

PROLOGUE

The Black Stallion stood seventeen hands tall, his dark coat glistening with renewed health and shining in the light of Alec Ramsay's campfire. The night sky over the Arizona desert was a brilliant field of stars. Alec took comfort in their nearness and brightness, thankful that he and his horse were alive to share the night.

He had given the Black one month's total rest since their terrible trials on the high mesas of the Indian country.^{*} Now, at last, the stallion was bucking and playing once again. Alec wished he too could forget the earthquakes that had rocked the mountains and the rain of fire that had fallen from the sky. The turmoil had seemed to herald the end of the world. The aftershocks from the earthquakes had continued for weeks, but finally the stillness of the Arizona desert had returned.

The stallion moved away from the campfire, his black body well camouflaged in the darkness. He came to a stop when he reached the end of the lengthy longe line Alec had attached to his halter. His head turned in the direction of the south. He was a giant of a horse, with an inky mane and tail and eyes large in the night. There he stood, head and tail erect and nostrils wide, the image of horse perfection and beauty, as noble an animal as ever ranged those plains.

Alec went to his horse and gazed with him to the south. Something was out there, he knew, and the Black was aware of it. But all Alec could see were tall cactus looming in the distance, their limbs outstretched to the sky.

Alec realized once more how little the desert had changed since the beginning of time. True, the highway ran through it, but one had only to move off a few miles in any direction to know the overall look and feel of the desert, its vastness and majesty and, Alec admitted, the solitude he had grown to love.

Alec remained close to the Black, smelling the scents of the desert mixed with those of his horse.

"What do you see?" he asked aloud.

The Black did not turn his head, and his eyes remained large and bright in the starshine. As Alec's vision became clearer in the darkness, he made out what he thought were several antelope skimming over the distant plain. But he knew they might have been wild mustangs as well, and that could account for the Black's restlessness.

Alec led the Black into the trailer, reluctant to put him inside but having no alternative, lest the mustangs lure him away. The Black shoved his nose into Alec's chest, and the warm breath of his nostrils felt good. Alec breathed the smell of his horse and, for the moment, forgot all his cares, everything but the joy of being with the Black.

The stallion was settling down for the night, and Alec decided it was time for him to get some sleep too. Tomorrow would find them on the road again. There was no wind, and the dry air was gradually getting colder, perhaps to end with a frost before dawn. It didn't matter to Alec. He had stable blankets for both of them. He pulled two blankets from the cab of the truck and stretched out beside his horse.

Looking above the half doors at the rear of the trailer, he turned his eyes to the stars once more. He had never seen them so bright and numerous as they were that night. No wonder the Indians read their legends and prophecies in the night sky. Despite the millions upon millions of stars, there was too much emptiness up there, he decided. Space was boundless, extending in all directions. One had to believe in legends, as the Indians did, to understand the cosmos.

He settled back more comfortably on the straw bedding. His eyes remained on the stars while desert sounds became sharper in the clear air. He heard the distant call of a coyote. It was soft yet piercing, very sad and heartrending, almost like the wail of a lost child. He shuddered at the loneliness of the cry. It was as if the coyote were calling for someone who would never come.

Alec found Sirius, the Dog Star, in the night sky, gleaming far brighter than the other stars. Moving on, he found Lepus, the Hare, and his eyes followed the tracks of the great rabbit. Above Lepus he made out the constellation of Orion, easy to recognize by the three stars in the hunter's belt. It was there his gaze remained.

If he were to believe in legends and prophecies, as the Indians did, it was there that his life with a black horse had begun many years ago.

He recalled going with his parents as a child to the Hayden Planetarium in New York City. Among the photos of the heavens taken by the world's most powerful telescopes was a picture he would never forget.

It was of the Horsehead Nebula in the constellation Orion, three light-years across and one thousand, five hundred light-years away from the earth. Directly in the center of the nebula, as plainly as one could see, was the head of a beautiful black horse, silhouetted against a curtain of glowing gas and illuminated by millions of stars.

His father had bought him a poster of the picture, and Alec had hung it in his bedroom. Looking at it every day, he had come to think of the starry black horse as *his* horse.

Years later the poster was still there—but now hanging beside it was a photo of the Black Stallion. If one looked closely, there was a similarity in the finely molded heads.

So, Alec decided, he had his *own* legend, as mystical as any Indian legend—and just as rewarding. For the horse of his childhood fantasy, the dark horse of the nebula, had become in his mind the Black!

Strange as it seemed, it was a fact that a special bond existed between the Black and himself. One believed what one wanted to believe. The Black had come into his life and forever changed it.

Alec turned to the great black stallion, who was busily chomping his feed. “Anyway,” he said aloud, “you’re part of me, and that’s all that matters. The horse up there may be just a lot of gas and dust, but down here you’re *real*.”

The Black was standing quietly, contentedly beside him, and yet Alec knew that the stallion was so physically tight and right that it would have taken two people to walk him under the shed row back home at Hopeful Farm. In fact, he was so feisty that few, including his trainer, Henry Dailey, would care to try it. The Black was everything a horse should be, *could* be. How had it happened? Where did he come from?

The Black was not of pure Arabian blood. The stallion’s head was Arabian, but he was too tall, his body was too long, his croup and hindquarters too high and powerful for an Arabian. He was a breed of his own, Alec thought, a *mystical* breed.

“I wish you could talk,” Alec said aloud to his horse. “I wish you could tell me how it was for you in the beginning, in the mountains of Arabia, before I saw you for the first time. You must have been something, really something.”

The Black continued eating and Alec turned back to the stars, his eyes fixed on Orion, on the unseen Horsehead Nebula. Gradually, his eyelids grew heavy with sleep, finally closing for the night.

The radiance from the stars brightened as the night grew colder and clearer, shining ever more brilliantly over the trailer holding Alec Ramsay’s great black stallion of the sky.

And this is his story, the way it was in the beginning.

*As described in *The Black Stallion Legend*

THE OLD ONE

1

In a high, grassy pasture, well concealed in the remote mountains of eastern Arabia, two herders tended their horses.

“It is a dying breed,” the old herder said in a deep, guttural voice. “Our chieftain knows this as well as I do. His only hope rests with the black one.” He waved his gnarled hands in the direction of the small band of young horses grazing in the light of the setting sun.

The young herder, tall and thin, lowered his body to sit on the ground beside the old man. His *kufiyya*, a white headdress made of fine cloth, was drawn back, revealing a look of childish eagerness and anticipation on his face. He had heard this talk many times before. Still, he asked his questions and listened eagerly for the old one’s replies.

“O Great Father,” he said, “thou who knowest everything, is it not true that our leader is the richest of all sheikhs in the Rub‘ al Khali? Is it not his wealth that enables

him to breed and maintain horses of such power and dazzling beauty as we see before us? Look at them, Great Father. Their coats have the gleam of raw silk and although they are still young, little more than a year old, their shoulders are muscular and their chests deep. Truly they are horses of inexhaustible strength, endurance and spirit, all worthy of the great tribe of Abu Já Kub ben Ishak."

"It is true our leader is one of great wealth, but that does not make him the wisest breeder of all," the old man proclaimed, his small, sharp eyes never leaving the horses. Reaching for his walking stick, he tried to get his old legs beneath him. After a brief struggle, he gave a weary sigh and sank down again.

The young man drew back before the harshness of the ancient one's words. He wanted no confrontation. His only recourse was to humor the old man. Slowly, a soft smile came to his hard, flat face.

"O Great Father, I do not mean any disrespect," he said, waving his long, powerful arms in the cold mountain air. "I know there is no other horseman as wise as you, who have spent your long life in the same saddle as your forefathers. It is only my bewilderment at your words. We are living with the birds of the mountaintops when our feet as well as those of our horses prefer the soft, hot sands of the desert. Why are we here if not to breed and raise the fastest horses in all the Rub' al Khali?"

The wind blew in great gusts. Despite a glaring sun, the day had been icy cold. Winter seemed unwilling to leave the highlands, where the barren peaks of gray limestone were now painted blue and yellow by the softening light. Setting his turbaned head against the wind, the young man waited for the old man's answer. Receiving no reply and growing impatient, he persisted. "Tell me, Great Father, pray tell me, what other reason would we have for coming to this mountain stronghold of our leader?"

Finally, the old man turned his head toward the youth, his bones showing prominently beneath taut, aged skin. To the young man he appeared to be a hundred years old or more, his body frail and withered beneath the folds of his great *aba*, a shapeless black cloak. How could such an old man stand this cold, coming as he did from the gleaming sands of Arabia, where the burning desert scorched the soles of one's feet?

No one in their tribe knew how many years it had been since the old man had first traveled the paths from the desert to the Kharj district of the high eastern mountains in order to serve the forebears of Abu Já Kub ben Ishak. There was no other horseman like him in all Arabia. He was the oldest and wisest—yet he kept traveling back and forth, tending each crop of young horses, searching for what? What dream led him on and on over such tortuous trails? The young man wanted to know. It had to do with horses, of that he was certain. Horses were the ancient one's life. Their blood was his blood, his blood theirs. It was the only thing that had kept him alive.

Others might scoff at the old herder's crazy stories and his wild talk about a stallion of the night sky, but the young man felt privileged to share his watch with the

legendary one. He had learned a great deal over the winter and hoped someday to breed horses himself. For now he would help the old man back and forth from their tents in the valley up to the different pastures, a job that was becoming more and more difficult as the old herder weakened with age.