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An incredible time-space journey to Dimension XI!

RICHARD **BLADE**

EMPIRE OF BLOOD

by Jeffrey Lord



Empire of Blood

Jeffrey Lord

Book 23 of the Richard Blade Series

Chapter 1

The salesman examined the Barclay's Bank draft with elaborate care. Richard Blade crossed one long leg over the other and clasped both tanned hands around the raised knee as he waited.

Finally the salesman raised his head and smiled. "All in order, Mr. Blade. Now, if you'll just sign here" as he shoved a small stack of papers toward Blade. Blade bent forward, his chair creaking as he shifted his two hundred and ten pounds of bone and muscle, and drew out a pen.

He had to sign his name twelve different times on eight different sheets of paper before he'd finished. It occurred to him that if anyone ever wanted copies of his signature for purposes legitimate or otherwise, all they'd have to do was examine the files of Hollis Brothers Automobile Sales and Services Limited, London.

"Very good, Mr. Blade. The model you wish will run you about a hundred and seventy pounds less than the sum of this draft. We will have the delivery driver give you a check for the balance."

Blade shook his head. "I would advise against that. You say the model I want isn't in stock at the moment?"

The salesman shook his head. "No, sir, it isn't. I expect it will be about three weeks before we have one in."

"That's what I thought," said Blade. "Unfortunately, I'll be leaving the country for an indefinite period within the next couple of days. Family business in America-it seems they've got it into their heads that I'm the Indispensable Man. I haven't the remotest notion when I'll be back. I think the wisest thing to do would be to garage the car here until I return and apply the balance to the garage fees. Can you do that?"

"Oh, yes, by all means, sir. It will be quite easy." The salesman opened the drawer of his desk and rummaged through it, then pulled out still another form. "If you'll just sign this, here and here--"

Finally it was all over. Blade rose, shook the salesman's hand, then buttoned up all but the top button of his Burberry.

"Thank you, Mr. Blade," said the salesman. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, and I hope you find driving your new car altogether agreeable. Good day, sir."

Outside it was a sunny but brisk London morning, with enough wind so that Blade promptly buttoned the top button on his coat. Then he headed down the street toward the nearest taxi stand. As he went, he contemplated how his profession complicated even such a simple business as buying a new car.

Richard Blade was indeed leaving England within the next couple of days, but he was not traveling to America, on family business or for any other reason. He was traveling much farther, into a place where only he of all living people could go, survive, and return safely to England.

That place was called Dimension X: It was sometimes hard to realize that until only a very few years ago no one, least of all Richard Blade, had even suspected the existence of Dimension X.

Yet that was the simple truth. It was not long ago that a bad-tempered scientific genius named Lord Leighton had conceived the idea of directly linking an advanced computer and a human brain. He had found in Richard Blade the perfect combination of physical and mental development needed for the experiment.

What happened after that would have made scientific history if it hadn't immediately become the most closely guarded secret in Britain. The link with the computer did indeed alter Blade's mind, but not quite as Lord Leighton had intended. The whole world in which he'd lived until then vanished from around Blade. All his senses now registered a strange, savage, primitive world called Alb.

In that world Blade moved about, lived and loved, ate, drank, fought, killed, bled, and, by his strength and wits, managed to survive. Eventually Lord Leighton adjusted the computer, Blade's senses returned to normal, and England reappeared around him.

That was the first human encounter with Dimension X. It was not and could not be the last. Dimension X was rich in land, resources, knowledge. If that wealth could somehow be tapped, it would mean a mighty rebirth for Britain. Dimension X would have to be explored and that exploration kept a closely guarded secret.

So Project Dimension X came into existence. Richard Blade left his post as a top agent for the secret intelligence agency MI6 to begin a new profession as the world's first interdimensional explorer. Tomorrow he would begin his twenty-third expedition into Dimension X.

Blade was not only the first person to explore Dimension X; he was the only one who had ever done so and was still alive and sane. Others had possessed the qualities of mind and body needed to travel into Dimension X, but they were all dead. It was just as well that some of them were dead, for they had been agents who might have given the Dimension X secret to the Soviet Union. How much damage that might have done no one even cared to guess.

Yet there was no doubt that more people were needed for the project. One man could only do so much exploring, even a man as gifted as Blade. Dimension X was vast and varied, full of enough complexities and unknowns to baffle even Lord Leighton. Every trip into Dimension X produced a little more knowledge-and also more proof of how much there was to learn. A dozen men might grow old exploring Dimension X without more than scratching the surface, and Blade was only one man.

Even so, he was pushing back the unknown, a little bit at a time. On his last trip he had taken a ring with him from Home Dimension into the forests of Gleor and back again. No object before that ring had made the round trip. It was only a small beginning, of course, but it might promise more for the future. Perhaps in time Blade and those who came after him could travel into Dimension X and not arrive naked as newborn babes, with nothing but their wits and muscles between them and sudden death.

Perhaps. In the meantime, Blade's profession as an explorer of other dimensions made continuous trouble for him in his day-to-day existence in this one!

Take the matter of a new car, for example. Just before his last trip into Dimension X, Blade's MG had burned out a bearing. The car had been needing a lot of repairs recently, so Blade decided that it was time to say goodbye to the MG and get the best new car that he could afford. His means were a good deal better than the average Englishman's-much of what Blade brought back from Dimension X was gold and jewels, some worked or mounted, some raw. The raw gold and jewels were examined, then judiciously and quietly sold off through MI6 channels. Most of the money went to finance the project its appetite for new equipment and new people never stopped growing-but the elderly spymaster known only as J insisted that some of the money go to Blade. He loved the younger man as he would have loved a son if marriage and a family had ever been part of his life. He saw no reason why Blade should not receive some tangible reward for all the time he spent in deadly danger on the very secret service of Her Majesty the Queen. Blade protested, but J insisted and went on insisting.

So a secret account was set up-again through MI6 channels-and bit by bit money trickled into it. Enough bits added up to quite a respectable sum. At the moment the balance in the account stood at just under fifty thousand pounds. Even with inflation, that was not a despicable sum of money.

It was certainly more than enough to buy any sort of car Blade might let himself dream of, even a Rolls-Royce or a Ferrari. A spectacularly expensive car, however, would make him conspicuous. It was not wise for a man in Blade's position to be conspicuous.

As for something small-well, Blade figured that he got more than enough exercise in Dimension X. He didn't have to try shoehorning himself into an undersized sports car every time he wanted to go somewhere in Home Dimension. There were a good many women who liked doing this even less. Blade's Home Dimension social life was discreet, but it was active enough for him to have to consider this angle.

So he decided on a Rover--comfortable, fast enough, cheap enough to be fairly common, expensive enough to match his cover identity as a youngish man of good family and respectable private means. What else was there left to do but go down and buy the car?

Quite a bit, unfortunately. The money for the car had to creep out of the secret account into a more open one at Barclay's Bank and from there to Blade's pocket. His cover identity had to stand up under the usual host of credit checks without arousing anyone's suspicion, or even their curiosity. Then and only then could Blade go out and behave like a more or less normal man who wanted a new car.

At least his cover identity was in his own name. Beyond a certain point false names caused more trouble and confusion than they saved. That was good. There were times when, if Blade hadn't been able to sign his own name, he'd have wondered exactly who he was.

As he approached the taxi stand, a taxi came swinging by. He raised a hand to hail it, then stepped off the curb and ran toward it as it slowed. The driver threw open the door and Blade scrambled in.

"Westminster Embankment."

"Yes, sir." The driver let in the clutch and the taxi whirled off down the street as Blade settled back in the seat.

Chapter 2

The massive bronze doors in front of Blade slid smoothly open with a faint hiss. He was now two hundred feet below the Tower of London, in the secret complex that housed so much of Project Dimension X.

A familiar corridor stretched out in front of Blade, empty, echoing, and sterile. It was all concrete and polished tile and dull shades of paint. The only sign of life in it was the man walking toward Blade, the man called J. Blade stepped forward to meet him. They shook hands. J's grip was as firm as ever. Like so much else about the man, it did not change.

There were supposed to be photographs in existence that showed J as a young man. Blade had never seen them, nor had anyone else who was willing to admit it. For all the years he'd known J, the man had looked like a thoroughly respectable senior civil servant, urbane, quiet, flawlessly tailored, a gray man who moved through life without making waves or attracting much attention. Over those years J's face gained a few more wrinkles and his hair showed more white and less gray. That was all.

Appearances were more than usually deceiving in this case. Behind J's modest exterior lay the brains, talent, and experience of one of the greatest of all spymasters. Every sensible man who had been in the same line of work over the last forty years either respected or feared him, and sometimes both. J was also a comfortable and agreeable man to work for, a quality lacking in many other brilliant people in the great game of espionage. His friendship helped make Blade's lonely and complicated life more endurable.

"Ah, Richard," said J, when they'd finished shaking hands. "I must say, your beard suits you. I'm glad that beards are coming back into respectability. It simplifies at least one of our problems."

Blade sighed. "I'm glad you like it. I can't say I share your enthusiasm. It used to be that when I came back from Dimension X with a beard, shaving it off made me feel back home again. Now I'm going to have to carry this blasted chin spinach around everywhere."

"I know," said J. "But you know the situation."

Blade nodded. "I do. Unless it's improved over the past couple of weeks?" he added hopefully.

J shook his head. "We're still exactly where we were the last time I talked to you about it."

"In other words, stalemate?"

"That's about it," said J. He turned and they began the long walk down the corridor to the computer rooms at the far end.

The "situation" bothering both J and Blade would have been ludicrous under other circumstances. It began on a stormy night just before Blade's last trip into Dimension X, when Blade was taking a train into London. The train was wrecked, with fifteen people killed and more than fifty injured.

Blade was unhurt. He promptly went to work, using all his strength and skill to help the others in the

wreck. His swift rescue work and first-aid measures saved at least a dozen lives.

Blade realized that being a hero would put him squarely in the middle of a blaze of publicity, making him conspicuous and possibly endangering the security of Project Dimension X. So he slipped quietly off into the stormy night just before the police and rescue teams arrived on the scene.

Enter the Chief Constable of the county, to hear about the mystery hero who had saved so many lives and then vanished. He immediately took it into his head that the man had disappeared because he was a wanted criminal! The Chief Constable had a composite drawing of the mystery hero prepared and took all the other steps necessary to launch a full-scale search. As Blade sailed off into Dimension X, Scotland Yard was being alerted to comb Britain for him!

At this point good luck and J both entered the picture, just in time to keep things from getting completely out of hand. Even a dozen witnesses together could not produce a recognizable picture of Richard Blade, seen briefly on a cold, dark night. What Scotland Yard and the newspapers and BBC put into circulation was a picture of Blade that his own mother wouldn't have recognized.

J also went to work. MI6 had well-established routines for quietly blocking or sidetracking Scotland Yard in emergencies. In J's opinion this was an emergency. The public uproar might eventually threaten Project Dimension X. Even if things didn't go that far, it would certainly become difficult or impossible for Richard Blade to live a normal life in Britain. That thought made J see red.

Even Blade never learned the details of all that J did. Whatever was done, it was enough. Blade did not have to dispose of his apartment and all his possessions, assume a complete new identity, and live under cover in his own country. On J's recommendation, he kept the beard he'd grown on his last trip to Dimension X. He also took extra precautions to keep people from trailing him. Apart from that, he could live at least as normal a life as he had before the whole business of the mystery hero exploded on his face.

"Eventually I suspect that interest will fade out entirely," said J. "Then you can take off the beard and go back to normal. I could speed up the process, of course. But it would be a gamble."

"Politics?" said Blade.

"Quite. We'd need direct intervention by the Prime Minister. That would be bound to attract attention in certain places that have a nasty habit of leaking things to the press. There could easily be a public scandal about the sinister plottings of security people. The Prime Minister's in no mood to risk something like that now."

"I can hardly blame him," said Blade. "Besides, it would mean the hunt would be on again. As things stand now, it's dying down. We'll just have to wait it out."

"True," said J. "Although I must say that for once I'm rather glad that your job keeps you beyond the reach of Scotland Yard most of the time. It makes this sort of thing a dashed sight simpler to handle."

They were now approaching the door to the computer rooms. They stopped briefly while electronic monitors scanned, identified, and approved them. Then the doors opened and they passed on.

The ever-increasing mass of equipment in the first few rooms was a familiar sight to both men. They passed swiftly onward from room to room with hardly a glance to either side. They only stopped when they came to the massive door of the main computer room. Beyond that door was Lord Leighton's private sanctum, with the huge computer, the product of his genius and the heart of Project Dimension X.

Blade had seen the main computer as often as he had the supporting equipment in the outer rooms. Unlike the supporting equipment, the main computer remained interesting, even awe-inspiring. It was monstrous-ranks of towering consoles with gray, crackled finishes, rising almost to the rock ceiling of the room.

Its creator was already on the spot, as he usually was. Lord Leighton came bustling out of the shadows as Blade and J entered. In spite of a hunchback, polio-twisted legs, and eighty-odd years, he moved with surprising speed and agility, wiping his hands on his filthy lab coat as he came.

"Greetings, gentlemen, greetings." There was little age or feebleness to be heard in his voice. "We can proceed any time Richard is ready." He looked at the attach case Blade was carrying. "You have the knife?"

"I do. I also brought the sheath and a belt I've had for some time."

"Very good. I fear I cannot report much progress in our research into the matter of the ring. What about you?" he said with a glance at J.

"Nothing worth your time or mine to discuss at the moment," said J. "I'm afraid I've been rather heavily committed in this blasted 'mystery hero' affair."

"I quite understand," said Leighton. "Very well, Richard. If you would care to change, I will see about activating the main sequence."

Blade nodded and headed toward a small door in one wall, taking the attache case with him. Inside it was a commando knife he'd carried on a good many field missions over the years, along with its sheath and a belt he'd owned since he left Oxford. They all showed signs of wear and age, but the knife was as lethal as ever and the leather as tough. They had been good friends to him in Home Dimension. Perhaps they would survive to be equally good friends in Dimension X.

"Perhaps" was as far as Blade would go. The whole business of how to get something beside his own naked body from Home Dimension into Dimension X was still very much guesswork. All the hard data they had came from the transportation of one single solitary ring. It was being examined by every known method with a few techniques being made up on the spot. The examination had as yet revealed nothing.

Meanwhile, there was the theory that something Blade had owned, used, or carried for a while might have a better chance of making the trip. Lord Leighton normally hated relying on guesswork, but he made an exception for Project Dimension X. He was too good a scientist not to recognize the limitations of his own knowledge, and he did not want to see Blade endangered unnecessarily. Lord Leighton might have a computer instead of a heart where most people were concerned, but not with Blade or J.

The end result was that this time Blade would be hurled off into Dimension X with something that might help him stay alive there. That was good news, by any standard.

The routine in the changing room had been the same ever since the project began. Blade stripped naked, smeared himself all over with smelly black grease to prevent electrical burns, and pulled on a small loincloth.

Next Blade opened the attache case. The knife was already in its sheath. Blade drew it out and watched the play of light on the steel, then sheathed it again. He hooked the sheath to the belt, strapped the whole belt around his waist and drew it tight. Finally he stepped out into the main room again and headed toward the glass-walled booth in the center. Around him the lights on the consoles and control panels were already flickering and dancing in the familiar patterns of the main sequence.

Blade sat down in the metal-framed chair inside the booth. The black rubber of the back and seat were chill and clammy against his bare skin. After a little shifting about, he found that he could sit naturally, in almost his usual position, even wearing the belt and knife. Good. The fewer variations from the routine on any one trip, the better. He remembered his trip through two different dimensions when everything seemed to be going wrong or at least becoming gruesomely unpredictable. He didn't want that to happen again.

Lord Leighton took a final look at the main board and turned away with a satisfied expression. Even by his exacting standards, everything was going smoothly. He could leave his computer to its own devices for at least a few minutes and wire Blade up.

"Wiring up" was another routine that hadn't changed in a long time. Lord Leighton worked with the speed and agility of a monkey, attaching cobra-headed metal electrodes to every part of Blade's skin. From the electrodes colored wires ran off into the bowels of the computer consoles. When the job was done, Blade and the computer were a single unit, ready to be activated whenever Lord Leighton pulled the master switch.

Lord Leighton chose to wait a few moments, his eyes scanning the controls. J was perched in his usual place, on the small fold-out spectator seat on the wall by the main controls. On his face was the sober expression he usually wore as the time approached for Blade's leap into the unknown. In those moments J could cease to be an urbane, poised gentleman. He could openly show the concern he felt as someone he cared about headed into danger.

Seconds ticked past, turning into minutes. If Blade hadn't known better, he would have suspected Lord Leighton of prolonging the suspense for dramatic effect. Lord Leighton had been known to do that elsewhere. He'd never done it down here at this time and never would.

Suddenly Lord Leighton's right arm shot out and the fingers of his right hand closed on the red master switch. Lord Leighton's aged and misshapen body seemed to take on a grace that it never had at any other moment. The master switch slid down its slot and reached the bottom.

Between one heartbeat and the next, Blade's senses twisted in the computer's grip, and the world around him dissolved.

The floor gaped open, the walls split apart, the ceiling fell in. From some unimaginable outside a

greenness swirled and boiled and roared into the room. It was not a liquid, a solid, or a gas. It was a color from some place where the laws governing nature were like nothing that Blade had ever met in Home Dimension or Dimension X.

The greenness poured down on Blade like a waterfall, rose up around him like lava bubbling up out of a volcano, roared past him like a river with a noise like an express train. The computer's consoles and controls, Lord Leighton, J and his seat-all vanished.

There was nothing around Blade now except the greenness, the color that behaved like a liquid, a gas, a solid, and many things that were none of these and should not have existed in any sane or healthy universe. The more Blade saw, the less he liked it. The less he liked what he saw, the more a chilling thought battered at his mind. Had his luck finally run out? Had some malfunction of the computer, some error of judgment by Lord Leighton, even the effects of the knife and belt, brought him to the end of his road? Was he going to live out the rest of his life in some nightmarish nowhere between the dimensions?

It was possible. It always had been possible. His mind had never recoiled from that possibility into raw panic. It did not do so now. Grimly Blade fought his way back to a disciplined awareness of what seemed to be going on around him.

The greenness was now turning steadily into a liquid, a rushing torrent of liquid that was hot and cold at the same time. It chilled parts of Blade's body, scalded others, filled his nostrils with fumes that had no odor and yet choked him, stabbed at his joints and groin with piercing daggers of icy cold, tormented him in a hundred ways. It carried him along as it did so, as if it wished to prolong the torment. It carried him on at a steadily increasing speed, until he felt that he was being whirled along like a log through rapids in flood.

Blade wondered when the rapids would sweep him over the falls to be smashed to pieces on the rocks at the bottom.

Chapter 3

Suddenly there was no more heat around Blade, only cold. What roared past him as loudly as ever was not liquid but air. He was still moving, but more slowly. As he rolled over and over, something solid struck him, now in the chest, now in the knee, now in the head.

Blade threw out his arms and legs to stop himself. They slammed against something solid and cold and rough as sandpaper. He could feel patches of skin vanishing from his fingers and toes. Then he rolled over the edge of something, fell with a thud, and stopped dead. He took several deep breaths and opened his eyes.

He realized then that his eyes had actually been open for some time. It was just that this time he'd landed in Dimension X on a pitch-black night. As his senses cleared further, he realized that the roaring coldness around him was a strong wind. It had blown him across the face of the land like a dry leaf, into the shallow depression where he now lay. He shifted position, ready to sit up. As he did, he felt the pressure of the belt around his waist and the sheathed knife against his thigh.

Blade let out a yell of triumph. He'd done it again! Once more something from Home Dimension had made the trip into Dimension X with him. Knowledge was growing, bit by bit.--His delight at this discovery drove out the last of his headache and he sat up.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Blade's superb night vision began to pick out details. He was sitting in a shallow depression that ran up and down the side of a steep hill. The hillside was strewn with boulders and rose high above him, blocking off half the dark sky and making the world around Blade even darker.

Blade did not feel like standing, not yet and not in this wind. Instead he shifted position until he was on hands and knees, then crawled slowly up out of the depression.

That move saved his life. As he sat down again, there was a faint rattle, then a series of rumbling and crashing noises from the darkness above. A boulder twice the size of Blade himself came bouncing and rolling down the depression, straight across the spot where Blade had been lying. If he hadn't moved, it would have crushed him to a bloody pulp.

Blade decided that it was time to get to his feet and get out of here, in spite of wind, cold, and darkness, before the hill rolled any more half-ton rocks down at him.

Blade moved downhill as fast as the steep slope and the uncertain footing would let him. As always when he started moving, he felt his full strength return swiftly. Below him a spreading dark mass curled around the base of the hill, like the sea around a rock on the shore.

Several times more as Blade descended the hill the wind sent boulders crashing down close enough for him to hear them. Soon he could make out the dark mass at the foot of the hill. It was a vast expanse of pine forest, hundred-foot trees bending, bowing, and tossing their long branches in the wind. The forest seemed to stretch away, endless and lightless.

Blade practically ran down the last hundred yards of bare slope and plunged into the shelter of the

trees. Up there on the hillside he was exposed to the full force of the wind. He might not die of exposure in one night, but he would become damned uncomfortable! When daylight came he would also be as visible as a bug on a tabletop, never the best situation in a new and unknown dimension. He preferred the forest.

Inside the forest Blade moved slowly to avoid bumping into trees or tripping painfully over fallen branches. He had covered about a hundred yards when he decided to stop before he became disoriented and lost his way. The darkness under the trees was so deep and complete that it almost deserved a stronger name. It was not just an absence of light, it was an almost tangible presence that seemed to passionately hate even the idea of light.

At least the trees broke most of the wind. Only an occasional gust swept down from above, sending it a chill breath across Blade's skin and kicking up the dead pine needles that lay inches deep underfoot. High above, the wind moaned and shrieked and roared continuously in the treetops, as if to remind Blade of its presence. Once or twice Blade heard the unmistakable long, tearing cracking and crash of a tree falling, giving up its struggle against the wind.

It was a forest in which a less disciplined man than Blade would have been expecting to meet vampires, ghouls, and witches. It was a forest in which even Blade was not sure he wasn't going to meet bears, wolves, and hermits or woodcutters who might swing axes and ask questions afterward. It would be a good forest to get out of--tomorrow morning, when there was enough light for him to see where he was going. It was not a forest where Blade cared to run the slightest risk of wandering around in circles. He would settle in for the night and move on in the morning.

Blade found a clump of bushes in the lee of a pair of particularly massive trees. Under the bushes the needles lay thicker than elsewhere. He crawled in and began scooping them over himself. They would not be much protection against the cold, but they would be better than nothing. He would not be spending a very comfortable night, and he doubted that he would be getting much sleep. But he would be alive and reasonably healthy, come morning.

He stopped when there were six inches of needles over him. He relaxed, and after that sleep came with surprising speed and ease.

Blade was struggling up from a dream that seemed to be nothing but golden warmth. He shivered as the dream gave way to the cold and darkness around him. Then he opened his eyes, shook his head, and was instantly awake and alert, listening to the sounds of the forest.

They were all there, the same sounds he'd been hearing when he dozed off. But there were new sounds as well. As they registered on Blade's awakened hearing, he sat up, plunged his hand under the pine needles, and drew the knife.

Far away, he heard the clang and thud of cymbals and drums, the occasional faint, thin wailing of a flute, and even more rarely the brassy voice of a trumpet.

The darkness was as solid and the wind as loud as before. Even Blade's trained ears found it hard at first to judge the direction of the music. Gradually he got the impression that it was coming from somewhere off to his left.

Blade's eyes searched the darkness. Was this lonely black forest beginning to make his imagination work too hard? Or did he really see a reddish glow flickering there off to the left, far away through the trees? After a moment, he was sure the glow was real.

It was hard to tell how far this forest stretched or how far beyond it lay the nearest human settlement. It certainly seemed endless and utterly lonely, no place for any sensible people to be lighting fires and playing music in the middle of the night.

So what was he seeing? Once more Blade could not forget that this forest was much too appropriate a setting for black masses, witches' sabbaths, and other strange ceremonies. And people involved in that sort of affair were apt to resent intruders and deal with them drastically.

True enough. Yet if he didn't seek out the musicians and their fire, it might be days before he got out of the forest, let alone found human beings. Blade slipped the knife back in the sheath but left it unstrapped for a quick draw. Then he set off again.

It took him longer than he'd expected to reach his goal. Several times the wind overhead drowned out the music. The fire seemed to flit ahead through the forest like a will-o'-the-wisp. He lost sight of it half a dozen times and once even managed to completely lose his sense of direction. He suspected that he was leaving a trail like a drunken snake's. He knew that if anyone was watching him blundering about, they were probably laughing themselves sick.

The only consolation was that the music and the roar of the wind in the trees completely covered any noise he might be making. Between the wind and the music, the people around the fire probably couldn't have heard him if he'd been approaching them in a tank!

Sheer determination carried Blade through. Eventually he reached a point where he could see the orange-red fire glow flickering clearly through the trees. He set the most direct course toward it he could manage, crouching low and moving by bounds from one tree to another. Whoever the people were, they had probably put out sentries.

The fire seemed close enough to touch when Blade came out on the edge of what was unmistakably a road. It ran in front of him, then curved around to the left toward the fire, which now showed through the trees on the other side. It was not a road that any people able to build anything better would have tolerated, even in this forest. It was barely one lane wide and totally unpaved. With his bare feet Blade could feel ruts and holes a foot deep and rocks the size of his head.

As he slipped across the road, the sound of the music grew louder than before. For the first time Blade heard human voices, cheering and shouting enthusiastically. The beat of the drums grew more rapid and the shouting grew more frenzied. Then suddenly all the instruments stopped as if the ground had opened up and swallowed the players. More cheering followed, along with applause; then that too died away and left the forest to the moan of the wind. Blade crept forward more cautiously than ever, until he could get a clear view of the camp. Beside the road was a clearing about a hundred feet square and on the far side, an enormous pile of roughly dressed tree trunks. In the lee of the pile half a dozen tents of various sizes were pitched in a rough semicircle. In the middle of the semicircle a campfire burned. Beside the tents a score of horses and pack mules were tethered to trees and bushes.

Blade's attention shifted to the people. There were at least a dozen men seated cross-legged around the

fire on furs spread on the ground. All wore variations of the same outfit—a short tunic with baggy sleeves and broad trousers bloused into soft leather boots equipped with spurs. Two of the men wore tunics and trousers of material with a high sheen and had jeweled daggers stuck in broad leather belts. The others wore duller clothes, some of them showing patches and ragged edges. Every man had a weapon, either on him or within easy reach. Five held musical instruments—two drums, a flute, a pair of cymbals, and a spiraling horn with what looked like a pearl mouthpiece.

Beside the fire knelt a girl. She was totally naked except for a broad copper bangle around one wrist and another around one ankle. Blade could see her shivering in the wind in spite of her closeness to the fire. Her skin was olive-hued and beaded with sweat, her short hair was a gleaming copper-gold, tangled and damp. It was obvious she'd just been dancing to the music.

There would never be a better time to catch these people relaxed and off their guard, ready to talk first and shoot afterward. Blade rose to his feet and pushed the sheath around the belt, toward the small of his back. He could still draw fast enough in an emergency, but he would not be flaunting his one and only weapon.

Then he spread out both hands in front of him and walked forward, out of the trees and into the firelit clearing.

Chapter 4

All of the men around the fire jumped up, grabbing their weapons. The girl screeched and threw herself flat on the ground. Before Blade could take three steps, he found four crossbows, three lances and five swords aimed in his direction. A dozen pairs of eyes stared at him over the weapons, hostile but also curious.

The older of the two well-dressed men frowned at Blade, then gave orders.

"Tzimon, Dzhai, climb up on the woodpile. Watch the forest, and call if anyone approaches."

Two of the other men bowed jerkily and scurried toward the piled tree trunks. Blade looked at the well-dressed men and noticed a strong resemblance between them. Father and son?

The older man sheathed his sword and crossed his hands on his chest. "Well, man who comes forth so strangely from the night. Who are you, and what do you in the Empire of Saram?"

"What I do is seek aid. Food and fire and clothing, to begin with. Then whatever you may wish to offer me."

"What the Empire of Saram offers those who stray into its borderlands is usually a quick death, if we are feeling merciful. If not, you go to the Emperor and a death that is anything but quick."

"I have done nothing that honorable men would consider worthy of death, either quick or slow," said Blade severely. They might take that as an insult, but these men seemed as likely to take the words as the sign of a man with a warrior's pride.

"Who are you, then, that you should ask us to believe such a lie?" said the younger man with a harsh laugh. The older man frowned but turned unfriendly eyes on Blade. "My son speaks wisdom, although his words are not well chosen. This is the borderland where Saram meets the Steppes. You are not of the Empire, and few of the Steppemen have ever traveled here without wishing us harm."

"What you have said merely proves that those of the Empire of Saram do not know everything," said Blade. "And do not draw your sword and wave it at me for speaking this truth," he added, with a pointed look at the son. The young man was glaring at Blade and had his hand firmly clamped on the silver-mounted hilt of his sword.

Blade folded his own arms across his chest. It was a gesture that would have conveyed more dignity if he'd been wearing something besides the knife, belt, and bruises from bumping into and tripping over things in the forest. It served well enough, however. Blade's eyes met the father's and read in them a willingness to listen, if not necessarily to believe.

"Do any of you know of the lands that lie far to the south of the Steppes?" said Blade. This drew blank looks from everyone, exactly as he'd hoped. "Lands that lie far to the south of the Steppes" lay outside local geographical knowledge. They would be willing to believe anything he said about such lands, or at least unwilling to dismiss what he said out of hand.

"I came from one of those lands, a land called England. I am a prince of that land. With six of my warriors I was on my way north to come before the Emperor of Saram. Though knowledge of England has not yet reached Saram, we have heard of the power of your Emperor. We would wish to know more of such a ruler, who might do much for us, either good or ill."

"His Sublime Magnificence the Emperor Kul-Nam cares little what other people know or think of him," said the son sharply. "Why did you expect to accomplish anything?"

"We had heard that His Sublime Magnificence was a wise ruler," said Blade. "Any wise ruler would learn as much about other peoples as he could. Are you asking me to believe that in England we have heard lies, that your Emperor is in truth a fool?"

The son's mouth opened and shut several times but no sound came out. Finally he clamped his jaw tightly shut, as though distrusting what might come out if he spoke again. His father was obviously struggling to keep a straight face. Blade took advantage of all this and continued.

"We could not send through the Steppes a party large enough to fight those who live there," he said. "Yet we thought a small party of selected warriors might slip across the Steppes and reach the borderlands of the Empire undetected. We were right. We passed across the Steppes as though we were invisible. It was in the borderlands that ill fortune overtook us."

Swiftly Blade painted a vivid picture of weary and hungry men on wearier and hungrier horses entering the forests, believing that they were safe and thus relaxing their guard. He painted an even more vivid picture of the attackers who slew five of the men at once and drove the others separately into the endless dark forests. He carefully avoided giving too many details, using darkness and surprise as his excuse.

"Did they come against you on foot or on horseback?" asked the son.

Blade shrugged. "Some were on foot, some were on horseback. I do not know whether those who came on foot came that way on purpose or because they fell off their horses in the darkness and the trees. We were not far inside the forests, so it was not hard for the Steppemen on their small horses to come at us." The size of the horses was an educated guess. In Home Dimension people who lived on open plains usually rode tough, surefooted little horses or ponies.

"This is true. The Steppe horses are sure-footed enough so that in the past they have come as much as half a day's march into the forest. What happened to you and the other man who survived?"

"I do not know where he is, or whether he still lives. I do know that I sprang from my bed, naked as I was, and slew four of the Steppemen. My sword stuck between the ribs of one and he galloped away with it, dying in the saddle as he rode. I had no more weapons but the knife I wear now, and the five who died were already beyond my help. I could see no course that was not shameful-stay and die at once or flee and live to take a better vengeance later. I chose to come away. Perhaps I can ask your help in taking the lives of a good number of Steppemen and so taking away my shame?"

The son's face remained frozen, but the father nodded. "Perhaps. But it must be seen whether you are truly a warrior, or one who has been justly shamed and punished. Those who have brought ill fortune on themselves are often so accursed that they bring it upon others as well."

Blade was tempted to ask the man if warriors of Saram were so afraid of ill fortune that they refused hospitality to honest travelers. He decided not to. "It shall be as you wish," he replied calmly. "A warrior who is a prince of England will shrink from no test. Nor did I come all this way to fail in any such test." He brought the knife around on his belt until it rode clearly visible on his thigh. Then he crossed his arms on his chest again and stood quietly, waiting for the men facing him to make the next move.

The father clapped his hands three times. The girl who'd been dancing sprang up from the ground and vanished into one of the tents. The guards and servants shifted position, spreading out until they formed a complete circle around Blade and the fire. The two leaders stepped back until they were outside the circle. Then the father turned toward the two men mounting guard on top of the piled logs.

"Ho, Tzimon, Dzhai!" he shouted.

"We come, lord," they shouted back. Both men scrambled down the logs and ran across the clearing toward the circle. They stopped in front of the father, bowed so deeply they almost fell on their noses and then stood up. In the firelight Blade could see that both men were as broad as he was and nearly as tall. One now carried an axe, the other a mace. Both moved like tough, experienced fighting men.

The father turned and pointed at Blade.

"You see this man?"

"We see him, lord."

"He says he is a prince from England, a land far to the south- of the Steppes. He has come north to greet our Emperor, of whose strength and wisdom he has heard much."

The two men looked at Blade, then looked at each other, then wrinkled their broad noses as if they smelled some particularly foul odor. The one on the right spat into the fire. Obviously they would have liked to say something but didn't dare without their master's permission.

"He was surprised by the Steppemen in the forest, he says, and the men with him slain or driven off after a hard fight." More sour looks from the two men. "I do not know if he lies or not. In any case, if a stranger come to Saram from the direction of the Steppes."

The father suddenly drew his sword with a rasp of steel and flourished it toward Blade. The fire sent shimmers of light up and down it.

"Tzimon, Dzhai-kill him."

Chapter 5

Blade shot a quick look at the father, trying to guess what was on the man's mind while concealing his own surprise. The other's face was as blank as Blade's own. He might have been ordering a meal in a fine restaurant instead of calling for cold-blooded murder in a dark and windy wilderness.

Then Tzimon and Dzhai began to move forward and Blade turned his attention to them. Both men held on to their weapons as they advanced but did not raise them. Blade dropped into unarmed-combat stance. He did not draw his knife. If it came to killing, he could kill with his bare hands well enough. If his best course was to disable without killing, as he suspected it might be, his bare hands were better than the knife.

Tzimon and Dzhai walked toward Blade side by side until they reached the fire. Then they separated, one moving around each side of the fire. They moved slowly, a step at a time, matching each other's movements step for step.

Blade gave ground slowly, letting his opponents gradually close the distance. He would have liked to be able to retreat until he was half-concealed in the shadows of the trees and Tzimon and Dzhai were silhouetted against the fire. That would give him a useful edge. It might also leave a bad impression on the two noblemen. Blade suspected this was one of those fights where how he won mattered as much as whether he won.

In any case, he probably didn't need the advantage. Tzimon and Dzhai were moving in on him like men who had fought side by side before, but they did not move like a team who'd trained together for years to fight as a single mind with two bodies. Against a pair like this, a single man always has the advantage.

Blade was only three steps from the shadows when his opponents suddenly charged. They came at him with Tzimon slightly in the lead, axe raised, while Dzhai whirled the mace in a great circle around his head. Anything that got inside that circle was going to get smashed, whether it belonged to friend or foe. Blade noticed that, and noticed that Tzimon was keeping well clear of his comrade as they advanced. This left a gap between the two men so wide that they could not hope to support each other against a fast-moving opponent.

Blade was going to be that fast-moving opponent.

He seemed to explode forward into the gap between his opponents. Dzhai sprang to one side, taking himself completely out of combat position. Tzimon stopped in midstride, whirled with frightening speed, and started to bring the axe down where he expected Blade's head to be.

Blade's head stayed in one piece only because he ducked just as the axe whistled down. He knew in that moment that Tzimon was his major opponent here, far more dangerous than Dzhai, as dangerous as any man he'd ever fought. It would be suicide to turn his back on Tzimon without doing him some damage first. Blade shifted his attack and put even more speed and power into it.

One arm shot upward in an eye-blurring stroke. The edge of Blade's left hand slashed across Tzimon's right wrist. The impact jarred Blade from shoulder to waist. It was like trying to chop through a log.

The axe wavered in midair above Blade instead of swinging down to split him from shoulder to crotch. Blade threw his clenched right fist into Tzimon's stomach, putting all his weight and strength behind it. It felt like punching a bag of cement, but the wind went out of Tzimon with a tremendous whuffff.

Blade let the movement of the punch pivot him around in a complete circle. He let go with a back kick as he swung. He aimed for Tzimon's jaw, but the man stepped back far enough so that Blade's foot slammed across his chest in a glancing blow. Blade heard something crack, but he wasn't sure if it was Tzimon's ribs or his own foot!

Blade came down out of the circle to see Tzimon standing with his feet wide apart and his axe raised, his eyes still focused on Blade but his chest heaving as he fought for breath. Three solid strikes from Blade were enough to slow anyone down, even a fast-moving mass of bone and muscle like Tzimon. For a moment Blade had one flank clear. He badly needed that moment, for Dzhai was now moving back to the attack, the mace whirling in circles over and around him.

Blade used that moment to time Dzhai's swings. He noticed that the man held his free arm out across in front of him.

Blade moved in. He darted under the swing of the mace, driving his left hand upward and jerking down with his right. Dzhai's right arm swung down in a perfect arc. The mace whistled past Blade's ear and grazed his shoulder hard enough to jolt him. His left hand crashed into Dzhai's descending elbow. Dzhai screamed horribly as his elbow shattered.

In the same moment Blade jerked Dzhai's free arm down and to one side, nearly pulling it out of its socket. From the corner of his eye Blade now saw Tzimon moving back into the attack, looking for an opening that would let him strike at Blade without hitting his comrade. Blade closed with Dzhai until he was embracing the man as tightly as he might have embraced a woman. His arms locked around Dzhai's chest.

Then Blade hurled himself backward, at the same moment heaving upward on his opponent. Dzhai rose into the air as Blade dropped. He came down at exactly the right moment for Blade's upthrusting feet to take him in the stomach. Blade continued rolling, balancing Dzhai on his feet. He rolled right over in a backward somersault, flinging Dzhai's entire helpless two hundred pounds squarely into Tzimon's face. There was a crunch and a gasp, the axe flew out of Tzimon's hand, the mace flew out of Dzhai's hand and landed in the fire, and the two men crashed down onto the ground together. Blade sprang to his feet, snatched up the axe, plucked a couple of thorns out of his buttocks, then looked at his two opponents. They were sprawled on the ground, both obviously out cold but still breathing.

Blade sank the axe into the ground at his feet and turned to face the two noblemen. Both were staring at Blade, their swords still drawn. To one side of them stood one of their guards, holding a matchlock musket under one arm. On the other side stood the dancing girl, now wrapped in a blanket. She was staring at Blade even more intently than the others, her eyes wide and seeming to glow in the firelight. The other men stood behind these four.

Blade bowed politely, drew his knife, laid it down on the ground with the point toward him, then bowed again. It was a symbolic disarming only. He could snatch up the knife and pick off at least one man long before any of them could do anything to him, even the one with the musket.

Everyone remained as motionless as figures in a waxworks for a moment. Then the father smiled, thrust his sword back into its scabbard, and stepped forward. His son hesitated for a moment, then did the same. The man with the matchlock blew out his match and lowered his weapon butt first to the ground.

The father stepped up to Blade, hand outthrust. Blade took it, matching the other's firm grip.

"Well, my-" began the father, then shook his head. "No, I cannot call you friend, not now, and not even without the Emperor's permission. You are still a stranger, and the laws of the Empire are strict when they speak of strangers." He smiled. "But though you are a stranger, certainly you are no Steppeman. You are just as certainly a warrior, whom I am happy to have met, and very probably a truthful man as well. Blade, I am Boros, Duke of Kudai. This is my son, Tulu. And these"-he pointed to the other men-"serve in the House of Kudai. Though we cannot call you friend, yet we can say that here and now we are happy to have you among us.

"Prince Blade, welcome to the Empire of Saram."

Chapter 6

Blade sipped from his cup of hot, spiced wine, found that he'd emptied it, and held it out to the girl. She took it, refilled it from a large jar near the mouth of the tent, and handed it back. Blade took another swallow of the steaming liquid, feeling it warm him all the way down, and looked at the girl for about the tenth time. She now wore a blue linen shift belted around her slim waist with a gilded silk cord. She was just as pleasant to look at the tenth time as she'd been the first.

Blade sat facing the mouth of the tent. He wore a pair of leather trousers, a woolen tunic, and a leather belt, all borrowed from Dzhai. Their former owner had no use for them at the moment. He lay in another tent, his shattered elbow and cracked ribs wrapped in bandages, the rest of him wrapped in blankets, filled with drugged wine and sleeping peacefully.

Duke Boros had apologized for not being able to produce better clothing for Blade. "I hope we shall be able to find garb more fitting to your rank before you come into the presence of His Magnificence. But for the moment, only Dzhai among those whose clothes would fit you has any to spare."

Blade sipped more wine. "What is there about the Steppemen that makes them so hated and makes you so sure that I am not one of them?"

"As for what makes them hated, Blade," said Tulu, "need you, who have survived one of their attacks, ask this? What they did to you and your men once, they have done a thousand times in the borderlands of the Empire. They have done it to soldiers, both by open attack and by treacherous ambush. They have done it even more often to farms and villages and towns. They slay all the men and enslave the women and children. Only the bravest will now live within two days' ride of the Steppes. There would be fewer still if it were not for His Magnificence Kul-Nam's iron will."

"How is this?" said Blade.

"He has caused the abandoned farms to be resettled. The new settlers must hold on to the death against the Steppemen. Otherwise their lives are forfeit to the Emperor. The women and children are impaled or flogged to death. After watching this, the men are either burned at the stake or thrown into pits of snakes."

Blade nodded politely. Kul-Nam's determination to keep his borders secure was impressive. His methods were another matter.

"One can understand why your Emperor's reputation has traveled even as far as England," Blade said finally. "Indeed his will is one of iron."

"It is," said the duke. "Yet even iron has only so much strength. The army of Saram is strong, and when it can meet the Steppemen man against man and horse against horse, they must flee or perish. But this seldom happens. They choose their time and place and seldom fight unless they can bring against us numbers so great that we must flee or die. The soldiers of His Magnificence will not flee, for he is harsh with cowards. So they die. Each year our soldiers grow fewer, each year the Steppemen grow more numerous. We know they dream of a year when they will ride across our border in all their strength and sweep our army aside like the tides of the sea. We fear that year is not far off, for all that"

His Magnificence and his soldiers can do."

So the Empire of Saram seemed to be facing the attacks of a horde of nomadic barbarians. Blade was not quite ready to call the Empire itself "civilized"-not with their Emperor's rather bloodthirsty taste in punishments. Yet certainly they were facing a notoriously unpleasant sort of enemy. A horde of horsemen could be as elusive, painful, and sometimes deadly as a swarm of wasps.

"I can understand why they are not welcome in Saram," said Blade. The duke laughed shortly, and even his son managed a thin smile. "I am glad you decided that I was not one of them. Matters might have become difficult, for as you have seen, I would not have been easy to kill."

The duke laughed again. "No, indeed. There would have been a battle worthy of quite a number of poems, if by some chance anyone had lived to write them. In fact, we had some hopes that you might not be a Steppeman when you first appeared. Not one in a thousand of them is as large as you are. Nine out of ten have their legs bowed like the crescent of the moon from a life spent on horseback, while yours are as straight as pine trees and as tough as seasoned wood.

"Yet we could not be sure, so I ordered the fight. If you perished, it would be a quicker death than you would receive at other hands than ours. If you lived, you would be no Steppeman, and your fate a matter for His Magnificence."

"You are certainly no Steppeman," said Tulu briskly. "They are mighty warriors on horseback, but far less dangerous on foot. They have no such arts of fighting with their hands and feet as you have. Nor do they ever show mercy to a foe. I saw how you were fighting, Blade. Am I not right in saying that you were trying to spare both Tzimon and Dzhai?"

Blade grinned. "I was. They had done me no harm. If I could keep them from doing me any without killing them, why shouldn't I do it?"

The duke shook his head, his face blank. He seemed to find either Blade's words or Blade's philosophy totally incomprehensible. Blade wasn't surprised. If the Emperor Kul-Nam's bloodthirstiness was normal for the Empire, mercy would be something seldom mentioned and even more seldom shown. The idea of someone casually refusing to kill a couple of men who were doing their best to kill him would be hard to grasp.

To help the duke over his embarrassment, Blade went on swiftly. "I wish I had been able to do better. I'm afraid that Dzhai has lost the use of one arm for life. He and Tzimon were too good. I had to move too fast or they would certainly have killed me. I hope someone will be able to take care of Dzhai now that he can no longer fight."

Tulu stared at Blade. "You wish-help for Dzhai?" He shook his head, as bewildered as his father.

"Of course," said Blade. "It was not his fault that he was defeated. I am a stranger with no money and no certainty that I will be able to live here in Saram. Otherwise I myself would offer him a place in my service. The world is full of jobs that a strong man who works hard can do with only one hand."

"That-that is the way in England?" said Tulu. He was not quite able to keep his voice steady.

Blade was tempted to say "Of course"-as unpleasantly as possible. It was fairly obvious that in the Empire slaves no longer able to do their jobs were killed, discarded like worn-out furniture or a broken sword.

Instead, he said only, "Yes, that is the way of the men of England."

"It is-it is not our way, although one hears of it in the Five Sea Kingdoms," the duke said quietly. "But I will thank you for it. It is good to know that Tzimon will fight again in my service. As for Dzhai-" He hesitated.

Blade broke in. "As for Dzhai, I have said that I cannot myself be sure of doing anything for him. I am a stranger, and you say the laws of Saram are harsh toward strangers. But is it permitted to do one favor for a stranger?"

The duke nodded.

"Then I ask you to find Dzhai a post where he can continue to serve you as loyally as he has served you until now. That is the greatest favor you could grant me."

"It is also the strangest favor I have ever heard anyone ask," said the duke, his face slowly brightening into a smile. "It does you much honor, though. In any case, it will not be the only favor we grant you. Our laws are harsh, true, but not that harsh. You will sleep apart from us, in a tent of your own, and will be guarded day and night. Otherwise you shall eat as we eat, drink as we drink, and receive all else that the laws and customs of hospitality demand of us for a guest who has proven himself honorable." The duke and Tulu bowed.

The tent they erected for Blade was small and low. Its leather was pierced with holes through which the wind whistled angrily. The furs they spread on the ground for him were dirty and musty smelling. Blade insisted on holding them briefly in the smoke of the campfire to drive out the odors and any vermin that might be infesting them. Then he threw the furs down on the floor of the tent and lay down on top of them. Through the holes in the tent he could see his two guards taking up their positions. Blade rolled himself up snugly in the threadbare blankets.

He had not quite drifted off to sleep when he became aware that someone was trying to get into the tent. The front flap was jerking steadily, as if someone were fumbling at the cords. Blade lay still and waited. Whoever or whatever it was, the guards were paying no attention. A quick look through the holes on either side showed their booted feet and trousered legs exactly where they'd been before. Blade doubted if Duke Boros and his son were planning open, crude treachery, but he was quite sure he would have been happier with a weapon more formidable than his knife.

The jerking suddenly stopped. The tent flap swung open and a small figure appeared silhouetted against the glow of the fire. Blade shifted his grip on the knife for a throw but something made him hesitate. Then the figure moved forward, to take on a definite shape and recognizable features. It was the girl who'd danced and served the wine.

She went down on her hands and knees and crawled closer. Her small, neatly molded face seemed to be lit up by a joyful, almost ecstatic grin that bared two rows of perfect teeth. Even her eyes seemed to be part of the grin.

She still wore the blue robe belted around her, but the linen had grown heavy in the night dampness. ~~It clung to her slender body, molding her graceful curves, and flowed down off her, rippling as she moved toward Blade.~~

As the girl's head came level with his feet, Blade sat up, keeping his hand on the knife but keeping it well out of sight under the blanket. The girl jumped, but seemingly more in delight than in fear. Her grin widened.

"Ah, Prince Blade," she said. Her voice was low, with a slight sing-song intonation but nonetheless extremely clear. "Ah, Prince Blade," she repeated. "You wake and welcome me."

"I wake," Blade corrected her. "As for welcoming you-we shall see." He decided to be blunt. "Are you part of the duke's hospitality to a stranger?"

"Oh yes, it is so that I am," said the girl, controlling a giggle. Then her smile faded and she spoke very softly and earnestly, with none of the sing-song quality in her voice now.

"Yes, I was to come to your tent. The duke thinks I come only because I know it is my duty as a slave girl. He does not know that I also come out of gratitude." She hesitated. "He must not know it, either. He would be punished terribly for it if he knew."

"Then why do you tell me?" said Blade. "Do I need to know it?"

"Yes," said the girl bluntly. "You are a stranger in the Empire. Most strangers who come to Saram die some very soon, some later. Some of those who die, die because they have no friends. It is against the laws of the Empire to be a friend to a stranger. But you have two friends now. You must know this. It may save you."

That depended very much on who the friends were, even if the girl was telling the truth. "Who are these friends?"

"I am one. I am Haleen, a slave girl in the house of the Dukes of Kudai as my mother and my mother's mother were before me. I have come to you because I am your friend, and because I want to tell you that I am."

Blade nodded. "I thank you for your friendship. But you said I have two friends. Who is the other?"

Haleen fell silent for a moment, apparently listening for sounds from outside the tent. Then she went on, her voice barely above a whisper. "The other is Dzhai, the fighting man whose arm you crippled and whose life you asked be saved. Saving him made both of us your friends. Dzhai is my brother, so are we of the same father by another woman. His mother was a free woman and his father was not known to those who had charge of such matters, so he was born free. If anyone else knew this secret, he would be enslaved or slain at once. I trust you to keep silent. You have already saved him once, so I do not think you will say anything now that would slay him."

"I understand," said Blade. "The secret will go no farther."

"Do you swear it by whatever you hold most sacred?"

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