keep Fador'n's head above water took away most of what energy he had left. He gritted his teeth and swam on, until suddenly his feet struck a gravel bottom and there were Elstani shouts in his ears.

He managed to stay on his feet until he'd seen Fador'n placed on a litter and hurried off to the doctors, and after that he stood while someone shoved a cup of spiced hot beer into his hand. Then he sat down, ignoring the shouted congratulations all around him, forcing strength back into his limbs as the warmth of the beer flowed through him. By the time Daimarz came up, his face a red mask from a scalp wound, Blade was on his feet again.

"The work of the gliders is done, Blade. Your work."

"There were five hundred—no, more like five thousand sharing that work."

"Have it your way, if you're going to be stubborn about it. But you'd better hurry if you want to be in on the kill. Our people are across the river, and the men from the other guilds are in sight. They finally agreed to join in our fight."

It was about time, Blade thought, but all he said was, "I'm coming." Blade noticed a nick in his sword, but decided it would last out the rest of the fight. He belted it on and followed the woodcutter.

The Jaghdi weren't helpless even without their rolghas, but they were certainly doomed. The Elstani had steel swords and their crossbows outranged the Jaghdi horsebows. The woodcutters were trained to work together on foot, and the refugees fought like men possessed. A third of the Jaghdi died, but there were only a few hundred Elstani casualties. The rest of the invaders were surrendering as fast as they could by the time the men of the other guilds came up.

"It's going to be the woodcutters' and the weavers' victory," said Daimarz's father, Yishpan. Although he'd worked himself to exhaustion trying to get the rest of the Elstani to the battle in time, he didn't sound exactly unhappy about this. "The rest can—"

"Pick up the dead rolghas before they poison the river," said Daimarz sourly. "That's all they're good for."

They walked through the camp to the tent where Efroin lay. He'd cut his throat, and Blade was glad that he'd had the strength to do this at the last. It had spared him the lingering agony of a belly wound, or some equally harsh fate at the hands of the Elstani.

That reminded Blade of a pressing question. "We've got close to five thousand prisoners here. We'd better decide what to do about them, before the refugees start cutting their throats."

"I'd say let them," growled Daimarz. "You can be sure that a dead Jaghd won't be coming through the forest again next year. Besides, we'd have to feed them."

Yishpan shook his head. "That would make the Jaghdi on the Adrim desperate. If they thought we'd give them their lives, they might yield without a fight and more loss of life. Let's hold our prisoners and promise to release them if Queen Tressana gives herself up to us."

Blade wasn't the only person staring at the Master Woodcutter. Yishpan stared back. "Why not? She is evil but not yet mad, and has much courage. If we ask her to be an honorable chief and die for those who follow her—"

"I suppose you could do that," said Daimarz. "But I warn you, Father, I'm taking the best hundred men I can and go after the bitch queen myself. If I don't come back with her head, you can do as you see fit."

"Daimarz—" began his father, but Blade interrupted.

"Daimarz, I'll come with you. You may need someone who can talk to the Jaghdi. You'll certainly need someone who knows their ways better than you do."

"True." He gripped Blade's hand. "We leave as soon as we've got the men and supplies. I think we'd better take some captured amulets too. If we have to follow her into the forest, we'll be ready to do it."

"And you'll take Blade away from Chaia for the gods know how long!" snapped Haima. "Was that your purpose in suggesting this?" She was splattered with other people's blood and looked like some demonic goddess of war. Right now she also looked angry enough to draw her sword on the woodcutter.

Blade knew he had to play peacemaker. "Haima, I can't do much here, even to help with the prisoners. I can do much more with Daimarz. He and Yishpan are both right. We've won a battle, but Tressana is the

key to winning the war. We can't leave anything undone to strike at her. Nothing would make me happier than to stay here and begin giving Chaia your grandchildren, but do you want me to desert my post while I'm still needed?"

Haima sighed. "Blade, I wish I knew how much of that is the truth. But you are right about my asking you to desert. As I value my own honor, I cannot ask you to give up yours." She kissed him lightly and walked away, her shoulders sagging.

Blade really wished he did have nothing to do but guard prisoners and find ways of not sleeping with Chaia. Unfortunately he had to stay with Daimarz and try to keep him from throwing his life away to kill Tressana. He also had to try to save the queen herself, if he could. Her death would still mean chaos in Jaghd, probably even worse now that so many leaders were dead or captured. He hoped he could find a way to save Tressana without defying the Elstani, but the chances were slim. Without joining Daimarz, they didn't exist.

"All right, Daimarz. I think we'll need some refugees as guides, as well as your woodcutters. Most of the prisoners we've released aren't in shape for any more fighting."

"I agree with you about the refugees, but how do we choose them? They'll be killing each other for a chance at Tressana."

"Pick out the two or three hundred strongest, then draw lots."

"That could work. We'll want everyone in Jaghdi clothing, but with our own weapons. Then..." They sat down on a leather blanket in front of a nearby tent and began planning.

Chapter 22

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Tressana found her legs shaking as she slipped from her rolgha's back to the rocky ground. She cursed her own weakness. She shouldn't be so tired, not when she was riding all day. She had to set a good example for the rest of her people, and put courage back into the Jaghdi fugitives who had returned from the disaster in the Kettle of the Winds. Some of them had walked for five days, managing to get through the ranks of Elstani that had been stationed to the northwest of the camp.

Unfortunately her legs wouldn't obey her. She had to grip the stirrups for a moment to keep from falling. Then Jollya was there—Jollya, so good and reliable even if she was her father's daughter. Jollya was helping her away from the rolgha, so gently that no one could see the queen's weakness. By the time the queen's tent was up, Tressana could walk into it herself, even though she lay down the moment she was out of sight.

She must have slept, because the next thing she knew it was no longer twilight but night. A cold rain was falling, and the wind made the tent ripple and crackle. Jollya was there again. She had soup and wine on a tray, and Tressana discovered that she was finally hungry.

"Your Grace," said Jollya when the queen was finished. "How much farther east do we want to go?"

"As far as we need to," said Tressana shortly. She'd thought that question was settled, although she hadn't reached the point of saying "You will obey!" to Jollya or Sikkurad.

"Haven't we done all that can be done to help our people escape?"

"Perhaps. But we haven't done all we can do against the Elstani. If we can mount the fugitives... Why do you think we're herding all the rolghas with us?"

"Your Grace, our fugitives are dying on their feet! The only reason they aren't actually dying is because they're eating the dead rolghas! How long—?"

"As long as it takes us to avenge our dead and kill Richard Blade."

"Him again."

"Jollya!" Tressana's voice cracked like a whip. "Did you love him too?"

Jollya jumped up, looking startled. "Yes. I loved him, and I don't want him dead."

"You filthy little—!"

"I'm not throwing away the lives of men who follow me to take an impossible vengeance. Your Grace, I beg you. You're trying loyalty beyond what it can bear. Let's go home and—"

Jollya had her mouth open when Tressana hit her in the stomach, it stayed open as Tressana picked up a spear and smashed her across the back of the neck with it. Then it closed and she crumpled forward, to lie face down on the furs.

Tressana stood over the fallen woman, holding the spear and afraid for a moment that she was going to vomit from sheer rage and disgust. Blade had betrayed her even before he fled to Elstan and taught those—those— She couldn't find a word. Before he taught those people to fly and destroyed her army. He'd betrayed her with Jollya, which made it even worse. And how much treason had he been planning even while he was in her bed?

Tressana felt as if her head was going to split apart. She pressed her hands against her temples and screamed out loud. That released some of the pressure, but it also brought the other guardswomen on the run. They stopped at the door of the tent, staring down at Jollya. With a terrible effort Tressana forced out coherent words.

"Jollya tried to kill me. I had to strike her down. Tell Siharma she's captain of the Women's Guard now and bring her to me. Bind Jollya and take her to the treasure tent."

"Yes, Your Grace."

With the aid of a hand on the tent pole, Tressana stayed on her feet until she'd given Siharma her orders and Jollya had been taken out. Then she had to sit down.

Perhaps she'd been hasty in striking Jollya. Jealousy over a man who was now beyond the reach of either of them was foolish. But once she'd struck, there was no way back. Jollya could no longer be trusted, perhaps not to obey, certainly not to keep her mouth shut. Siharma would do well enough in the Women's Guard, and meanwhile Jollya would make a good hostage for her father's loyalty. It also meant a clear road to Manro, and that was becoming more important each day. If the loyalty of the men was beginning to fray, Manro's death at the hands of the Elstani would repair much of the damage. It would fill

most of the men with a burning desire for vengeance on the Elstani, and remove the king as a possible rallying point for anyone who became discontented.

Blade was rubbing animal fat on his blistered feet when the refugee family arrived with word of Tressana's camp. His feet were as tough as leather, and it took a good deal to get them blistered, but keeping up with vengeance-driven Elstani was enough. Daimarz considered thirty miles a day no more than healthy exercise. Blade had met only one other people who could cover ground as fast on foot, the tall warriors of Zunga. When he set off Blade doubted that any men on foot could hunt a mounted enemy. Now he suspected that a well-fed Elstani could move faster than a hungry rolgha, and certainly the enemy's mounts were hungry.

Daimarz listened to the refugees for only a minute before calling Blade over to hear the rest of their story. It took a while, because the father was always interrupting himself to ask Blade if he could join the raiders in their attack. Blade kept refusing to make any promises to a man half-mad with rage, exhaustion, and hunger.

Tressana was no more than ten miles away, and had King Manro with her. Blade recognized both banners from the man's description. She had four or five hundred armed men with her, and twice as many gaunt rolghas.

Daimarz was in no mood to count the odds, and after a while he was able to convince Blade. The Elstani could march the ten miles, strike, and be safely away between sunset and dawn. In Jaghdi clothes they would be hard to recognize as enemies in the darkness. With surprise on their side and all their strength concentrated on striking down the queen, Tressana would be doomed. His desire for vengeance wasn't keeping Daimarz from thinking clearly. Blade went along with him partly because of this. The raid really wasn't as suicidal as it seemed. He also went along because it was his only way of getting to the queen, even if there wasn't any way of getting out.

It was nearly sunset. If they started now they would be approaching the camp before midnight. Blade and Daimarz started going down the list of their men, picking the best sixty. With surprise that would be enough. Without surprise there weren't enough Elstani closer than the Kettle of the Winds to make the attack. Everyone would carry a sword or a spear, half would be carrying crossbows, and six would be carrying pots of the Living Fire. They'd brought it along at Blade's suggestion, in spite of Daimarz's protests that it would slow them down.

"I told you we'd find a use for it," said Blade cheerfully, as he sharpened his sword. "If we can stampede the rest of Tressana's rolghas, it hardly matters whether she dies or not. She'll have to go home. After a disaster like this, her own subjects may lose their patience with her." Blade realized that if Tressana returned home safely, Jaghd would not be thrown into chaos. The Jaghdi would be able to find someone to take her place in a peaceful and orderly fashion, which they couldn't do if she was simply murdered by the Elstani.

"Maybe," said Daimarz, wrapping his feet in clean cloths before pulling on his boots. "But people who could follow that woman in the first place—I won't trust them. Not now. I'll trust these and not much else." He rested one hand on his sword and the other on a pot of the Living Fire.

Something was wrong tonight. Manro knew it. He felt it in the air, heard it in the voices of the women

guarding him, saw it in their faces. The gods were going to strike tonight at Tressana herself. They'd already struck the men who rode away from her, hoping to escape. Now it was the bad woman's turn. So pretty, but bad.

Where was Jollya? Dark Jollya would protect him, if he could find her. But he could find her only if he got loose from the chain on his ankle. How could he do that? He remembered that chains were fastened by locks, and locks had keys, but only the person who had the key could open the lock. He didn't have the key, so he would have to wait until the person with it came to him.

But what if the person didn't come before the gods did? He might be hurt too, because the gods would think anybody near Pretty Tressana had also done bad things like her. Even Dark Jollya might get hurt, although she hadn't done anything bad at all!

Manro whimpered. He had to get out of his chain, find Jollya, and escape from the gods with her.

Chapter 23

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Tressana was drunk, because the wine had gone down on a nearly empty stomach. She wasn't feeling cold or tired any more. In fact, she had new strength. She decided to go over to the treasure tent and have a short talk with Jollya. Some of that talk might be conducted with a sharp knife—perhaps even a hot one.

"Siharma! Give me four of your people. I'm going over to the treasure tent."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Tressana's hands shook as she picked the knives. Traitor, traitor, traitor! went the scream in her mind. She wasn't sure if she was screaming at Jollya or at Richard Blade.

Maybe when Jollya was also screaming she'd know.

The rain had stopped but the wind was rising. That was just as good for the raiders, although it had come too late to help them dry out. The sound of the wind would muffle their footsteps from sentries who could still be more concerned about keeping comfortable than with keeping watch. With surprise on their side the sixty Elstani could hardly fail. At least they could hardly fail by Daimarz's standards, which meant killing Tressana and be damned to everything else! Blade knew his own standards were different, but knew even better that he had to keep them to himself.

Blade lay on his stomach, feeling the chill of the ground eating through his clothing, and peered out at the camp from under a bush. The leaves of the bush were faded and brittle; autumn was definitely coming to Jaghd. The center of the camp was lit up by a fire that flickered and danced in the wind, throwing twisted shadows onto the tents and making the tents themselves seem to change shape with every gust of wind. The sentries' fires on the edges of the camp were much smaller, barely large enough to let a man warm cold hands and feet.

As far as Blade was concerned, the less light and the more cold the sentries had, the better. He shifted

position to make room for Daimarz as the woodcutter crawled up and lay down beside him. "We're ready, Blade."

"Has Borokku gone back?"

"Cursing every step of the way, but he's gone."

"Good." Borokku had twisted his ankle, so they'd ordered him to escort Lorma and the farmer who'd guided them back out of danger. Borokku wasn't at all happy over this order. He felt that a glider flight and six dead Jaghdi still wasn't enough vengeance for his dead sister Kima. Blade and Daimarz felt differently, and once again superior rank got results.

Blade was especially determined not to get Lorma killed. It would be a poor reward for her loyalty, with the end of the war so close. If he got killed tonight, Borokku's orders were to release Lorma and let her make her way back to freedom in the forest of Binaark.

"You remember your own advice, Blade," said Daimarz, putting a hand on the Englishman's arm. "You're probably the man the Jaghdi would most like to kill. You don't have to be out in front all the time."

"I'll do my best, but in this sort of battle..." He shrugged. He could hardly explain that unless he took the lead, he'd have no chance of reaching Tressana ahead of the Elstani.

Blade rose to his hands and knees and looked to either side. That was the signal for the men behind him to stand up and move forward in a deliberately ragged formation. In Jaghdi armor and wearing Jaghdi helmets, they would deceive the sentries for at least a few vital seconds. Blade and Daimarz waited until the first twenty men passed the bush, then fell in behind them.

The raiders were halfway to the sentry fires when the first challenge came. "Who goes there?"

"You're Jaghdi?" Blade shouted back.

"What?"

"Are you Jaghdi? We've come all the way from the Kettle—"

"Hey, Varosh! Get Siharma out of the queen's bed and tell her we've got some new—" He broke off suddenly as he got a clear view of the size of the band advancing toward him. "Just a minute, there. Hold up, while I—"

"Archers!" Blade and Daimarz shouted together. They and all the men ahead of them went flat on the ground. Behind them twenty archers threw aside the Jaghdi cloaks hiding their Elstani bows, raised their weapons, and shot. At this range an Elstani crossbow could put a bolt clear through a man. The Jaghdi sentries went down as if they'd been machine-gunned. One of them fell into the fire. The sickening smell of burning flesh was in Blade's nostrils again as he dashed past the fire. He caught up with the leaders, Daimarz on his heels, then went out in front. Blade and Daimarz were the first of the raiders to get in among the tents.

Manro heard the shouts and the running feet, and whimpered in fear. The anger of the gods was here,

Dark Jollya was gone, and he was still chained.

The whimper turned into a scream. A woman came in and struck at him with the butt of her spear. It didn't hurt as much as he'd expected. He grabbed the spear with both hands. The woman looked at him in a way he didn't understand, then pulled the spear out of his hands and stepped away from him.

None of the other women got close to him after that.

The raiders were only supposed to divide into two groups. One would go with Blade and Daimarz to kill the queen, the other would go with the Living Fire to stampede the rolghas. In the confusion the two groups quickly became four or five.

Blade killed a man with a downcut, then lost his sword as it stuck in the dead man's skull. Three of the guardswomen charged out of a tent at him. Blade snatched up the dead man's lance and used it as a quarterstaff. He smashed one woman's knee, broke another's arm, then thrust at the third woman's face. She chopped off the lance shaft with her sword, but the stump caught her in the forehead. She reeled, Blade jabbed her in the stomach, then chopped her across the side of the neck with one hand. She fell on top of the other two women, unconscious but still breathing.

During the fight with the women, he'd lost Daimarz. He picked up his sword and started to move on, then saw a shadowy figure inside the tent and heard a whimpering cry. He stepped into the tent and stopped abruptly.

King Manro was kneeling in the middle of the tent, frantically tugging at the chain on his ankle. Blade saw the padlock on the king's leg iron, and the heavy post driven into the ground with the other end of the chain stapled to it. He saw no keys, but there was an ax in the corner.

Blade dropped his sword and snatched up the ax. Before he did anything else, he was going to release poor King Manro and see about getting him away. The Elstani didn't have any quarrel with him, and he'd be safer in their hands than he would be within reach of Queen Tressana.

Blade attacked the post as if it were his deadliest enemy. Splinters flew, the wood around the staples rapidly vanished, and King Manro stared up in silent confusion at the furious giant. At last Blade was able to drop the ax, grip the chain, and jerk it loose.

He turned to help Manro to his feet, but the king jumped up as if he'd sat on a snake. Grabbing the chain, he charged out the door, screaming at the top of his lungs. He nearly impaled himself on the spears of two men running up to see what was going on in the tent. They jumped aside, not sure what they should do to whom. Before they could make up their minds, King Manro was out of sight, not at all slowed down by the chain he was carrying. Then Blade was upon them, working off his anger at Manro's foolishness. He thrust one in the throat and put the other down with a slash to the thigh, then leaped over them and started after the king.

He'd only gone a few steps before he realized that there was no longer much hope of getting Manro away. Even if he could track him through the dark camp, the Jaghdi would have time to rally and prevent escape. It would also keep him too busy to lift a finger to save Tressana.

From somewhere off in the darkness, he heard the screams and neighs of panic-stricken rolghas. The men with the Living Fire must be going to work, although the tents as well as the darkness blocked his

view. Blade wiped his sword on one of the dead bodies and started looking at the tents around him. The largest one should be the queen's.

Tressana saw that even in the chilly tent Jollya was sweating. Good. She was afraid. She ought to be. Tressana stepped back and examined the ropes tying Jollya's wrists and ankles to the tent pole. They looked tight enough to hold, perhaps even tight enough to be uncomfortable. She hoped they were.

The shouting outside had penetrated the wine fumes some time ago. As long as no one came to tell her what was going on or ask her for orders, she was going to assume she wasn't needed. She could at least start Jollya's punishment tonight, and that was important. When people saw how Jollya had been punished, they would be too afraid of her to disobey. Then she would have no trouble in finding a way of putting an end to Manro.

Then the rolghas started screaming. That sounded like something she couldn't ignore. Were the Elstani attacking? It was hard to believe that any of the people from the burned-out farms in the area would have the courage and weapons to attack five hundred Jaghdi. But after the Kettle of the Winds she wasn't going to say that anything was impossible.

Jollya would have to wait. If it was Elstani, they could do too much damage. They also might give her a great opportunity. A slash across Manro's throat with an Elstani dagger, and a couple of Elstani bodies sprawled beside his—yes, that promised well.

In spite of the wine, Tressana's fingers were steady as she sheathed her knife and sword, pulled on her helmet, and started doing up her cloak. She was turning toward the door when one of the Men's Guard burst in.

"Lady! Your Grace! Elstani in the camp! They're—"

"Yes, I know. You'll have the honor of—"

A monstrous figure appeared in the door. It was King Manro, coated with mud where he wasn't bleeding from cuts and bruises, one eye closed, nearly naked, and holding the chain on his leg in one hand. Tressana let out a gasp of pure horror.

Manro spoke. Human speech from this figure was nightmarish, but the words were unmistakable. "You're hurting Jollya. Bad Tressana. Bad!"

The soldier moved toward Manro but the king moved faster. The chain whirled and smashed into the soldier's face. It became a red ruin. He collapsed, screaming horribly. Tressana broke out of her paralysis and thrust at Manro. Her sword sank deep between his ribs, but he twisted so violently that she lost her grip on it. She jumped back, but not far enough to escape the chain. It caught her around the left leg and she felt the bone snap as she went down. She rolled to the right, but the chain pulled her back. Manro was on his knees now, coughing blood but groping for something outside her field of vision.

He came up with it in both hands. A footstool, of heavy dark wood. He swung it, and when it caught her knee there was more pain than she'd thought there could be in the whole world. Then he swung it again, and she didn't know where it hit or where the pain was. He swung it a third time, and she saw it coming at her head.

She closed her eyes for a moment. When she tried to open them again she couldn't see anything except darkness. Then the darkness got even darker, although she didn't understand how that could be. She did know that she couldn't see anything at all, but since there wasn't any pain either it balanced out.

By the time Blade thought he knew which tent might be Tressana's, he knew he wasn't going to reach it. He didn't even see much chance of getting out of the camp alive. The forty surviving Elstani were in the middle of a group of Jaghdi who already outnumbered them two to one, with more coming every minute. On foot the Jaghdi were fighting as poorly as ever, but they would soon be able to win by sheer weight of numbers. Blade set about the grim, unrewarding task of taking as many enemies with him as he could.

He killed five men at least, perhaps others, certainly enough to clear a circle around him. No Jaghdi wanted to get within reach of that deadly sword. Blade wiped the blood out of his eyes and started to shout a challenge. He knew what was going to happen next—Jaghdi archers filling him with arrows from out of reach of his sword. He made up his mind not to let that happen and got ready to charge.

Before he could take the first step there was a sudden outburst of shouting among the Jaghdi. Unmistakably, someone was yelling, "Treachery! Treachery! Sikkurad's guards—!" before his voice was cut off. By then the damage was already done. The Jaghdi in front of Blade broke up and scattered like dead leaves whirled away by the wind. Blade stopped bellowing challenges to the Jaghdi and started calling to rally the Elstani. They hurried toward him, most of them showing wounds. Daimarz was among the wounded, one arm bloody but still useful.

"We've got to search the tents before they rally!" Daimarz shouted. Before Blade could stop him, he shifted his sword to his left hand and dashed into the nearest tent. Blade was following at a walk when he heard a strangled, "Oh, gods!" He ran the rest of the way, then stopped at the tent door.

Jollya stood against the tent pole, bound hand and foot to it, wide eyes staring down at the three bodies on the floor. One was a Jaghdi soldier, his face red pulp. The second was King Manro, lying in a pool of blood and filth with a sword between his ribs.

The third body was Queen Tressana. Her left leg was bent unnaturally, one side of her head was a spongy mess, and the blue eyes were blank and lifeless.

Blade started to back out hastily, in search of fresh air. Daimarz hurried forward and started slashing with his dagger at the ropes holding Jollya. As she slumped half-fainting onto him, a sudden commotion outside made Blade turn. Sikkurad, Keeper of the Animals, came tramping through the crowd, a dozen of his guards around him. All looked grim, all were armed to the teeth, even the Keeper. He was pale, sweating, and seemed afraid to look anyone in the face. He still held a short sword in a very steady right hand.

Blade looked from the Keeper to the men around the tent door, counted the Jaghdi, counted the Elstani, saw that everyone seemed to be waiting for someone else to take the lead. Then he looked at the bodies on the floor and back to the Keeper.

"Sikkurad, how would you like to be King of Jaghd?" At last Sikkurad's fingers lost their grip on the sword.

Two days before, it had been very cold. Today the weather was hot and sticky, more like summer than autumn. In the southwest a wall of black clouds was building up, which promised at least thunderstorms and possibly hail or even tornadoes. Although autumn in Elstan was notorious for changeable weather, this was something beyond the normal. Men were saying that the gods themselves were confused by all the strange events since the Jaghdi marched into Elstan, and did not know what to do.

If the gods were still confused, Blade thought as he walked toward his rolgha, men were beginning to sort things out. It took some fast talking on the night of Tressana's death and for several days afterward, but Sikkurad had now been hailed as King of Jaghd by all the survivors of Jaghd's armies. This included not only the battered cavalry force, but also the infantry who'd sailed up the Adrim. They'd come in a few days before, after a march south from the river under Elstani guard. They would be going home through the forest of Binaark.

In return for letting the Jaghdi go home and recognizing Sikkurad as king, the Elstani were exacting a stiff price. They were taking three thousand amulets and the formula for the synthetic scent. They were also taking home a thousand rolghas, including three hundred mares of proven fertility, and as many draft animals. This would start rebuilding Elstan's slaughtered herds, and within a few years also produce an Elstani cavalry. Then it would hardly matter if Sikkurad was overthrown, or that the hang gliders were no longer a secret. Elstan and Jaghd would be able to meet in battle on equal terms if they met at all.

Blade rather hoped they wouldn't, although it was too soon to be completely optimistic. He also doubted that he'd be in this Dimension enough longer to know much more than he did now. He did know, however, that for every leader who swore eternal bitterness and bloody vengeance there was another who saw the war as the beginning of a new day for both peoples. Blade's vision of the union of Elstan and Jaghd wasn't popular, but it already had some friends. Haima was one in Elstan, Sikkurad was another in Jaghd.

As Blade mounted, Daimarz and Jollya walked up. They were only just restraining themselves from walking hand in hand, and Blade smiled down at them. What was growing between the amazon and the woodcutter was one of the reasons for Blade's optimism. Even though her father would soon be ruling Jaghd, Jollya still wanted to get out from under his thumb as much as possible. In Jaghd that meant getting married, and for Jollya no man except Blade or an Elstani would really do. Since Blade was already betrothed to Chaia, that meant an Elstani. The most eligible Elstani for the daughter of the new king was clearly Daimarz.

It might start out as a state marriage, of course. Blade suspected that it would warm up quickly enough in the bedroom.

If it did, Sikkurad's grandson and the heir to the throne of Jaghd would be half-Elstani. That would be a step toward uniting the two peoples which would be hard to reverse.

All around the herd of rolghas and draft animals, horns were beginning to sound as the herdsmen took their position. Most of them were on foot. Only a handful of Elstani had learned to ride in the last few weeks, and not many Jaghdi were being allowed to join the march. Even they wouldn't have been allowed without Blade and Daimarz arguing hard for it.

"We want to bring the herd home safe!" snapped the woodcutter. "Is it so shameful to admit that the Jaghdi can help us do that? Or are we still so afraid of them that a dozen Jaghdi herd riders make us wet

our pants?" He spat on the ground for emphasis.

Jollya untied a pouch from her belt and handed it to Blade. "If you don't think they're unlucky, they should go home to Elstan." Inside the pouch were the Queen's Jewels.

Blade shook his head. "I don't think they're unlucky. But don't you think you've got a better right to wear them than Chaia?"

In spite of herself, Jollya looked toward a solitary wagon draped in silver-gray, the Jaghdi color of mourning. Tressana and Manro lay in it, embalmed for the trip home. "I hope Tressana won't be forgotten completely," she said quietly. "She did much good, even though she ended by doing evil. But for now, I think my wearing the Queen's Jewels would keep awake memories better left to sleep for a few years."

Blade had to agree. He thought particularly of the memory of Tressana's gruesome death. He didn't like to think about it, even though he supposed it could be called a rough justice—Tressana killed by the husband whose mind she'd destroyed. He nodded, and dropped the jewels into his pack on top of the amulets, the dried meat, and the wire garrote. "I don't know how soon I'll be able to visit you in Jaghd. If I set a foot out of Elstan before I've got Chaia with child, Haima will probably not only find another husband for her daughter but geld me as well."

Jollya looked very serious. "That would be a disaster." Daimarz carefully looked everywhere but at Jollya.

"Come on, Lorma," said Blade. The cat stood up, rubbed against Jollya one final time, then leaped into her riding position behind Blade. Blade pulled his rolgha around and trotted off toward the front of the herd. The last thing he saw as he looked back was Daimarz slipping his good arm around Jollya's waist. He was too short to reach her shoulders comfortably.

The thunderstorm broke an hour after the herd set out. Blade was certain by then that more Jaghdi riders would be needed to get the animals safely to Elstan. The rolgha stallions and the bulls were being particularly troublesome. If there'd been more of them the herd might already have been disintegrating. Blade hoped it wouldn't take a stampede to convince the Elstani they needed more help.

The first flash of lightning and thunderclap broke over the herd like an artillery shell. Blade heard bellowings, neighings, and furiously blown herdsman's horns. He put the spurs to his rolgha, cutting toward the front of the herd and shouting for the Jaghdi riders as he went. He'd have to get all of them in front of the herd and try to head off a possible stampede, while the Elstani kept clear. The men on foot couldn't possibly survive around the herd, while even the mounted ones couldn't be trusted to handle their frantic rolghas except under ideal conditions.

The second flash and thunderclap sent a ripple of fear through the whole herd. Blade was out in front when the third explosion turned the ripple into a full-scale stampede. Then the dark skies started pouring down rain so that in a single moment the visibility shrank from five hundred yards to fifty feet. In another moment the ground underfoot was slick with the rain, and as Blade turned his rolgha, the animal bucked and kicked and went down.

He and Lorma fell clear, but before he could get up his rolgha lurched to its feet and galloped off. Blade stood up, aware of pains in his right wrist and head, and shouted to Lorma.

"Run! Get out of here! Go, Lorma, go!"

She didn't move. Instead she crouched facing the oncoming herd, mouth open, her snarl inaudible over the rain, the thunder, and the swelling rumble of thousands of hooves. She was going to stay and die with him.

Blade knew he had only one chance. If he could run fast enough to keep ahead of the herd, the stampede might die down or break up before the main body of animals caught up with him. He turned, and as he took his first step he felt a pain in his head like a spike being driven into his forehead. He staggered, stayed on his feet, knew that he'd never be able to run with a head injury like this—then recognized the pain for what it was.

The computer was reaching out from England, calling him back to Home Dimension. He went to his knees as the pain increased, and groped blindly until his hand fell on Lorma's collar. She growled, recognizing something wrong with his touch, but he gripped the leather tightly. Through the rain he could see the approaching herd, but the animals now seemed to be running on a treadmill. Their legs churned up mud, but they got nowhere.

Then even the rain was blotted out, as the pain clamped down on Blade like a dog's jaws on a rat. He knew he was falling to the ground, he thought he was falling through it, then he couldn't even guess what was happening to him except for his deathlike grip on Lorma's collar.

Chapter 25

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Blade came home from Dimension X with Lorma, the Queen's Jewels of Jaghd, a dozen amulets, and a bad cold. The first three were highly interesting to Lord Leighton and the other scientists of the Project. The last was interesting only to Blade himself, after the doctors established that the cold came from a purely Home Dimension kind of virus and not some exotic bug from worlds beyond.

It was annoying, nonetheless. It was one of those colds where you feel just bad enough to know that you want to feel much better. Blade was lying on the sofa in his apartment, treating himself with good Scotch, when the secure telephone rang. It was J.

"Ah, Richard. How are you feeling?"

"I could be feeling quite a bit better."

"No doubt. The report on the amulets and the jewels has come through. I'm afraid the synthetic scent is of no particular interest. We can't even use it as a garden weed killer. All it's good for is what the Jaghdi intended—paralyzing killer plants. Lord Leighton says it's a pity you couldn't bring back one of the plants, or at least some seeds—"

"If I brought back everything Lord Leighton wanted to study each trip, I'd need a lorry."

"No need to be testy, Richard."

"Sorry, sir. But Lord Leighton's 'might have beens' are a trifle annoying at times."

"True. He's happy enough about the jewels to forgive quite a lot, though. They're rather exceptional, both chemically and optically. They'll intensify a beam of light ten times better than anything we know now, and remain stable much longer."

"So they'd be ideal for lasers?"

"Yes. Not heavy ones, perhaps, but the smaller industrial or surgical types—it would mean a whole new generation of them."

"If we establish trade with Elstan."

"I notice you didn't say when, Richard."

"No. But then neither does Lord Leighton, even after the wire traveled both ways without any harm." Blade then remembered something else. "What have you learned about Lorma?"

"Nothing one way or the other. It's true that this is the most intelligent animal you've ever brought back with you from another Dimension. At least it's housebroken." J laughed as he remembered the clean-up job they had had after Blade returned with the Golden Steed from Pendar.

Blade was in no mood to laugh. "But we still don't know if teleportation between Dimensions is any closer?"

"Well, we have the wire, which traveled both ways without any harm. And we have an intelligent, though not human, creature, which also made the trip safely. Maybe we are closer."

"How is Lorma doing?" Blade suddenly thought to ask.

"The vet is getting worried. She won't eat."

"Tell him to try leaving her alone for a few days. I wouldn't eat either if that hairy nuisance was trying to make me."

J chuckled. "I'll do that. And I hope you're right. I'd rather like to see the man confounded too. Good night, Richard."

"Good night, sir."

Blade poured himself some more Scotch and lay back on the sofa. What would they find in the Dimension of the killer plants if they found a way to go back there in a few years? He didn't think there was much to worry about with the Elstani, and even the Jaghdi might have put their house in order if Sikkurad stayed on the throne.

He probably would. The Keeper would use ten words where two would do as well as long as he lived, but in those ten words he'd talk sense. Sooner rather than later, the Jaghdi would recognize it. After Tressana's death and their defeat in the war, the Jaghdi would probably be much more concerned about a civil war than an unwarlike man on the throne. They'd be willing to accept the devil himself, and Sikkurad was a long way ahead of the devil. If Tressana hadn't made them too afraid of queens, they

might even be willing to accept Jollya as her father's successor, and then...

Then the Elstani and the Jaghdi would go their own way, without his ever knowing what that was or being able to do anything about it. The only being from that Dimension whose fate Blade could affect was Lorma. The first thing he'd do would be to get her out of the hands of that blasted vet. And then? Blade sat up as he remembered his building didn't allow pets. Turn Lorma over to a zoo? Not bloody likely! Apart from the possible danger to the Project's security, being put in a zoo would be as good as a death sentence for her. She would want to stay with him. How to make that possible?

Of course! If he sold the apartment and cashed in some of his investments, he'd have plenty to buy a modest country house. Not a cottage, a full-sized house where he could live the year round when he was at home—and where he could keep Lorma. His salary would be enough to maintain it easily, as long as he wasn't too extravagant.

There might be security problems—someone might get suspicious about the strange cat and want to learn more and if the secrecy of the Project were endangered the whole notion might have to be scrapped. But he wouldn't assume the worst until he had to. As long as there was no danger to the Project's secrets from his periodically leaving the place empty, he suspected J would approve, and J's approval would be most of the battle.

Then he and Lorma could settle down in the country. He could do something for her, even if he couldn't do much for his own loneliness.

Blade poured himself more Scotch, pulled the telephone directory toward him, and started leafing through it toward the listing for real estate agents.