

Monster of the Maze by Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

Richard Blade had not given much thought to getting bald. He was too young and his hair much too luxurious, though well kept and clipped, for such worries. Old age, senility, the palsied pace—all that was years in the future. If he lived. If he made this final trip through the great computer and came back alive.

But at the moment he was bald. He was wearing a most expensive toupee—courtesy of Her Majesty's Government—and beneath his shorn skull, implanted in the dura mater enveloping his left frontal lobe, was a paper-thin wafer of crystal. Blade's brain was in direct communication with Lord Leighton's computer. That monster, really a connected bank of nine 7th-generation computers, was telling Blade exactly what to do. At the precise moment it directed him to leave Bayswater Road at Marble Arch and stroll down Park Lane to Piccadilly, then to his right to Wellington Place and into Constitution Hill and past Buckingham Palace into the Mall. He was headed for the Thames now, and the tang of salt and the sludgy smell of oily mud mingled with the fumes of a million cars.

No stranger, nor even a friend, could have guessed that Blade was at the moment little more than an automaton; and this was not, in the usual sense, true. The computer, directed by Lord L, was directing his steps, but in no other way did it interfere with his sentience. He smiled back at the pretty miniskirted birds that smiled at him—and many did—and walked briskly on. He was still Richard Blade, never mind the sliver of crystal in his brain, and he was a handsome and superbly conditioned young giant. He had been through the computer five times and was soon to go for the sixth and last time and then his life would be his own again. He could go back to working for J and MI6, instead of for Lord L and MI6A, and never in all his thirty years had he been happier about anything. It was nearly over. One more time into the dangerous mystery and it was over—he had done his time in hell, served England and St. George and Western civilization and all the other rot, and he would be alive and his own man and free of it all.

Blade came to Northumberland Avenue and turned toward the river. It was an early November day, dour and with what the Scots call a louring sky, and dusk was falling. The amber-silver splash of car lights on Hungerford Bridge was incessant. He came to the Victoria Embankment and swung to his left toward Blackfriars. When he reached the Temple Steps he halted and stood at the rail, gazing out at the busy river, here known as King's Reach, and watched the tugs bully their barges to and fro and admitted that, to a point, Lord L's experiment with the brain crystal was a success. He had just walked the route chosen by his Lordship, who at the moment was in his

lab far below the Tower of London. Lord L, using an ordinary street map of London, had penciled a route and fed it into his computer and Blade had obeyed. He had, of course, been cooperating. He had exercised no volition of his own. He felt sure now, as he realized that the computer control had ended, that he could have broken away from the machine at any time he chose. Or could he?

Richard Blade grinned, shrugged his big shoulders and went in search of a taxi. At that hour in London it was not easy and, as he turned back toward Waterloo and then over to the Strand, hailing cab after cab with no luck, it occurred to him that here was a minor irony. Blade was the only man in the world, the only man born, ever to escape his own dimension and go out into X, into spaces that the ordinary mortal was not even capable of conceiving, and he could not get a taxi.

As he waited impatiently at the curb on the Strand, a group of youths approached and demanded "something for the Guy." They had blacked their faces and wore rags and tatters and carried bags of chalk dust to mark those who did not pay.

Blade paid, a shilling all around, remembering that it was indeed Guy Fawkes day, November 5. Until now he had forgotten. He had been preoccupied as usual before a mission into Dimension-X, and matters were not going well between Lord Leighton and J, who was Blade's real boss in MI6 and who had screamed bloody murder when Lord L suggested implanting the crystal in the young man's brain. J had done more than scream. J had gone to the Prime Minister and made an official protest. The project had nearly been called off, then the election had put in a new Government, and a new PM, and the project was on again. This last time.

The new PM had been most emphatic. Millions of pounds had been poured into Project DX so far with no results. This meant, in political language, no profits. Science, and especially Lord L, had reaped vast benefits. Very good. But England was so many million pounds the poorer. There had been, in short, no treasure in Dimension X. The old PM had been sympathetic; the new PM was not. Produce or close down was now the order of the day. One more chance: Venture No. 6 into DX. And if the sliver of crystal in Blade's brain would help in any way then the Prime Minister was all for it.

Blade could understand J's bitterness. He should, he supposed, be a little bitter himself. Yet he was not. England was a commercial nation fighting for her life in the world marketplace. The politicians could not be expected to understand Project DX. It was as far beyond their comprehension as the quantum theory was beyond the comprehension of that poor little street cur, just now so nearly struck by a taxi.

Blade realized that the taxi was empty. He ran for it, shouting, feeling very insecure beneath the damned toupee, and as he slammed into the musty leather-smelling interior he came to a sudden decision.

He had intended to go down to Dorset and stay at his cottage while his hair grew in again. The weather would not be pleasant on the Channel at this time of year, but he had a lot of reading to do and he could always have a girl down for the weekend. He would have to think up some excuse for looking like a young Yul Brynner, but his wits should be equal to that. There would be a little drinking—he had cut way down—and a little lovemaking and many long afternoons and nights before a snug fire.

And then, one day without warning, the crystal in his brain would summon him to London and he would go through the computer for the last time. That had been the plan.

Blade now changed the plan. He directed the driver to take him to the Tower of London, the old Watergate side.

The cabby, an ancient character with a Bairnsfather moustache, advised against it.

"Be closed now, mate. Them bloody beefeaters locks up shop at four sharp. Wasting your time, you'd be."

Blade was surprised at his own reaction. It was most unlike him, yet he heard himself snapping, "Take me to the Tower fast, and keep your bloody advice bloody well to yourself. Understood?!"

"Yessir." The cabby turned to his wheel with a shrug. You got all kinds. But if this toff was a tourist he was Prince Philip.

Chapter 2

Lord Leighton was not pleased with Blade's decision. He sat hunched sideways in his chair and stared at the younger man with yellow eyes, looking every bit the hunchbacked and evil-tempered little gnome he was. Lord L was very old and very famous and quite properly considered himself the foremost cybernetic genius of his time.

"It is not nearly time," he complained. "We've only just implanted the crystal. Your hair hasn't even grown in yet."

"Damn my hair," said Blade. "I want to get on with it. Otherwise I might not go at all. I might funk it."

J had been sitting quietly in a corner, sucking on his pipe and listening and watching, rather enjoying himself. Enjoying Lord L's discomfiture. J had noticed that in himself of late—more and more he had come to dislike Lord L, and all scientists, and he had struggled against it and lost.

Now he said, "Funk it, Richard? Not you. You never funk'd anything in your life, much less a mission of this importance."

"I might this one," said Blade. He smiled at J. Theirs was very nearly a father-and-son relationship. Blade was fond of the older man even though they were opposite types and the generation gap was great. J was dry as dust, Establishment to the core, something of a fussy old woman in dress and manner—and as much a genius as Lord L in his own line of work. He was a security man, head of MI6 and also of MI6A, the special security branch created for Project DX. He did his job superbly and hated it. As he spoke again he found himself almost wishing that Blade *would* funk it, would drop out and refuse the upcoming mission. They had a new man on tap, a trainee, and though he was no Richard Blade he would do.

Lord Leighton said: "Look, my boy. You don't really understand the problems. The telemetry is working, and the laser microprogramming is coming along, but there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done on the encephalographic code. And that is the crux of the whole matter! What we have just done, directing your route this afternoon by computer impulses, is primitive compared to what I hope to do. I tell you, Richard, the possibilities are limitless. There is literally no end—"

"And that," said J dryly and with some malice, "is just the trouble. There never is any end to it, Lord L. There never will be, if you have your way. In any case, I'm sure that Dick has his reasons for wanting to start the mission now."

They were in the office suite far below the Tower of London. All three men were at present living there. J had given up his comfortable quarters on Half Moon Street and Blade had closed his flat in Kensington. His Lordship, though he owned a house in Prince's Gate, had to all intents and purposes lived under the Tower since the missions into Dimension X began. It was J's private opinion that Lord L would have slept with his precious computers if possible.

They were waiting for his answer. Lord L left his chair and shuffled about, looking frail and with his hump grotesque beneath his smock. Blade recognized the implicit appeal and steeled himself—he had seen it all before: Lord L representing himself as an old man, an aging genius about to die, a poor old fellow with a polio-wracked body who must be granted this last favor. Let things be done his way, just this last time.

J also recognized the gambit and his smile was icy. He nodded to Blade. "Speak up, Dick. You have never complained before, or tried to interfere in any way. You have obeyed orders, kept your mouth shut and performed splendidly. Surely you must have your reasons now. We're listening."

The trouble was that Blade could not put his finger on it, really could not explain the feeling, the hunch or intuition, or whatever you wanted to call it, that had swept

over him so suddenly when he leaped into the taxi. One moment it had not been there. The next moment it was. The urge to go, to begin the mission. It was almost as though the computer itself, working through the crystal in his brain, had spoken to him.

Blade did the best he could. "It is a feeling I have," he told them. "A strong, an overpowering feeling, that I should go now. I can't name it and I won't try, but it's there. I think I had better obey it."

Lord L snorted and said something vulgar. He was given to bad language when thwarted.

J nodded and smiled and said, "If you feel that strongly about it, my dear boy, by all means I think you should go. As soon as you like. I see no drawbacks, no reason for delay. The Prime Minister need not be consulted, though he will have to be informed after the fact. So I think—"

"Who gives a bloody good goddamn about the Prime Minister!"

Lord L hobbled around and around his desk. His thin white hair floated atop his pink skull and his leonine eyes had a baleful gleam. He pointed a graphite-stained finger at J.

"You know what you can bloody well do with the PM! It is my experiment I'm concerned with. This is our last chance, damn it. *You know* that, J. After this mission they will cut off our funds, and that will be the end of Project DX. It's a shame, a crime, a criminal waste and worse stupidity, but that is what they will do."

J crossed his tweedy knees, blew on his pipe and gave the old man an insincere smile. "Maybe not. Not if we bring back some treasure this time."

Lord L clenched a gnarled fist and shook it at the ceiling. "Treasure shit. Those fools can only think in terms of material things—gold, platinum, gems, uranium! Stupid pots that can't see beyond their noses. Project DX is treasure, damn it. The greatest discovery ever made by man. DX makes the moon landings look like a row on the Thames. We send a man into new dimensions, into dimensions that people do not even know exist, cannot conceive of existing, and we get him back safely. Five times we have done this, and those misbegotten bastards want to close us down because we aren't showing a profit. Suppose the Americans had thought so—they would never have landed on the moon!"

"A nation of shopkeepers," J said smugly. "Profit or we don't play." He began to ream his pipe. The worst was over. Lord L had forgotten his immediate displeasure with Blade, and with J, and had taken off on the powers that be. The thing was—and J, even loathing the X missions as he did, had to admit it—that the old man was

right.

The outburst was over. Lord L went back to his desk and slid into his chair like an old crab, easing his hump.

Blade said: "About being out there five times, Lord L—I am the man who has done it and it has been my intuition, my hunches, if you please, that have kept me alive more often than not. I have survived all those various hells because I have followed my instincts. I think I had better follow my instinct now."

The old man was making scribbles on onion-skin paper. He did not look up. "Very well. If you are so determined—it is your life, Richard, and you know best how to safeguard it. And, no matter what J thinks, your safety has always been my chief concern. It was, in fact, my main reason for implanting the crystal in your brain—so the machine could tap your stream of consciousness and, by means of the encephalographic code, give me a printout of your thoughts at the very instant they were occurring. I would know, Richard, exactly what you were thinking every moment. I would be aware of every situation in which you found yourself. In times of great danger I might be able to help by reversing the process and feeding my thoughts to you through the machine. Two heads are often better than one, Richard. It might save your life."

Both Blade and J recognized the last appeal. The old man did not give up easily.

Richard Blade went to a chair, sat down quietly and did not speak for a few minutes. He had given much of himself to the DX experiments and he had not shirked duty. His body was still intact, but for the myriad scars, and he was not mad. Yet his brain was not the same and never would be again. Each time the computer altered his brain's cells, restructuring them so he could perceive and exist in a new dimension, new deviation from the norm took place. The machine never restored the cellular configuration to *exactly* what it had been. The Blade who sat in this room now, thinking these thoughts, was as different from the Blade who had undertaken Mission No. 1 as the puling infant Blade was different from the grown man who had graduated Oxford and gone straight into MI6. No help for it. But there was a law of averages. Once more to the brink and let that be an end to it. He did not particularly fear the physical dangers, the battles he fought, the monsters he faced, the sexual exhaustion at times forced on him. He feared that his brain would be destroyed. He feared death, yes, but that was a secondary fear. Lord L and J... they could not dream of what it was like out there. He could not tell them. Words did not do the job. It was like war. You had to undergo it personally to know what it was like.

And there was this urge, this hunch or intuition, telling him to go now.

He tried to tell them. He spoke briefly and saw, after a few moments, that even J

did not understand. Lord L sulked and only half listened.

Blade faced them. "So if you like, sir, I am refusing to obey an order." This to Lord L. "I go tonight, sir, or I do not go at all. You do have a backup man, after all, and maybe it would be better if—"

Lord Leighton suddenly looked like a peevish child. He waved a pencil and said, "Come now, my boy. Nobody said anything about orders or any of that rot. Forget that. It is just that I am a scientist and I distrust intuition. But have it your way, by all means. I will make the setting on the machine—it may take me an hour or so before the cycle is right and then we will go. By all means."

The old man hobbled out of the room, mumbling to himself even as he fussed with a slide rule.

J had his pipe going at last. He peered at Blade through blue smoke. "You are feeling all right, my dear boy?"

Blade shrugged his massive shoulders. "Never better. In the pink. I really can't explain any of this, sir, except that somehow *I know* it is better to go now. Other than that I suppose it is just another DX mission. Routine. I am sorry to upset Lord L's schedule, but it is the way I feel and—"

J nodded. "You do as you damn well think best, boy. Don't let that bloody old boffin get to you. He really can't help it, you know. He doesn't mean to be insensitive or inhuman—he just is! He is a scientist, not really a person."

Blade had to chuckle. "Oh, come now, J. He really isn't all that bad."

J very seldom used bad language. Now he said, "The hell he isn't. But as I say—he can't help it. Well, lad, this is the last time out."

"I hope so," Blade said. "I sincerely hope so, sir."

And he did. He had had quite enough. Yet he knew that if there was a reason for more ventures, if duty called him, if his country needed him, he would go. He did not foresee the possibility, and never had he more devoutly wished that a circumstance would not arise. He had had it up to his neck with Dimension X. He knew now what a bomber pilot must feel like before embarking on his last mission before going home.

J, his pipe steaming, had picked up a ruler and was tapping it on his palm. "You've been worried about your mind, eh?"

"A little, sir."

J would never understand that, either. The nightmare of black sweat and screaming, the pitiless alcoholism, the raging drive of satyriasis, the double and triple vision and loss of memory, the old friends offended and the girls lost because he could not explain. The Official Secrets Act that bound him like a net.

And the blackouts, the terrible and frightening blackouts. He had wakened once in Liverpool with some doxy by his side and absolutely no recollection of the events of the week before. True, he had sought help and it had been given by J and Lord L and the most famous specialists in England—but it was not enough. There were times when a million famous doctors could not have helped him.

J said, "Lord L has always assured me that the machine restructures the brain cells, but it does not cause them to deteriorate."

"I know."

And he did know. He trusted and admired Lord L. And yet he did not really believe.

Lord L hobbled back into the office and wagged a finger at Blade. "I have the cycle upcoming on the machine. Half an hour. You had better get ready. Unless—you've changed your mind?"

"No," said Blade.

J came to shake hands. "I don't believe I'll go with you to the computer room this time, my dear boy. Not in person, at least. But I will be—well, you know."

"Of course, sir."

They shook hands. "Bless and keep," said J.

Lord L glanced at his wristwatch. "Best get a move on, lad. If we miss the cycle it will be a lost twenty-four hours. And since you're so dead set on going now..."

Blade grinned. The old man died hard. "I am," he said. "Let's go."

As Blade followed Lord L through the maze of corridors and past the various security checks into the computer complex, he conceived the weird fantasy that Lord L was not really Lord L at all, but a white-smocked Apollyon leading him into the Pit. Which might well be. You never knew, until you had gone through the computer and landed in Dimension X, whether it was to be hell or paradise. In most cases it was a bit of both. Which this time, and in what proportions?

They passed the final security check and walked amidst the smaller computers,

heading for the room that housed the monster machine that would launch Blade. All around him the lesser brood hummed and clicked and flashed and rang bells and made complex decisions in a billionth of a second. The big man felt his usual antipathy taking over; he did not like computers and no use pretending he did. Now and then, when they passed a white-smocked figure in attendance, a human being in charge of all these electronic brains, Blade felt a small positive charge of relief. The machine had not entirely taken over. Not yet.

At last they came to the central room that housed the master computer. Lord L did what he had never done before: he followed Blade into the little disrobing cubicle. The old man talked as Blade stripped and donned a loincloth and began to smear himself with the tar salve that prevented computer burns.

Blade took off his toupee and flung it into a corner. His naked skull glistened blue in the fluorescent light. The toupee looked like some small dead animal; it would serve, Blade thought, as a reminder to take care of his hair when he returned from the mission. If he did.

It came hard for Lord Leighton to beg, but he was near it now.

"I wanted this word alone with you, Richard, away from J. He is against me in everything these days. And he treats you like a child, you know. He is like a mother hen with a chick. That's all wrong, Richard. You're the dominant one, the hero, the adventurer. It is you who must go into DX and suffer whatever comes. So all final decisions should be yours."

Blade smeared tar salve on his bottom. "Exactly, Sir. I agree. I do. I am—making the final decisions."

Was there ever such an obdurate old boffin?

"If you would only wait for a month, Richard? Surely that isn't asking too much and I, er, have so much to do yet."

Blade shook his head. "No. I also have things to do, sir. I want to get into Dimension X and get it over with. Now."

"You don't understand," said Lord L. "None of you really understands what I am trying to do." There was real despair in his voice. "The computer-cortex link, my boy, is only the first step in what I am trying to do, what *I can* do. Even Dimension X is of secondary importance compared to what I am really after. I want to change the world, Richard! I want to change people and so the world. But I need time and I haven't much. I am an old man and my sands are running out."

Blade rubbed tar salve between his toes. The old boy was never so dangerous as

when he waxed dramatic and turned to florid usage. In self-defense Blade was flip.

"I'm sorry, sir, but there is nothing I can do about your sands. Shall we get on with it?"

Lord L glanced at his wrist. "Another ten minutes. I had thought, Richard, to implant another electrode in your brain. In the hypothalamic region. As a part of the new ESB experiments I am undertaking. It would not take very long and if we delay—"

"No," Blade said. For the first time he began to understand what the old man was really up to. The computer-cortex experiments had evolved into something new, something of such a magnitude and importance that Lord L had all but forgotten DX. He was trying to phase one experiment out and leap headlong into a new one. And he needed Blade, for of all the men alive in the world only Blade had a brain already geared to receive and react to computer signals.

Lord Leighton was afraid—afraid that Blade would not come back from this mission and that he, Lord L, would have to start all over again with a new subject. Blade knew then that his understudy, the trainee whom he had never met, had not proved out. Something had gone wrong.

"Hear me," said Lord L. "I foresee the day, Richard, when this earth can be a paradise. Because men can make it that way. They can do that because they will be able to control their own mental functions. It will be a psychocivilization and as near to perfection as we dare not dream today. Each man will carry his own computer, no larger than a hearing aid, and by means of it will control his thoughts and his passions. It is complex, Richard, and there is no time for detail now, but believe me—I can rid the world of evil, Richard! I can. I know I can. Given time and money and the proper personnel."

Blade was ready to go. His huge brawny body glistened with tar salve. He gave the old scientist a smile and said, "Quite apart from all you've said, sir, and the fact that if you can do what you say you can there will be, sooner or later, a brain dictator, I am not very interested. Now—do we go through with it or do I resign and get dressed again?"

Lord L stepped aside and let Blade precede him through the door. He said nothing.

As Blade took the last few steps into the computer launch chamber, the words of Sir Charles Sherrington echoed in his brain. The brain that Sir Charles had been describing when he called it "an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern."

Yes. It was all of that. The thought only hardened Blade's resolve. After this time no more tampering. Fini. Kaput. All over.

The small glass cage stood as always, containing the chair with its straps and electrodes. Blade hesitated for just a moment, then strode over to the chair and sat down. Lord L began to tape the shiny-headed electrodes to his greased body. The old man worked silently and intently, frowning and mumbling to himself, the usual bandinage missing. Once, as he taped an electrode to Blade's naked skull, Lord L did pat his shoulder. I am not forgiven, Blade thought, but he is a professional and it is business as usual.

The preparations went on. Blade felt himself going rigid and tense, though he willed against it, and the queasy liquid of fear began to seep through him. There was no way to dam the fear, to hold it back—not in these latter days—and so he let it flow. It would vanish soon enough when he went through the computer and found himself in a new dimension fighting for his life. It always came to that. It was never easy.

Blade stared at the instrument panel on the far wall, concentrating on the red toggle that, in a minute or so now, Lord L would pull and so catapult Blade into—what?

Lord L taped the last electrode into place and went to the instrument board. His hand hovered over the red toggle.

"A final chance, Richard. Won't you consider—wait a month or so—or perhaps we can scrub your mission altogether and let your backup man do this mission?"

Blade's nerves were screaming. He knew that if he hesitated *he* would be screaming. The battery of his courage, sapped cumulatively by so many trips into DX, was running low.

"Pull the lever," he said. "Pull the lever, you damned old fool!"

He had only time to read the amazement and shock on Lord L's face before the red toggle came down. No one had ever spoken to his Lordship in that manner.

The current washed through him like bloody surf. For a moment there was pain, pain that could not be borne and yet must be, and then his body vanished and with it the pain and he was only a brain on a stalk..

The stalk was planted in purple gravel and atop it his brain waved and moved in a hot wind. Lights flashed and bells rang and behind a shadow screen he saw horned figures copulating. A clown ran up from nowhere and smote his raw brain with a bladder and there was more pain. The clown and the pain locked hands and danced

off into silver fog. A girl with fur all over her came out of the fog and stood looking at him. She sucked her thumb and stared at him and mouthed words that he could not understand. As his brain watched she grew a penis, a huge pole of flesh, and laughed and began to toy with herself and then went off turning cartwheels.

His brain detached itself from the stalk and began to rise like a balloon into polychromatic clouds wreathed around the base of a gigantic chryselephantine statue. The statue was hermaphroditic and towered into eternity and filled the cosmos and the brain knew that it was seeing GOD.

GOD smiled. GOD smote. The brain fell and fell and fell...

Chapter 3

At first Blade thought he was in a forest. Gradually, as the computer shock wore off, he realized that he lay not among trees, but among reeds, weeds, amid spindly stalks and bushes. As always he lay still, unmoving, waiting until his senses fully returned and he could assay the situation. It was his usual procedure upon entering Dimension X and so far it had ensured his survival.

As time passed he became aware that something was terribly wrong. Things, objects, were all out of kilter, out of proportion and in false perspective. Why should weeds, or reeds, look like trees to him? Unless?

Blade did not believe it. He did not want to believe it. The computer had played strange tricks before, but this? Was he a Tom Thumb, reduced in size to a minikin? Or was he still his normal self and had landed in a dimension where everything was so massive that he was dwarfed?

It was much worse than that. So far he had not moved a muscle, he stared straight ahead of him and a bit upward. Now he tried to flex his muscles. Nothing much happened. His fingers moved and his fist clenched and relaxed, but there was no strength. He was as weak and uncoordinated as a baby.

Blade looked at his hand. It was small and pink and chubby. Tiny. He was a baby. The computer had reduced him to an infant.

In body only. For that Blade was grateful even as the curses formed in his brain. He damned the computer and Lord L and J and the gods and himself for a fool. And found some satisfaction therein. His brain was all right, unchanged, crystal and all. He was Richard Blade still, but his tiny pink body was that of a newborn babe.

He tried to raise his head. Too heavy. He could not even move it. That made sense, if any of this made sense, because his brain was full grown and must be housed in the cranium of a full grown man. He must be a hell of a looking sight, Blade thought. A macrocephalic horror. Whoever found him would probably kill him

on sight and either stuff him or preserve him in a bottle. Monster babe.

Survival. How to live, how to beat this nasty turn of events? Think, Blade. Think harder than you have ever thought in your life. For this is it! This is all the trouble there is and the worst, the most dangerous, spot you have ever been in. Think. Because only your brain can save you now, the brain so seared, and distorted and twisted and restructured. Think fast, Blade!

He was going to need luck and about that he could do nothing. It came or it did not. He would need all the luck in the world and he was helpless to summon it. What could he do?

Always before he had been able to depend on his body, on his superb physique and conditioning, and on the fact that he adapted so rapidly to each new dimension. He could fight, do battle, kill or run as the circumstances dictated. Not this time. All he had was his brain—cunning, scheming, already beginning to adapt and take on the psychic coloration of his environment. No muscles, no strength. Only his brain in a grotesquely oversize head.

Richard Blade squirmed over on his back and waved his chubby pink arms and legs in the air. He glanced down and saw his little worm of a penis and said: "Goddamn the fucking luck!"

The words came out clear and distinctly. He could talk! That was something, he supposed, though he could not see how it would aid him at the moment. It might even be wise to forget it. Babies his age didn't talk.

Blade clasped his little fists in rage and began to howl. He grew red in the face and howled on. Might as well get it over with and be found, if there was anyone to find him. He couldn't do anything for himself, not a damn thing, and someone had to find him and help him or he would starve to death. Between his cries and his sobs, he let an adult curse slip in now and then. He hoped that the crystal was working, however imperfectly, and that the computer was picking up his brain waves and encoding them and handing them to Lord L on a printout.

Strange, but Blade smelled the women before he saw or heard them. His more primitive senses were sharpening as they always did when he entered DX—smell and sight and hearing and taste and all the guile of his primary and noncivilized brain. They were all working. And small good it did him.

Female bodies nearby. A mixture of perfume and sweat, the musky woman odor he had known in a thousand beds. Close by. Very near. Blade began to hope. If a woman found him...

A woman said, "What was that, Valli? Did you hear it?"

"Shhh—be quiet a moment. Yes, I heard something. It sounded like a baby crying."

"A baby! How could that be, Valli? You know babies aren't allowed in the harem. I must have been mistaken. Come on. It was only the wind in the reeds."

"Be quiet, I say. I'm sure I heard something. And we both know, Stel, that some of the women have babies and put them out to die."

The woman Valli had a light and pleasant voice, with some force in it, and, Blade thought, a tinge of kindness. He made his decision. With a woman like this he might stand a chance. He let out a series of wails and waved his hands and feet frantically in the air. He felt his sphincter muscles let go and cursed as he wet himself.

The reeds parted and the two women stood looking down at him. Blade closed his eyes, but continued to kick and scream. It would not do to let them see his eyes. Adult eyes. Not yet. Not until he had established a claim to their affections.

"It's a baby," said the woman called Stel. "You were right, Valli. One of the women has had a child and put it out here to die. Come away. We mustn't touch it. You know the penalty for concealing babies in the harem."

Damn it. Blade almost stopped crying. He must have strayed into a pretty weird dimension if they killed off babies.

"I can't leave it," said she called Valli. "I just can't, Stel. Look at it—so helpless. Poor little thing. It's all wet and dirty."

"And deformed, too. Look at its head. See how big it is. Ugh—no wonder the mother got rid of it. It's a monster."

Blade stopped crying and smiled up at them. His gums hurt him and for the first time he realized that he was toothless. He smiled on, sweetly, and felt an intense dislike for the woman called Stel.

As his fate hung in the balance he stared at their feet. Four bare feet with red-painted toenails and jeweled rings on each great toe. These were harem women and babies were forbidden them. It was going to be a near thing—already he was feeling the pangs of hunger in his small belly. How long did it take a baby to starve to death?

Valli had not spoken. The woman Stel said, "Come on now, before we get into trouble. If the Izmir finds you with a child he'll have your head off just like that. You know the law, Valli. And this little monster isn't worth breaking it."

When the woman Valli spoke, it was as if to herself. Blade, listening intently to every word, did not and could not at that time understand all of circumstance and nuance, but he understood enough to take heart. This woman Valli was going to be his salvation.

"They made me kill my baby," said Valli. "You know that. Stel. I obeyed the law and let that filthy old priest thrust into me with his knife and cut the living child from my body. I did that, I obeyed, when all the time I wanted to seize the knife and slay the priest."

Stel whispered in horror. "Be careful, Valli. That is treason. That is death—you must not dare to talk so. I think you have gone mad—losing your child has turned your mind. Come away now. I beg you. Is this big-headed monster-child worth your life?"

"I will not leave it to die," said Valli. "I cannot. I think that the gods, those gods of which the priests know nothing, have sent me this child to replace the one I lost. If I abandon this one I will be twice damned. Go, Stel, if you are afraid. I am going to keep this child. I will hide it and somehow try to keep it alive. So go now and you have seen nothing and know nothing."

"You are bewitched," said the woman Stel, "and I will have none of it. I have no desire to be tortured and have my head cut off. But I will be silent. This is all I promise. Goodbye, Valli. I know nothing of this."

She disappeared into the reeds. Good riddance, thought Blade bitterly, glad that he was not being left to her not-so-tender mercies. Then he forgot Stel. He must concentrate on this Valli, see to it that she did not change her mind. He smiled and showed his pink gums and gurgled and waved his tiny fists at her. A fine goddamn business for a grown man!

"Poor darling." The woman knelt beside him and Blade caught his first full glimpse of her. She was young, probably not yet twenty by Home-Dimension time, and she wore only a short skirt, or kilt, with underpants of some silver color. Her breasts were bare, large and firm with brown-tinted nipples. A mass of dark hair was piled atop her head and held with golden combs.

She took him into her arms. "Is the poor little thing hungry?"

Blade very nearly spoiled it all by speaking, by saying that Christ yes he was hungry, that he was damn near dead of starvation. He remembered in time and gurgled. He stared up into her eyes. She patted his behind and stroked his belly and joggled him. Blade saw that her eyes were black, coal black, and in them he read love and kindness and fear and determination. He began to feel a little easier about matters. He had found an ally.

He flailed at her with his little fists. Valli took one of her breasts and held it to him and thrust the nipple into his mouth. She had some milk, thin and warm and strange tasting, but Blade knew that it would keep him alive for the time being. He sucked contentedly, holding that firm round breast in both his chubby hands and making noises. It was an odd form of survival, but so far it was working.

Valli stroked the fuzz on his great head. "*You are* a little monster," she said. "Stel was right about that. Already you've got the head of a grown man. Any other woman would call you ugly, but not me. Not Valli. I love you already and I am going to take care of you. I won't let them kill you, baby. But I will have to hide you somehow, keep you someplace where the guards can't find you. Ohh—honey, you mustn't bite Valli."

Blade had not meant to bite her teat. But the milk was running out and he was still hungry. He eased up and sucked away and found, once his immediate hunger was appeased, that he was taking a very odd pleasure, what amounted to a physico-sexual sensation, in keeping her warm breast in his mouth. If he ever got out of this, he thought, he could tell old Dr. Spock a thing or two about babies. Not that anyone would believe him. Not that he could, in point of fact, tell anybody anything. Security was too tight for that.

Valli was carrying him close to her now, walking rapidly along paths leading through gardens and vast expanses of shrubbery and trees. She was almost running. They had met no one and he realized that her chief fear was that they would. His fear, too. The guards that had been mentioned, for instance. Blade did not like to think of that. For the moment he had only an infant's body, if a man's head and brain, but if they cut off that head he would be just as dead as if they had killed the adult Blade.

They passed what sounded like a fountain falling into a basin. These must be extensive gardens, harem gardens, and the position was bound to be a bit exposed. Blade sucked away and fondled that lovely breast and hoped and even prayed a little that Valli knew what she was doing and that she was lucky. He began to wish her on—hide me. Hide me quickly. Hurry. Hide me.

He needed time. How much time he did not know exactly, but some. He was beginning to grow. Not much, very slowly as yet, but he could feel the tingle and the surge in his small body. It was like a spreading itch and more an indication of growth to come than any actual physical change at the moment.

Blade *knew* this. The crystal in his brain was working. Faint, faltering, imperfect and fading, the computer was feeding him thought impulses. Lord L and J knew of his situation and were trying to do something about it.

What they could do, if anything, Blade had not the slightest idea. But he was

growing. No doubt of it. And that would create new problems. Blade sucked at the last of Valli's milk. He would need all his strength.

Chapter 4

And so it was that Richard Blade came to the Land of Zir. Valli hid him in a pavilion in a deserted reach of the harem grounds. She put him in a closet there and swaddled him in rugs and contrived to bring him milk in bottles. Valli dared not trust any other woman or guard with her secret and so had to leave him alone for long periods. This was a great worry to the woman and none at all to Blade. His strength increased by the hour and soon he could open the closet door and crawl all about the ornate pavilion. On the second day he was walking, on the third striding, and on the fourth day he could run. His hair began to come in thick and dark.

He kept all this from Valli. She held him and gave him the bottle and marveled at how he grew, but in no way did she suspect the truth. Blade knew that he would have to tell her soon. She was the only friend he had, still the only means of his survival, and he spent long hours in pondering just how to go about breaking the news to her. He must not frighten her, or shock her into uselessness. Beyond his self-interest was his real fondness for the woman. Valli was, after all, the nearest thing he had to a mother for many years. But there was the mission to get on with.

The crystal told him that Lord L knew of his predicament and that it could be remedied on the instant that his Lordship worked out some intricate calculations and translated them for encodement into computer macroergs.

It took the crystal, wavering and fading and imperfect, many hours to get this telecommunication through to Blade; when he realized what Lord L was up to he was badly upset and sought to send a message, by fierce concentration, that Lord L hold back. Blade wanted a full month to grow in. He had a plan. A plan that would be ruined if he suddenly regained his adult stature and strength. He was greatly relieved when the thought came, crystal inspired, that his Lordship understood and would do as Blade wished.

Meantime he learned much of this new dimension. He hid and listened as various women came, always women in pairs or sometimes threes or fours, and used the pavilion as a place of assignation for Lesbian love. The Izmir of Zir was an old man, mostly impotent and with bad breath, and there were five hundred women in his harem. Small wonder, Blade conceded as he lurked and watched, that they sought out the pavilion to writhe on the divans and use their bodies and artificial phalli to gain relief. There was, it seemed, a death penalty for such behavior.

There seemed to be a great many death penalties in Zir, and this was a paradox, for outwardly it was a land of milk and honey, with the air warm and fragrant and the sun golden. Blade did not dare venture beyond the pavilion, but he sometimes

watched from an open window and was impressed by the beauty of the great park in which the harem stood. There were cunningly clipped trees and flowering shrubs and flitting birds and song and splashing water everywhere. Graveled paths led through mazes of high-growing hedges.

Only once did he see any of the guards, two large men with hard, brute faces who wore baggy pants and beaded vests and carried both sword and spear. They passed near the pavilion, hardly glancing in its direction, and Blade retired to his closet and hid for an hour. He could not stand up to such men yet. Not for a month.

On the evening of the sixth day Blade knew that it was time to speak to Valli. She had been ohing and ahing about his rate of growth and he sensed an uneasiness, a fear, in her. His foster mother, in short, was beginning to suspect that something was very wrong.

It was dark when she came to the pavilion. The gardens were bright with hanging lanterns. She put her can of milk on a table and came to the closet where Blade lay in his swaddle of rugs. As she lifted him and carried him into an anteroom she said, "What a little giant you are becoming, my sweet. So heavy. Surely there was never a baby like you before in all the world. I am beginning to think that Stel was right and that you are a monster-child—"

"Stel was wrong," said Blade. "I am not a monster, Valli. I am a full-grown man caught in a baby's body. You must not be frightened and—"

He might have expected it. Valli fainted dead away. She dropped him and Blade had to twist in midair to land on his hands and feet. He swore mightily and, mindful of his hunger, drank the milk down before he filled the can with water and splashed it into Valli's face. He knelt beside her and chafed her wrists and patted her cheeks and hoped for the best. If she lost her wits and ran screaming into the night he was going to be in a lot of trouble. He could not yet fend for himself. He needed Valli as much as ever.

There was one dim light in the anteroom. Valli's eyes fluttered open, black and luminous and huge, and she stared at the baby Blade. He smiled. She continued to stare. "I—I had a dream, a nightmare, I know not. But I thought you spoke to me, child. I thought you spoke with the voice of a man."

Blade patted her hand. "I did. I am a man, Valli. Do not be afraid of me. I will never harm you. Just listen and try to understand."

For a moment he thought she would faint again. Impulse bade him lean close and kiss her cheek. "You see, Valli. I love you. I will not harm you. You are still my mother."

Valli moaned and lay back and closed her eyes. "I have gone mad. I am being punished for breaking the laws of Zir. I will be chained and whipped and my head will be cut off."

Blade crouched beside her. "None of those things will happen. I will not let them happen. Now you must lie very still and listen closely and try to understand."

"I understand nothing," sobbed Valli. "I am a madwoman."

Blade patted her hand. "Listen. I have come from a far place, a land of which you in Zir have never dreamed. I am a full-grown man and should have come as such, but a mistake was made and I came as a babe. But this mistake is being corrected—in a month I shall be a man again. Until that time I need you, Valli. I need your protection and your help and your knowledge of Zir. Do this for me and when I have my strength—I have never lost my wits—you will profit by it. That I promise. Anything you desire will be yours—you have only to ask."

Valli had ceased to tremble. She half opened her eyes and peered up at him. "You are a demon, then? A wizard? A magician?"

Blade laughed. "None of those things, Or all of them, if it will please you. But for now you must think of me as a man in a baby's body. In a month I will be fully grown. It is that month that we must be concerned with—I must survive it. And we must use the time to plan, to scheme, to accomplish matters of which I will speak later. Now, does all this still frighten you? Do you begin to see, to understand?"

Valli sat up. She took his hand and pressed it to her breast and stared hard at him. "I understand nothing. But I am no longer afraid. I must believe what my eyes and ears tell me, and if you say such things are possible I must believe."

"Then hold me," said Blade, "and this time do not rock me or croon to me, but listen and answer my questions."

Valli picked him up and carried him to a divan and, as she had been wont to do, nuzzled him to her bare breasts. Blade found this not unpleasant, though he had no desire for her teat now. He was beyond the need of milk. He could have devoured a raw steak.

Valli held him away from her and stared into his eyes for a long time. At last she sighed and said, "I begin to believe I do not dream. Your eyes are those of a man."

In that moment he sensed the change in her. Her smile was somehow different and her eyes narrowed and the look that came over her lovely face could only be called sly. With a little shock he remembered that she was probably not yet twenty—this was really only a girl.

Valli said, "You made a promise to me just now. That if you live and your schemes prosper I could have anything I asked?"

"I did that."

She pressed his face against her smooth warm breasts. "Could I have a child, do you think? A real baby of my very own?"

Blade's thoughts were elsewhere. A strange thing was happening to him. But he nodded and said, "Of course. If that is your wish. As soon as I have the power of Zir you may have as many children as you desire."

He was naked, as usual, and he looked down at his tiny baby penis and saw it in an erectile state. Odd, because he was not really in a state of sexual excitement. Yet there it was. He put it down to automatic function, the contact of flesh on flesh, and tried to forget it. It would be a long time before he was the old Blade and ready for sex.

Valli cradled him to her again and began to rock him.

"Stop that," said Blade snappishly, "or you will have me asleep. We must talk and plan, Valli. It will take the whole of the night."

"I am sorry—but what shall I call you now? You who are a baby who is not a baby?"

"My name is Blade. You will call me that."

"Blade— Blade—what does it mean?"

Blade sat up on her lap and scowled at her. "That is no matter. You must not be stupid, Valli. You must answer questions and do as you are told. And call me Blade. Just that."

Her luminous dark eyes devoured him. Her gaze made him uneasy. In it he read doubt and fear and love and desire, even awe, and at the moment these things did not please him. He wished that Valli were brainier, cooler, more like a man than a woman, but wishing was vain and stupid and he must make do. She was all he had.

Valli seemed to sense his disapproval. She hooded her eyes and said, "I will do as you say, Blade. What do you wish to know?"

"Everything. Everything about Zir."

They talked the night away. As the dawn crept in and the birds began to twitter in

the bushes, Blade saw that his half-formed plan, until now little more than an armature for hope, might well come to fruition. It was remarkable how the pieces of this future jigsaw began to drop into place. Risky, yes, with mortal danger around every corner, but no help for that. Danger, fear, terror—they were all part of life in Dimension X.

Just before the sun came up Blade told Valli what she must do. She covered her face and sobbed. "No-no-they will kill you. And me also."

"I do not think so. Not if you spoke truth about the Izmir and this high priest, this Casta. You said that Casta has promised the old man an heir, that he has made a prophecy that a boy will come to inherit Zir and lead it to new glory. Did you not tell me that?"

"I did, Blade. I did. And it is true. But the Izmir is a doddering old fool who believes lies. Casta is cunning and a liar and a villain. He is also the lover of the Princess Hirga and plots to put her on the throne. They are only waiting until the old Izmir dies, or until they can kill him without suspicion to themselves. Oh, Blade, do not do it! The Izmir will believe and welcome you—the High Priest will have you slain."

Blade sighed. He was getting into another nest of vipers. Always so. He could remember thinking, back in Home Dimension, that for once, just once, he might stray into paradise. Vain hope. If he had learned anything at all in six trips through the computer it was that in all dimensions you found the foul rot of greed and lust and vanity and jealousy. You found brutes and cowards and brave men and fools. No help for it. Cope.

"The first hour or so will be tricky," he admitted now. "If I live past that I will be all right. That is why your part in this plan is so important. You must smuggle me right into the bedchamber of the Izmir. He must be the first to see me and the first to whom I speak. Otherwise I have little chance."

He kissed her cheek. "You see, Valli, I am still your child and dependent on you. You must not fail me."

Valli wept and held him to her breasts. "Yes, Blade. I will try. I will do my best. There is a palace guard who is always after me. I do not like him, and he risks his head by so much as glancing at me, but I think it might be done. Ramsus would do anything to have me."

At that moment the crystal ticked in Blade's brain and he felt a faint electric surge and knew that the computer had added another year's growth. An odd sensation—to feel yourself grow. Odder still was the sudden realization that Valli's breasts no longer looked so much like mother's breasts, the source of nourishment, but had

somehow become more round and firm, softer blue-veined marble, shapelier, the nipples larger and more erect.

Blade slipped off her lap and ran to a window. The sun was up and dew sparkled like diamonds. "Then let this Ramsus have you," he commanded. "It must be done. Perhaps he will get you a child into the bargain and by the time you come to bear it I will either be in power or dead. And if I am dead it is likely that you will also be. Now go. The sun is high and people are beginning to stir."

"I want no child by Ramsus," said Valli. She came to stand beside him at the window. She put her hand on his fuzzy head and stroked it. "My darling little Blade. I hate to lose you, to see you grow so fast."

"Go," Blade said, "and come for me tonight as planned. Be careful. If you are caught now all is ruined."

"I come and go by a secret way. In the harem I sleep alone and the Izmir has not visited me for months. That is not the danger. The danger will come when I try to smuggle you into the Izmir's bed chamber."

"We can only try," said Blade, "and hope. Just be sure that you are a satisfactory lover to Ramsus this day. Make him desire you again. If he wants more he will be careful and cooperative and guard his own neck better. And in this case his neck is our neck. Goodbye, Valli."

He felt like a pimp.

Valli lifted him and swung him high and kissed him on the mouth. "Goodbye, little Blade. I will see you tonight. Heed your own advice and be careful."

When she was gone Blade retired to his closet and pulled a rug over him. He was hungry, starving, but if things went well tonight he would have food. If things did not go well he would not need food. He lay sleepless and tried to concentrate and let the computer, and Lord L, know what he was up to. After a time he sensed that he was not getting through and gave it up. The crystal was in one of its bad moods, on strike, and there were no impulses either way. Blade was on his own. No great surprise in that, for he usually was, and during the next thirty days he would survive, if at all, by his wits, guile, cunning and above all his brass, his gall.

Blade had no illusions about his chances in Zir. He had milked Valli far more completely than she knew—he was an expert in interrogation back in Home Dimension—and before the night was half over he had known that this was the worst snake pit into which he had ever strayed. Intrigue, cruelty, lust for power—it was all there. Zir was a land torn to shreds by jealousy and hate and clashing factions. Ruled by an aging, superstitious fool.

Superstitious. The Izmir of Zir was superstitious. In that, and in that alone, lay Blade's one chance of staying alive.

At last he slept. When Valli came for him that night after dark he had grown another year and was beginning to look like a very stalwart infant indeed. His hair was darker and thicker and already inclined to curl. Muscles were developing beneath the baby fat. Valli kissed and hugged him and when Blade drew away impatiently she laughed and said, "If I did not believe before—and all day I have been wondering if it was not a dream after all—then I must believe you now. I think you have gained ten pounds this day."

"I don't see how," Blade said crossly, "since I am starving to death. If I do not have meat soon I will never grow back to manhood."

"You must manage a little longer," said Valli. "In the morning, if this crazy plan works and we are still alive, you will have food." She eyed him and with a strange little smile said, "In the meantime, if you want it, there is my breast."

Blade shook his head, though her breasts were inviting enough. "No. I am grown beyond that now. I must have meat. So let us get on with it... your lover Ramsus is going to help?"

Valli made a face and sank onto a divan. From an anteroom a single light cast a faint glow over her face. Blade noted that for the first time she was wearing lip salve and that her lashes and brows had been darkened. Her hair smelled of fresh scent and she wore new combs to keep it atop her head. Her kirtle was new, he saw, and shorter than before, and tonight she wore scarlet underpants.

I have, he thought sourly, a most beautiful mother.

"Ramsus is ours," said Valli. "He will do anything I ask. He should, after this afternoon. He nearly killed me. He is not a man at all—he is a beast, a goat, an animal or a devil. I do not know what he is—except that it is impossible to satisfy him."

"That is good," said Blade. "He will want you tomorrow and the day after. That will keep him quiet and cautious. What is he going to do for us?"

Valli explained. Ramsus had promised to drug a guard who would normally be stationed at the door of the Izmir's bedchamber. The man would become ill and a substitute guard would be sought. Ramsus would volunteer for the duty.

Blade was pleased, but looked for flaws in the plan. "Suppose Ramsus is not chosen? Suppose another man volunteers and is given the post?"

Valli shook her head. "Small danger. It is dull duty and the palace guard is lazy

and spoiled. They never volunteer for anything."

Blade nodded. She was probably right. It was the same back in Home Dimension.

"So far, so good, but how do you get me into the palace?"

Valli patted his head and pulled him onto her lap. "Come, let me cuddle you a bit before you grow too big." She pressed his face against her breasts. "My little sweet—I hate all this. I do hate so to see you become a man so quickly."

Blade pulled away. "Enough of that. How do you get me into the palace?"

"Simple enough—if nothing goes wrong. Stel has agreed to help me. I have told you of my friend Stel?"

"Yes, yes. She wanted to leave me to die. Can you trust her now?"

"I think so. I know things about her, things which I have threatened to tell if she does not aid me. Of course, I would not really tell, but—"

"Get on with it."

Valli sighed. "You are becoming a man, all right. Already you give orders like the Izmir himself. Very well—there is a postern gate that leads into the palace near the old man's chambers. It is guarded by a single man and it is well known that sometimes he sleeps."

"We cannot depend on that," Blade complained. "This may be the night that he does not sleep."

"Patience, little Blade. I know that. But Stel is to go to him and engage him in talk and, in good time, offer her body. They will go off into the bushes. It will really be no great hardship for Stel," said Valli with some spite, "for it is a long time since she has had a man."

"And then what—supposing this all works out?"

"I will sneak quickly into the palace, carrying you, and make my way to the chambers of the Izmir. The corridors are deserted at that time of night and, with good luck, I will see no one but Ramsus. He will be guarding the bedchamber. He will let me in and I will place you on the bed of the Izmir and depart, to pray and to hope that all goes well and that we will both live to see another dawn."

Blade thought it over for a moment. There were no flaws in the plan—if his luck

held. It was simple and uncomplicated and should work. And there was no alternative.

"It is the best we can do," he agreed. "How soon do we go?"

"Two hours before dawn. I have a basket outside the door. I will carry you in that."

And so she did. Matters went well. Their luck held and she left him on a great soft bed in which an old man snored loudly. Valli kissed him and stroked his head and whispered, "Goodbye, little Blade. If matters go badly we will both die. If they go well and you do come to power in Zir, you will not forget your Valli? Or your promise?"

"I will forget neither," whispered Blade. "Go. Go quickly."

Her kirtle rustled as she left the room. A door closed softly and Blade heard an instant of whispering. Then he was alone in darkness and listening to the Izmir snore.

Blade sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed and waited patiently for light to show through the curtains. He tried to concentrate, to get a message through to Lord L, but the crystal was still dead. As dead, Blade thought, as he might be if this gambit did not come off.

Once in the pavilion, when he had spied on the women who came there to make love, he had heard them mention that in Zir unwanted babies were strangled.

Chapter 5

When it grew light enough to see Blade crawled up the bed until he crouched near the pillow on which rested the Izmir's head. The old man was bald and toothless, with cheeks heavily pouched and a nose like a scimitar. His neck was thin and wrinkled, leading under the bedclothes to a body that Blade guessed would be an emaciated wreck. This man was very old. He could die at any moment, even the next, in his sleep. Blade could only hope that the wracked flesh and the senile brain would hold together for a time yet—long enough for Blade to attain his growth and the ability to survive on his own.

The light grew stronger. The Izmir moaned and tossed a bit, mumbling to himself, and at last opened his gummed and rheumy eyes and stared, face to face, at Blade.

"Do not fear me," said Blade. "I am the child, sent as Casta promised. I am your heir. I come in a child's body and with an adult's head and brain."

Blade's small spine was cold and the hair frizzled on the nape of his neck. The next second would be decisive—if the old man screamed and summoned his guard,

if panic and mindlessness took over, Blade did not stand much of a chance. He held his breath.

The Izmir did not move. His runny eyes narrowed and when he spoke his voice was surprisingly calm and deep.

"If you are a dream or a phantom," said the Izmir, "you can go away. I am too old to frighten. If you are real, and this I do not yet believe, lay your flesh to mine so that I may feel it."

Blade put his tiny hand in the wrinkled old one of the Izmir. The old man picked up the little hand, examined it, stroked it, squeezed it, then let it fall. "If it is a dream," he said, "it is a most marvelously vivid one."

"I am no dream," said Blade. "Look you at my head—is it not too big for my body?"

The Izmir nodded. "Much too big. You are grotesque."

"And hear my voice," Blade continued. "Is it that of a man or an infant?"

"A man."

"And do you believe that in this oversize skull there is a man's brain, fully developed?"

"I am beginning to believe it," said the Izmir, "though I am not the fool that many, especially that Casta, take me for, and I have never really believed in miracles or wizardry. My people say that I am superstitious and I let them think so, for it does me no harm and gives them something to gabble about."

This gave Blade pause. He saw that he had better revise his plan a bit. He leaned closer to the old man and stared into his eyes. The rheumy old eyes stared back and Blade saw cunning and knowledge there, and he saw also infinite weariness and boredom and, lurking last and deepest, final despair.

The Izmir said, "Your eyes are those of a man. And, if all my experience does not deceive me, those of a strong and shrewd and triumphant man. This I believe. But what good are these things in the body of a baby?"

"I grow a year each day," said Blade. "You will see this for yourself. I come from another world, which I will explain when we have time, and, though you do not believe in miracles or wizardry, there is something of both in my coming here—though not in the ordinary sense. How much time have we, Izmir, before someone comes to these chambers?"

The old man nodded toward a bell pull. "All the time we need. I am never disturbed until I summon my servants in the morning."

"Good. Now watch me." Blade leaped from the huge bed and ran around the room. He turned cartwheels and somersaults and jumped over a chair or two, then returned to the bed. "You saw that—you have never seen a normal babe do such things."

By now the Izmir was sitting up in bed, propped on pillows and stroking the few scant hairs of his goatee. He nodded and narrowed his eyes at Blade.

"You need not belabor it, my friend. So far I believe. I do not understand it and I doubt I ever will, but to this point I believe what I see. And in the end it is all very simple—you say that you will soon grow into a man? I shall wait and see. If you *do* grow into a man, then I will accept it and believe even more firmly. If you do not grow into a man I will have you strangled. Simple."

Blade settled on the bed again. "Yes. Simple. But I am speaking the truth and so we must plan. Hear me out, Izmir and then tell me your thoughts."

The old man opened his mouth, then closed it. He made a gesture that indicated that Blade was to speak on.

"I had thought you a senile old fool," said Blade. "I was led to believe this."

From deep in that scrawny throat came a chuckle. "A fool, yes. Old, yes. Senile, no."

"I was going to lie to you," Blade went on. "Lie and bamboozle and pretend to be this child that the priest Casta has been promising will come to save Zir and be your heir. This I cannot do now because it is not true and *you know* it is not true."

The Izmir nodded and chuckled again. "Costa is a great liar and also something of a fool, though very cunning. He believes that *I* believe him."

The old man fell into a fit of coughing and hawked a great gob of spittle into a cloth, then said. "It is my thought, of late, that *Castadoes* have a child somewhere in the background, a child that he trains and keeps secret and awaits the proper hour to produce and announce as the heir to Zir. Then, when I am dead, he will slay the Princess Hirga and place this child on my throne and rule through him."

Blade held up a hand. "Later—later for all these details of intrigue. Our task now, for I take it that you are agreed to accept me, is to ensure my survival for the next few days. I cannot think that this priest will take kindly to my coming."

The Izmir went into such a fit of laughing that he nearly choked.

"Take it kindly? You, whoever you are, will be a living curse to him. You have stolen his thunder—and his idea. He will most certainly try to have you killed."

"Can you protect me, Izmir? Until I get my strength and manhood back?"

"I will try," said the Izmir. "I think I can do it. Many plot against me and many think me senile, but I am an old dog and I know many tricks. But you must prove yourself to me... what are you to be called?"

"Blade."

"Blade? It makes no sense to me, but as you wish. So, Blade, as I say, you will have to prove yourself to me or I will save Casta the trouble of killing you. So let us begin. What is first to do?"

"Food," said Blade. "Meat and bread in plenty. I am so near famished that, if I do not eat soon, the task of proving myself to you will never arise."

"And clothing," said the Izmir. He looked Blade up and down. "I think I have seen you grow since we began to talk. You are too large to run around naked."

"And a little sword," said Blade. "A real one, a weapon that will kill, but light enough for me to wield. I will feel safer with a weapon."

The Izmir reached for the bell pull at the head of his bed. "It shall all be done. Then, later today, I will arrange for a grand audience in the palace. I will introduce you to all my wise men and my statesmen, bah, and certainly to Casta and the Princess Hirga. I cannot wait to see the expression on the priest's face when he finds that his prophecy has come true and that a child has indeed come to save Zir and subdue the Hitts."

This was a new note. "Hitts? What of Hitts? It is the first time I have heard the name."

The Izmir stroked his goatee and his eyes grew hard. "They live across the narrow water and are savages and barbarians. They defeated my father and his father and even his father before that. I have sworn to avenge all these defeats and, before I die, to invade and conquer the Hitts. Casta has promised this most of all—that the child to come would lead my soldiers victorious against the Hitts. Now *you* will do it—unless, of course—you fail to grow as you say you will and I must have you strangled. But enough of that for now—here come my servants."

The two servants who entered were both fat men and wore only loin cloths and

soft hats like fezzes. They bowed to the Izmir and stared with round eyes at Blade. When the old man had given orders and they had gone he said to Blade, "Slaves. From the south, of course. I have never had a Hitt slave because they will never surrender. When they are beaten, which is not often, they kill themselves. You cannot make a slave of a corpse. But those you just saw are of a different breed—ball-less now, because they go into my harem occasionally and I do not want them at my women."

Blade said nothing, but something in his expression made the Izmir chuckle and nearly fall into another fit of coughing.

"You are wondering, Blade, what an old fool like me can do with a harem of five-hundred women? I do not blame you. Often I wonder myself—but now and again I manage. My cock is not more senile than my brain and with five or six soft and tender young girls I can sometimes achieve."

Blade kept silence. The Izmir looked at him sharply and went on, "When you get your growth and strength—if you do—I suppose that will be a problem. Do not fret about it. I will give you a harem of your own."

The food came and Blade fell on it like a wolf. As he ate he felt the electric ticking in him and understood that the crystal was working again and that he had grown another year. Lord L would know, when the computer decoded Blade's thought impulses and printed them out, just how he was progressing. And how important it was that his growth continue at the proper and predetermined pace. His life depended on it now. Blade had no illusions about this old man in the bed. The Izmir was playing along. He believed or did not believe—Blade had no way of knowing which—but in the end he would kill Blade unless matters went as Blade predicted. If the computer broke down Blade was dead.

Chapter 6

The computer did not fail. Blade lived and prospered and, when the thirty days had elapsed, he was his own brute and masculine self again, with the civilized trappings of Home Dimension fallen away as they always did when he was in X Dimension. His thews were mighty again, his legs like pillars of oak and his chest deep and his shoulders massive. He had his hair clipped to a decent length but let his beard grow long and black and curly. Now that his body again matched his head in proportion he was as handsome as ever, but he was not the Blade of HD. Beneath that flowing dark mane was a brain both subtle and shrewd, but with an animal cunning the normal Blade did not possess. By the time he had attained his growth again he was more a creature of Zir than of Home Dimension. He had adapted.

The Izmir kept his word. He had said that he could muster a dozen loyal guards and he did. They were led by a captain named Ogier, a stalwart, barrel-shaped man

who clanked about in armor and whose only loyalty was to the old Izmir and, later, to Blade. It was this Ogier who, when the situation was explained to him, schemed how the child Blade could be kept alive.

"'Tis simple enough," Ogier said, "given loyal men such as I have. There are twelve of us. Six of us will remain always awake and on guard. We will keep the boy here, Izmir, in your own chambers and six of us will be with him come night or come day. Six will guard and six will sleep, and so it will be until the need is past." And he glanced down at Blade, who by this time had the size and heft of a ten-year-old.

"He has grown since yesterday, Izmir. It is indeed a miracle and all Zir whispers of it. The people are impatient to see for themselves."

Blade, dressed in baggy trousers and a jeweled vest, was practicing with his little sword. He liked Ogier and trusted him and had plans for him, but he did not speak now. He listened. Always he listened and learned.

"The people will have to wait," the Izmir said, "until he has his years and is announced as my heir. And that cannot be done until he has proven himself in battle against the Hitts. In good time, Ogier, all in good time. But what of Casta and the Princess Hirga? I have not seen them since the audience in the palace. It is not like the priest to be so quiet."

Captain Ogier laughed harshly. "Casta is sulking, Izmir. He has been sulking ever since he denounced the boy and stalked from the palace. Yes, he sulks and I think he plots, but for the moment he is quiet. The Princess Hirga is curious and employs her spies. This I overlook, for what can they tell her but the truth? I think that she is as awed as the people and that her faith in Casta is somewhat shaken. And something else, I near forgot—a boy child, dressed in rich and priestly vestments, has been found on a dungheap with his throat cut. My own spies say that the boy had been seen with Casta from time to time."

Blade spoke then. "The priest had plans for that boy. Then I came and the plans were useless, so the boy has been silenced. I do not think, Izmir, that this Casta and I are going to get along when finally we meet."

But the High Priest and the Princess Hirga made no move. When Blade reached his full growth, he was given a palace and a harem of his own, at the far end of the park from the Izmir's own palace, and Ogier and his twelve faithful men were assigned to Blade as permanent bodyguard. The Izmir accompanied Blade on the day he moved into his palace. They moved through the streets of the palace-city, Blade on a white horse with golden trappings and the old man carried by slaves in an ornate chair. The crowd that gathered to watch was a curious one, silent and almost sullen, awe-stricken and fearful, obviously torn between disbelief and faith.

When they were in Blade's palace the old man said, "That crowd was packed with Casta's spies. He will be told that the miracle has come to pass, but he will not believe. He will suspect some trick because he is a trickster himself. It will be interesting to see what he does. But we will talk of the priest at another time; come now, Blade, and see your palace and the harem I promised you. Afterward we will talk of your campaign against the Hitts."

Guarded by Ogier and six of his men, Blade and the Izmir toured the palace—and grounds. It was all magnificent enough—the buildings of smooth white marble and with furnishings of gold and ivory—and Blade found no cause for complaint. The harem was guarded by ball-less men and the women that Blade saw were young and pretty. He saw few of them on this first trip, though the harem reeked of woman-smell and he heard giggles and was conscious of being watched from behind ivory screens that shielded the various rooms. Strange, but all this available female flesh aroused no desire in him, no lust. This puzzled him at first, even alarmed him, but he put it down to tension and the newness of things.

Blade had a throne room of his own and the Izmir insisted that he sit in the ivory chair on its dais and play the part of heir and prince. Ogier was permitted to remain while the others were sent to guard the entrances.

"A throne befits you," said the old man. "You look natural there, as if born to it. Not so, Ogier?"

The Captain nodded gravely. "I agree, Izmir. No one seeing Blade now could doubt that this was meant to be exactly so. Casta's prophecy has come true."

The Izmir cackled. "In spite of Casta, eh? His lies have come true. I have a son and heir, full grown in a month and fit to rule a dozen Zirs and— subdue the Hitts. Aha, my friends, this is a sweet moment that I had not thought to see. If only I did not have to die soon, if only I could linger to enjoy it... which brings to mind something of which I would speak, Blade. You will leave us, Ogier."

When the Captain had gone the Izmir said, "This has all been a miracle, Blade, whether you call it so or not, and you have kept your word. It has occurred to me that if you can do such things you may be able to do others—in short, can you make me young again?"

Blade leaned back on the ivory throne and crossed his legs. He wore a kilt and light breast armor, an ornate dress helmet and carried a gold-hilted rapier which he had himself chosen from the armory. He stroked his curling beard and stared down at the old man. The question had not taken him by surprise, for he had expected something of the sort.

For a moment he pondered and then said, "To be merciful, Izmir, I must be

cruel. No. I cannot restore your youth. My miracles do not extend so far."

The old man had drawn up a stool and perched on it, wrapped in his brocaded robes, looking like an ancient tortoise. He wiped his eyes, which exuded constantly, and rubbed his beaked nose, nodding slowly.

"So. It may be as well in the long run, but I had hoped. But if not my youth, can you restore my health? For time enough for me to see you accomplish all the things I could not? My infirmities are many, as you know."

Blade knew all too well. In the past month he had had ample time to study the Izmir. He was no doctor, but back in Home Dimension he had read widely in the field of medicine.

He shook his head. "No, Izmir. I cannot prolong your life a moment beyond its natural span. You have all the diseases of age and something else—what in my world is called cancer. It will kill you when the time comes."

The old man had a habit of stroking his great nose with a finer. He did so now, staring at Blade. Then he laughed.

"You give cold comfort, Blade. But perhaps even that is for the best—if I were young again I would likely be at your throat. And certainly I would not share my harem with you. So be it. As a young man and an old, dying man, we can get along. And I have a strong will—I shall use it to stay alive until I have seen certain things come to pass. Now, about the conquest of the Hitts..."

Later the Izmir departed and Blade was left alone in his palace, as he had known he must be eventually. Ogier remained, and his dozen men, and Blade saw to their posting. He and Ogier supped together. They washed in scented water and sat at a great table and were served by soft-footed servants. Ogier, a rough man better suited to barracks than palaces, was still proud and somewhat vain, and tried hard to conceal his awe of Blade.

Blade sought to put the Captain at his ease. They talked for a time about the Hitts, the savages who lived over the narrow water, and the Captain was not very hopeful.

"The Izmir talks much of subduing them," he said, "but I have been fighting Hitts all my life and I do not think it can be done. They never surrender and they are better soldiers than the Zirnians. The narrow water protects them and their country is a nightmare of rocks, ravines, crags and mountains. Wheeled vehicles are useless and it is difficult to deploy troops. They do not give battle in the ordinary manner, but resort to one ambush after another. My advice to you, Blade, though it may be treason, is to coddle the old man with promises until he dies—which should not be

long—and stay away from the Hitts."

Ogier gnawed a bone thoughtfully. "You could pretend to make invasion preparations, of course. The Army is in sore state and badly needs work and discipline. Do all this, and let it be seen and known, and you can only profit by it. You might even worry the Hitts a little. But do not venture beyond the narrow water. It would only mean defeat and give Casta a chance to gloat and point you out as a failure and an imposter."

Blade gave him a cold glance. He liked Ogier, but had not deemed him so loquacious and opinionated. Best, he thought, to give the man an understanding of affairs here and now.

"I amnot an impostor," Blade said. "I have done what I have done. You saw it. I grew from a babe to a man in thirty days."

"Yes. I saw it." Ogier passed a meaty hand over his face and did not look at Blade. "I saw it. I must believe it. I acknowledge you witch or wizard, Blade, and I respect that and will serve you as faithfully as ever I served the Izmir. But all the same I do not think your miracles will work against the Hitts. But that is up to you—you are Blade, the heir and prince to the Izmir. I am but a Captain who obeys."

Blade pointed a meat knife at him and smiled. "Remember that, Captain, and we shall do well. I command here. Never forget it."

Ogier raised a goblet of wine. "I shall not. I serve you, Blade."

The moment of tension passed. Blade shifted the conversation to a topic he knew was dear to any soldier's heart.

"There is something I want you to do for me tonight, Ogier, and in return I will do something for you and your men. It concerns women. Are you interested?"

Ogier wiped his mouth with a hand and grinned. "Women? Of course I am interested. Tell me more of this, Blade."

"I have a harem," said Blade, "in which I am not much interested at the moment."

Ogier stared. "That alone makes you more than mere man. I wish I had a harem. I would be interested."

"There is a woman named Valli in the Izmir's harem," Blade explained. "I want you to find her and bring her to this palace tonight. You may tell the old man if you wish—or I will. I do not think he will mind when matters are explained to him."

Ogier put down his wine goblet with a thump. "I do not advise telling the Izmir. He is an old man and has little use for his women, true, but he is very jealous of them all the same. I am not sure of the wisdom of this. What is this Valli to you. Blade?"

"That is my concern," said Blade curtly, "a personal matter and nothing to do with the Izmir or politics or priests, I promise you. Will you do it, Ogier? In return you and your men shall have the run of my harem. Take your choice of as many as you can handle. I will issue orders to that effect."

Ogier studied him, stubbled chin in hand. Finally he nodded. "I will do it. No great trouble in that, for I know all the guards and they will obey me. But I think it had better be kept from the Izmir. You are now as his son, Blade, but a father can be angry. And he would not understand why, with a harem of your own, you seek a woman from *his* harem. I myself do not understand it."

Blade pushed his plate away and stood up. "You do not have to understand it, Ogier. You must only do it."

Ogier half scowled. "It is a command, then?"

"No. It is a request. When I give commands you will be in no doubt of it."

Ogier suddenly laughed and slammed the table with his hand. "I will do it—and hold you to your word. I will loose my men in your dovecote and you will have a happy harem, Blade. We have not had women lately, my men and I, and I think each of us good for six, at the least."

Blade smiled. "Only when they are off-duty, Ogier. Be sure they understand that. Any man caught in the harem when he should be on guard will be severely punished."

Ogier pushed away from the table. "You need not tell me that, Blade. I am a soldier. Where shall I bring this woman?"

"To my chamber, well after dark—and be quiet and careful about it. The fewer who know the better."

Ogier eased his swordbelt around his little paunch, distended by the hearty meal. "It shall be done. And then I will stand the first watch myself—in the harem."

Blade watched the Captain exit laughing and went to his own private quarters, a suite of austere and high-ceilinged rooms with something of the Romanesque about them. But comfortable enough. His bedchamber was hung with drapes and opened into a latrine closet. There was a great round bed in the center of the room and mirrors here and there on the wall and a large table and a chair for working. Blade

sank into the chair, put his feet on the table and examined his image in one of the mirrors.

He looked as he usually did in Dimension X, a bit larger than life, this illusion helped by the full black beard. The planes of his face were flatter, his jaw more prognathic, his eyes harder and colder, his stare more intent. He had noted it all before. He was Blade and yet he was not Blade; he was the same human animal with better and improved survival equipment.

It would be some time yet before Valli arrived, if she came at all. Blade went to the bed and stretched out without undressing. He must relax now and begin thinking ahead. He had come through the first ordeal. But it would not be the last and he much doubted that it would be the worst. Danger lay ahead and he must contrive to meet it as it came. It was always so in DX—you lived from hour to hour, day to day, week to week.

The thought made him uneasy and he left the bed to make a check. He returned satisfied. There was a guard on the door and a man beneath each of his chamber windows. From over the court, beyond a fountain of colored water, he heard the shrill laughter of women. Ogier had wasted no time in letting his men know of their good fortune. Blade grinned and went back to his bed.

The crystal was not working at the moment. He felt no impulse, no communication from the artificial intelligence of the computer. That did not necessarily mean that His Lordship was not reading Blade's impulses, though, and with this in mind he began to concentrate.

Alive and well. Blade smiled at the banality, then got back to his task. Future most uncertain. Much too early to know if there is treasure in Zir, or anything of use to England that can be teleported.

As of this moment know very little of Zir. Begin this task tomorrow. Am at present in position of power, but chancy. Have enemies, as usual, but not yet sure of the extent of this danger. Will pursue my usual course of coping with events as they arise and trust that luck holds.

His head ached and Blade left off. He was covered with sweat. Such concentration was hard work. He got up and summoned a servant and had a bath prepared. When he came out of the bath, with only a cloth about his genitals, Valli was there.

She fell to her knees and would not look at him. He went to her and stood looking for a moment at that sleek head with its golden combs and piled dark hair. She wore her silver kirtle and red underpants and nothing else. She kept staring at the floor and he saw that she trembled. He took her arm and raised her. "What is this,

Valli? Are you afraid of me?"

The huge dark eyes were filled with tears. "Yes, Blade. I fear. Everything has changed. I am but a harem woman and you are now a god. Everyone knows this. All speak of it."

There were many advantages to being thought a god. Blade knew this and meant to take his measure of adulation and use it, but not with Valli. He meant to use her too, but not in that manner. The fact was, and he admitted it now, that he was a bit ambivalent about Valli.

He took her chin in his hands and forced her to look directly into his eyes. "Smile," he commanded. "There, that is better. And I am no god, Valli. Never to you. We are friends, good friends, and I am much in your debt. And will be even more so, for I have a task for you, a favor to ask, and that is why I have sent for you. Did you have trouble leaving the harem?"

She shrugged and her bare breasts moved. Her nipples were taut and aroused. "None," she whispered. "Ogier is a powerful man. He commanded and it was done. I do not think the Izmir will ever know."

Blade nodded and smiled. He guided her to the bed and sat beside her. "That may be as well. But how does it go? What of your friend Stel? And how goes it with the guard Ramsus?"

Valli by now had regained her composure. She smoothed her hair and leaned ever so slightly against Blade, so that her breasts brushed his bare chest. She was now, Blade thought with a little sense of shock, ten years younger than he was and very lovely, and it was incredible that she had once played mother to him, that he had once suckled those well-formed breasts that he might live. Beneath the cloth his penis began to stir.

"I no longer lie with Ramsus," Valli said. "It is not necessary now and I never liked him. He pursues me, but I keep to the harem and he cannot get at me. As for Stel, she is mad with jealousy and curses herself for a fool. She wishes now that she had been kind to the god who came as a babe. She regrets the reward that she would have had."

"Reward," said Blade. "Ah, yes. That. I promised you, Valli, did I not?"

She lowered her eyes and did not look at him. "I want no reward, Blade, other than what you promised. A child."

"I remember, Valli. And it shall be arranged. But first I wish to talk of other things. To explain why I have sent for you and—"

Valli moved closer to him. Her voice firmed and she looked at him and there was determination in the dark, liquid eyes.

"Can we not talk later, Blade? Now you must understand—I want a child. Your child!"

By now Blade was fully tumescent and the cloth that covered him was bulging. Valli cast a glance downward and smiled. She put her hand on him gently.

"You see, Blade. You are ready. You desire me as I desire you. So am I to beg? You did promise, you know, and, though I doubted then, I do not doubt now. You are a god, no matter how you deny it, and the child I have will be the child of a god. Please, Blade. I implore you. Keep your promise."

Blade was lost. Indeed, as he drew her to him and kissed her, he wondered if this had not been in his mind all along. He did have a task for Valli, but had it not been secondary? Had he not from the very first, even with his infantile penis, wanted this girl? For that was what she was—a girl. No mother to him now. Nothing of incest here. He realized then, as he and Valli rolled over on the bed, that he had not yet shaken the mores of Home Dimension completely. Like shackles, some habits of thought persisted. He would have to do better, get completely free, if he meant to survive in Zir.

Valli, as a harem woman, had been well schooled in all the arts of love. Even had Blade not known this he would soon have guessed that, ever since she had been old enough to understand, she had been learning the ways in which men are best pleased. Her kisses were sweet and her tongue made of honey. She soon took command and, gentle-voiced, bade Blade relax and let her minister to him. And in exciting him who needed little urging, she soon excited herself.

She laved his big body with her tongue and her fingers were agile and knowing. She directed where his hands should go and what they should do. She drew it out and out and out, to such excruciating length of ecstasy, that Blade sworled in passion and began to think he would go mad. Always, when making love, he sought to keep a portion of his mind cool and detached, but with Valli it did not work. She took complete charge of him, she consumed him, and when she mounted him at last and was panting toward climax, all sweet sweat-covered, it took all his willpower to force her over and take command as he liked to do. As he insisted he do. He went into a flurry of brutal last strokes, pounding and pounding away, and then he moaned as she screamed and they collapsed into exhaustion.

Valli was first to break the silence. She touched his face with her fingers and whispered, "Ah, Blade. Blade! That was a baby. I know it. I feel it. You spewed a fountain into me and of it will come a child. I thank you. I will have your child, and who is to say that he will not also be a god."

It was some time before he could control his breathing well enough to speak. Then he said, "I hope so, Valli. If that is what you want."

She clung to him. "It is what I want. And you will stay in Zir, Blade? You will not go away? You have power now and you will not let them kill this child as they did my first?"

Blade could not promise this and knew it—and yet he could not bring himself to hurt or worry her. So he lied.

"I will remain. I will protect your child, if indeed you have one." He laughed and kissed her tenderly. "You are getting a little ahead of things, you know. Imagining. One time in bed does not always make a child and you cannot know—"

"I know," Valli said firmly. "I know, Blade. I am sure. You do not understand such matters, even if you are a god."

Blade laughed and gave it up. "All right. Have your way of it. Now we can talk of other matters—the real reason I sent for you."

Valli lay with eyes closed and her arms outflung. She whispered. "What we have just done is reason enough for me. But speak on. I will do anything you ask, as you well know."

Blade explained what had been in his mind for some time. He needed an intelligence network—a system of spies, to put it bluntly—and he thought to make a beginning with the harem women. Valli was to be in charge of collecting the information and bringing it to him. It was a bare beginning, a first step, but Blade must begin somewhere and at once.

Valli was intelligent. She grasped at once what he wanted.

"There is much loose talk in the harem," she said. "The women talk to kill time and ward off boredom. But most of such talk would be worthless to your purpose, Blade. Rumors and gossip. How can they help?"

He acknowledged this but pointed out that it was worth wading through a pound of chaff to gain a Brain of truth. You never knew. His own experience in MI6, back in Home Dimension, had taught him that.

Blade donned a robe and came back to the bed. Valli had slipped back into her red underpants. "I am sure," said Blade, "that your harem women have more to do with men than is generally known or admitted. This is bound to be so, Valli, and you need not be afraid to admit it. You will not be getting your friends in trouble. I wish this information for my own use only. I do not care a damn what harem women do

or do not do. Their business is their own. And the Izmir will never hear anything from me."

Valli smiled. "I am glad to hear that, Blade. I would betray my friends for you, I would do anything for you, but I am happy that it is not required. It is true that there is much intrigue in the harem—if the Izmir knew of it, many heads would be struck off. There are ways in which the women smuggle men in—guards and officers and even priests. There are even ways, and times, when the women leave the harem and spend nights with their lovers. Most of the guards are corrupt and can be bribed to make a false count. But I do not see—"

"You do not have to see," said Blade. "Just do as I ask. You will form a little secret society, not more than five or six of your trusted friends, and they will listen and report to you and you will report to me. I will send for you when I am ready, and if anything of great importance arises you can reach me through Ogier. All this is understood, Valli?"

She left the bed, sensing dismissal. "It is understood, Blade. I will try not to fail you."

"Goodnight then, Valli. Ogier will be waiting to get you back to the harem unseen." He kissed her and patted her behind lightly and, with a sense of some relief, saw the guard on the door take her arm and lead her away. Blade went to the bed and flung himself on it naked. It was warm and he needed no cover. He needed sleep. As much as he had needed Valli an hour ago. He had had her and it had been pleasant and he hoped that all went well and she did have his child, since she really did seem to want it. Valli's role was already well established in his mind; she would never be a consort, but she could be quite comforting. It was enough.

He was nearly asleep when he noted a faint movement behind the drapes. He came instantly alert. The drapes were heavy, of some stiff material that hung straight from rods along the cornice of the ceiling. Their purpose was to add warmth to the cold marble of the room.

Blade rose swiftly and snatched his sword from a chair. There was a slight bulge in the arras where it edged near a window. Blade put his swordpoint against the bulge and pressed firmly, just hard enough to pierce the material, and said, "Come out. Or get this steel through your gut."

A voice came muffled from behind the hanging. "You would not dare. I am the Princess Hirga."

Chapter 7

Her voice was deep, husky, a rich contralto. Blade took three paces back, his rapier still pointed at the arras, and commanded, "Come out, Princess. I would have

a look at such a royal eavesdropper."

The hanging moved, swayed, parted. She stood before him. Blade stared and the point of his sword dropped. He had not expected such beauty. If this was indeed the Princess Hirga, the last of the Izmir's get, then the old man had wrought well on a long-ago night and bed.

She was the first woman he had seen in Zir who covered her breasts. She wore a high-necked doublet of gold cloth and trousers of silver on long, slim legs. She was regally tall, near to Blade's height, and her hair was flaming red and piled high on her head in the Zirnian fashion. Instead of the usual combs, her hair was held in place by a small coronal in which gems sparked. Blade was impressed but sought to conceal it. He retreated another step and bowed, gesturing with his rapier. "Princess. I am glad that we meet at last, though I had not thought it to be in this manner. How long have you been behind my drapes, and how came you there?"

She stared at him. Her eyes were large and a deep sea green. He noted that her breathing was fast and there was a swollen, puffy look around her mouth and eyes. She had been there long enough. She had seen and heard everything and it had excited her.

When she spoke, her voice quavered a bit. "Simple enough to come there, Blade. Your guard is faithful, but even faithful men must void their water now and then. I watched and waited and, when he was gone for a moment, I was in the window. There is a secret way into the grounds which I know well. I should. This palace was once mine."

"Oh? I did not know that." Blade pointed to a chair with the rapier. "A princess should not stand."

She ignored the chair. She went to the bed and sat on the edge. She put a hand on a pillow and looked at Blade and half smiled. Her teeth were small and very white. As she stared and stared, as though she could never see enough of him, she caught her nether lip in her teeth and bit it and there was no mistaking the speculation in her glance. Beneath the golden doublet her bosom swelled and moved, and he plainly heard the rasp of breath in her throat.

Blade knew that he could tumble her in an instant if he chose. This was a sensual woman and she was aroused to a high pitch by what she had seen and heard.

Hirga put her hand on the pillow again. "Still warm from your harem whore."

Blade took the chair and with great show of nonchalance put his feet on the table and regarded her with a mocking smile. She was aroused now, and available, but it did not please him to take her. For one thing, he was at the moment satiated and, for

another, he knew she had not come to his chambers with sex in mind. That had been incidental. There was method here and a motivation deeper than the achievement of a spasm.

"Valli is not a whore," he said, "and the matter is no concern of yours. What do you want with me? Or, rather, what does Casta want, for it is my guess that he sent you."

The green eyes widened and he knew he had struck true. She looked away, at the small hands in her lap, much bejeweled and with scarlet-painted nails.

"That is true," she said at last. "Casta did send me. He wishes to meet with you, to speak of matters to our mutual interest."

"Why did the priest not come himself?"

"He is too busy at the moment. He has much to do."

Blade smiled and tapped the table with his rapier. "I can believe that, Princess. Busy plotting against me, no doubt. And against the Izmir, even while he waits for the old man to die. Tell him not to be impatient—the Izmir may die at any moment. Then he will have only me to deal with."

Hirga clasped her hands over her breasts and looked at Blade again. She was calmer now and Blade admitted that if she was a liar she was a good one.

"You misjudge Casta," she said. "You have heard only one side of the story, you have listened only to the Izmir and his friends, and the old man is in his dotage and his friends are sycophants. You cannot know the truth about Casta until you see and meet him and judge for yourself."

He nodded gravely. "There is some truth in that. And I am willing to meet your priest. When and where?"

She stood up and came close to him. A faint fragrance of flowers came from her and her skin was like milk. He sought for blemishes in that face and found none. Her brow was high, the nose straight and fine with flaring nostrils, her mouth firm and full and moist. Blade felt a renewed stirring in his loins and invoked his will. This woman was dangerous to him in some manner which, at the moment, he did not fully understand. But dangerous she was.

Hirga did not preen for him, did not simper or invite. She stood close and watched him and waited, offering herself with her eyes, and when she saw that he would not succumb she laughed and moved toward the arras and the window.

"Tomorrow when the sun is at the highest. Do you know the Plain of Pyramids?"

Blade nodded. "I have glimpsed them. Nothing more." He had caught an occasional glance at the great level stretch of land to the south of the palace, dotted with white marble pyramids built as monuments to past rulers of Zir.

"You have seen the unfinished block that the Izmir builds for himself?"

He nodded again. "Once I saw it. I have had little time to explore Zir."

The old man had explained to Blade: "All the others built small pyramids to themselves. I shall build a square, a stone block that towers to the sky and will cover many cubits. There will be a maze so cunningly wrought that, when I am buried, none will be able to find me and dishonor my bones."

He thought of this now and smiled. Vanity. Hirga mistook his smile and said, "You need not fear. Casta does not plot treachery. The truth is that he fears you a little, as do I, and he wishes only to talk and come to terms."

"I will not come alone," said Blade. "But I will come—to the unfinished monument?"

"Yes. The priests' quarters are there, in the lower half of the structure, and it is there that Casta had been staying this past month while you—"

She broke off and stared at him again. "Is it really true, Blade? There are those who swear to it and yet I cannot believe—"

"That I grew from babe to man in a month? It is true, Hirga. Take that to your priest. Convince him. And tell him that I will be there tomorrow when the sun is high. Goodnight, Hirga."

Her lovely face tightened. "You do not call me Princess—"

"I call you Hirga. You are not *my* Princess. Go now!"

She glared, then softened and smiled. "You had best bid your man let me pass. I cannot expect him to piss at my convenience *every* time."

Blade smiled and agreed. And determined to tighten his security. He summoned the surprised guard from beneath his window and, whilst the man came around by a postern, the Princess Hirga slipped out and was gone.

When the guard reported Blade said, "There is a secret way into these grounds. I have no clues to it and cannot help you, but I know it is there. You will take a squad

and begin searching for it at once. I want no word from you until it is found. Understood?"

The guard saluted and left. Blade went to bed and for half an hour tested the crystal. No communication. At last he slept.

Ogier sulked as they rode from the palace-city south to the great Plain of the Pyramids. As they came to the first of the monuments Blade saw that the plain stretched for miles in every direction and he counted a score of pyramids at first glance. Others loomed like stone triangles on the far horizon. Some miles ahead was the huge unfinished block of the Izmir's monument.

"I do not like this," said Ogier, "and the Izmir will not like it. Casta cannot be trusted. He is a priest, for one thing, and for another he remains out here, alone and aloof, and brews wickedness and black magic. There will be trouble."

Blade glanced back at his escort. Ten mounted and heavily armed men. Blade was himself wearing battle armor and carried broadsword and mace, with a dagger thrust into his belt as well. He laughed at Ogier.

"If we cannot handle a gaggle of priests then we had best give up soldiering and become priests ourselves. Cheer up, Ogier. I will handle this. And remember that I am my own man now, even though son and heir to the Izmir, and I do as I will. If you do not like my service you are free to go and no prejudice from me."

"You still do not understand," grumbled Ogier. "That is because you are a god, or close to a god, and you do not fear the things that ordinary men fear. But I tell you that Casta and his priests are to be feared. They do dark and evil things out here. It is said that they make monsters, beasts so fearful that a man's sight is blighted if he looks upon them."

"And what do they do with these monsters?"

"They use them to guard the priestly treasures. They roam the mazes and slay and devour any who come to steal. The priests of Zir, and especially Casta, are rich beyond all dreaming, Blade. I have heard all this and I believe it."

Blade laughed. "So will I believe it—when I see it. When I have laid eyes on one of the monsters."

Ogier grunted but did not speak. They rode a little time in silence. The massive block of marble that was to be the Izmir's resting place and monument grew larger on the horizon. Blade called a halt and during the rest found a stick and notched it. By using the sun and shadow and simple triangulation he, made an educated guess—the Izmir's monolith already thrust into the sky some 300 feet and would

have covered four city blocks in Home Dimension. It was a magnificent piece of engineering. Now it was shrouded in a pall of dust and topped by cranes and derricks and other engines. Enormous ramps led to the structure on all four sides. Thousands of slaves toiled and sweated, dragging blocks of marble up the ramps on wooden rollers. Even at that distance Blade could hear the hoarse cries of the overseers and the crack of whips as they lashed flesh.

Ogier scratched his stubble. "I do not think that the Izmir will live to see it finished. He is too ambitious. It must go yet another 300 feet higher and there are to be gardens on top. If he had another hundred thousand slaves it might be possible, but he has not. No, the old man will never see it finished."

They started on. Blade said, "Who builds this? Who is the architect, the engineer?"

Ogier nearly smiled. "A man called Thane. He is a Hitt and something of a wizard himself. I know him slightly. It was I, in fact, who took him prisoner when he first came across the narrow water."

Blade gave his Captain a puzzled glance. "I do not understand. I was told that the Hitts never surrendered and never became slaves. How is this, then?"

"I know. That is true. But this Thane is an exception. He is not a slave. Ordinarily he would have been killed, but the truth is that I took to him, liked the man, and when he sought audience with the Izmir I permitted it. The old man, not the fool that many think, gave Thane a chance to prove himself as a builder. He is marvelously fine at it. So now he is a free man, with some rank, and has all the privileges of Zir."

"I will see and talk to him," Blade said. "If I am to fight Hitts I would know what they are like."

"You are a fool if you fight Hitts," said Ogier bluntly, "but that is your affair. I have had my say about it. As to Thane, he is no common Hitt. The story is told that he had a falling out with Bloodax, the Hitt leader, and had to flee for his life. I do not doubt it. Thane is an intelligent man, and educated, and never should have been a Hitt in the first place. Bloodax is a stupid barbarian."

"We will speak of Bloodax later," said Blade, "when our councils of war begin. Today, after I have seen this priest, you will introduce me to this Thane."

Soon they were into the noise, confusion and billowing dust of the construction area. They made their way through bedlam, picking a path through various engines and tangles of cable and the thousands of hard-working slaves. These included both men and women, even small children, and from a row of gallows dangled those who had rebelled. As they cantered past one small working party, an old man, emaciated

and gray, his strength at an end, fell and could not arise. An overseer clubbed him to death and the body was flung into a pit.

Ogier paid it no mind. Blade let nothing show on his face. This was X Dimension and at the moment he could afford neither sympathy nor conscience. But he marked the incident well and swore inwardly that when he came to real power, and was secure, such things would end. If he lived and prospered, and lingered long enough in Zir, he would free the slaves. That was far in the future and Blade had no guarantee that he would live out the day.

Work was at its busiest on the north and west facades. They rode around to the east facing, into comparative quiet, and found an arched entrance into the monolith guarded by two of the black priests. It was the first time that Blade had seen any of the "crows," as Ogier called them, other than the single glance he had had of Casta before the High Priest denounced him and walked out of the Izmar's audience. He had a fuzzy memory of that occasion, for much had happened since.

Bidding the men remain behind, Blade and Ogier urged their mounts to the entrance and swung down from the saddle. Ogier, stout warrior that he was, was plainly uneasy with the priests. He took refuge in brusqueness.

"You there," he called to the tall one, "here is the Prince Blade, son and heir to the Izmir, come to see Casta. You will conduct him at once." And Ogier shifted his swordbelt and tapped his fingers on the hilt of his sword.

Blade studied the two priests. They were dressed all in black, robes and hose and shoes, and black hoods covered most of their faces. What he could see of flesh was fishbelly white, and the eyes of both had a fanatic gleam. They ignored Ogier and fixed those gimlet eyes on Blade. Both men wore girdles of twisted silver cord from which dangled curved daggers in ivory sheaths. Not, thought Blade, a gentle religious order. It was in their eyes and in the set of their features and in their voices. Harshness. Obedience. Fanaticism. Death.

The tall priest spoke at last. "You are Blade?" He took a step near the big man and a dirty, long-nailed hand fiddled with the dagger at his belt. Ogier muttered and moved in. Blade waved him back.

"Let be, Ogier. I am Blade, priest. I come to see the one called Casta. You will take me to him without delay."

Ogier muttered again. "Do not do it, Blade. Do not go in there alone. Let me come with you."

Blade laughed. "You are an old woman, Ogier. Stay here and wait for me."

He strode into the entrance, beckoning to the tall priest. "I said we go. Or must I seek out Casta alone?"

Without speaking, and with downcast eyes, the priest slipped in front of Blade and crooked a finger. Blade followed. They went down a marble ramp into a central chamber from which a dozen corridors radiated like the spokes of a wheel. Torches, held by iron rings, flickered over each entrance. The tall priest plucked a torch from its sconce and, beckoning once again to Blade, led the way into a labyrinth of marbled halls that soon had the big man totally confused. Already he was lost. It would be possible, he thought, to wander for days in such a maze and never find his way out.

The priest went swiftly, never looking back, and Blade hurried to keep up. They came to a steep flight of narrow marble steps and descended. The air was hot and oppressive now and Blade began to sweat. They entered a chamber with a pit in the middle. The priest signed to Blade to step onto the platform. In all this time he had not spoken. He watched, sunken eyes glowering from the hood, as the platform sank with Blade on it.

Blade drew his sword and loosed the mace in his belt. He was not so sure of himself now. It might have been wise to have fetched Ogier along.

The platform halted and Blade gazed into a vast cavern. Somewhere a fire burned and cast lurid red shadows. Blade stepped off the platform, peered into the gloom and kept his sword ready. The silence made him uneasy.

The Princess Hirga appeared from the gloom. She was wearing the silver trousers, but this time her breasts were bare and Blade felt a spasm of desire as he gazed at those perfect cones. They would match his hands and they were as firm as the marble above him.

Hirga saw his glance and smiled in a secret way, beckoning to him. "You can put away your sword, Blade. Casta awaits you and he plans no treachery. Follow me."

Blade sheathed his sword and followed. She led him back into the cavern, past grinning skeletons, some mounted and some dangling from the rafters. Hirga indicated them and said, "Casta is a great scholar. He opens bodies and examines them, and he knows and has names for every bone."

They passed what seemed to be a smithy, where coke fires glowed and cast off a great deal of heat. Blade sweated harder.

"Casta works in iron," explained Hirga. "When he needs a certain tool and does not have it, he makes it."

Blade said nothing. This High Priest was certainly a man of parts. Blade mentally girded himself for the encounter. He began to get the feeling that he was going up against an equal, something that rarely happened in Dimension X.

Hirga stopped before a leather curtain, slit like a stage curtain. She motioned. "In there, Blade. Casta is waiting. He would speak to you alone first."

As he stepped toward the curtain she moved to him and her jutting breasts touched his chest armor. Her green eyes were bold. She laid a hand on his heavily muscled arm. "And perhaps later, Blade, there will be time for us. I am curious about you. I would know more of you."

Blade nodded curtly. "Perhaps, Hirga. We shall see" He parted the leather curtain and stepped through.

This chamber was small and at first glance crammed beyond capacity with specimens of all types—stuffed animals, skeletons, a great many skulls, books and bottles and casks and retorts. A small fire burned in an iron grate, and before the fire was a long table. Behind the table sat a man dressed in black.

"Come better into the light," said the man at the table. "When I first, and last, saw you I saw a baby. Now let me behold the miracle for myself."

Blade strode into the circle of firelight. "You are the High Priest Casta?"

"I am he. And you are Blade, the child full grown to manhood in one course of the moon. Yes, now I believe it. If it is trickery, and in some manner it must be, I would give all my present knowledge to know the trick."

Blade steeled himself. It was not like him, in his X-Dimension persona, to feel so ill at ease. The man was nothing—a priest, a charlatan, a greedy power-grabber. Nothing more. Why did Blade's nerves tingle and his sweat turn cold and his knees feel unsteady?

Gloom shrouded the figure behind the table. Blade strode to the table and leaned over it, peering. "You have taken a good look at me, Casta. Now I demand the same. Turn your face to the fire, priest."

The chuckle was low, throaty. "Yes. That is fair. Look, Blade!"

The eyes, huge and burning black, were torches in a skull. The face was a death's head, bone with saffron flesh drawn over it like a drum. A skull. Blade could see the veins writhing like blue worms. The nose was vulpine, sharp as a nail, and the lips a bloodless anus.

There was no hair. No hair at all. No lashes and no brows, and the pate as sleek as the skull near at hand on the table.

Blade had an odd thought for such a moment. If this was the lover of Hirga, as was said, then the times were indeed out of joint. Even for Zir. Even for Dimension X.

Casta picked up a black skullcap from the table and placed it on his glabrous head. He chuckled again and pointed to a cask nearby. "You have seen. And yet you have seen nothing, for what a man is is not carried on his face nor in his muscles or bones. Sit there, Blade, and we shall have our talk. But let us understand each other from the outset—I do not think you are a fool and I am not a fool. I hate waste of time. If we speak truth to each other, and only truth, and do not waste words in fencing or deceit, we shall get much further. Do you agree to this?"

Blade sank onto the cask. "I agree in principle." He glanced at the wall behind the table and saw what could only be a sky chart. The man was an astronomer as well.

"I am a practical man," said Casta. "I seek power. I have power now, but I want more. For only with power, absolute power, can I do the things I want to do. The reason I have not had you murdered before now, Blade, is that I think you can help me. And I can help you. If this is true we would be fools to fly at each other's throat—and we have already agreed that we are not fools, eh?"

Blade was cautious. "I can see how I might help you, Casta. But how can you help me?"

The low chuckle again. "In many ways. By advice, by intrigue, by treachery if need be, and by treasure. Lastly, and most important, by not having you killed."

Blade leaped to his feet and slammed a fist on the table. He half drew his sword. "You keep saying that, priest. I think you boast. If you are so sure you can murder me then why not try it now?"

Casta patted his gash of a mouth with bloodless fingers. The great dark eyes burned at Blade. once more he chuckled.

"Such is not my way." He tapped his skull. "In here is my strength. But sit down, Blade, and hear me out. Be calm. We are not children, or slaves, or simple folk. Now tell me—whence do you come?"

As Blade went back to the cask he decided to play along. For a moment he had been on the verge of putting his steel into Casta and having done with it, but intuition told him that he would never leave the place alive. He could not, for instance, even find his way out through that maze of corridors.

"There is little point in telling you that," he said, "for you would never understand. I come from another world, perhaps another planet, though as to that I cannot be certain. The difference is in dimension and not in time. But it is hopeless—you could not know of these things."

"You are arrogant," said Casta. "Intellectually arrogant, and that is the worst kind. How do you know what I know, Blade? Let me tell you—I have long suspected that there are other worlds, other times and dimensions, than are known here in Zir. We here are locked in ignorance, all but myself, and I think that you are such a person, come from such a place, and that your trick of growing from babe to man in a month is nothing but some advanced machinery of the brain. I cannot do it, nor even understand it, but I know that it can be explained and I do not fear it. There is nothing of the supernatural about you, Blade. That is my department, my skill, and mayhap one day I will show you something. But as of now, my bristling friend, I want to keep you alive and learn from you. When your knowledge is mine, when I have drained you of all you know, then is time to worry about dying. In the meantime we are not friends and will not pretend to be. But we can help each other. It would be a pity if we did not. What say you now?"

Blade, with a sinking feeling, knew that he had been right. He had met his match. This living skeleton was his peer. Blade did not like to think that Casta might be his superior.

"I will make a truce," he said at last. "When time affords I will tell you what I can, and what you can grasp, of what I am and how I came here. It will not be easy. And what do I get in return, other than the assurance that you will not have me murdered?"

"I will give you power and freedom of movement. I will give you treasure, or at least show you where it is."

"Treasure? What kind of treasure?"

"Hah," said Casta. "I have struck a note. You are a seeker, Blade, and a seeker usually is after treasure of one sort or another. But we must see—perhaps the treasure I can offer is not what you seek." He opened a drawer in the desk and reached into it.

Blade tested the crystal in his brain. Not working. Nothing. No matter at the moment. But treasure was what England wanted, needed, and treasure was what the Prime Minister demanded. Teleportation was working now—at least it worked in the labs in Scotland—and if there was anything in Zir worth sending back.

Casta put something on his desk. It resembled a large lump of coal, irregular and many-faceted, except that it was colorless and of a crystalline purity. Blade gazed at

it in awe. It couldn't be. It simply could not be. He left his cask and swept the lump off the table and took it to the fire. He held it up. A million fires danced and reflected in the giant prism; it sparked and burned in every facet and somewhere deep in it glowed a rainbow. It was! It was a diamond.

Chapter 8

Blade hefted the diamond in his hand. It weighed at least ten pounds and would run to thousands of carats. He held it to the fire again and his hand seemed to catch flame from it. Here was treasure indeed. If there were more of these stones, and if they could be teleported back to Home Dimension—

Behind him the High Priest said, "I was in the right of it, Blade. You are a seeker and you have found—it is written on your face. Already your mind changes and you are more inclined to bargain with me."

Blade put the diamond on the table and stared at Casta. "You are partly in the right—it depends. How came you by this stone? Are there more? Are they easy to come by?"

Casta folded his hands on his frail chest. "Hold a moment. Knowledge for knowledge. What is this thing called in the place from which you come?"

"A diamond. They are deemed of much value and greatly sought after."

Casta compressed his thin lips. "Indeed? How strange. Here they are but edged stones that are good for cutting. Thane, the builder, showed me the use of one to cut stone or metal. Diamond, you say? I have never heard the word."

Blade poked the great diamond with his finger. "You do not answer my questions. Are there more of these?"

"Not in Zir. We have none."

"Where then?"

"In the land of the Hitts. They have mountains of the stuff. They accord it no great value except to make statues of their kings and queens—after they are dead. So if you really value these diamonds, as you call them, you must cross the narrow water and take them from the Hitts. That will not be easy. Loth Bloodax, the leader of the Hitts, is a savage and a barbarian, but he is a great warrior. It will take a greater warrior to defeat him. I admit that you have the look of a warrior .. are you one in truth?"

"I am," said Blade. "If you have a champion and wish to test me, bring him forward."

Casta gave him a very odd look, then covered his lips with a hand. "In time—in time. I have such a champion, but the time for that is not yet. Let us get back—you want these diamonds. To get them you must invade the Hitts. To do that with any hope of success, you must have my help. Shall we strike a bargain?"

Blade pondered before he answered. Casta broke in on his thoughts and now there was a touch of impatience in his tone.

"If it will help you in coming to a decision I will tell you something—something I had not meant you to know just yet. The Izmir is dead. In this last hour."

Blade stared. "How can you know that?"

Casta shrugged. "By mirror message, how else? Surely you have seen and understood that, and how we use the sun, you who know so much."

Heliograph. Blade had seen the flashes in the sky many times and had tried to decode the messages to no avail. He decided that Casta was telling the truth.

So he nodded and said, "How came this about?"

Casta shrugged again. "I know only what the message spelt out. The Izmir had a seizure in his chambers and was dead before his surgeons could be sent for. You may be sure of it. My spies in the palace would not dare lie to me in this matter."

The Izmir's death changed everything. The old man, as frail and ill as he had been, had afforded Blade some protection. He had pronounced Blade his son and heir, Prince, and now he was gone and Blade was bereft of sponsors—other than his sword and his strength and his cunning. What of Ogier and his twelve stout men? Would they cling to a man so disinherited?

Casta said, "I think you had best strike the bargain, Blade. For both our sakes. I want no trouble and you can afford none. If I have you slain I will be the loser, for you carry knowledge that I would have. Do not force it. Agree."

Blade decided. "For the time being, then. To what would you have me agree?"

Casta smiled, showing toothless gums, and picked up the skull from his table. He toyed with it.

"Good. You are being wise. So hear me out and, when I am done, I will hear your objections.

"First I would have you marry Hirga. She is a princess, the sole blood of the Izmir that survives—all the other infants having been strangled to ensure this—and

by taking her to wife you will become Prince Consort. The people of Zir will accept that and, though my hand will be suspected in it, they will not know for sure. For I am not loved, Blade, nor my priests. I am hated and feared and, while I do not care for myself, such hatred and distrust is an obstacle to my plans. So I remain hidden and you and Hirga will seem to rule.

"You will marry as soon as the funeral is over and the Izmir has been placed in his crypt in this place. A pity he did not live to see it finished for I could have wished him that. As soon as you marry you will move against the Hitts. I wish them destroyed."

"Why?"

For the first time rage showed in Casta's face. "Because they are mockers. They laugh at me and defy me. Loth Bloodax is an arrogant savage and must be taught a lesson. And there are other reasons—I would have the lands of the Hitts. They are of no value to me, but my north flank must be protected when I march at last to the east and to the west and south. I have plans for conquest in due time, Blade, and I do not want the Hitts at my back. Are you agreeable so far?"

Blade feigned doubt, though he knew that in the end he must agree. With the Izmir dead he was in a weak position. He must bide his time, play along and await developments. So he nodded.

"So far I agree. With these conditions—I am to have complete command of the armies. I will choose my own officers. I will take whatever diamonds I find as my share of the loot. Other than that, and if Hirga agrees to the marriage, I am in accord."

Casta put the skull down. "I see no quarrel. Hirga will do as I bid her. So go now, back to the palace-city and await word from me. In the meantime you can make plans for the invasion, subject to the interruption of funeral and marriage services. I think they will not greatly hinder you?"

"No," said Blade. "I will get on with it. Goodbye, Casta."

The High Priest did not rise. He gave Blade a thin smile. "Goodbye. Hirga will be waiting for you. Since you are to wife her, Blade, it might be as well to pay her some attention and do as she lists. Spend some time with her and listen—she is not a fool. And think not of treachery, Blade, for I will know of it and there would be trouble and great loss to both of us. Think always that, though we are not friends, we need not be mortal enemies. Let your brain rule and not your emotions. Farewell for now."

At the leather curtain Blade halted and looked back. "I would have a word with

this Thane, the builder. I may have use for him. I will need an engineer for the Hitt invasion."

Casta shrugged. "See him. Talk. Arrange it as you will. Goodbye, Blade."

Hirga was waiting for him in the cavern. She took his hand and drew him into an adjacent corridor and thence to a bare cubicle in which there was only a cot. She wore only the silver trousers and atop her piled red hair sparkled the coronal. Blade sought for diamonds in it and could see none.

There was an odd smell in the cubicle. Blade could not identify it, but it was unpleasant. A burnt smell, a rotten smell, somehow an odor of feces and death and rot that yet eluded those names.

Hirga's green eyes were bold and her teeth gleamed. She took Blade's hands and placed them on her jutting breasts. "Since we are to marry we had best get acquainted."

Blade was aroused physically but felt no real desire for her. This he accounted strange indeed for he was a sensual man. He kissed and caressed her briefly and she drew him to the cot. Her eyes were wild and out of focus and she did not lie down for him at once, but insisted on loosing his kilt and making a long study of his phallus. She fondled it and stroked and leaned closer to see it, and Blade, for the first time in his life, sensed that he was found wanting in the genital department. She did not speak of it, and when they coupled on the cot she gave every outward sign of enjoyment, but he knew. She lay on the cot and watched as he arranged his clothing and armor and buckled on his sword, and he saw discontent in the green eyes. He had not satisfied her. He could not understand it.

The foul smell was in the cubicle again and as he went to the door he saw something shining on the floor. He stooped to pick it up. It was of silvery sheen, a hard substance, leathery and pliable, and he thought it some sort of scale. A fish scale? On impulse he sniffed at it and the foul odor was there. He flung it away and glanced back at the cot. Hirga was watching him with her mouth half open, her red tongue lolling out and her eyes narrowed. She was laughing at him. She knew something that he did not, about a subject that he could not fathom. Blade stared at her.

"Something amuses you, Hirga? Tell me. Matters have not gone so well today that I could not use a laugh."

Hirga laughed. She covered her breasts with her arms and swung her feet off the cot and smiled at him. "It is nothing, Blade. Nothing you will know of, or understand, ever. I am sorry. Goodbye, Blade. I will see you next at the marriage ceremony. Casta wishes it so. Until then goodbye."

For the second time in half an hour he had been summarily dismissed. He nodded coldly and left the cubicle. Anger rose in him and he forced it down. He must walk carefully. He would marry her, for in that direction lay his fortunes of the moment, but he did not look forward to it.

And he rankled—never in his life had he failed to satisfy a woman, to bring her to cries of pleasure and orgasm. What had gone wrong with Hirga?

Blade scowled and shrugged it away. Matters of greater moment were afoot. There was no time to waste in vanity or in brooding over lost sexual powers. But that was just the point—he had been strong and of long duration, had used time-proven techniques, and yet Hirga had not come to climax. She had not bothered to fake and she had not reproached, but they both knew. And her knowing look at the last— *whatdid* she know? Blade cursed heartily and made himself forget it.

The tall priest waited for him by the platform. He was led out into the sunlight at the entrance where Ogier paced impatiently. He greeted Blade and scowled darkly at the priest.

"Another few minutes, Blade, and I meant to come seeking you, priests or no. I would love to put my steel into those black bellies, in any case."

They were alone by the archway. The two priests had gone. Ogier's men lolled a little way off. Blade clapped the Captain on the shoulder.

"Listen to me, Ogier, and listen well. Then you must decide. For much has happened and I need a friend now as never before."

He told Ogier of the interview with Casta and that the Izmir was dead. He spoke of his promised marriage to Hirga. He said nothing of the interlude in the cubicle.

Ogier, arms akimbo, stepped back a pace and surveyed Blade. His face was dark. "And you agreed to all this?"

"I had to, Ogier. I was in a weak position. I had no power to strike a better bargain."

Ogier shook his head. "You have me. I have sworn an oath and I will bide by it. So will my men."

"Ogier! Think, man. You and a dozen soldiers, no matter how loyal?"

"I could get other men. I am not the only soldier who hates the priests."

"How many men, Ogier?"

The Captain scratched at his stubble. "Perhaps a thousand. Or even more."

Blade smiled wryly. "And how many priests are there in Zir? I want a cool answer, Ogier. Forget your prejudice and anger. Give me an officer's answer."

Ogier frowned. "At last intelligence, Casta had some ten thousand priests to his back. I admit the number. But it is of no matter. Give me a thousand good men and I will slit their throats as if they were pigeons and not black crows. Only we had best hurry before Casta can organize. Give me the word, Blade—"

Blade shook his head. "No. It is my game and I will play it my way."

Ogier looked his disgust. "As you say. I promised the Izmir I would obey you, and I will—but you are a fool. For one thing—cannot you see why Casta sends you to invade the Hitts? To get you out of the way, and at the same time do his dirty job for him. For it is true that the Hitts are a menace to our north flank and we dare not invade elsewhere until they are pacified."

Blade grinned at him. "That is better. That is the soldier thinking. Keep to such thoughts, Ogier, and let me worry about the plots and the intrigues. I am not a child at such matters. Now take me to this Thane."

With his little party trailing along behind, Blade was directed to a cluster of huts nearby on the plain. In the largest of the huts he found the man called Thane and so glimpsed his first Hitt.

Thane was as tall as Blade and thicker in the chest and shoulders. His yellow hair fell to his shoulders and his eyes were wide set and an icy blue. He wore leather trousers and a vest and the hair on his bare chest was thick and as yellow as his head. He did not rise as they came into the hut. There was a cup on the table and a large jar of wine nearby and it was evident that Thane was drunk. For a moment Blade thought to come another time, or have the man brought to him, then he realized that here was a man who could drink and still hold to his senses. The voice was thick and the eyes bloodshot, but Thane knew what he was about.

Ogier spoke first, introducing Blade, and then stood back. Thane stared at Blade, still not rising, and if there was no overt disrespect in his tone and mien, neither was there respect. Blade was secretly amused, and not displeased. He did not want a serf. And it was evident that Thane could draw the line just short of insolence.

"So you are the babe grown to a man so soon, eh? I have been wanting to see with my own eyes, for one must be a fool to believe these Zirniens. But now I see and I must believe. But how, I ask? I would give a lot to know the trick."

Blade smiled. "So said the High Priest Casta."

Thane scowled and smashed at the table with a huge fist. "Do not speak to me of that black corpse. It sickens me to think of him. But he is a brain-picker for all that—I admit it. He is always after my secrets. Not that I tell him. I lie to him. Not that he believes me. Aha, what games we play, the crow and me!"

Blade sat down and poured himself a cup of wine. Ogier looked on, arms crossed on his barrel chest, and refused drink. "One of us must stay sober," he commented dourly. "This is not a time for drinking, Blade. It is a time for thought and preparation."

Blade grinned and winked at Thane. "I know, Ogier. I will have but the one cup. And why am I here, if not for thought and preparation?" Thane drank off his wine and splashed his cup full again. "You speak like a warrior, Blade, and you look like a warrior. Are you one?"

"I am," said Blade mildly. "As time will prove. And it is of war that I came here to speak, Thane."

Thane belched. "You want something of me, then? I thought so. What is it?"

"I plan to invade the Hitts. I need an engineer. I will make you a Captain and you will have full authority in your field, also a full share of loot and treasure."

Thane shook his head. "I am well enough here. Anyway, the work is not finished yet. Now that the old man is dead I would like to finish it quickly, even though he will never see it."

"I could command you," said Blade softly, "but I will not. An unwilling man gives poor service. But hear me out. There is no great hurry to finish the block. The Izmir will sleep as peacefully. Whereas I would take the Hitts off balance and strike as swiftly as possible after my preparations are made. I plan to build a pontoon over the narrow water so I will not have to depend on boats or wind."

Thane began to laugh. He spilled wine into his chest hair and daubed at it and roared. "A pontoon? A bridge? Aha-ho-ho-it has been tried, Blade. It failed. The Hitts swam out and cut it in the middle and those Zirnians who did not drown were slaughtered when they reached land. Ho-ho-ho- A pontoon! You will have to do better than that."

Blade glanced at Ogier. The Captain nodded. "It is so. Some half-dozen years ago. The last time the Izmir tried to tame the Hitts."

Thane drank wine and roared on, slapping a leg like an oak limb. "You may be a

warrior, Blade, but you are no general. You do not interest me. You have no ideas. You will never beat the Hitts."

"I will beat the Hitts." Blade was calm. "I said to hear me out. I plan to build *two* pontoons—one with much bustle and show above the water. The other pontoon—the one we will use—will be built at a distance from the first and it will be a foot *below* the water. It will be built at night and in secrecy. But it will be difficult, such a task, and very likely beyond your powers, Thane. I will find another man. Thank you for the wine. Come, Ogier, it is time we rode back and—"

Thane was staring at Blade. The big blond man smiled and slapped at the table, sending a pool of wine splashing.

"Two pontoons, eh? One as a feint, a decoy, and the other under the surface? By the gods—I never thought of that. It might work. But you are right—it will be a hard task."

"Probably impossible," agreed Blade. "Forget it, Thane. I dreamed. I doubt that it can be done. Not even by you. So—"

Thane regarded Blade for a moment with a scowl. Then he laughed and filled his cup again. "I know your method, Blade, and how you seek to lure me. I am not fooled, not taken in. But it can be done. It is a challenge and I will undertake it—as soon as I am sober."

"When will that be?"

Thane waved his wine cup. "In a day or so. I am in mourning for the Izmir."

Blade smiled. "That is as good an excuse as any."

"Yes. When the time comes I will build your two pontoons for you. But there will be a price."

"Name it, Thane."

The Hitt put his elbows on the table and leaned over it. His breath came wine-laden to Blade.

Thane leered. "Has Ogier told you of why I fled my own country?"

"Not I," said Ogier. "How could I? You never told me."

Thane looked puzzled for a moment and scratched at his yellow mane. "I didn't? No, I suppose not. I was too busy trying to save my head. Well, no matter—here is

the truth of it. There was a woman. Her name was Trosa and she was wife to Galligantus, chief Captain to Loth Bloodax. But she was my woman first and loved me and I her, but when Galligantus asked for her she was given. I had no say. Loth Bloodax rules the Hitts. I offered to fight for her, but Bloodax would not permit it, the truth being, of course, that he knew I would slay Galligantus and he would be out a Captain. Oh, Galligantus is a great warrior and a fine Captain, I give him that, but I would have slain him just the same. I was in love and would have found the skill and strength in that love. But Bloodax refused to sanction the duel. So I had to let Trosa go. But I did not give her up, if you take my meaning?"

Blade and Ogier exchanged glances. Blade nodded. "I take your meaning, Thane. The story is somewhat familiar."

"Ah? Mayhap, but not to me. Anyway I did not give up my Trosa. Whenever Galligantus was away, I was in her bed. Somehow it was sweeter so."

Ogier laughed harshly. "And you were caught?"

Thane nodded and reached for the wine again. There were tears in his eyes now and he spilled wine as he drank.

"Aye, I was caught. Among the Hitts the punishment for adultery is to be torn apart by horses. I was made to watch the death of my Trosa. She was put naked into a public place and beaten to death with clubs."

There was a pause. Thane swilled wine. "That night I escaped and swam over the narrow water... As far as I know, Galligantus still lives. Promise me his head, Blade, and I will build your pontoons for you. And anything else that needs building."

"You have it," said Blade. "If we can come by it. But why Galligantus and not this Loth Bloodax? You say that Bloodax is the ruler of the Hitts—surely his word was the last?"

"No." Thane shook his head, then lowered it to the table, cushioned on his thick arms. "No. Bloodax left it up to Galligantus. His was the last word. He could have spared her. He did not. He struck the first blow."

Thane began to weep. Ogier signed to Blade and they left the hut. "We had best hurry," said Ogier. "It will be dark before we get back to the palace. You will, of course, move into the Izmir's palace now?"

Blade had not thought of it, but he nodded assent. He had no real power in Zir yet, but a display of the trappings would do no harm. He drew away and rode alone, thinking hard. Events were rushing on and he must meet them and be ready. And tonight, when the palace was quiet, he must use the crystal, must get in touch with

the computer. Diamonds. Mountains of diamonds.

Chapter 9

The Izmir was entombed and Richard Blade was married. He kept away from the first ceremony and, though it was permitted in Zirnian law to marry by proxy, attended the second. He moved into the Izmir's palace and spent his wedding night there. It was not a great success. Blade sensed that he did not content Hirga, though she said nothing, and within a week they agreed to separate chambers. Blade came to understand the arrangement and, apart from a wound to his vanity, was not displeased. Hirga was his wife and always willing to couple with him, but her first and chief duty was to provide liaison with Casta.

The High Priest remained in his cavern and made no visit to the palace-city that Blade knew of. He sent no word other than that Blade get on with the invasion of the Hitts.

Blade sent for Valli on several occasions and bedded her and listened to her reports. He learned little of value. Rumors and rumors of rumors. The black priests were making themselves scarce in the palace-city but were converging on the Plain of Pyramids in great numbers. Work continued at a great pace on the Izmir's monument and it was to be finished in a few weeks. The black priests, coming from all over Zir, were set to work alongside the slaves. Blade pondered all this and made no great sense of it other than the obvious—Casta was grouping his man-power, collecting his forces against the time he might need them.

Blade had his own manpower troubles. The Zirnian army was in a sad state. Morale was poor, the pay low and the common soldiers lazy and inefficient. Blade began to change all that. He organized a general staff and appointed Ogier as chief. Thane was made head of logistics and engineering and began to build a pontoon over the narrow water. To do this, Blade had to introduce labor conscription. This, Valli told him during one of her visits, was the cause of much discontent among the ordinary people of Zir.

All in all, Blade made good progress and was content. There was one incident, though, that occurred on the night before he was to ride to the coast with Thane and Ogier. It disturbed and upset him because he could not understand it and he feared things he could not understand, especially in his present ambience where he thought of himself as superior—with the possible exception of Casta—and it was maddening to know that certain matters were beyond his ken.

He chanced to visit Hirga's chambers unannounced—she lived in another part of the palace and had her own retinue—and he found her half asleep and with the rosy and contented look of a woman satiated. She made no effort to rise but greeted him courteously enough, though with a certain soft-voiced scorn. She had trouble

keeping her eyes open and there was languor and fulfillment in the sprawl of her lovely body on the huge bed. Blade, who cared nothing for her, was nonetheless rankled. And did not at first notice the odor.

Blade stood at the foot of her bed, hand on sword, and surveyed his Princess wife, "You do not miss me, Hirga? You have taken a lover."

Her mouth was puffy and her lip salve smeared. She still breathed hard. She could hardly open her eyes as she answered. "Why do you say that, Blade? How can you know such a thing?"

"By the look of you, woman. I am neither a child nor a fool. You have just been filled, stuffed, and not long ago. It must have been greatly to your liking, by the look of you."

Hirga gave him an enigmatic smile and wiggled a finger. "I do not admit it. Or deny it. It is a pity that you cannot do so for me."

Blade glared, knowing he was a fool, but there is a time when the child in every man will surface.

"Would you care to tell me who it is? I promise I will take no revenge, for I do not care that much, but if it is one of my Captains I should know. For it bespeaks lack of loyalty to me—I will retire him and you shall have him as a companion."

The truth being, he told himself, that he longed to see this man who was a better cocksman than himself.

Hirga opened her eyes wider and laughed at him. "Do not concern yourself, Blade. It is none of your Captains, none in this palace or in the city, and none of your affair."

Blade began to anger. She sought to make a fool of him. "How can that be?" he snapped. "I came by the single corridor that leads to these chambers and I met no one. The place swarms with guards. You die swooning, a woman who has just left off making love, and yet you tell me the man is not near! Mind yourself, Hirga. I know that we play games, you and I and Casta, for mutual benefit, but do not push me too far. I care not a damn whom you bed with, you slut, but I will have you preserve the amenities and be secret about it. I have a task to accomplish in Zir and if I am laughed at it will be the harder done."

"I am secret about it," said Hirga. Her smile mocked him. "I am *very* secret about it, Blade. You may believe me in this—nobody sees my lover come and go." And suddenly she buried her face in the pillow and went off into wild laughter.

Blade was puzzled, baffled, and it made him the angrier. It was then he noticed the odor, the foul smell he had noted in the cubicle in the cavern. It was fainter now, barely evident, but it was there. He frowned and wrinkled his nose.

Remembering, he stalked about the bed and the room and searched the floor. He found three of the silvery scales and picked them up and sniffed. The smell. He flung them away from him and looked at Hirga, She had turned and was watching him through fingers spread over her face. Still laughing at him.

Blade was beaten and knew it. There was a mystery here he could not guess at, and she would never tell. He flung the insult as he left.

"I was wrong, mayhap. You have no lover—other than your fingers. I think you do it yourself and call it lover. It is why I can never content you, for no man could. It is said that such women can never find satisfaction of a man, but must always turn to self-love. I wish you joy of it, Hirga."

She screamed something at him as he stalked out, but he made no sense of it. Something about a little man with nothing between his legs who pretended godship. Blade slammed the door and made a vow—as soon as this thing between Casta and himself was resolved he would see that something was done about Hirga. For now it must bide as it was.

As he made his way back to his own quarters he realized how far he had adapted to Zir, to this present Dimension X. Blade of Home Dimension had faded. He retained the crystal in his brain and full memory of HD, and he still had his sense of mission, but he was now a Zirnian.

The crystal still was not working.

The next morning Blade, with Ogier and Thane, and a large bodyguard, rode to the coast. It was his first glimpse of the narrow water.

It was near a day's ride, and as they went Ogier and Thane answered Blade's questions. Thane wore new armor, which he had forged himself, and a helmet with bronze horns on it. "It will confuse the Hitts," he joked. "For they wear the same themselves. If we ever get across the water and *if* we can bring Loth Bloodax and Galligantus to battle, I may get close enough to his head to take it. I am a Hitt, after all, and they might mistake me for friend."

Ogier laughed. "I think you have been at the wine again."

"No." Thane reached beneath his chest armor to scratch. "But it is an idea. Tonight—"

"Tonight you will stay sober," Blade said. "No man drinks until we have accomplished our task. After that, Thane, you can roll in the gutter, for all of me."

They came to the narrow water as first dusk was falling. Fires blazed on high cliffs across the channel, as Blade immediately thought of it. He judged it half a mile wide at this point, where the first pontoon was being built, and it was inevitable that he be reminded of the English Channel. The air was light this night and the water calm and on the Zirnian side the beaches were wide and long and gently sloping.

Torches and fires blazed on the leach near the jutting pontoon, for Thane had sent a division of engineers, guarded by foot soldiers, to begin the work. Blade, accompanied by his two Captains, walked briskly through the encampment. He spoke to wren and inquired of their health and the quality of the food, made a joke here and there and let himself be seen by as many as possible. When they retired to his tent for tree evening meal, Blade said, "They seem in good enough spirits. How does the work go, Thane?"

The big Hitt, soured at being denied wine, was in a grumbling mood, although this was not unusual in him.

"Slowly" he said, "for I must use the dregs for this first bridge. They are slow and clumsy and must be whipped to their work. There is no help for it—I must save my best men to work at night and build the secret pontoon under water. Even I will not ask a man to work *both* day and night."

Blade gnawed the last meat from a bone and cast it to one of the great Zirnian hounds favored by Ogier. "Where do you build this secret pontoon, and how soon?"

Thane unrolled a map on the table and pointed with a finger. "Here. Half a mile to the east of this place. The water is as narrow there as here, and there is a large cove just opposite, a break in the cliffs, with meadows leading inland. There is perhaps a mile of this easy ground before the mountains begin—not much, but it will give us a foothold if we ever get across."

"Aye," said Ogier. "A big if."

"You two are skeptics," grinned Blade, "and believe in nothing. We will get across. I mean to feint at this first pontoon, the one we build above water, but I will feint in strength. Everything must seem as if we actually mean to attack across it in our greatest numbers, our main blow. Bloodax must be convinced of that. To this end we will concentrate all our daytime activity around here and to the west. Nothing must stir to the east, Thane. No fires, no smoke, no action of any sort. Keep your men well back behind the dunes and make them sleep the day away. I would not even have them talk, but I suppose nothing can be done about that."

Thane chuckled. "Not even you, Blade, can stop soldiers from grumbling."

Blade shrugged and assented. "I know. But see that they grumble in low tones. Now you, Ogier, must assemble boats and begin raids over the water. Always to the west, remember. We will lose men and boats, but it will be worth it. Your men must strike fast and hard, raid inland and kill as many Hitts as possible and burn villages. They have permission to loot, if there is time. This will serve to draw the Hitts to the west, where we must keep them. We will raid day after day, a steady pressure, and each raiding party will stay for only an hour before withdrawing. By this we may cut our losses somewhat."

"Not by much," said Ogier. "I have told you—the Hitts fight like devils, even the women and children, and it is easier to raid in than to get out again. We will lose many men and boats."

"Then build more boats and find more men." Blade stabbed a finger at the map. "It is essential that we keep them so busy that they have no time or thought to look eastward."

Thane said, "There is one thing we have not taken into consideration, Blade. The leather-men. The winged ones. They cannot fly far, true, and must always go lower and never up, but it is possible that such a leather-man could fly over our troops in hiding and report it back."

Blade nodded. "I have given that thought and I see no real danger. They must leap from their crags and their glide path is down. If they succeed in crossing the water, it will be easy to find and kill them."

He had not quite believed in the leather-men at first, not until Thane had sworn it so and drawn him sketches. The Hitts trained certain men, built batlike wings of leather on light wood frames, and used them to glide among their mountains. Blade had made a thorough study and was convinced that the Hitts knew nothing of thermals or air currents and thus could not soar as could a glider back in HD. The wings were crude and permitted only a downward glide from a high peak to a lower one. Blade was impressed but not fearful. The leather-men would be only a minor headache.

Ogier, who was against the whole project, was not so sure. "They have already attacked the pontoon," he said. "They launch from their cliffs and fly over my men working and drop stink-fire. The first attack caused a panic."

Blade eyed him. "How many men did you lose?"

"Four only, and they became frightened and fell into the water and drowned."

"And the leather-men—what happened to them?"

Ogier grinned. "They also fell into the water. We killed them with arrows."

"You see. Was the pontoon damaged by fire?"

"No. They missed it. But they will try again."

Blade yawned and stretched. "I am sure they will. Good. Let them try and be killed. As long as they concentrate only on *this* pontoon and do not know of the one under water, I am content. We will mislead them and take them by surprise and beat them. Now let us sleep. There is much to do tomorrow."

Thane yawned. "I agree to that. But I could sleep the better with a single cup of wine."

"No" said Blade. "Go to bed and dream of that pontoon you will build for me. Remember that it must be exactly one foot beneath the water."

"I should have been a fish," grimaced Thane as he left the tent.

The next morning they rode into the dunes and circled to the east and came to where Thane's best labor battalions were camped. Here were great stocks of pilings and planks and tools, all scattered and covered with sand. There were no fires, and Blade had lent Thane his personal Guard for security. He made a rapid inspection of the camp and was satisfied for the moment. He was sure that Loth Bloodax and the Hitts had no inkling of this place, nor of his plan. The problem was to keep it so.

There were other problems too. Thane pointed out one in particular. "We must work in the dark and in silence, Blade, and that is hard enough. But we must also work under water and that greatly slows us—I have recruited the best swimmers and those with the strongest lungs, but no man can stay under for long. So do not count on a speedy job—this bridge will be a long time building."

"That is not good enough," Blade complained. "The underwater pontoon must be completed just as the other one pushes near the Hitt shore—that is my whole plan, that they be drawn there and contest me fiercely. By the time they see us walking on the water, so they will think, it will be too late. That in itself will be a shock and before they recover their wits we will be ashore in strength."

"Then teach my men to breathe under water," said Thane in a surly tone, "and give them gills."

Blade stroked his beard for a moment in deep thought, then grinned and clapped Thane on the shoulder. "I may do that. You have tent cloth here and there is a

smithy?"

"Of course. Do you think to fashion gills of iron?"

"You will see. Fetch me tent cloth and needles and twine or heavy thread."

When this was done Blade had the cloth cut into strips and rolled into tubes and stitched up. "Smear them with tar on the outside," he ordered. "It will make a tighter seal. Now to your smithy."

The armorers were working in a pit dug underground to lessen the noise, and their chief gaped in amazement when Blade explained what he wanted. He found a stick and drew a diagram in the sand for them.

"You have made helmets," he told them, "and this is naught but another helmet. But large—to fit over the head and rest on the shoulders. There must be a hole in the back for the tube and a small plate of glass in the front."

By this time, Thane had grasped the idea and swore joyously. "By the gods, Blade, you do work miracles. But one thing—how are we to force the air down to them?"

Blade was in high humor. He wished all his problems were so simple. He laughed at Thane and pointed to the smithy bellows. "You are an engineer, Thane? How think you?"

"It will work," Thane roared. "I tell you it will work."

"Yes. It will work. And so will you and your men. You will begin tonight. There must be no talking, and you will use signs. All men to be dressed in black. There will be reward for good workers and punishment for loafers or careless men."

"I have thought of all that," said Thane. "I have drilled them this past week. Each man knows his work and there is no need for words."

"Then the gods and luck be with you," Blade said. "Ogier and I ride back now to the west bridge. I will be in touch by courier and see that you do likewise. Farewell for now, Thane."

As they rode westward again, Ogier was silent for a long time. At last he admitted grudgingly that it might all work, that the invasion might be successful.

"But I still do not see the need of it, Blade. To guard our north flank, yes, but that is Casta's plan. He is the ambitious one. It is Casta who wants the north safe so he can invade to the south and east and west. Or is it only Casta? You do his work for

him, Blade. Do you also share his ambitions?"

Blade denied this. "The Hitts have something I want, Ogier. I mean to get it."

The Captain looked his puzzlement. "What? It is a cruel country, all crags and valleys and mountains. The cattle are poor and the soil worse. The Hitts are barbarians and stupid, but perhaps for Thane, and he is not really a Hitt. He is an exception. What, Blade?"

"Diamonds. You know of them?"

Ogier scowled. "You mean the shiny rocks that Thane uses for cutting? I know of them. They are also useful for toys, for children to gaze into, for they catch the sun and make pretty sparkles. I once knew a harem whore who wore one about her neck. And that is what you want? Only diamonds?"

It was impossible to explain and Blade did not try. He merely said, "In the place from whence I come, Ogier, such shiny rocks are accounted valuable. They are used for money."

Ogier shook his head. "They must be fools indeed where you come from. A stone is a stone, shiny or not. You cannot bed a stone, or eat it, or drink it, and it cannot be a companion to you. I hate to lose so many men, Blade, to get you stones."

"I know. But it is necessary to me, and you have sworn. Do you retract your oath, now that the Izmir is dead?"

Ogier scowled and his visage darkened. He scratched angrily at his grizzled stubble. "I retract nothing. An oath is an oath and I honor mine. But I do not like it."

They rode in silence for a long time. At last Ogier said, "But as long as I must, I must. And I would have it begin as soon as possible, so that it is over the sooner. When do we attack, Blade?"

"The day the underwater pontoon is completed. In the meantime we must push the west bridge as near the Hitt shore as possible. Have they begun to harry it at night yet?"

"No. But they will. I know. They will swim out and chop it and set fire tubs against it. They will loosen the pilings and make it fall into the sea. I know, as I say. I was here before, when the Izmir last tried to cross."

Blade thought a moment. "Yes. I expect all that. But if we can get it three-quarters of the way across it will suffice."

"How so? The water will be deep. Heavily armored men cannot swim, not even a few hundred yards. Of what use is a three-quarters bridge?"

Blade had to smile. "I have never seen such a doomsayer as you are, Ogier. You excel at it. You see only darkness—never a bright spot, never a ray of light."

Ogier did not smile. "I see truth," he said grimly.

"But what you do not see is that I plan to turn a liability into an asset. I will use the uncompleted bridge as a stage, a pier or dock. I will ring it with boats for protection, and I will bring other boats to the end of it and embark troops, a steady stream of troops, to throw against the Hitts. Bloodax will think it the main attack—how can he otherwise?—but it will be only a very strong secondary attack. Strong enough to pin down the main force of Kitts."

Ogier frowned. "How can this be done? There is a limit to our troops—if you attack in great strength at the west bridge, how can you have troops for the sunken bridge? I thought it *wasthere* that you meant to use the main force."

Blade regarded him calmly. "Have I spoken of any final battle plan?"

Ogier shook his head. "Not to me. You are secretive and that is not a bad thing in a commander, but I thought—"

"You thought wrong. Bloodax will expect my main force at the west bridge and there it will come. The main force, Ogier, *not* the main attack. That comes over the sunken bridge. I will lead it in person. A small, elite body of troops. We will cross fast and circle behind Bloodax. You will lead the frontal attack and engage him heavily. With any luck we will strike him from behind before he even knows we have crossed. That is the plan. Now let me hear your cavils."

But for once the Captain was at a loss. He thought for a long time and said at last, "I like the plan. It should work. But there is a matter—"

"I thought so."

"A matter of troops," Ogier persisted. "I have but one division on the beaches now, not counting the labor troops. I have nine divisions just recruited and training back in the palace-city. You know what they are—not yet soldiers and just better than a mob. So how solve this? Or perhaps you will use your shiny stones for soldiers?"

"I have you," said Blade. "And you are all I need, Ogier. You will ride this night back to the palace and you will work. Your officers and your men will work. And you will bring me those nine divisions in a week."

Ogier looked horrified. "It cannot be done. I—"

"You will do it. I know they will not be soldiers as you think of soldiers, or as I do, but they will look like soldiers and they will die like soldiers. It is numbers I need, Ogier. Hordes. To impress and shock and frighten Bloodax. He will not know how poor our soldiers are not unless our luck fails and he takes prisoners. That must not happen."

"It is unlikely," Ogier explained. "The Hitts have never raided for prisoners and any who do fall into their hands are instantly slain. I do not think that is a problem."

"Fine. Then I will bluff with poor troops and get away with it. And I will take your division, Ogier, and my own Guard, to cross the sunken bridge. I will need the best."

Ogier spat into the wind. "I feared that."

Ogier left as soon as he had supped. He would ride all night and be in the palace-city before dawn. Blade retired early and concentrated fiercely in an effort to reach the computer and Lord L. After some minutes he felt the electric tingle in his brain. The crystal was working. He was getting through.

An hour later, vastly weary with the effort, he had his instructions. Home Dimension was interested in the diamonds. But there were difficulties—teleportation was in its infancy, and what worked in a lab in Scotland might fail in Dimension X. The problems were many and complex and would take time to solve. Lord L would be in touch. Meantime proceed.

Chapter 10

The invasion of the Hitts was launched at dawn on the tenth day after Blade's arrival on the coast. The west pontoon had been forced, by much blood and sweat, to within a few hundred yards of the Hitt shore. The beach here was shallow and ended abruptly in towering cliffs broken by occasional defiles. Loth Bloodax had five thousand warriors waiting on the beach; his main host, which Blade judged as near to ten thousand, waited in a crescent battle array atop the cliffs. All the previous night fires had blazed on the cliffs and beaches, and the battle songs of the Hitts had blown across the channel to Blade and his men.

Ogier had twenty thousand men, three-quarters of whom were raw recruits. Blade, waiting in the dunes beyond the sunken pontoon, had a bare three thousand men, but they were the best in the Zirnian army. He had three troops of cavalry, six hundred horse in all, and in the first light of dawn he led the first troop out of the dunes and down to the shore. The pontoon, twelve feet wide, was marked by strips of red cloth just visible above the water. The large cove, near half a mile opposite them, appeared deserted. A light breeze from the west bore the sounds of Ogier's

battle; he had made a circle of picket boats around the end of the pontoon and was sending off his first transports to effect a landing. Mist still clung to the water and Blade could not see the battle, but the air was filled with the defiant chanting of the Hitts, The sound filled the sky. *Yeeeeeee-ahhhhhh—Yeeeeeee-ahhhhhh* .

Blade wore new burnished armor, and a scarlet panache fluttered from his helmet. He bore sword and mace, and a saddle sheath carried three short spears. Thane, riding at his side, was accoutered much the same but for the bronze-horned helmet.

As they rode to the water's edge Thane said a little prayer to the Hitt gods he had forsaken. "Give me the head of Galligantus this day," he finished, "so the bones of my Trosa may rest in peace."

Their chargers were skittish and did not want to enter the sea, unknowing of the planks a foot below the already bloodstained water. For the current here set to the east and, even as they forced their horses, the first corpses came bobbing into sight.

Blade put the spurs to his beast and forced it into the water between the red flags. As soon as the animal felt the planks beneath it all was well; it began to move, fetlock deep, out upon the hidden pontoon. Thane came after Blade and they paused for a moment. Blade turned in his saddle and raised an arm and let out a bellow.

"Men of Zir—follow me!"

He and Thane set out across the channel, the horses moving well but cautiously. The far shore loomed through the mist, desolate and forsaken. Nothing moved in the cove that was Blade's first objective. He grinned at Thane and glanced back. The first troop of cavalry was already on the pontoon, crossing in twos, and behind him the foot soldiers were forming in fours.

Thane peered at the far shore. "Not a sign of them. I think we're going to do it, Blade. By the gods, I do. Aha—I shall have wine tonight."

"We will not count our fortunes until we have made them," Blade warned. But he felt good. It looked good. They were halfway across.

The mist cleared fast. From half a mile to the west came the iron clamor of battle. From his vantage in the middle of the channel Blade could see great columns of greasy black smoke rising. Fires blazed. Some of Ogier's picket boats were burning. Dozens of leather-men, on their crude wings soared down from the cliffs and dropped stinkfire.

Thane said, "Ogier has bitten off a tough chew." He pointed to the corpses bobbing near them. "Most of those are Zirnian. See—there is but one Hitt, and she is a woman."

Blade had been studying the battle upstream. A transport was loading at the end of the pontoon. As he watched, it pulled away and another took its place. The pontoon was a solid mass of troops, four across, as far back as the Zirnian shore where others waited. He counted six of the transport barges already at the beach, three of them wrecked and burning. There was hand-to-hand fighting on the beach now. Ogier had a foothold, precarious as it was.

He turned his attention to the corpse Thane pointed out. It was that of a young woman, clad in leather armor braced with metal, with her yellow hair cropped short. She floated face up, her blue eyes open and staring. A stone or some such missile had taken off the top of her head.

"Even the children will fight," muttered Thane. "Come. Let us to it."

They pushed on. Blade looked back again. His cavalry was fifty yards behind, and behind them came the foot like a metal-and-leather centipede. The cove, with its broad beaches, was only a hundred yards distant now. Blade let his steed feel the spurs.

Thane and Blade were within twenty yards of the shore when a leather-man sailed down from the cliffs and dropped stink-fire. It was Blade's first close look at these air warriors with their bat wings and wood frames into which their arms fitted. He reined in and watched as the leather-man dove toward them with a faint hissing of wings. The man was naked but for a loincloth and wore no helmet. In each hand he carried a leather sack. He came so low that Blade could see the snarl, the teeth flashing, the eyes full of hate and fury. The leather-man let go a sack and there was a flash of fire and smoke and a stink filled the air.

"Close," said Thane. He drew a short spear from his saddle scabbard and stood in the stirrups. He took aim and hurled. The leather-man went fluttering into the channel with the spear through his middle.

Thane laughed, then opened his mouth wide and bellowed the Hitt war cry:
Yeeeeee-ahhhhhhhh .

"Leave off," Blade commanded. "Enough confusion lies ahead. Remember that you are no longer a Hitt."

"It is in the blood," said Thane. "And blood cannot be denied. But for those bastards, Bloodax and Galligantus, I would be fighting against you, Blade."

They were ashore. They rode onto the sands of the cove, the horses curveting and prancing, glad of solid earth again, and reined aside to let the first troop of cavalry land. They cantered past, jungling and shining, with pennons flying, and Blade shouted at their Captain. He was to take them immediately into the ravines and

low hills beyond the cove and guard the landing of the foot soldiers.

Hardly had he given the order when the attack came. First the blood-curdling war cries ringing in the crisp morning air, *yeeeeee-ahhhhh yeeeeee-ahhhhhhhh* —and then they came swarming from concealment. For a moment Blade felt panic and thought he had been ambushed, then saw how few they were. Less than a hundred. Most of them old, some crippled, a motley guard left as a matter of routine. Bloodax had expected no attack here. He had not guessed at the sunken pontoon.

So Blade first saw the mettle of his enemy. They came on and on, yelling and hurling spears and stones—he did not see an archer—and as they were cut down and the corpses piled up, the Hitts behind climbed the piles and still came to death with defiant screams. Blade and Thane stood aside and let the troop of cavalry handle it. Pity and admiration stirred in Blade. He had never seen the like of these men. He gazed at Thane in wonderment. "They do not know the meaning of fear."

Thane laughed deep in his throat. "I had not told you, Blade, but the word is unknown to them. This I mean in a literal sense—there is no word for fear in Hitt. Nor any for coward. That is because they are stupid barbarians and—"

"Another time." Blade pulled his horse around. "Now we must hurry. You remain and see the troops safely ashore. I will take the second and third groups of cavalry and ride back into the hills. March after me as soon as you have formed the men. Make haste, Thane, for it is my thought that Ogier is having a hot time of it. He will be watching for our signals with impatience."

Thane rode back to the pontoon head. Already a thousand foot were ashore and forming on the sands. Blade rode out through a narrow ravine and into a lush meadow that sloped gently upward. Behind him came his second and third cavalry units. He found the first group deployed as pickets near the upper meadow. Blade put his charger to the gallop and sought out the Captain of horse.

"What sign of Hitts, man?"

The Captain of horse, a young fellow wearing the blue and yellow of his service, did not salute. Such was Blade's order, for he did not want his officers marked by the enemy.

"No sign, Prince." So was Blade called by the lower ranks. "We have made a fool of Bloodax," the officer went on. "But for those few back there, now slain, there is no smell of a Hitt. My men are anxious to ride, sir. Have I the order?"

"When I give it you will have it," Blade said sternly. "And be careful that Bloodax does not make a fool of you. Now, when the second and third cavalry have formed with you we will ride. In echelon, so."

Blade dismounted and scratched a pattern on the ground with his sword point. "You will ride the point," he instructed, "and I will come along in command of third group. Second group will be to your left and a quarter-mile behind as I will be on your right. Mind you grasp this well. I have no mind to ride into an ambush."

The young officer was somewhat chastened. "Aye, sir. The Hitts are very good at ambush." Then he cocked an ear and grinned at Blade. "But by the battle sounds Bloodax will have no men to spare for ambush."

"I will worry about Bloodax when I come to him," said Blade. "Now go. Ride off. You will go a mile deep, no more, and seek for trees to screen us. When you make your turn to the west, signal with a flag. Keep always screened by forest if you can—for our purpose is to come in behind the main body of the Hitts on the cliff meadows. If you encounter Hitts, any Hitts, they must be taken prisoner or killed. None must be allowed to escape and warn Bloodax that we are behind him. This is understood?"

"What of women and children, Prince?"

"Take them prisoner if you can—if not, they must be killed." That decision came hard, but there was no alternative.

When the first cavalry group had ridden off, Blade gave like orders to the leaders of second and third horse. Blade placed himself at the head of third group and they moved out. Still no sign of Hitts.

A courier found Blade when they had gone half a mile inland.

"The Captain Thane says that all foot soldiers are ashore, sir, and are formed and beginning the march. I am ordered to remain with you to carry messages if need be."

Blade looked to the rear. The van of the foot had just come into sight, a glittering column of spears glinting in the first rays of the sun. Even at the distance Blade could make out the bronze mirror of Thane's horned helmet.

The courier was little more than a boy. Blade eyed him. "How are you called, son?"

"Marko, sir."

Blade smiled and patted his arm. "Then ride with me, Marko. And let us hope I find no use for you—for that would mean plans gone astray and trouble."

Thane knew what to do. He and Blade had fought and mapped the campaign a dozen times this last week.

For half an hour they rode inland. The battle din faded as they found heavy stands of trees and disappeared into them. Blade was watching the sun anxiously now for he dare not let Ogier bear the brunt too long. That Captain was wasting men, lavishing blood on a beach that could hardly be taken as Bloodax fed reserves down the defiles from the cliff meadows above. That was the essence of Blade's plan—that Ogier engage Bloodax hot and heavy, keep him pinned down, make him feed a constant flow of fresh troops to the beach whilst Blade moved in behind. So far it was working, but time and fatigue were factors. Ogier had second and third-rate troops. and how long they would fight was a guess.

Marko broke into Blade's thoughts. "There is a signal, sir."

Blade rose in his stirrups and peered ahead. A scarlet banner was waving far ahead, hardly more than a dot of color at that distance. Then a heliograph began to flash, catching the sun and glittering. Blade swore beneath his breath. If Bloodax had scouts this far back they would see those flashes.

"Read me that," he commanded Marko.

Marko stood on his saddle and deciphered the mirror flashes.

"The first horse unit turns west now, sire. No Hitts have been seen. They have found a village, deserted even of fowl and cattle. The officer deems that two miles will put him squarely behind the Hitt line of battle. He awaits orders or response."

"Send him this—you have a mirror?"

Marko drew a small mirror from his blouse.

"He is to make his turn south after two miles west. He will remain out of sight, using trees and hills for screening. When his forward scouts come into view of the Hitt rear, he is to halt and draw back a quarter-mile and wait until I come up. Be sure he understands and acknowledges."

The boy rode better into the sun and flashed his mirror for a time. They waited. Answering flashes came.

Marko rode back to Blade. "He understands and proceeds."

"Good. Now, Marko, you ride back to the Captain Thane and tell him what I told the first horse group. The same message, but that I will await his coming just as the first horse awaits me. His men are to triple-time. Tell him he is to whip them to it if need be. Go."

Marko went galloping off and Blade rode back to the head of his column. They

cantered on. Soon they were passing through the village. Blade gave it a brief study as they rode through: streets laid out in neat rectangles, houses of wood and wattle, some mud-daubed, all painted in bright color. Windows and doors were open and there was a smell of cooking in the air, but nothing live moved. Blade grimaced. He had been told aright—when the Hitts fought it was a total effort.

The forward cavalry scout obeyed orders exactly. Blade found them waiting in trees at the foot of a long slope. They were dismounted and quiet, the troopers tending their mounts and breakfasting on dried meat. From beyond the ridge came the battle sound, louder now and fiercer. Blade dismounted and went cautiously to the edge of the trees, peering at the sky for any sign of leathermen. The young Captain of horse, walking beside him, laughed and said, "We have seen none of the flying warriors. No life at all on this back ridge. I think that the Captain Ogier engages them so closely that they have no time to look elsewhere."

Blade studied the slope. The gradient was easy and the land smooth and grassy, pocked only here and there by trees and bushes. A line of bare rock lay along the ridge, but he saw no hazard in this. Beyond the ridge the terrain did not drop, insofar as he could see, but continued level.

"I sent a man on his belly to the ridge," said the young officer. "He was not seen. The meadow is there, straight to the cliff edge over the beach. And the Hitts' main reserve."

Blade had given no orders for this, but he let it pass. The scout had not been seen or they would be facing Hitts now.

"What of numbers? Did your man count?"

The Captain shrugged. "He guessed. He did not linger, as you may suppose. He guesses near ten thousand, and they are not much concerned with battle. They loaf and gamble and, unless my man is a liar, a couple made love in the bushes not fifty yards from him."

Blade smiled briefly. "No leather-men?"

"None. I doubt that any live. They are a special breed and the Hitts have but few."

Again Blade studied the slope. It was a mile long and half a mile to the ridge. It was almost too easy, too good to be true.

"No stragglers," he muttered. "No camp-followers, no deserters or skulkers. I do not understand it."

The young cavalry Captain waxed a little bold. "That is because you do not understand Hitts, Prince. They die so gladly that *it's* hard to understand. Your Hitt deems it a privilege to die for his rulers and will even fight for the honor of doing so. They are a strange people, my Prince."

"Yes," Blade agreed. "I could wish that I had an army of them to fight them. But yonder comes the second cavalry-post a man to them and tell them to take up position on the right flank. You will move to the left and I will take the center."

In a few minutes Marko came galloping up, his horse all steaming and lathered. "The Captain Thane is but minutes behind, sir. He will move into line soon. He begs leave to let his men catch their wind—they have been running most of the way."

Blade looked at the sun. "Ten minutes, no more. When you have delivered that, see to it that signal fires are laid and ready for lighting. You will go to supply for the red powder."

Now that the moment was nearly upon him, Blade found himself nervous with impatience. He dismounted and paced up and down within the sheltering line of trees. He sent for his officers and when they came and saw his mood they were silent and sat or stood in groups, whispering among themselves.

Thane came at last, sweating heavily, his yellow hair drenched beneath the bronze helmet. He grinned at Blade and clapped him on the shoulder.

"I near ran the guts out of the foot, but they are here. Give them time for breath and they will fight well." He nodded toward the ridge and cocked an ear to the battle sounds.

"Ogier will be glad to see us, I wager. By now he has probably damned us thrice over and I do not blame him—he could fight on that beach all day and never take it."

Blade summoned his officers around him and drew his plan on the soft black soil. "I will lead the attack in the center with the third group of horse. The first and second will each take a flank. We will keep the battle line and will top the ridge at the same time. The center will lag then for a few seconds in order to let the flanking horse curve forward and in, so that our line of battle will look like a crescent moon. I want no Hitts slipping away beyond our perimeter. A single platoon of lancers will keep to the rear, remaining out of the action, to hunt down such stragglers as do get through. Now—is all clear?"

"Aye. Let us begin." His Captains spoke as one voice.

Blade looked at his aide, Marko. "Are the signal fires ready, lad?"

"Ready, sire. They await but the torch and the powder."

"Touch them off."

A dozen fires blazed up, spewing a thick red smoke as the powder was cast into them. Blade, mounted and at the head of his cavalry group, watched as the first smoke drifted above the trees. A little higher and Ogier would see it and know that the attack from the rear was beginning. He would then press the battle with all his might, throwing in his last reserves to pin Bloodax to the beach. Ogier was the anvil, Blade the hammer—and betwixt them the Hitts.

Blade rose in his stirrups and waved his sword. He pointed it toward the ridge half a mile distant. He bellowed the charge and heard it echoed and repeated up and down the line.

Blade's mount, unleashed at last, with nostrils flaring and armor glinting, screamed and pawed the air. Blade brought it to tight rein and spurred and they were off. He was twenty yards in front of his men.

The sound of iron-shod hooves mounted in a crescendo of thunder. The earth trembled. Just before they topped the ridge Blade looked back over his shoulder and saw the line of foot soldiers, a mile wide and three deep, running and shouting. From somewhere he heard Thane's brazen voice flung to the skies and reverberating—*Yeeeeeeahhhh*.

They were over the ridge. Horseshoes struck sparks from the barren rock and some mounts skittered and went down. When they had crossed the rock Blade held up a hand to slow the charge and let the flanks move forward in the enveloping movement. He began to count off the seconds.

Before him, on a great meadow that sloped to the cliff edge, was vast confusion. Women screamed and children ran to the Hitt warriors milled as they sought to come about and form a backward-facing battle line. They had had less than two minutes' warning. Now they poured cursing from black tents and from under flat-topped wagons where they had been sleeping, and they tried to fight back. Some began to tip over the wagons to form a makeshift fortress.

Blade finished his count and glanced to left and right. The flanking cavalry had moved ahead and were curving in to make a trap. They were already heavily engaged. The Hitts were forming little groups, back to back, and using their long spears to make a bristly defense. As Blade watched he saw horses gutted on those spears and the cavalry fall back for a moment.

He put his mount into gallop and at the same time beckoned a subaltern to him. The officer, his face gleaming with battle fervor, rode knee to knee with Blade and

craned to hear the shouted orders.

"Back to the foot," Blade bellowed, "and bid them pull in their wings and converge on the center: We must smash straight through to the cliff edge and so divide them, then turn right and left to finish them off. When you have done this, seek the officer Thane and bid him to me."

The officer, looking disappointed, fell back out of the charge.

Then they were into it. A line of the flat-topped wagons, hastily tipped and manned, loomed ahead. Spears and arrows hissed at Blade's contingent. A ragged line of slingers formed behind the wagons and smooth rocks, twice the size of eggs, began to come. Horses and riders began to fall.

Three Hitts, fair-skinned men clad in skins and leather armor, leaped at Blade. One dragged at the bridle, trying to wrestle the horse down, while the remaining two attacked from either side with daggers and sword. Blade took a slash across his thigh before he maced one and sabered the other. The man at the bridle went down before his mount's flaying hooves. Blade urged the beast forward, took the wagon barrier in a great leap, and was in a swarm of Hitts. A woman, bearing no weapon, leaped at him with a scream of defiance. Blade laid the flat of his sword across her head. Even in such battle frenzy he could not bring himself to saber a woman.

The Hitts tried to bring down mount and man by sheer force of numbers. A dozen of them clung to him and his horse, screaming their war cry.
Yeeeeeee-ahhhhhhhhhhh .

Blade fought them off, standing in his stirrups and hacking and slashing and thrusting. He was drenched in Hitt blood. At last he broke free and rode on beyond a line of black tents to a slight rise in the meadow. Here he paused for a moment of breath and viewing. His cavalry was over the line of wagons and the foot soldiers were pressing hard through the center. The edge of the cliff lay but a hundred yards ahead.

Blade summoned another young officer to him. The man arrived gasping and sweating, his sword red with Hitt blood.

"They fight like demons from hell," he blurted. "I have sabered me five children this day and I had never thought to do that." Blade, wiping blood and sweat from his eyes, commanded him to take small parties of the horse and seal off the defiles leading down to the beach. He would send foot to reinforce and lend mass.

"I will press on to the cliff and then turn to right and left. We have split them now and it is but a matter of time. But no Hitt must reach the beach from this meadow and no Hitt must come up here from the beach. We must keep them separate."

The officer nodded in quick understanding. "Aye, Prince. The defiles are narrow and a small party can hold them either way, to front or back."

"Go and do it then."

Thane came up with an arrow through one brawny arm. His armor was dented and bloody and his horned helmet slipped askew, but he gave Blade an enormous grin. "Did I not tell you these Hitts could fight? Even when surprised. I am proud of my people."

Blade regarded him with a faint smile. He nodded at the arrow. "They appear to have given you something to remember them by."

Thane glanced down at the arrow as though he had just become aware of it. "This? It is nothing. A gift from some tall warrior. I repaid him in full."

Thane extended his arm. "Break off the head, Blade, so I can pluck it out."

Blade snapped off the arrowhead and Thane grunted saying, "It does hurt a little—a man needs wine for this." He pulled out the shaft and flung it away. Blade handed him a cloth and helped him bind the wound.

Thane pointed to Blade's thigh. "They blooded you also."

"Nothing. Come on. We must get to the cliff edge and give Ogier sight of us. He has borne the real brunt of all this and will be needing encouragement."

The fighting was spotty now, diminishing as more and more of the Hitts were slain. Some of the hedgehogs still fought back to back, and the cavalry had been called off while machines hurled huge stones into the close-packed Hitts. Infantry advanced slowly on them, ready to move in and finish the job when the hedgehogs broke at last. Blade summoned an officer.

"This is a general order, to all officers. You will take such prisoners as will surrender. Women and children are to be disarmed by force and held prisoner by force—all males will be killed if they do not surrender. See you to it that all officers get this order."

When the man had ridden off, Thane said, "It is useless, you know. Hitt warriors will not surrender, and to hold the women and children only brings trouble. They will not be slaves. They will kill themselves if they cannot escape, and those that remain you will have to feed and care for."

Blade looked at him. "What would you have me do? Massacre babes?"

Thane shrugged his great shoulders. "I do not know. It is impossible to deal with Hitts. I know, being one. But look you yonder, Blade, and see what I mean."

A thin and ragged line of Hitts, the survivors, had retreated to the edge of the cliff. They had flung their last spear, shot their last arrow, hurled their last stone. Now, as the horse and foot soldiers of Zir advanced on them, they turned and, screaming a last defy, leaped out into the void.

Thane said, "*They* have no leather wings. It is a harsh landing on those rocks below."

One Hitt remained. Blade and Thane spurred toward him. He was a slinger and he had one stone left. As they drew near he whirled his sling about his head, screeching the harsh *yeeeeeee-ahhhhhh*, and loosed his missile. It buzzed between them. The Hitt spat and made an obscene gesture, then ran to the edge and leaped far out. They could hear his war cry as he fell—*yeeeeeee-ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh*.

They reined in at the cliff edge and peered down. The narrow beach far below, at no point more than a hundred yards deep and less than a quarter of a mile in length, was an inferno. Blade's first thought was that peering into hell must be very like this.

They still fought down there, so jammed and close-packed that there was little room to swing a weapon. Ogier's troops had carved a beachhead some hundred yards in length and at no place more than fifty feet deep. Ogier had dug trenches in the loose sand and piled corpses before them as barricades. But beyond this perimeter, at the moment, a hundred individual small battles were in progress. Ogier himself, on horseback, rode back and forth at the water's edge and bellowed commands. Behind him and all up and down the beach were the hulks of burning transports. Other barges were leaving the end of the pontoon as they were loaded and made for the shore. The bridge itself was packed with troops for half its length.

Thane urged his horse closer to the edge and strained to see. He shielded his eyes and peered and swore mightily. "I can see Loth Bloodax! He fights yonder and he fights well, as was to be expected. But what of Galligantus? I do not see him. By the gods—if someone else slays him and I am cheated..."

Blade had called up some of his officers. The battle of the meadow was won, but for mopping up, and now Ogier must be relieved, and speedily.

"Take your foot," he ordered, "and begin pressure on the defiles. Dismount the cavalry and throw them into it. It will go hard, for those passages are narrow, but use our advantage of numbers and force it. We must move onto the beach at once and take them from two sides."

There was some grumbling at this, for certain of the officers thought they had

finished their day's work, but Blade glared and the muttering ceased. Blade summoned a signaleer, and flags were shown on the cliff. Ogier stared up and lifted his sword in response. Blade thought that the Captain looked weary unto the death.

He moved to where Thane, muttering oaths, still searched in vain for his enemy Galligantus. "He is either slain or fled," Thane grumbled, "and to give him his due, I do not think him coward. Some bastard has killed him, and if I find out who I will slay *him* ."

Blade had to laugh at the big Hitt. "You are battle-weary," he said. "Your thinking is tangled. Forget it and point me out this Loth Bloodax."

Thane tugged at his yellow beard with blood-stained fingers, then had to laugh at himself. "Yes, you are right. I am a fool. But yonder is Bloodax—see with the ring of Zirnian corpses all about him. I count some twenty at a glance."

Blade stared. At this point the Zirnians had thrust a narrow salient across the beach to within a few yards of the cliff wall. The wedge was beset on all sides by screaming Hitts, but so far it was holding. The battle here was fiercest, hand to hand and bloody, but Ogier fed in more troops constantly, and as Zirnians fell they were replaced. Blade understood the tactic and nodded in approval. Ogier sought to drive between the Hitts, to divide them on the beach and strengthen his salient until he could face two ways and begin the last drive.

At the point of the salient, blunting it, was the warrior called Loth Bloodax. He led a party of some twenty Hitts and they were yielding nothing. Blade cupped his eyes to get a better view. The man Bloodax was not as tall as he had guessed he would be, but was broader and of greater girth than any man he had ever seen. He wore metal armor, whereas most Hitts fought in leather, and his helmet bore a single tall spike made of horn. He fought with axe and shield. The watching Blade felt admiration and at the same time a tightness in his chest. This was a man and a warrior. The huge axe, which Bloodax handled like a toy, glittered and spun in a shining circle. It darted and bit deep and smashed and pulped and gleamed scarlet as the warrior danced back to safety.

This Loth Bloodax was a cool one. Winded for the moment, he retired into a protective pocket of his warriors and rested, leaning on his axe and regarding the scene. He took off the spiked helmet and wiped his forehead with a forearm, then glanced up at the cliff top, at the Zirnians ranged all up and down it. Blade would have given much to see the man's face and hear his words. Bloodax must know that he was defeated, doomed, yet he fought on as if he were sure of victory.

Thane was puzzled. "I do not understand it. Why does not Ogier bring him down with arrow and spear-fire?"

"My orders," Blade said quietly. "Given to Ogier in secret. I want Bloodax alive if possible. I want him subdued and friendly, or as much so as possible, to govern his people when we have gone. And I want his aid in finding my diamonds. And I see that you do not approve, Thane?"

Thane regarded his chief with a disgust he made no attempt to hide. "You have proven yourself a warrior and a great general this day, Blade, but what you tell me now proves you still a fool. I talk and talk and you do not listen—you refuse to understand Hitts. If children die before yielding, do you think Bloodax will surrender? Pah—you had best send command to have him killed at long range, before Ogier loses another two-score men."

"Mind your tongue," Blade snapped. "I command as I will. You may be right and I wrong, but it is worth a chance. These Hitts must be ruled after they are defeated, and for that no one is better than their natural leader."

Thane laughed and pointed down at the beach. "There he is and I wish you joy of him. Now with your permission, I will leave you and go searching for Galligantus. You have no further need of me?"

"None," said Blade stiffly. "Go. I hope you find your Galligantus. Perhaps it will improve your humor."

Thane reined away and put his mount to gallop. Blade remained at the cliff edge. Far below him, Bloodax leaped into the fray again and his axe was drinking Zirnian blood. Blade pondered. Was he in the wrong? Perhaps. But he wanted the man alive, to woo and win him to friendship if possible, to use him to rule the Hitts and guide Blade to the choicest diamonds.

He watched the fighting on the beach. Ogier was now beginning to win. The defiles had been stoppered and there was no place for the Hitts to retreat to. Blade had smashed the reserves and when a Hitt warrior fell he could not be replaced. The piles of Hitt dead were rising minute by minute. Ogier kept flinging more troops ashore, using sheer numbers and mass to overwhelm his enemy. The Zirnian beachhead widened bit by bit as the Hitts were forced, literally, to the cliff wall.

Blade remained where he was, easing himself in the saddle and binding his slight wound with a cloth. A steady stream of officers brought reports, and some remained to keep him company.

"No male Hitt lives," said one officer, "but for some old men who did not have time to kill themselves before we took them."

Blade looked at the meadow behind him. Smashed wagons and burning tents and thousands upon thousands of corpses. In one corner of the meadow were captives,

most of them women, with some children, guarded by horsemen and foot. They were keening, wailing for their dead and for their future, and the sound came harsh to Blade's ears. He looked away and tried to shut out the sound.

"Our losses?"

"More than a thousand, sire. Another half thousand so badly hurt as to be useless. Shall I order them killed? They will be a burden on us."

Blade eyed the officer who had spoken. "You will order them cared for," he said curtly. "I will inspect later and say who is to have a mercy death and who is to live."

He turned back to the cliff. He sought for some sight of Loth Bloodax and could not find him. Uneasiness stirred in Blade. Where was the Hitt chief? He swung from his saddle and stalked to the cliff edge flinging himself on his belly to peer over.

"Mind the edge," one officer warned. "It is loose soil there."

Blade ignored him. He sought anxiously in the melee below for a sign of the spiked helmet and the flashing axe. It was gone, they were gone, Loth Bloodax was gone. Blade swore and knew that he had been somehow outsmarted. But how?

Ogier had driven his salient through to the cliff wall now and had widened it. He poured battalion after battalion into the aisle dividing the Hitts. It was nearly over.

The remaining Hitts on the beach died one by one. They were encircled and cut off and taken from all sides. They grouped in twenties and thirties, and the last man died atop the pile of his companions. Ogier spurred up and down the beach, bellowing orders and lending a hand now and then in the fighting. Blade smiled faintly. A fine warrior, Ogier, and a shrewd Captain. Of all the heritage left him by the Izmir, he prized Ogier the most; Thane, but for the drink, would have ranked equal, but there was excuse for Thane. He had a sorrow that did not plague Ogier.

Blade began to look among the corpses for that of Loth Bloodax. He thought it wasted effort, yet he still sought without success. But maybe the Hitt chieftain was buried under other bodies, perhaps his corpse would still be found. Blade did not really believe it. He knew that he had been somehow diddled, though he could not guess at the how and why of it.

At last Ogier sent up blue smoke. Victory. It was all over on the beach. In a few minutes a courier came from Ogier and sought out Blade among his officers. The courier was evidently just off the last transport, for his armor was new and unsullied by blood, his face clean and his mount fresh. Blade's veterans loured at the man and muttered. The courier reddened in the face, but ignored them and rode to Blade and saluted.

"The Captain Ogier sends greetings, Prince, and says that the beach is taken. Our losses, at first count, are some eight thousand dead and as many hurt. The Captain says—"

Blade waved an impatient hand. "What of Loth Bloodax? And a warrior called Galligantus? What of them?"

"I come to that, Prince. Of the man Galligantus nothing is known, but Loth Bloodax has escaped us. He has fled."

Blade stared. "How is this possible? He grew wings, mayhap, or borrowed a pair from one of his dead leather-men? What do you tell me, man? That Bloodax flew over the cliff, or the sea?"

An officer broke in. "This one lies, Prince. It is impossible. I last saw Bloodax backed against the cliff wall with a score of Zirnians after him. He had half a dozen men about him, no more."

Blade bade him be silent. He waited. The courier knew a dramatic moment when it came. He took his time in speaking.

"Loth Bloodax escaped *into* the cliff, my Prince. He must have planned it all along and so fought in that direction. There is an opening into the cliff, cleverly concealed and invisible, unless you come within six feet of it. It leads into a tunnel, a tunnel so narrow and dark and winding that the Captain Ogier will not send men in there to search. This he bids me explain to you, and to say that he is sorry, and that he had done all he can for the moment. Have you a return message, Prince?"

Blade thought for a moment before answering. He must get after Bloodax at once. And yet he could not ask his men to do more than they had done this day. It would have to wait until morning.

"Say that the Captain Ogier had done well and that I thank him. He will dine with me tonight in my tent. If there is blame for the escape of Bloodax it is mine, not his, for no man could have done better. Say all this and also bid him extend my thanks to his officers and men. I am proud of them. Go."

Thane came back. He was gloomy. He had a wine sack flung across his saddle and his mouth and beard were purple.

"I have heard the news," he said before Blade could speak, "and I confess that I am not surprised. These cliffs are honeycombed with caves and tunnels. I should have thought of it, but I did not. I am sorry."

"So am I." Blade looked at the wine sack. "You are beginning?"

"Aye, I am. You have objection?"

"None. You have earned your drink."

"I have," Thane agreed, "and I have double cause for it this day. Galligantus has escaped me. His body is not to be found, though I have it that he fought here today. I am thinking that he went ahead into that tunnel, as advance guard for Bloodax. So they have diddled us both, Blade."

Blade smiled. "If you keep some of your wits, Thane, and your head permits in the morning, we may come up with your Galligantus yet. For with the sun I go in search of Bloodax. It should not be hard—he can have few men and nothing of supply. I will get him."

Thane tilted the wine sack and drank deep. "Or he will get you. I do not like it, Blade. This coast is one thing, the mountains are another. I should know. I once lived in them."

"I do know that—which is why I wish you to drink lightly. I will need you as guide. But I request it, do not command it. Suit yourself."

Thane drank hugely and grinned. "I always do, so far as I can and keep my head. But I make you a bargain, Blade—if you can wake me in the morning I will go with you. I will not like it, but I will go. But for now you have other troubles."

Blade gazed about the littered battlefield. "Have I now? I had thought them over for a little time."

"You will see. For you still do not know much of our Zirnian soldiery, and especially of such riff-raff as we have recruited for this campaign."

"They have fought well enough," Blade said. "Far better than I guessed."

"Aye," agreed Thane. "And now they will want their reward. And will take it. They have found a thousand casks of Hitt beer and are broaching them by the dozen. I doubt that you have ever tasted Hitt beer, Blade, but let me tell you of it—it steals a man's senses in no time. And to add to the dish, you have taken women captive. I advised against that, remember, and before this night is out you will admit me right. Even Zirnian soldiers will not couple with a corpse, but your Hitt women are alive. For now at least."

"We will stop it now," said Blade. "I will call the provost officer and have him see to it."

Thane laughed wildly. "You will have to lure him away from his beer, then. I

passed him and his marshals on the way here and they were knocking out bungs at a great rate. I would not count on the provost, Blade."

A shout of drunken laughter came over the battlefield. Thane winked at Blade. "They begin. You might as well join me in wine, Blade, and enjoy it. For you cannot prevent it. I will not try. I have fought long and hard this day and have no mind to be slain by my own men."

Chapter 11

Thane was right. Before dusk Richard Blade had done what he seldom did—given up, resigned to the fact that here was a situation he could not alter. The orgy of drunken soldiery must run its course. Ogier and he supped alone, preparing the meal themselves—for the servants had run off to join the drinking and raping—and discussed the day past and the day to come. Thane lay drunken in a nearby tent. They could hear him singing and cursing.

Ogier had bathed and donned fresh linen and armor, as had Blade. They ate in silence and drank little. When Ogier had finished, he tossed bones to one of his hounds and stared gloomily at Blade.

"Thane is right, you know. You are a fool to go after Bloodax. The country is treacherous and wild. There are a thousand places to hide. You will never find him unless he wants you to—and *if* he wants you to it will be because he is in a position of advantage. Give it up, Blade. Today we broke the Hitt power for many years to come. Let us go back now and attend to that black crow Casta. I have had word from my spies—he has moved into the palace city and again consorts with Hirga. I said it all along—we should have been killing priests instead of Hitts."

Blade shook his head. "Your advice is no doubt good, Ogier, but I cannot follow it. I must go after Bloodax. You will remain here and whip these rebellious dogs back into some form of an army—when the beer is all gone and the women all raped." Blade sighed. "I would have prevented that."

A woman ran screaming past the tent, pursued by a dozen howling men. Ogier scowled.

"Not even you can do everything, Blade. The gods themselves are helpless. Do not let it fret you so—the dawn will come and it will end. And think that the Hitts would do the same in Zir, were matters reversed."

They went to stand outside the tent. A thousand fires glowed like carbuncles in the night. A vast clamor lifted to the black sky. Laughter and screams, curses and threats, song and tears. Nearby a youth lay headless while a dozen soldiers took turns with his young sister. Blade took a step in their direction and Ogier laid a hand on his arm.

"Leave off. They will not be controlled this night and it is death to try. Believe me, Blade. I have seen such nights before."

A woman passed them, running and pursued by men. She leaped from the cliff out into darkness. The soldiers cursed in disappointment and turned back to quarrel with the men raping the girl. There was dispute and swords were drawn and used.

Blade said nothing. He turned away, his face hard and set, and stalked to the tent of Thane. Ogier came after him.

A flambeau guttered atop a pole. Thane lay snoring on a pile of skins. Spilt wine had dyed his chest hair purple. Beside him crouched a Hitt girl. She wore an animal skin about her middle, nothing more, her hair was wild and her face caked with grime. She stared at them with enormous eyes and reached across the sleeping Thane to pluck his dagger from its sheath.

Blade made a sign to Ogier and spoke softly, smiling. "No need for that. We will not harm you. Who are you and how come you to this tent? Does the Captain Thane know you are here?"

Ogier said, "The Captain Thane knows nothing at the moment."

Without taking his eyes off the girl, Blade told him to be quiet. The girl stared and stared, the dagger held at half length from her breasts, whether for herself or Blade he could not guess. Thane snored on.

Blade was very gentle. "Speak girl. No harm will come to you. I am the Prince Blade and you have my word on it."

Her eyes sparked blue in the torchlight and her knuckles whitened on the dagger's hilt, then suddenly she relaxed and nearly smiled. Her voice was low and pleasant and very young—Blade guessed her at not past thirteen.

"Thane spoke of you," she said. "He says you are as near a god as mortal can be. But now that I have seen you I do not believe—you do not look like a god to me."

Ogier made a sound that was suspiciously like a chuckle. Blade ignored him. He smiled at the girl.

"We will discuss my godhood another time. How came you here?"

Slim shoulders shrugged and tight young breasts bobbed. "I am a Hitt. Soldiers were after me and I was caught, but the Captain Thane leaped on them and slew three. Then he brought me here. When I snatched for his dagger to kill myself he

stopped me and told me that he was also a Hitt. I did not believe at first, but he spoke of many things that only a Hitt would know and at last I believed him. I promised that I would stay and not kill myself. Then he drank much wine and is as you see him."

Ogier pushed forward. "Did he bed you, girl?"

She stared at Ogier and the corners of her mouth pulled down. "He tried. I willed it. But wine robbed him of his manhood. So now I wait and I am starving—you will give me food?" Blade bade Ogier go fetch the remains of their own supper. The Captain left, grumbling at being made an errand boy. The girl gave Blade a tentative smile. "Before Thane slept he promised that he would ask leave of you that I stay with him, to be his woman? You will permit this?"

"Do you wish it?"

Again the shrug, and her small breasts danced. "I wish it. Thane is a Hitt, even though he fights for Zir, and I would rather live than die."

"How are you called?"

"My name is Sariah."

Blade nodded. "Very well, Sariah. Thane has you and you have Thane, if that is the way you both wish it. But you had better think of this—when he is sober in the morning, for I will see that he is, he may have a change of mind."

The girl nodded. "I know. We will see."

Ogier came back with food and the girl fell on it like an animal. Blade and Ogier watched with some amusement and no little awe as her white teeth ripped at a great haunch of meat.

Ogier found a camp chair and slumped into it. "I am glad I am not at her mercy. She would eat a leg off me before I could think."

Blade regarded the snoring Thane. "We will have to remain here and share the guard," he told Ogier. "Thane is in no condition to protect himself or the girl. We had best take no chances."

They listened to the howling of human wolves on the battlefield and Ogier agreed. "Yes, so be it. I will take first watch."

"Take this with you and empty it." He flung the wine sack at Ogier. "We must have him on his feet in the morning."

Ogier grunted. "Nigh as great a task as winning this battle today. You have never seen Thane on a real drunk."

"Nor will I this time. I need him. Wake me in two hours, Ogier."

He had hardly closed his eyes before Ogier shook him awake. Thane was still snoring and the girl Sariah slept close to him. Ogier dropped on the pallet of skins and was instantly asleep. Blade drew his sword and left the tent.

It was dark and wind came cold off the channel. Stars glittered like the diamonds Blade hoped to find. He walked around and around the tent to warm himself and stay awake. There was no moon and he could not see the battlefield and thought it just as well. Ever and anon there came a cry or moan from the dark. Otherwise it was quiet but for a few fires and some drunken song. The worst was over.

At that moment he felt the tingle in his brain. The crystal was alive and receiving impulses from the computer. Blade walked and walked, concentrating, feeling the electronic field spread and usurp his cortex. The impulses were stronger than ever before.

Lord Leighton had been working hard. Certain changes had been made. The computer read Blade's brain well and the encephalographic coding was near perfect; there were lacunae, but they could be filled in or guessed at. Blade's situation was known and understood and approved. Continue progress toward diamonds.

Teleportation was now a crash program. There had been some successes and some failures, but they were pushing on. When the chances of success were improved, Blade would be instructed. Meantime push on for the diamonds. The crystal went dead.

Blade rubbed his temples, there always being some small pain, and glanced at the sky. Dawn was not far off. When it lightened enough he sought out some sleeping men and kicked them awake and sent them with tubs to the beach. Cold sea water would awaken Thane. Hot broth and walking, perhaps even a swordpoint, would keep him awake.

Chapter 12

Blade was a royal prisoner and treated as such. For near a month he had been a captive of the Hitts, and he still did not know their intentions toward him. He knew his own intentions—escape as soon as possible. If possible. And it might be. He glanced at the pile of sewn-together skins in a corner of his hut and smiled. Just possible—if his crude balloon worked and the Hitts did not kill him first.

Thane was dead. Poor Thane. He had been right all along, as had Ogier. Ogier had taken the army and retreated across the narrow water after laying waste to as

much of the coastal area as time permitted. He had destroyed both pontoons.

Blade left the hut and wandered across the stone plateau to the edge of the escarpment. In effect, the hut was a penthouse and he marooned in it. They kept him prisoner atop a tower of sandstone five hundred feet high and falling sheer on every side. There were higher cliffs around and he was watched from them. Now and then a leather-man glided across the plateau, checked on him and dropped to a lower peak. It was a most efficient prison.

He went to a jumble of rocks near the precipice and seated himself on a boulder. The air was clear and cold and he could see for miles. He gazed south and held up a wetted finger to test the air. And smiled a little. The wind was to the south again today and that made eighteen days out of twenty-five that it had been so. He had been counting them.

Before him rolled line after line of jagged peaks, stone fangs with snow in their jaws overlooking dark and twisting valleys. Nearby, below him and spreading all around the plateau were the caves and houses of the Hitts, carved from the soft sandstone. Thousands of chambers and apartments dug out of the living rock and reached by a complicated system of wooden ladders. Scattered throughout the valleys were bee-hive huts carved from the same soft rock.

There came a faint hissing overhead. Blade glanced up in time to see a leather-man glide over, the hostile blue eyes staring down at him. Odd, he thought, that they can make gliders and put men into them, and yet do not conceive of a balloon. For they did not, else they would not have permitted him the skins and the needles and sinew and rawhide. They did not guess at what he was up to—or did they? Were the Hitts playing games with him?

As he gazed at the far horizon the thoughts came unbidden. Blade groaned softly and knotted his forehead in anguish. He tried not to think it, but the haunting would not be denied. The thoughts came when they would and it was always painful. He had been a fool and he was paying for it. But poor Thane had paid for it too, and therein lay the greater suffering.

They had found the tunnel leading from the beach, and Thane, suffering direly from wine, had tried a last time to beg off the venture, to dissuade Blade.

"There are other and safer ways to come at Bloodax and the diamonds," he said. They stood in a vast cavern into which the first tunnel had led them. The party was of Blade and Thane, the girl Sariah and twenty men found sober enough to understand and obey. They all carried torches.

Thane waved his torch toward a dozen dark passages leading from the cavern. "How are we to know which one Bloodax used? Or where he lies now? It is my

guess that he will not linger, but will escape into his mountains and form a new army. But that is only a guess. He and his warriors may be lying in wait for us around any bend. This is too chancy, Blade."

Blade was stubborn, perhaps wrong. He knew it and yet would not be deterred. If he did not take Loth Bloodax speedily he would not take him at all. If he waged an orthodox campaign he would soon be ensnared in the treacherous terrain, in the valleys and mountains, and might never come up with the Hitt chief, might never reach the treasure he sought. Thane was right. It was chancy. But Blade deemed it the only way.

"We will push on, he said. "We will split into small, separate parties and scout carefully in these tunnels. Use the line we brought from the ships to guide us back to this place. There must be no fighting, no engagement, if the enemy is sighted. He who does so will return here at once and warn the others. When we have found Bloodax, if he is here, I will determine a plan to take him."

Thane groaned. "I wish I had wine. I would not mind this foolishness so much if I had wine."

The girl Sariah spoke then. "I have been through this place once when I was small and played with my brother on the beach. There is one tunnel that goes for miles and comes into a valley that in turn leads into the mountains."

"That would be it," Blade said. "I'll wager it. Which tunnel, Sariah?"

She pointed it out and they entered. A hundred yards into the tunnel they found a Hitt dead of wounds. Thane moved the body with his foot. "They came this way, right enough. But what of it—we have but twenty men and they not at their best. Nor am I. That leaves you and a girl." He glowered at Sariah. "And I am not sure I would trust her."

The girl stared at them and shrugged. "I cannot force trust on you. I care not."

Blade studied her and could read nothing in her eyes or on her face. Thane was probably in the right of it, but it was a chance that must be taken.

"I have told the truth," Sariah said. "This tunnel leads into a valley, and that valley leads into the mountains and to the place of the Hitt kings. I saw it as a child and I have never forgotten. Do as you will."

"You are no more than a child now," growled Thane, "and since you have gotten your belly full and are safe from rape you are a snotty child!" He raised his hand.

"Forego that," ordered Blade. "We will push on. Sariah will go first, as far as

possible ahead of us and still in sight." He gave a command to a bowman. "Keep her well in view. If she seeks to escape, to run, kill her."

Sariah smiled.

It was very cold on the plateau. Blade's fingers and lips were numb and blue. He went back to his hut and huddled by the fire.

He was still not positive that Sariah had led them into the trap. There was no proof and how could she have known that Loth Bloodax and his men were lying in wait?

They had pushed on for half an hour before entering another cavern. The floor was littered and jumbled with stone pillars and there were ledges all about the cavern. Sariah, carrying a torch, advanced beyond the center and pointed to another tunnel leading away. "This one."

The Hitts struck them. They came yelling from the ledges and behind the pillars and in the semigloom and confusion it was soon over. Blade and Thane fought back to back and slew a dozen Hitts before rope nets were tossed over them and they went down. They were trussed up and lashed to poles and carried off. The Hitts cut off the heads of Blade's men and stuck them on lances. There was no sign of Sariah.

Blade went now to his fire and poked it up. He added more wood. The Hitts fed him well and kept him well supplied with wood and all other things for which he asked. That Bloodax had plans for him Blade did not doubt, though what those plans were he could not begin to guess. In the meantime he was treated well and his wishes indulged. He regarded the pile of skins he was fashioning into a balloon and the rawhide tube that would conduct the smoke into it. Blade smiled. It was simple enough. The Hitts could not dream of a balloon any more than an ordinary person in Home Dimension could dream of Dimension X. They might puzzle at Blade's demands and think him a bit mad, but they would never guess at what he was making. Until the moment came to use it. That would be risky. He had not forgotten the leather-men. They would be after him.

He sat cross-legged and began to sew, and thoughts of Thane came back. The big man had been recognized and condemned immediately to die as a traitor, as a Hitt who had deserted to the Zirnians. Blade, held in isolation in a bee-hive hut, had been told nothing but that Thane was to die a traitor's death. And that he must watch it.

Blade put away his needle. He had tears in his eyes and he was not ashamed of them. His fault. All his fault. Thane had been a drunk and a hard man to handle, but he had been loyal. At engineering he had been a genius by Zirnian standards. But most of all he had been Blade's friend.

Blade had watched. They took him to the place of execution in a valley. Loth Bloodax was there and the man called Galligantus, though Blade was not permitted near them. He near forgot Bloodax, for he so longed to be at the throat of Galligantus, a lean and sinewy man with a mean, pinched face and eyes like dull diamonds. Galligantus who was victor in the end.

Thane died well. He spat in the face of Galligantus. Blade shouted in fury and frustration and was gagged. He willed himself not to watch it and failed. He looked. He had to look.

It was explained to him. The punishment for traitors was the Death of Five Strokes. Galligantus had begged to be executioner and his wish had been granted.

Thane's left hand was struck off. Then his left foot. Then his right hand and right foot. He was left to grovel in the dirt, his face twisting in agony. He did not scream and he tried as best he could, scrabbling on bloody stubs, to get to Galligantus. At the very last he spat again.

Galligantus stepped near and cut off his head.

The head of Thane was stuck on a pole and brought to Blade, and he was made to look at it for an hour. His mind turned at the end of the time and he thought he saw Thane grin and ask for wine. After that he became dizzy and sick and only half aware of what went on. When he came to himself again he was in the hut on his plateau prison. He lay ill for a week, sometimes raving, only dimly sensing that people came and went and that he was being cared for. He was sure he dreamt, and then not so sure, that a girl tended him. Once, in a moment of lucidity, she called herself Lisma and said that she was daughter of Loth Bloodax. Another time, though of this he was never positive, he thought she made love to him, that she aroused him and had her fill of him and he half conscious.

Blade heard the trapdoor rise and clatter and put his needle away. He pushed the pile of skins back into a corner. He had not dreamt it all—her name was Lisma and she was daughter to Bloodax and she had made love to him then. And many times since. Lisma came to him three times a week. Her purpose, as she explained without guile, was to become pregnant. It was Hitt logic, Dimension-X fantasy, and Blade could not fault it. It was pleasant enough and it killed the time. He did not like her, nor trust her, and it did not matter. No doubt she felt the same way about him. She was, Lisma explained, only being dutiful to her father's wishes when she came to him.

Now, as he watched her fit the trapdoor back into place and start toward the hut, Blade determined to force the issue. He must have an audience with Loth Bloodax. So far he had been denied this, for Bloodax showed little interest in his prisoner, and with every day Blade grew more frustrated and enraged. How could he cozen

Bloodax, or win him over, if he could not come to see him!

He stepped away from the door and bowed as Lisma entered. She bore her usual grave and unsmiling look. She was a small girl, fragile in bone, with a tiny waist and slim legs and large breasts that belied the rest of her. She brushed past Blade and went directly to a chair and perched on the edge of it like a wary bird.

Lisma Bloodax was in her early twenties, at his guess. She had the blue eyes and flaxen hair of her race. Her teeth were good and she wore her hair long to her waist, caught up behind with a band of beaded leather. The Hitt women, at least some of them, covered their breasts. Lisma wore a bandeau of soft worked leather. Her midriff was bare and she wore tight breeches to her knees. On her feet were high-laced buskins with long, curling toes.

Lisma put her chin in her hand and stared at Blade. "You are well? You wish for anything?"

He smiled. Every visit began with the same inquiry.

"I am well and I want for nothing—save for an audience with your father. How much longer am I to be kept in solitary on this crag, Lisma? I find it most strange. Does your father not want to see his prisoner? I would have thought he would—if only to take his revenge at first hand. I am not a common soldier, you know. It was I who defeated him and smashed his army. Has he no curiosity about such a man?"

Lisma said, "My father's greatest curiosity is that I am not yet pregnant. He begins to think that your seed is poor. Galligantus swears it so and also swears that you are no god. *He* took the girl Sariah to wife but three short weeks ago and already her monthly blood does not flow. Galligantus asks every day that he be allowed to kill you."

Sariah had married Galligantus. She was a Hitt to the core and *had* led them into the trap.

Blade went to crouch by the fire and eye Lisma. "And what does your father say?"

Lisma shrugged. "Every day he says no. He still believes you a god—for how else could you have defeated him?—and he wants me pregnant by you. If it is a son, it will be at least half a god and bring the Hitts luck in everything—war and peace, crops, rain when we need it, strong children and bold leaders. He bids Galligantus hold his peace—at times they come near to quarrel over it. But we are wasting time, Blade. I have not all day for this. Put your man weapon in me and have done."

It struck Blade that he had been missing a bet. He had not been thinking right. He

put thought into action at once. He went to her and, as she would have moved to the pallet to lie for him, he caught her to him and kissed her hard. He had never kissed her before.

At first she struggled. He crushed her to him and sought her lips and kissed her until she went limp in his arms. Her tongue crept into his mouth and began to respond.

"I will show you something of loving," Blade muttered. He carried her to the pallet. She was a simple little thing, a savage, and if he could not get around her he had no business in Dimension X. Why had he not thought of it before?

When he had done with Lisma she lay limp and gasping, her eyes soft as she caressed his face. Blade thought briefly of the Princess Hirga, whom he could never satisfy or dominate. Something wrong there—something he meant to discover, if and when he ever got back to Zir.

Lisma peered up at him through half-closed lids. "I near to swooned, Blade. How is it that I never felt like this before? I saw visions and my spirit fled this room and into the skies. How is it? Why have I not known such pleasure before?"

"Because you have not loved before," said Blade. "and I did not love. Now we both love and want each other and it is different. You will be pregnant soon, Lisma."

Her fingers toyed with his dark beard. "Do we love? I had no thought of that. You are a prisoner, even if a god, and I am the daughter of a king."

"I had not thought of it either," said Blade. "Now I know. I love you, Lisma, and you love me. We have found our destiny."

He met her glance without difficulty. It was no great task. He had faked love many times before.

He did not give her time to think. He entered her again and for an hour rang every sexual change he knew. When she left him she had promised to arrange an audience with her father as soon as possible. When he walked with her to the trapdoor she clung to him and whispered, "I will have you out of this place soon, Blade. You will be consort and lover to me. We cannot marry, for Hitt law does not permit marriage to a foreigner, but we will be together. I vow it."

"Beware of Galligantus," said Blade, "for I think he is my real enemy."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "I have my father's right ear—Galligantus has only his left."

Blade went back to sew on his balloon. His spirits were back and he felt more alert and confident than in weeks. The old Blade was back. No more bewailing the past and blaming himself. What was past was done and could not be changed. Look to the future. Look to himself.

That night the crystal worked again for the first time since his capture. The computer, meaning Lord L, was worried about his mental condition, more so than his present physical peril, for based on past performance he would somehow extricate himself.

Blade concentrated long enough to tell them of his plans, of the balloon, and then had the best night's sleep in many a day. The following morning they came for him.

He was not bound or chained. He walked inside a square of armed guards. He was taken down through passages and stairs and out into a valley, past crowds of staring Hitts, to a cavern where Loth Bloodax held his court. There, in the garish light of a hundred torches, he found Bloodax sitting on a natural seat of stone that served as throne. He was attended by warriors and by his council, the latter wearing iron chains of office and with blue marks of rank painted on their forehead.

Lisma squatted at her father's feet. She smiled as Blade was brought forward. To the king's right was the man Galligantus and his new wife, the girl Sariah. She did not look at Blade. Galligantus stared and his lip curled in contempt. In that moment, even before he had spoken, Blade determined to kill Galligantus if possible. It would be some revenge for Thane.

Loth Bloodax leaned to peer at Blade. The man was short-sighted. He was also enormous, not tall, but with a span to him that bespoke great strength going a little to blubber. He wore an iron crown, and beneath it his hair was thin and dry, the yellow fading into gray. He wore a dress kilt and light chest armor. His eyes, a pale, washed-out blue, were set too close to a blobby nose. Nothing distinguished about him, thought Blade, and then he remembered how the man had fought.

Blade did not bow. He had noted that Hitts never bowed or were in any way obsequious. Loth Bloodax had a low, harsh voice.

"You have worked a new magic, Prince Blade. My daughter who came to you first for child now comes to me for your life and comfort. She tells me that you seek to live with her, to be her lover and man and warrior. This is true?"

Blade inclined his head. "It is true."

Galligantus glared meanly at Blade and spat. "It is false, Loth. He is weary of his perch atop our rock, and lonely, and in fear of his miserable life. He has fooled Lisma and now he is trying to fool you. I will kill him for you. A pleasant enough

task."

Bloodax waved him off. "There will be no killing until I say so. I gave you the man Thane to carve as you pleased. Be content for now."

He looked at Blade for a moment, frowning and plucking at his teeth with a forefinger. He dislodged a bit of meat and spat it out.

"Is it true, Blade, that in Zir you grew from a babe to full man in a month?"

"That is true."

Bloodax nodded slowly. "My spies brought word of it. I did not believe it."

"I still do not believe it," said Galligantus.

"I begin to," said Bloodax. "And I will not tell you again, Galligantus. I am king here, not you. Hold your tongue."

Galligantus subsided, muttering, but his glance toward Blade was hate-filled. Blade's likewise. Somehow he must find means to kill this man.

"You defeated me," said Loth Bloodax, "and that was no small thing. I know how you crossed the water behind me, for I watched your Captain Ogier tear up the hidden bridge. But it would have taken a god to think of that. I have use for a new god, Prince Blade, for our old ones have deserted us. But tell me—can you work that magic again?"

Blade was puzzled for the moment. "What magic?"

Bloodax slapped his hand on an enormous thigh in impatience. "Make babes into men in so short a while! I need warriors. I have babes beyond counting and few men who can wield an axe or sword. You have bled me of men, Prince Blade, and I think you owe me this magic to restore my armies."

So that was it. Blade knew that this was a ticklish moment. He must go cautiously, and yet he must seize the opportunity.

"I can do that," he said, "but it will take a little time to prepare. And I will need your help—I will also need many of the shining stones. I am told that you Hitts have mountains of them?"

Loth Bloodax was excited now, eager. He clapped his hands and stared hard at Blade. "You swear you can do this?"

"I swear it. If I am not interfered with and am given leave to go my own way

freely. First I must be taken to the place of the shining stones."

Bloodax frowned. "You keep speaking of shining stones. I do not wholly understand this. Do you mean—"

One of the counselors came forward. "I think he means this, Loth. See—I use it to sharpen my dagger."

In his hand was a diamond as large as a baseball in HD. Blade was not an avaricious man and so did not have to cloak it, but nonetheless he hooded his eyes. And reached for the stone. Bloodax nodded and the counselor handed it to Blade. He hefted it. Not half the weight of the stone Casta had shown him, but a fine gem just the same. Blade handed it back.

"That is what I mean. But I must have larger stones, much larger. For if I am to make warriors out of babes, I must first make an image—and it must be life-size."

Silence came down like a pall. Bloodax stared at Blade, his pale eyes hard and unblinking. Galligantus could contain himself no longer. He leaped to his feet and pointed a trembling finger at Blade, shouting.

"This is not magic, Loth. This is witchery. How else could he know of our sacred place, of the place of Kings and Queens? And how could he know that the images are made of the shining rock—such matters are never spoken of. I say kill him now. At once! If he is a god he is an evil one."

The girl Sariah had been sitting quietly, head down, not looking at Blade. Now she spoke. "He is not evil. I do not know if he is a god or not, but he is not evil. He was kind to me and kept his word. He guarded me while I slept, so I was not raped or slain. I am a Hitt and am married to a Hitt, but still I must say this."

Galligantus turned on her with a snarl. He struck her across the face. "Keep your tongue, wife! Women do not speak up in the councils of men."

Loth Bloodax laughed. He patted his belly and roared and pointed at Galligantus. "You would marry her, Galligantus. Now you see what you have taken into your bed. You will live to rue it, but this is your worry and not mine."

Lisma had been keeping silent, half smiling at Blade and occasionally nodding encouragement to him. She also spoke now. And glared at Galligantus.

"I have never liked you, man, and I like you less with each hour that passes. You defy my father too much. You interfere. You are fortunate that I am not yet queen."

She turned to her father. "You are king, father, you are Loth Bloodax. I beg you

do as the Prince Blade asks—for you would have soldiers and I would have him." She rose and went to her father and whispered, twirling her fingers in his hair as she did so, smiling and cozening. Blade heard the last of her words.

"I already feel his seed stirring in me, I tell you. Soon you will have a god as grandson. Do this thing for me, father. I will see that all is well. I promise. And you can have him well guarded, to put your mind at ease."

Bloodax drew her into his lap and kissed her and ruffled her hair. He grinned. "I can deny you nothing, child. It shall be so. Galligantus, you will take an escort of warriors and show Prince Blade the sacred place of Kings and Queens. And I charge you this—he must return safely or your head will join that of the man Thane on a pole."

Leather-men glided over the line of march occasionally, flitting from peak to peak. Galligantus did not bind Blade, but kept him well guarded. He had fifty men, all heavily armed, the last of the royal guard. The others had died on the beach.

Galligantus went a little out of his way so that Blade would have to view Thane's head on its pole. It had been set into the rock near a valley entrance. The eyes were gone and most of the flesh, and Thane's last grin was ivory and terrible.

Galligantus, sneering, called a halt and pointed to the head. "One smell of treachery, Prince, and you will join your friend. You would be with him now were I not obedient and loyal to Loth Bloodax." He lowered his voice. "Though he can be a great fool at times and lets his daughter Lisma coax him into anything."

Blade ignored him. He forced himself to look at the head. Poor Thane. No more wine. No more huge laughter and crude jokes. No more battles or building.

After a time he said, "I have seen and I have heard. Shall we march?"

Galligantus glared at him, then gave the order. They left that valley and entered another. And another and another. Their march was a succession of valleys. Blade noted what landmarks he could and tried to keep himself oriented. They were heading to the southeast and in that direction must lie the channel, the narrow water.

The last valley ended in an open plain. Not unlike the Plain of Pyramids back in Zir. In the center of the plain a mountain stood alone. The sun was dying in the west, but a last ray struck over the mountains and cliffs and valleys and caressed one black flank of the mountain on the plain. In that moment it came alive, sequined, glowing and sparking and flashing. Blade stood awe-stricken. Here was literally a mountain of diamonds. Stones that by some X-Dimension chemistry did not need to be polished but were thrown up already glittering. He made himself think as Richard Blade of Home Dimension—such a treasure would be worth countless billions, if the

market could be controlled, for industrial use alone here was a fortune— If, if, if. Blade went back to thinking in terms of Dimension X.

Galligantus and his men were not impressed. Indeed, the troops were bored and weary. Galligantus gave the order to move on.

As they grew near the diamond mountain Blade saw that it was in reality a volcano—long dead, for no wisp of smoke floated from the deep-scarred crater. They made camp near a mine entrance, a shaft leading into the side of the mountain, and Galligantus sought out Blade. He was in a sarcastic mood now.

"If you are not too weary, Prince God, we will go in this very night. The men will complain, but I wish to have done with it. You will see and you will tell me what you need and it shall be done. Are you ready?"

Blade was glad he had no weapon. His temper was uncertain and he did foolish things these days. He nodded. "I am ready."

Galligantus selected ten of his best men and they entered the shaft. One man went ahead with a flaring torch. They made their way through a burrow of narrow passages with width for only one man. At times they crawled on hands and knees.

They broke out into a chamber and Blade was nigh blinded by the reflections of the torches in the diamond face. It was a hall of mirrors, deep beyond knowing, a billion facets catching light and distorting it. Blade gazed and had trouble with his breath. The far side of the chamber was fifty feet high and some hundred across. Solid diamond. Like a coal face to be chipped away and loaded and hauled out, only this was crystallized carbon. Diamond. Formulae floated through his dazed brain. H10—specific gravity 3.52. Teleport it back to Home Dimension and you were the richest nation in the world—if you could keep the politicians and the merchants, the grabbers, from muddling things. Ah, well, that was not his worry.

Galligantus had been watching his reaction, a cunning smile on his mean features. But he was astute.

"I see greed," he said, "and I do not understand. How do you gain of it, of this stone? But to make an image and persuade Loth that you can work magic with it? Which mayhap you can. I do not deny it—yet, though I have my own thoughts as to it. But you gaze on this useless stone as a man might on a woman or a fine weapon."

"The images," said Blade. "I must see them."

Galligantus drew his sword. He had a brief whispered talk with his men and then gestured to Blade. "Walk ahead of me. We will go to the place of Kings and Queens alone. These commoners are not permitted to see."

There was a narrow opening to one side of the diamond face. Galligantus prodded Blade through it with his point. "Walk well ahead but not too far. Do not tempt me, Prince Blade. I would as lief kill you and take my chances with Loth. I admit it. But I will not unless you force me."

Blade carried a torch. The passage was short and ended on a wide ledge. There was a chasm, wide and deep and black, and across the chasm was another ledge, smaller, narrower, a gallery of glinting figures.

Blade advanced to the brink of the chasm and raised his torch to see better. It guttered and smoked, and the yellow flame wavered in a fetid draft from the pit, but he saw well enough. He stood dumfounded, locked in awe and near disbelief, for here some artisan had wrought close to the quick of life.

There were dozens of them close-packed along the gallery. Men in armor and women in robes or breeches or kilts. All were life-size and all appeared to move and breathe in the uncertain light. Blade moved along the ledge on his side of the chasm, peering, trying to catch his breath.

"Mind you the edge.," said Galligantus behind him. "If I am not to have the pleasure of killing you I would not have the pit take you."

He picked up a chip of diamond and flung it into the chasm. "Listen, and tell me what you hear."

Blade heard nothing. He gazed into the chasm and over it. At the narrow point he reckoned it to be fifteen feet across. He drew back a little and wandered farther down the ledge. And saw her.

She stood a little alone, on a natural plinth that jutted out over the chasm. She was naked and her arms were outstretched in welcome. Her glittering diamond smile seemed to welcome the torch, the light brought into the pit, and as Blade gaped she appeared to move. Warmth glowed in that perfect body. She spoke to Blade across the chasm and the years and he knew he must have her. From that moment on he reckoned himself a little mad and must live with it. But only half of him was mad.

Galligantus was close behind him now. Blade felt the swordpoint against his flesh. When the man spoke, Blade knew that he too felt the spell of this diamond goddess.

"That is Janina," he said softly. "First Queen of the Hitts a thousand years ago. What a woman she was."

"And is still," Blade breathed. "And is yet. She is not dead. She lives far more than you or me, Galligantus."

After a brief silence the Hitt said, "I see your reasoning, Prince Blade, and do not dispute it. But we cannot linger here all night. You have seen the images and can guess their measurement. What more do you want?"

A plan formed in Blade's mind. It was his death if matters went wrong, but he meant to do it if he could. He must hold Galligantus in talk.

He pointed over the chasm. "I must have a closer view. I would have one of the images for study, to compare and to show the artisan who will work it. If I am to make an image of a warrior it must be exact, or the magic will not work."

Galligantus began to laugh. "You ask too much. Even if it were possible, it could not be done—it is forbidden to touch the images once they have been placed on that ledge. In any case, we cannot come at them. Unless," and his voice held mockery, "unless you would leap over and fetch it back."

Blade gazed at the narrowest point. About fifteen feet. He might leap that far. But not now. He moved a little farther back from the edge.

"They were placed there," he said. "And what is placed can be fetched back."

Galligantus could not resist the temptation. "I will tell you how that goes," he said. And prodded Blade in the buttocks with his sword.

"When a king or queen dies, an image is made. It is brought to this place. So are all the young and strong men, or women, who would be king or queen of the Hitts. They draw lots for it—to see who leaps the chasm first. Do you begin to understand?"

Blade moved along the ledge until he was at the narrowest point. Fifteen feet. It was a challenge to numb the brain, an incredible dare. Below him the black pit gaped. He remembered that he had never heard the diamond chip strike bottom.

"Do many fail?"

"Many, Prince Blade. They fall and that is an end to them." Galligantus was closer now. Blade did not look at him. He held the torch away from his face. He did not want the man to see his eyes.

"Did Loth Bloodax come to the crown this way?"

"He did. He was the tenth to try. Loth made it and then lines were thrown and nets laid and the image lifted across. It was of his father. See yonder." Galligantus pointed to a statue just across from them, bearded and glowering and bearing a marked resemblance to Bloodax.

Blade moved a little toward Galligantus. The Hitt did not notice.

"And then? How did he get back?"

Something happened to the Hitt's voice. It grew surly, whiny, envenomed.

"He leaped back. It is required that a Hitt king make the leap twice."

Blade made a closer inspection of the ledge over the way. It was so narrow! No running room, no place to maneuver. The gallery was barely five feet deep and packed with statues. He remembered the thick legs of Loth Bloodax. Fat now, but they had been all muscle when he leaped.

Blade saw the truth then and recognized it and spoke it, for it came readily to hand and fitted his plan. He instilled disdain and contempt into his voice.

"You and Bloodax are of an age," he said. "Or nearly so. You were young then and no doubt the son of a leader. How was it that you did not leap, Galligantus?"

Blade heard a catch of breath behind him. The man was close. Blade waited for the swordstroke that did not come. He hurried on. He was into it now, the chance was there, and he must be careful not to be cut. There must be no wound or he would never live to tell his lie.

"I do not blame you," Blade said with just the right amount of derision in his tone. "It is a fearful leap. I would not do it. But cowards live longer than brave men. Yet it must have galled you all these years—"

Galligantus made a strangled noise in his throat. He leaped and swung his sword.

"No man or god speaks so to me! I will—"

Blade ducked low and caught Galligantus between the ankles and knees. The sword whispered over him. Blade straightened and flung the Hitt over his shoulder and into the chasm.

Galligantus screamed once and there was no echo. Blade lingered, listening, but heard no sound.

He examined his body carefully in the light of the torch. He bore no wound other than the battle scratch, and that was near healed and accounted for. Lisma herself had bathed and anointed it. He began to make his way out of the place, then went back to gaze once more at the naked woman on her plinth.

Janina. What did a name matter? Or a thousand years. She was not dead. She

lived. For Blade she lived, and he meant more than ever to have her. How he did not know, or when, but have her he must. She gazed back over the dark pit and held out her arms. It was then he saw her move and beckon. Her lips moved. The words came hauntingly sweet across the abyss. "Come to me."

Blade raised the torch in salute. "In time, Janina. In time."

Chapter 13

Blade told his lie, that Galligantus had slipped—mayhap a swoon or fit?—and fallen into the abyss. The junior officer did not believe it and Blade would have died then but for the order of Bloodax that he return safely. Galligantus had passed the order on and so his men dared not slay Blade now. They took him back, bound and with a halter about his neck, and he was once again imprisoned on the tower of rock. Lisma was forbidden to visit him.

But visit him she did, creeping in the dead of night after having bribed the guards. Blade did not ask how. She brought him a long dagger and minced no words as she handed it to him. She would not let him touch her.

"My father broods on this matter," she told him. "It is not his way to act suddenly. He keeps apart, even from me, and when he comes to a decision it is never changed. In the end, Blade, I think he will find you guilty of killing Galligantus."

"And what of you, Lisma? Do you think me guilty?"

She sat in the chair, tense, her hands nervous. "Yes. I think you slew Galligantus. Because of what he did to your friend Thane. I can understand that—any Hitt can. And to my thinking it is no great loss—his widow Sariah is not weeping overmuch. But that is not the point—Galligantus was a Hitt chief and a friend of my father. They were boys together. Galligantus was mean and envious, a man not much liked, but he was loyal. My father cannot let the matter pass as nothing, cannot ignore it, for there would be trouble with the tribes. He will punish you in—the end, Blade."

Blade, seated on his cot, toyed with the dagger she had given him. It had a curved eight-inch blade and was razor sharp. The haft was of polished wood.

"What manner of punishment, Lisma?"

Her blue eyes were soft and moist. A sudden tear ran down her cheek. Yet buried somewhere in those eyes he detected a hardness, an unforgiving hatred, and found it also in her voice when she spoke.

"You will be taken to a mountain top and staked out for the vultures. It will be a slow death and a terrible one. We are quits, Blade, and I have been your fool. But I

do not wish you such a death. That is why I gave you the dagger."

He regarded the weapon with a half smile. "You think I should use it on myself?"

"If you have the courage. It will be better than the vultures."

Blade nodded. "Yes. I agree to that."

Lisma left the chair and came to within a foot of him. "I will go now, Blade, and will not come again. It may be that I will have your child. I hope not, for I will have to kill it, god or no."

He was shocked and let it show. Of all things, he had not expected this. "Kill our child?"

Her blue eyes narrowed and her cold smile sent a chill up his back. He had near forgot that she was a Hitt—and a woman.

"When I sought to have your child without love between us—that was one thing. But then you spoke of love and I gave love and thought you did. You lied, Blade. You gave no love. You lied to me and made a fool of me, thus causing me to make a fool of my father. I want no child from that. Goodbye, Blade. Use the knife."

She was gone. Blade sat in thought for some minutes before he used the knife. Not as she had suggested.

He found a long pole, taken from the cot frame, and bound the dagger to it with some of his rawhide. It made a crude spear.

He began to build up his fire. When it blazed well he covered it with green wood, for smoke, and went out on the plateau of stone. The wind was brisk, from the north as usual, and it lacked but an hour to sunset. He went to the rampart of boulders and gazed southward. A leatherman glided nearby and scrutinized him with hard eyes, then disappeared under the far rim.

Beyond those peaks lay the thalassic coast, the channel with its coves and inlets, and Blade knew he would find corpses there. And so armor and weapons. The Hitts did not bother to bury the common dead. Could he reach the coast, or even gain near to it, he had a chance. But he must go at once. Any moment now the brooding Loth Bloodax might cease brooding and come to action.

He would have to do it in the dark. He did not like the idea, even with a moon already visible in the east, but it must be done. He dared not wait for another dawn. He would have to take his chances. The balloon was going up—he smiled grimly at the Home-Dimension slang—and he with it, and he had no way of knowing how it

would end. He glanced again at the peaks, flaming gold in the crepuscular light, and turned back to the hut. Looking would not solve anything. It was murderous terrain and he would need all his luck.

As the sun slid from view the trapdoor opened. Blade felt a tightness in his chest and held his breath. Were they coming for him now? He reached for the crude spear. If they came, he would fight it out here, for once bound and helpless he would be vulture bait.

A hand appeared and shoved a bowl of food and a can of water onto the roof, then disappeared. The trapdoor closed. Blade breathed again. He drank the water and wolfed down the food, not knowing when he would eat or drink again. The moon was gibbous, scratching its hump on a far peak, and he must go before it grew too light. He had never known the leather-men to fly at night, but did not preclude it.

He began to work. The balloon was complete, sewn as tightly as he could get it, and, though there would be leaks, he thought it would work. It had better. This pillar, this sandstone phallus on which he now stood, fell away sheer for five hundred feet. A long way to fall.

Thus far he had proceeded on theory, not daring to run a test. When it was full dark, but for the moon, he hauled his bag of skins out on the rock and spread it ready for inflating. He fitted a rawhide tube into the bottom opening and ran it to the hut chimney. Over the chimney top he fitted a leather apron and pushed the tube into a hole left for it. The smoke, thick and greasy, began to filter through the tube and into the balloon. There were many leaks and about this he could do nothing.

Blade had been short of rawhide and, not daring to ask for more lest he arouse suspicion, could not rig a full net over the balloon. He settled for straps tied into the skins near the fringe, knotting them together to give him a handhold. He had no way of making grommets, and if the straps pulled loose, or if the skins tore away... he did not like to think of it.

By the time the moon was an hour high the balloon was swelling, a puffed and lopsided monstrosity that moved with the wind and tugged at its tethering strip of rawhide. Blade regarded it askance and for a moment even his stout heart quailed. Could this poor thing even get him off the stone tower? Would it not be better to wait, to take his chances and await a better time to escape?

He went into the hut and heaped more wood on the fire. He had come this far with the plan and he would finish with it. He took his homemade spear and went back to the balloon. It was in the air now, tugging ever more fiercely at its halter. Smoke leaped from a score of seams. Blade punched it with his big fist. Solid, crammed with hot air longing to rise. It would not be long now.

A leather-man came over. Blade cursed. He had guessed wrong. They did fly at night, and with the moon so bright they could not fail to see the balloon. See, yes, but would they understand?

The leather-man glided past with the usual hissing sound, not twenty feet above the balloon. For a moment Blade thought the Hitt was going to land on the tower, and he snatched at his spear and stood ready. The leather-man barely cleared the far precipice—they were skilled at that—and drifted down into the valley. How much had he seen or understood? Blade ran to the rampart and peered anxiously down.

Nothing yet. A few fires down there, a few moving torches. Blade ran to the trapdoor. It was light, of wood, and there was no way to secure it from above. He moved the trapdoor a few inches and flung himself on his belly, listening. Voices. Far below. Voices bellowing orders and a tramp of feet and clatter of arms. They were coming. The leather-men had wasted no time.

Torches began to flare in the mountains around him. From the nearest peak, higher than his tower, he saw four lights appear and move in signal. The alarm was out. Go, Blade!

He ran back to the balloon. It was straining at the rawhide leash. Blade disengaged the tube from the chimney and thrust an arm through his knotted holding straps. The spear was in his right hand. He reached and began to saw the restraining line apart just as the trapdoor was flung aside and armed men burst onto the pillar top with a vast hoarse shouting. The line snapped. The balloon leaped upward with a jerk that nearly tore Blade's arm from its socket. The wind caught it and sucked it away to the south. A flung spear missed Blade by a foot and an arrow hissed into the balloon and hung there.

Blade gained altitude fast, but not fast enough. As he was swept away to the south on a freshening wind, a jagged snow-capped peak loomed just ahead. He was below it. His left arm was cramped, painful, and as he was about to shift the spear and use his right arm for support, he saw the familiar silhouette of a leather-man leave the peak and come gliding straight at the balloon. Blade tensed, the spear still in his right hand and ready for thrusting.

The leather-man must have meant to fly into the grotesque smoke-leaking bag that hurtled toward him. He did not understand a balloon and he was afraid, but the torch signals had bid him to stop this thing. To fight it. He tried to obey.

He could not control his crude, bat-winged frame of wood. He missed the bag and flew into Blade. The shock nearly dislodged Blade, and for a moment his feet became entangled in the armature. The leather-man, his arms helplessly pinioned into the wingstraps, glared at him, then shrieked as Blade put the spear-dagger into his throat. Blade kicked free of the contraption and watched it fold and break and spiral

down to crash.

He was past the last high peak now and the balloon was still rising. He traveled in the absolute silence that only a balloonist knows. He tucked the spear under his arm and hung on grimly. His arms were already weary, cramping, painful. It became very cold. He wore only his leather battle kilt and a crude woven shirt given him by Lisma. The pain in his hands and arms continued to grow, and for the first time the thought came that perhaps he did not have the strength to see it through. He flexed his fingers and changed grips constantly. If his hands went numb, if his great biceps cramped too badly...

The moon slid behind a solid bulwark of dark cloud. Blade skimmed along in darkness, a weird and frightening sensation. He might at any moment dash his brains out against a cliff, or any jutting fang of rock could tear the balloon to shreds.

He could bear the pain in his arms no longer. He tried to work a leg up to get a foot through the straps. It was cold. Sweat dried in a frigid glaze on his body. One of the straps pulled loose from the skins.

Blade felt it go. His heart skipped a beat. He swung sideways, down a few inches, off center and so pulling the balloon askew and causing it to leak at a greater rate. Smoke billowed into his face. He was no longer rising as the air in the balloon chilled and lost its buoyancy. He began to sink.

Another strap pulled free of the skins. Blade lurched and dropped and for a moment he thought the last two straps would go. They held. By now the balloon was tilted on its side and losing altitude rapidly. The moon was still hidden and Blade could see nothing in the void below.

Not one fire gleamed, he saw no torch, he was alone in cold and blackness.

Down. The balloon was deflating fast and the speed of his fall increased. He could not gauge his rate of fall, but judged that if he struck anything solid now he was a dead man. At best he would be maimed and crippled. The Hitts would find him and feed him to the vultures yet.

Down-down- The balloon was little more than a shrunken pouch trailing after him in the plunge. It had some braking effect, but not enough to save him.

The moon peered out of cloud again and Blade saw the water just before he struck it. He landed flat out and was hurt and stunned. He made a great splash. He loosed his hold on the straps and kicked away from the balloon and trod water while he got his senses back. He breathed deep and felt himself for broken bones and found none. He swam back to the balloon and pressed out air pockets with his feet until it filled and sank. Then he swam for the shore, for a glint of beach some five

hundred yards distant.

Blade crawled onto rough shingle and lay gasping. The long confinement had sapped his strength. But there was no rest for him now. The night was before him—he doubted he had been in the air for more than half an hour—and there was much to do. He must get his bearings, find a hiding place, make decisions. He had escaped his prison, but he had not escaped his peril.

He had nothing. No food, no water, no weapon. He was lightly clad, barefoot, drenched and shivering. And lost.

The bulbous eye of the moon mocked him. Blade shook a fist at it and went looking. For the nonce he did not fear encountering human enemies; nothing stirred about him, no night birds or animals, nothing but the soft wash of surf. This latter encouraged him. The water was salt and it moved and high water was marked plainly on the beach. Tides. It must be the channel. But which side of it?

Bit by bit he explored and found that his cove was roughly triangular and slashed well back into tall cliffs. There were great jumbles of boulders and weird rock formations and there must be caves in which to hide if he must. At the moment a cave, and a fire, were vastly appealing. And food. Blade shivered and grinned and forgot it. He had no food and no means of making a fire, even if he were foolhardy enough to show a beacon to every enemy within eyeshot. He took off his shirt, Lisma's present, and wrung it out as best he could and put it on again and went looking.

The moon had wheeled away and was beginning to wane when he saw the dark thing lying at the edge of the water. Blade approached it cautiously, though without fear, and saw that it was a dead man. A corpse near rotted away. Fish had been at it, maybe animals, and he had to kneel by it and look closely before he made it out to be a Zirnian soldier. One of the thousands who had died on the beach, or the bridge, and had floated far eastward with current to strand on this lonely beach.

The undercloth had rotted away, but the armor was still in fair enough condition, albeit the leather sodden and the metal rusted. Best of all, to Blade, was the sword. It was still in the scabbard. As Blade tugged it away, he saw the arrow still in the bony cage of ribs—the man had died before he could draw sword.

He donned the armor, which fitted well enough with some stretching at the jointures, and plunged the sword into sand to cleanse it. He buckled the weapon about him and felt immensely better. There was no helmet and he did not complain—his luck had been good this night.

Blade searched up and down the cove for something to eat. Clams, mussels, anything at all. He could have eaten a raw horse. He found nothing, but, finally, a

cave formed by two tilting boulders. Into this he retired and slept.

With first dawn he awoke. He sniffed the gray air and found it familiar, softer, fragrant, lacking the brisk sting of Hitt air. He scratched his beard, sleepy and puffy-eyed, and pondered. Could it be possible? He had been in the air such a little time—but the wind had been stiff when he took off and had increased as he gained altitude. It was, he conceded, just possible.

Blade came cautiously out of his cave and crawled on his hands and knees down to a rock formation overlooking the beach. There he lay hidden until the sun came up. The warmth was glorious and he reveled in it, turning on his back and letting the rays lave his face. He was nearly asleep again when he heard the muffled clapping of horses on sand and the jingle of armor and weapons. A patrol. Blade scuttled back into his rocks like a lizard.

He peered down at the beach. There were a dozen horsemen led by a sublieutenant. Zirnians. Blade gazed beyond them, out over the water to where land, looking like nothing more than a cloud bank, showed on the far horizon. His sense of terrain had always been acute and now he remembered the maps he and Ogier had studied by the hour. He had done it. He had crossed the channel and had landed but a few miles from where the sunken pontoon had been built. That was Hitt country over there. He was back in Zir.

Blade gave a halloo and began to run toward the beach. The troop of horse reined about in surprise and swords were drawn and spears loosed in their scabbards. Blade stopped and raised a hand, then another, his fingers spread and palms revealed. The sublieutenant spurred toward him with a pennon-bearer at his side.

Blade's luck was holding. The young officer recognized him at once. He saluted and doffed his helmet.

"Prince Blade! We thought you slain or a prisoner of the Hitts."

Blade grinned hugely. "Prisoner, yes. Corpse, no. Unless I am a ghost. And if I am, I am the hungriest ghost you are ever likely to see. Take me to food at once. What is this patrol and where are you quartered?"

"We have a camp two hours' ride inland, sire. I will take you there. The Captain Ogier will be glad to hear of you."

The troop reached a defile and turned inland. Blade made a brief inspection of the men and did not like what he saw. Their uniforms were tattered, their weapons dirty and the armor rusty and dented. He noted that some were near to sleeping in the saddle.

He stared hard at the young officer. "These men look worn out, spent. They should be in rest quarters. And why are there so few of you?"

"Captain Ogier cannot spare more for beach patrol, sire. He has few enough men as it is."

"How is that?" Blade knew that the Zirnian losses had been heavy, but Ogier still had a sizable army when he retreated back across the channel.

The sublieutenant was looking at him in surprise. Blade scowled. "Talk, man! I know nothing. I have been a prisoner of the Hitts, mind you, and they told me only what they wished me to know. What of matters in Zir?"

"They go badly, sire. There is a near state of civil war—though it still smoulders and has not broken into open fighting yet."

Blade knew then, but still asked the question. "Casta? The black priests?"

"Aye, sire. The black priests. Casta and his whore, the Princess Hirga, live in the palace-city and work day and night to undermine the army. The Captain Ogier and Casta had a meeting, and the rumors are that angry words were spoken and swords nearly drawn. In the end Casta had his way—the black crows are dispersed all through the army to aid discipline and preach loyalty to Casta. They have been given weapons and armor and—authority and no soldier is free to speak what is in his mind—lest he run afoul of Casta. Many of the men have deserted."

Blade forgot his hunger. Anger filled his belly. "And Ogier stands for this?"

The officer did not meet Blade's eye. He glanced back at his raggle-taggle men and said, "For the time, sire. Captain Ogier bides his time. He camps now on the Plain of Pyramids with half an army. All who would follow him. He confers daily with Casta and they meet halfway between the palace-city and the Plain, for neither trusts the other. You have returned at a bad time, Prince Blade."

Blade smiled faintly. "On the contrary, lad. Maybe it is a good time. We want no civil war in Zir. Perhaps I can stop it."

"How sire?"

Blade could not answer. He had not the slightest idea at the moment. But something would come to him. It always did.

Chapter 14

"I had thought you dead before now," said the Captain Ogier. "But you stand alive before me and so I do not know my Hitts so well, after all."

They were in Ogier's tent on the Plain of Pyramids. Blade, new clothed and armored, anointed and shorn and clipped, and with his belly full, sipped at wine as he told his story. He did not tell the Captain everything.

When he had done, Ogier clawed at his stubble and nodded and regarded Blade. He was the same Ogier, round as a barrel and taciturn as ever, though now he dressed in grander fashion and, so Blade had heard, called himself General.

Blade went straight to that point now. "You and I must have an understanding, Ogier. You have taken command of the army and you have done well. I would leave it so."

Ogier looked surprised. "But you are son and heir of the Izmir, may his soul repose."

Blade shook his head. "I forego that from now on—though for the moment it were best kept to ourselves. But we must work together in harmony, and I would have you understand you will be General and in command. I have tasks to complete, and when I have done them I will leave Zir. What you call yourself then is of no matter to me. King, Emperor, Izmir—what you will. I think you are a good man at heart, Ogier, and that Zir will prosper under you."

Ogier smiled and looked pleased. It was, Blade thought, like seeing a block of granite smile.

"I will be as honest as you," said Ogier. "I would take no pleasure in giving up the power I have come to since we thought you dead. But in the way you put it—and you have always kept your word—I see no cause for quarrel."

They clasped hands and Ogier poured more wine. He tipped his cup and let a little of the wine spill on the ground. "For Thane. He was a good man. I am glad you slew Galligantus."

Blade spilt his own libation and they drank. Ogier retired to his camp desk and Blade to a chair. "And now," said Blade, "let us get to it. Tell me of the black crow, the big one."

At that moment, as though summoned by Blade's words, a black priest came into the tent. Without formality or permission he strode arrogantly to Ogier and spoke in a harsh voice. Blade, caught up in the figure of speech, thought it more a croaking caw than ordinary speech.

"Casta, the High Priest, comes this night to the Plain. The Princess Hirga will accompany him. Casta will be in his quarters in the monolith of the Izmir and he bids you attend him there when the moon rises."

Ogier opened his mouth. Before he could speak the priest held up a hand and turned to stare at Blade. Blade stared back. The priest was hooded, his face cloaked but for the burning dark eyes that examined Blade and missed nothing. The priest turned back to Ogier. "You are to come alone." He stalked out.

Ogier cursed for a full minute. Blade listened and grinned. He had been a soldier himself in Dimension H. He waited until Ogier ran out of breath. Then he said, "I begin to see your plight. I was told, but now I have seen. They are arrogant, these crows."

Ogier nodded glumly. "And full of guile. And powerful and numerous. I have sought to fight guile with guile, to avoid an open break, but I think I am not the man for it. I had best fight Casta before he seduces more of my troops, whilst I still have at least half an army."

Blade had noted the priests on his way inland. At the coastal camp and at every camp on the way—always there were the priests with groups of soldiers around them to listen. The black priests talked and talked and talked.

"That is your problem. now," he told Ogier. "Mine is why Casta did not invite me to this meeting. He must know that I have returned. In minutes now he will know that I have been closeted with you. The news will be signaled to the palace-city."

"That is no great mystery, Blade. He will seek to talk to us alone, each apart, and make the best bargain he can with each. And to set us at each other's throats if he can."

Blade smiled at the warrior. "That he will never do, my friend. But still I am puzzled—why does Casta come here, to the tomb of the Izmir where he is surrounded by your troops?"

Ogier poured wine. "We have a truce. I observe such vows and, until now, he had done so. He comes at least twice weekly to the monolith. I know not why, but it must be that there is something there he needs, must have or must do, something that can only be done *there*. I have not inquired nor will I. I do not wish to know, for I have heard stories that chill my blood and I am not a superstitious or unnatural man."

Blade remembered that living skeleton seated behind the table and fondling a skull. The eyes like dark coals aflame. He thought of Hirga and her scorn and the foul smell, and the scales littered about her bed. There was something in all this that mystified and frightened him. That was Dimension-X thinking.

There was a natural, or an unnatural, explanation for everything. Logic of a particular context, a relative frame of reference, a way of doing and seeing and understanding that made sense within its own limitations. That was Home-Dimension

thinking.

Blade made up his mind.

He went to Ogier and clapped him on the shoulder and gazed deep into his eyes. "Ogier, there are some things I would ask of you. The first is that you hear me out and make no objection until I have finished."

Ogier nodded. "Ask then."

"When does the moon rise tonight?"

The General fumbled through a pile of charts on his desk. "It is late tonight—a little past the night noon."

"Good. Now, you have no objections if I kill a few priests?"

Ogier shook his head and did not speak.

"I thought not. And you have no objections if I kill Casta, the blackest crow of all?"

Ogier stared with wide eyes. "I do not object. I would like to do it myself. But how? You cannot come at him. He is too well guarded. And even an attempt on his life will begin the war I have been seeking to avert."

Blade studied the tent wall for a moment. Had that bulge been there before? He moved closer to the bulge, signaling to Ogier for silence. Dusk had fallen and the night was purpling fast. Blade drew his dagger.

He spoke loudly. "I do but jest, Ogier. We would both like to kill Casta, but it would be wiser not to. We must deal with him. Make bargains. And keep our vows at least until he breaks his."

Blade thrust his dagger hard into the bulge. There was a muted scream. The bulge slithered and collapsed and was gone. Blade raced out of the tent.

Nothing. Nothing but some blood on the tent wall and the ground. Blade cursed. Ogier, behind him with drawn sword, explained it.

"Some of the crows wear armor now under their robes. This one did. It turned your point enough."

He turned to the soldier who had been standing sentry before the tent. "You saw nothing of a black priest slinking about?"

"Nothing sires. I have only just come on duty." The man did not meet their eyes.

Ogier took his name and company and they went back into the tent.

"A month ago I would have had him flayed," Ogier grumbled. "Now I take his name and will do nothing but transfer him to dirty jobs. He has been won over by the priests."

Blade filled his wine glass. "I am right, Ogier. We must act, and with speed. I will kill Casta this night. You must make your plans accordingly."

Ogier shook his head in wonderment. "Being a prisoner has affected your thinking, Blade. The man escaped. He had heard enough. Casta will be warned and ready for you."

"I agree. But even so I must do it. There is a time for swift and direct action, Ogier, and this is such a time."

"But how? I have just said it—Casta will be warned. You will walk into a trap."

"That is part of it," said Blade. "If I go alone—and I will—he will let me get so far before he closes the trap. I have seen a side of Casta that you have not, and I think that he does not really want to kill me yet. I have knowledge that Casta yearns after. He would have me prisoner, broken and weak, perhaps tortured, but he wants me alive and able to speak. He will let me into the tomb of the Izmir. It will pleasure him. So long as he thinks he has the upper hand and can take me any time he chooses."

For a long time Ogier did not speak. Then: "I would not have you do this, Blade, but I cannot stop you. If you can kill him it will be a boon for Zir, though I think you had best kill the Princess Hirga also. And I will have to act in unison with you and pray for luck."

Blade eyed him. "You advise against it. I listen and I discard that advice. I go. And you, no matter your misgivings, are with me?"

Ogier put his sword on the camp desk. He laid his hand on it at the hilt. "By this weapon I swear it. Come success or death. It is time. I have taken enough from that crow."

"Then come to my tent for an hour, Ogier, and we will whisper. It is quieter there and less suspect. Pick us a guard of six men you can trust."

"I think I can find that many," the General said dryly. "The crows have not yet corrupted *all* of them."

It was full dark when Ogier left Blade alone. Blade bade him take the guard with him. "I will not need them. From now on I act alone and involve no other man. See that you keep your promise to care for the woman, Valli."

"I will keep it."

"And care for her child, if she has one. I think she will."

"That also, Blade. Things will change in Zir if I come to power. No more babes will be strangled."

"Then farewell, Ogier. If I do not see you again, and I may not, I tell you true that you are a man and a soldier."

"Goodbye, Blade."

They clasped hands a last time and Ogier was gone. Blade retired to his pallet. The moon would be late tonight and he need not begin the venture for an hour or so.

He did not try to sleep. He sought to concentrate, to make the crystal work and establish contact with the computer, but it refused. He soon gave it up. Janina was in the way.

Blade closed his eyes and saw her again, glowing and gleaming, beckoning from the ledge. He became aware of a physical reaction. His groin was taut and hurting. In his mind she changed from diamond to flesh, warm and soft and inviting. Her breasts were full and firm, and she leaned to trail her pink nipples over his face.

"Blade! Come to me, Blade."

The words came sibilant into the tent. Blade started up on his cot. Sweat beaded his face and crawled in his beard. *Shehad* spoken. Across all the miles and the water and again the miles she had spoken, had called to him.

Real or phantom? He no longer could be sure. Janina. He must go to her.

Project DX, the computer, Lord Leighton, the six previous forays into Dimension X, they had all conspired to work this schizophrenia, to tear his brain in half. The brain operation, the implanting of the crystal, had been the last straw. Blade knew now that he was a bit mad. Insane. Crazy. He laughed. He did not care. Reality was what you made it, what you said it was, what things meant to you.

He was like a madman who knows that he is mad and also knows that in madness there is a deal of sanity.

Janina. She called him again and for a moment she was in the tent and this time it was he who beckoned her to his bed. She would not come. She held out her arms and stood looking at him and the tent filled with her radiance. Then she vanished.

Blade groaned and got off the pallet. No more. Not now. Janina sapped his will and his strength and he had need of both this night. He began to make his preparations. It did not take long. He stripped naked and buckled his swordbelt on. He wore high-laced buskins. He donned a plumed helmet and slid his left arm into the straps of a small circular shield with a boss of sleek metal. Nothing else. He was ready. But for the ball of twine.

He hefted the twine in his hand. Stout enough. He smiled to himself. Casta would let him into the maze—he had no doubt of it, for the High Priest was sure of himself. And Blade, with the aid of the twine, would let himself out.

Chapter 15

An hour before moonrise, Blade was at the east entrance to the towering monolith that was the Izmir's tomb. The night was dark and windless, and all about on the plain the campfires blazed, but no torches burned over the arched door and no black priests guarded it. Casta knew he was coming. He was making it easy for him.

For a moment he lingered in the arch. A glow of torches filtered up the ramp from the central rotunda. Nothing moved. No sound. Blade drew his sword and went down the ramp.

The great central chamber brooded in dim, guttering light. The stink of the torches filled it. Blade watched the dark gates that opened from the chamber like wheelspokes. Nothing in there. Nothing he could see.

He went to the third door from the left, thinking back. He had made a point of remembering it. It was through this door that the priest had conducted him on his first and only visit to Casta. Blade moved on. Not this time.

He paused at each entrance, stood silent and sniffed the air. He was near to completing the circle when he found it. The foul odor. It came faint but unmistakable—the stink of dead meat and ordure and something else that he could not identify. Blade moved into the passage.

On a last thought he had attached a dagger to his belt. And carried a second in his hand. He drove the spare dagger into a crack between stones and secured the end of his twine to it, testing both dagger and twine. Firm. He began to explore along the passage, sword thrust before him, unreeling the twine as he went. Ahead of him a torch glinted in a sconce.

He went a little beyond the torch and peered into the dark. No more torches. He

went back and lifted the torch from its iron ring and now had to sheathe his sword again for lack of a third hand. He stepped on briskly, holding the torch high and letting the twine out behind him.

Light flashed overhead and then was gone. Gone before he could raise his eyes. A panel in the stone ceiling had been opened and closed. They knew where he was.

The sound behind him was a minor avalanche. Stone crashed down. Blade tugged at his line. It came easily to him, lax and supple. Useless. He reeled it in until he held the frayed end in his hand. So much for that. He cast the ball of twine away and drew his sword. With torch in left hand, held high, and the sword ready in his right, he proceeded.

A wind began to sweep through the narrow passage. A hot wind with the cry of tortured souls behind it. The wind rose and gusted at him, not now, a scalding wind rising in fury. It bore small particles of somethings—and?—that scoured his face and body and threatened his eyes. Blade bent his head and plodded on into the wind. It howled at him and buffeted him and then, in an instant, died away. Somewhere off down the passage a baby cried piteously and a wolf moaned. His skin crawled. He went on.

The passage began to circle, to twist around and around in ever narrowing spirals. Blade began to feel dizzy, a vertigo near overwhelmed him and he lay on the cold floor, pressing his face against it.

There was a jetting sound from all around him, high on the walls. A hissing as something was spurted into the passage. The foul odor vanished to be replaced by the sweetest smell he had ever known. It lulled him and soothed his senses. He felt the need of sleep. And he must breathe deep—he must.

Blade cursed and jabbed the swordpoint into his leg.

Again and yet again. The pain gave him strength to hurry on.

The corridor ceased to twist. It straightened and ran far into darkness. And ended. Stopped. Blade approached the edge and peered down into the darkness. Nothing to see. He thrust the torch into the void and shadows mocked him. He retreated from the edge and considered.

Ten feet beyond the pit the passage continued. For some thirty feet it ran, then ended in a short transverse corridor. Three doors opened off the corridor and over each gleamed a torch. The doors were high and narrow, of metal, with a ringbolt set into each. They seemed to wait, the doors, gleaming and reflecting the torchlight in their shiny surfaces.

Blade looked at the pit again. Ten feet. Easy enough. He drew back a little into the passage and did knee bends to limber his muscles. On second thought he went to the edge again and threw his torch across. It lay sparking and smoking on the far side. Blade went back and took a deep breath and ran.

As he began to run he saw the torch move. It lay on the far edge and it was moving! The ledge there was retreating.

Too late to stop. Blade ran and leaped with all his pent-up anger to lend him strength. The ledge slid away from him. He reached it with his toes, struggled desperately for balance and fell forward with a sobbing cry. Another inch or two and he would have failed the leap.

The door moved beneath him as the ledge slid back to its original position. Blade lay and caught his breath and considered that Casta had never needed Thane. He had master builders of his own. Or had Thane known of this? Had Thane built it? And, had he lived, would he have warned Blade of it, explained the perils and how to thwart them? Blade would never know.

He approached the three doors.

They were shiny and smooth and bore no inscription. In these imperfect mirrors he saw himself and it gave him pause. This naked, brawny giant, scowling, with sword in hand and shield on arm, was not like any of the Blades he had ever known or had ever thought to become. This image was of a savage, a barbarian, a shrewd and cunning warrior no better than the men he sought to kill. He snarled at the man in the door and the man in the door snarled back.

Blade began to laugh. Loud, harsh laughter. He smote his sword on the shield and brayed with laughter. It echoed down the passage and from the abyss behind him.

The laughter ended. Blade approached the middle door. He put out a hand and touched the burnished surface. The door moved easily. Opened. Into nothing.

Blade looked down. Blood-colored fire burned far below, and there was no smoke and only a sound of weeping. No heat. These were cold fires. Zero fires. And the weeping, as he listened and knew, was the sound of centuries of grief and stupidity, of mistakes and cruelty, of death triumphant over life, of loss of hope, of desolation beyond desolation.

Tears blinded him and he rubbed them away and jerked his head to clear it. He closed the door. Illusions, yes, but how done and how skilled he could only marvel at and admit ignorance. And something else—he had been careful not to underestimate Casta, and yet he might have done so. He had not bargained for all

this. Blade knew then, really knew, that this could be his death. He went to the left door and opened it.

Thunder blasted his ears and lightning forked livid over a far vista. Black rain sluiced down, and in the rain marched column after column of skeletons, wending their worm-like way through witch trees. There was a great mound of skulls. The black rain turned red. Blood. Blade set his jaw and pushed a little way into the room, holding his hand out to the scarlet rain. Nothing. His hand was dry, unstained. He retreated and closed the door. Illusion. But how? He was near ready to believe.

Now the door to the right. The moment he pushed it open he sensed that this was the door he was meant to enter.

A short passage led to a blank wall of stone. There was another door with a square peephole cut in it. Light glowed through the orifice. Blade advanced and peered through the opening. Yes. This he was meant to see.

There was a square room. In the center of the room a bed. On the bed, naked, lay the Princess Hirga. She lay with arms and legs flung wide, her taut peaked breasts rising and falling, her eyes closed. If she sensed his presence she made no sign.

As Blade watched she began to fondle her breasts, stroking and kneading. Her fingers toyed with her nipples. Her mouth fell open and he saw the moist tongue protrude and glisten and a worm of saliva rolled from her lips. She began to moan. "Come to me. Hurry—hurry—Come to me."

A travesty of the words Janina had spoken to Blade in fantasy. And not meant for him. Blade watched, narrow-eyed, and his scalp twitched. Not meant for him. Hirga had raised herself and was glancing around the chamber, impatient, looking, waiting. For what? Who?

First the odor. The stench smote Blade like an unclean fist.

The smell of death and shit and something worse than either.

It came. Whether from the floor or the walls he could not see, but it filled space that had been empty. *It was there* .

It stood near the bed and regarded the naked Hirga with eyes set deep in a face that was both animal and human. Horns curled from its forehead and it sprouted scales instead of hair. Silvery platelike scales covered its body. It had the breasts of a woman and the phallus of a man. The legs were short and crooked and ended in hooves. Cloven. It stood and glared at Hirga and slowly moved toward the bed.

Hirga held out her arms in welcome. Blade, sweating from every pore, watched

her face. He had never seen such terror writ on a human face, or such anticipation. Hirga groaned and her eyes rolled as she beckoned the creature to her. It was slow, advancing a step at a time, making no sound.

It came at last to the bedside and stopped. Hirga clasped her hands in supplication. Blade shuddered and tried to close his nostrils. The odor was obscene.

The phallus. It had been limp and dangled to the creature's knee. It was thick, a meaty sausage covered with tiny scales. It began to swell, to grow, to gain rigidity and strength until it jutted enormous and threatening. Blade understood then, knew why no mere man could satisfy Hirga. The High Priest sent this thing to her, controlled her by means of it, and Hirga was addicted, like an addict crying for heroin. As she was crying now, sobbing and writhing on the bed and, her face wild, reaching with both hands for the giant phallus.

The creature moved swiftly. It mounted Hirga and thrust in. She screamed. She lifted her knees high and clasped the foul thing to her and screamed. The creature made no sound, only thrust and thrust that gigantic phallus into her, deeper and deeper. Blade marveled that she was not torn apart.

Gradually her screams subside into groans. Soft moans. The thing was fully ensconced in her now and moving with a rhythmic beat. On and on and on. Hirga's eyes were open and staring. She drooled. Her belly pulsated and her nates quivered. Where there had been terror, fear, anticipation, there was now a growing ecstasy. Her face reddened and tears ran from her staring eyes. Blade, Blade the voyeur, looked down at his own penis and saw it iron hard. He cursed himself.

Hirga screamed in frightful joy. She thrashed around on the bed and screamed and screamed and the sound filled the room and ripped at Blade's nerves. He was gripping the swordhilt so hard that his fingers cramped. He pushed against the door. It gave a bit. He must go in, he must kill the thing, end this foulness, for he could stand no more. Casta would know this. It was so planned. Bit by bit he was fraying away Blade's nerves, whittling at his courage.

The thing was gone. Blade pushed into the room and went to the bed. Hirga lay fainting, her face in repose again, her eyes dull and heavy-lidded, her mouth swollen and pouty. Moisture glistened in her pubic hair and trickled down her inner thighs. She did not seem to know he was there.

Blade glanced at the floor. A few scales. The foul smell was fading. Yet another illusion? No. This had been real. The creature had been there, just as it had been in the cavern cubicle before, and in the palace bedroom. Hirga was in bond to it, slave to it, to Casta's abominable creation.

Hirga opened her eyes and stared up at Blade. They were a soft and sleepy green

and yet now they begged.

"Blade. You saw?"

"I saw."

"Do you understand?"

Blade shook his head.

"Casta," she told him with a weariness in her voice now. "He devises it and his priests obey—in the crypts below they copulate with beasts and so produce monsters. Half animal and half men—of many sorts. Casta seeks to produce a race of monsters with brute strength and small brains so he can control them and, through them, all of Zir and, eventually, the world."

"The intent is not new to me," said Blade. "The method is. But what of you, Hirga? Does your body have you so in thrall? Must you be Casta's creature always?"

Hirga rose on an elbow and looked at him. The green eyes pleaded. "When the desire, the madness comes over me I cannot help myself. But when the creature has come and gone I am, for a little time, satiated, and can think for myself. Now is such a time. So I beg a favor of you, Blade. Grant it to me and I will help you as much as I can—I will warn you of what lies ahead, though you must fend for yourself, and I will tell you of a way out of the maze should you live to use it."

Blade felt mingled pity and revulsion. "And what is this favor, Hirga?"

"Kill me, Blade. Cut off my head and take it with you. It may be of some help when you meet Urdur."

"And who is Urdur? Or what?"

Hirga began to weep. "A monster born of monsters. Casta mated a male with a female monster and they begat Urdur. He is Casta's familiar and guards him, and now that you have come this far into the maze you will meet him. If you can kill Urdur you will have defeated Casta. I do not think you can, Blade, but you cannot go back. Now, before the madness comes over me again, I ask you to kill me. I am vile and loathe myself beyond bearing. I grow old. Soon I will be a hag and Casta will use *me* to breed his monsters. And I have no courage to kill myself."

Blade stepped away from the bed. "Find it, then. For this I cannot do."

She was at his feet, clutching at his knees, begging with tear-filled eyes. "I beg it. I beg it! Please, Blade. It is no stain on you and a favor to me. Promise me this and I

will tell you of the secret way out. There is only one. Without this knowledge you will die in the maze, even if you kill Urdur. Even if you slay Casta. The crows will wait until you are weak from hunger and thirst, dazed from searching a way out, then they will creep up and slay you. I know this."

Blade stared long into the green eyes and saw truth there. She did wish this thing.

"Tell me of the way out, Hirga."

"You promise to kill me?"

"I promise."

"You were in Casta's private chamber?"

"He nodded.

"Then you saw a fire?"

"Aye. He sat before it."

"Beneath the fire, when you scatter it, is a grate that can be lifted out. A hole leads into a passage and the passage out to the Plain. When the tomb is sealed, as it now is, it is the only way out."

He believed her. He looked down at her and fingered his beard and knew that he must do her this kindness.

Hirga still knelt before him. "Do it quickly, Blade. Before I lose courage and become mad again. Before my body lusts again."

He stroked the gleaming red hair. "Close your eyes, Hirga. Be at peace. It will not hurt."

"I thank you, Blade. Farewell."

"Goodbye, Hirga."

Chapter 16

Beyond the bed was a door. As Blade approached it, the door swung open. Blade laughed and strode through and into a passageway. He carried the head of Hirga in his left hand, gripping it by the long red hair. In his right hand his sword was ready.

The passage sloped upward. Light gleamed at the end of it. The odor came again,

fetid and obscene but somehow different. Worse. Blade hurried up the ramp.

He halted before a vast iron door. From a tube over the door the voice of Casta was whispering.

"Greetings, Blade. I had not thought you would get this far. I miscalculated my control of Hirga. You are a warrior and a man such as I have never seen before. All this I admit. It is a pity that we must quarrel. Do not enter this door, Blade. Wait in patience until I come to you. We will talk as reasonable men. With your brain and strength and courage, and with my secrets, we can rule the world together. As equal partners. Think on it, Blade. Wait. Do not go through the door."

"Can you hear me, priest?"

"I can hear you."

"Then hear this. I will pass this door. I will seek you out. I will kill you. Take my advice and, since you are a priest, pray."

Laughter came from the tube. "I am sorry, Blade. I would not have you dead. But there is no cure for a fool."

Silence. Blade waited. Silence. He kicked the iron door with his foot and it swung open.

He was in a den of some sort. Dim light came from torches all around. There was earth beneath his feet instead of stone and he trod in a mess of dung before he saw it. One corner of the den was in deep shadow. Something moved there and the sound that came out of the dark chilled his bones. A visceral, a gut-rending sound, a swallowing and bone-crackling sound. The creature was eating. Urdur?

Blade stood uncertain. So far the thing paid him no mind. He saw skulls littered about and bones and bits of corpses here and there. Did it feed on cadavers or live men?

He knew that he could not stand up to this horror for long. *He* was human. He must have at it, put all to the test, get it over with. Each moment he delayed, his courage seeped away. Blade had never known fear as he knew it now. And he had not yet seen the creature.

He picked up a skull and hurled it into the dark corner. "Come out, Urdur! Come out and be killed." His cry echoed around the den. Did the thing know he was there, could it understand?

Something moved in the shadows. There was a dragging, a scrabbling sound, as

though some beast pulled itself through mire. Blade ran a step toward it and halted, sword poised, swinging the head of Hirga in his left hand.

It emerged into the light.

The human brain—who better than Blade knew the tricks it could play. As he gazed at Urdur his memory fled back in time and dimension and he caught at a fragment from Hamlet .

...I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul... freeze thy blood... make thy two eyes start... and each particular hair to stand on end .

Every hair on Blade's body was risen. Death touched his neck with icy fingers. He took a step backward, then another.

Urdur slithered toward him. It was half serpent, half dragon, with the head and fearsome teeth of a tyrannosaurus. Four-inch teeth glittering like daggers. Scores of them. Scythe-shaped claws on short, armored legs. Thick scales covered it, plates that would dent his sword—but for the underbelly. There the flesh was a putrid white, puffy and slack. The underbelly! That was his only chance.

Urdur stopped and studied Blade with reptilian eyes. It made a gobbling sound. From somewhere high on the walls came a chuckle. Casta knew.

It may have been the chuckle that saved Blade. That arrogant chuckle swelling into laughter. He leaped forward and hurled the blood dripping head at the creature. Urdur caught at the head with claws and began to rip it apart. For the moment he seemed to forget Blade. Small brains, Hirga had said.

As fast as a heartbeat he was in and had severed one of the Urdur's forelegs. He was out again. Claws grazed his thigh and the terrible fangs snapped behind him. Urdur roared and screamed, writhing. He lurched at Blade and then stopped. He began to eat his own foreleg.

Blade circled and dashed in again. This time he had to hack three times before a hind leg came off. Clouts of thick black blood sprayed him. The serpent body convulsed as Urdur reached back with his remaining foreleg, trying to get at his tormentor. Blade struck off the foreleg and danced away. Urdur's bellows of rage and pain filled the den. One hind leg remained. Strike that off, Blade thought, and I have won.

Smoke spurted into the den. From a dozen hidden apertures it came thick and acrid and stifling. Blade coughed and spat and coughed again. A thick brown fog obscured his view of Urdur. Blade retreated and circled around, feeling for the wall behind him. He lost sight of Urdur. He heard the slithering and the gobbling sound

and knew that the creature was after him. Urdur could move on his belly, like a snake, and the smoke did not bother him.

Through the choking he heard Casta laugh again.

Blade stumbled over something. A skull. He picked it up. It was large, smooth. He, fixed his fingers into the eye sockets.

He was in a corner and Urdur had him. For the first time he smelt the breath of the thing and was sickened. Carrion stink. Urdur gobbled and slithered closer, reptile eyes gleaming. The terrible fangs made a clashing sound and the head darted at Blade. He jammed the skull into that lethal maw and heard bone crunch as the jaws snapped shut. Urdur gobbled and swallowed and roared.

Blade leaped high over the head and sprawled alongside the snake body. He felt the coldness of scales, fought off terror and revulsion, and forced his hand deeper, farther down until he felt the end of scales and the beginning of bloated flesh. There! There if at all. Hurry! Urdur was turning, arching, the fangs searching again. Blade guided his sword with his fingers into the soft flesh, put both hands to the hilt and thrust in, twisting with all his strength.

Urdur bellowed and threshed about. He rolled over Blade, near crushing him, and the touch of that foul flesh on his face set Blade to screaming. He hung on, forcing the sword deeper and deeper, twisting it savagely, hacking back and forth to enlarge the wound. Blood engulfed him. Cold blood clotted his face and gouted his chest and stank in his nostrils and mouth. Still he forced the sword in. Still he slashed and cut and backed.

Urdur died atop Blade. With a last effort Blade wrenched himself from under the great body and thought to rest a time. He bled and he hurt and he was near to dying of fatigue. He forced himself to his feet. No rest. He glanced around the den. No smoke now and no laughter. Casta was gone. Blade sought a way out of the den, found none and, for a moment, was frantic. Every moment counted. If he lost the priest now...

He forced himself to calmness. The corner where Urdur had been feeding when Blade entered the den! He went poking back into the shadows, treading in slime and filth, and found an opening in the wall. It was a grille, hinged and held fast by a chain. Blade raised his sword and struck with fury and desperation. He broke the chain and his sword as well. He kept the hilt, with three inches of broken steel, and leaped through the sagging grille. He was in a tunnel that led straight on. Torches burned at intervals. Blade ran, his breath sobbing in his lungs. He came out into a wider passage and turned to his left and there was the leather curtain. Casta's lair.

Only now did he take thought and slow his approach. He halted and stared back

at the passage, at the arching cavern beyond. Nothing moved and no sound came. Where were all the crows, then? Had they deserted Casta in his greatest need?

He remembered. Of course—Ogier! The General had kept his vow and was implementing the plan they had worked on together. Ogier was on the attack. He was drawing off the black priests.

Blade pushed the curtain aside and entered the High Priest's chamber. It was the same. The table, the fire, the skulls and animals and charts. It was deserted. No priest.

Blade went to the fireplace and stooped. The ashes were still warm and they had been scattered. The grate was bare, the embers and ashes raked to the sides. He wedged his broken sword into the grating and lifted. It came away to disclose a black hole. Large enough for a man his size, easy for the scrawny Casta. Hirga had told him the truth.

He still had his dagger. He drew it now and, with the broken sword in his other hand, let himself down into the hole. His feet found iron rungs set into the stone and he climbed down into a round, bricked-in room. There were two sconces and but one torch. Blade took it and bent to peer into a tunnel that led away from the bricked room. Far away he saw the spark of a torch. Then it was gone.

Blade thought a moment, then he flung his torch away. He would go in darkness and take his chances. He moved into the tunnel, hands and weapons outstretched, and began to feel his way along as rapidly as possible. It was easier than he had reckoned. The air was good, pure and chill, and the tunnel appeared to run straight. Blade stepped up his pace and, when the tunnel bent at last, he saw the torch spark once more ahead of him. He had gained.

The torch halted and hovered in the dark air. Blade halted also. Casta was listening for pursuit. He could not know that Blade was after him, not with certainty, but he would suspect and he might guess that Blade would show no light. Blade waited, catching his breath. After a minute the torch began to move again.

He gained steadily, running on tip-toe, stopping each time the torch did. The tunnel began to narrow and the air grew fresher, to smell of dust and grass and flowering things. They were nearing the Plain, were now in fact beneath it, and the opening could not be far off. Blade ran.

Blade came stealthy as the death he was. Casta did not hear him. The High Priest was halted at the foot of a ladder, holding the torch to peer upward. But for the torch the darkness was absolute; Blade was buried in shadow. Quickly, quietly, careful that they not meet and chime, he shifted his weapons. The dagger in his right hand now, ready for throwing. Blade brought his hand back a bit behind his right

ear. He whispered out of the gloom.

"Casta."

The priest had just begun to climb. He halted and turned slowly, the hood falling away from his skull of a face. He peered into the shadows. "Blade?"

Blade laughed and flung the dagger.

It took Casta in his skinny throat and stood out behind one ear. Casta screamed and there was a spray of blood. He loosed his hold on the ladder to pluck at the dagger, and fell. He still lived as Blade went to him and stared down. The black eyes, coals burning in that skeleton's face, defied him. Casta tried to speak through the gushing blood.

"Fool you, Blade—fool—we could have..."

When he was dead, Blade picked up the body and tossed it over his shoulder and climbed the ladder. The trapdoor had earth on it and a flower bed. Blade shouldered it aside and stood on the Plain. The moon was up and stars shone, and everywhere there was a great running and shouting. Hundreds of torches traced patterns over the Plain. Blade dropped the body and stood there, breathing deep and enjoying the night, until a troop of infantry approached. They were carrying something on spears, and as they drew near Blade saw the shaven heads of priests. A bad night for the black crows. Blade hailed the officer in charge of the troop.

The man recognized him and saluted. He was polite and obviously puzzled. He stared at the body of Casta, which lay face down. Blade turned the body with his foot and the officer gasped. "It is Casta! The blackest crow of all. But how is this, Prince Blade? I do not under—"

Blade silenced him. "No matter. Do what you will with the body. See that General Ogier learns of this. How does it go on the Plain?"

The officer smiled. "It goes well. As planned. We have taken prisoner the crows who would surrender and killed those who would not. We are now sealing every entrance to the monolith—if there are any left in there they will stay a long time."

Blade led him to the trapdoor in the flower bed. "See that this tunnel is sealed as well. A few blocks of stone will do it."

"Aye, Prince Blade. It will be done."

Blade nodded and turned to go. The officer spoke quickly. "Will you not rest, sire, and have food and new clothing? You are covered with blood and look as if

you had fought an army. I will give you an escort to the camp, for there are still a few of the crows lurking about. I beg of you—"

Blade smiled and shook his head. "I beg of you, lad. A favor. Tell General Ogier for me that I will not see him again. And tell him that I intend to steal a horse this night—steal it or beg it or borrow it. I have nothing to pay with. And tell him this also—that he keep his word about the woman Valli. You have that?"

"I have it."

"Repeat it back to me word for word."

When the officer did so he turned to reprimand a soldier who out of curiosity, and the sight of Prince Blade, had edged near to listen. When the officer turned back, Blade was gone.

Chapter 17

Janina.

Her call was incessant, and everywhere he looked she beckoned. Blade—Blade—Blade— Come to me. Come to me.

He knew his obsession, grasped the reality of his mental state, and was powerless. She was but a diamond image in a mountain, but to him she was so real that he loved, he rutted, for her.

Blade swam the channel at night, coming to the Hitt shore just before dawn and hiding in a rock-strewn ravine until night came again. Several parties of Hitts passed nearby and he caught enough of their talk to learn that he was still sought. They were searching the coastal areas for him. Good. The last thing they would expect was that he would make for the place of Kings and Queens.

It took him three days, traveling only at night, to reach the high plain on which the mountain of diamonds stood. In all that time he did not eat and drank only brook water. He had cast off his armor for the swim and wore only shirt and kilt, bore only a sword and dagger he had borrowed from a Zirnian officer. Just before dawn on the fourth day he slipped into the mineshaft. He had not expected guards and found none. No Hitt would dare come near the place unless in time of official ceremony.

He found fire stones and struck them to tinder and lit a torch. He crawled through narrow passages and came to the diamond face and gazed into it and saw a thousand Blades staring out at him. Grim-faced, unshorn, starving and light-headed, weird and wild of visage, he stared back and laughed. He lifted his hand in salute.

He found the opening in the face and followed the passage which he and

Galligantus had trod alone. Blade sweated now and his breath came short. Soon he would see her again. She was waiting. Janina.

There it was. The wide ledge, the chasm, the gallery beyond people with the diamond images. Blade stepped to the brink of the abyss and held out his torch. He stared down and laughed.

"How do you fare, Galligantus?"

He made his way along the ledge to where she waited a little apart and on her plinth near the edge. She glittered, she gleamed and sparked, her magnificent body drank in the torchlight and shattered it and refracted it in a thousand glorious colors. Janina.

She smiled at him across the chasm. Her arms reached out, she beckoned.

Janina spoke: " You have come at last, my heart. I am glad. I have waited so long. I have waited a thousand years, Blade. I can wait no longer. Come to me."

Blade laughed and waved the torch. "Be patient a little longer, my love, my Janina. I come."

As he made his way back to where the chasm was narrowest the crystal came to life in his brain. For days it had been trying to get through and Blade had fended it off, had refused to concentrate or listen, had fought off the computer impulses. Now they were too strong, so strong that it was as if Lord L, in minuscule, was within his brain case and shouting.

Teleportation attempts a failure this time... unforeseen problems... prepare return to Home Dimension at once... bring what you can...

Blade refused to concentrate. He would not answer. He would not go. What did they know, those fools back in HD? He had found Janina and he did not intend to leave her. She was calling him even now, her voice sweet, low and melodious. "Come to me, Blade. Hurry—hurry."

Fools! But not Blade. Not any longer. He would never go back. Never back to the blood and the agony and the tears, the stupidity and the greed, the pain and despair and aging, the lust and inhumanity, disease and death. Not Richard Blade. He was too clever for that. Who needed Home Dimension? Janina had waited a thousand years; he had gone into hell six times; now they had found each other and it was enough. Forever it would be enough.

He found a crevice and wedged the torch into it. He ignored the throbbing signals in his brain. He went to the abyss and calculated the leap again. Fifteen feet, give or

take a few inches. Once over there would be no returning. Loth Bloodax had made the leap back, but Blade knew that he could not do it. Nor did he want to. He would remain with Janina.

Janina. From down the gallery she called softly. "Hurry, Blade. Hurry."

Blade backed off and measured his run. At its widest the ledge was thirty feet deep. That much run, no more, and if he faltered he was lost. He went a last time to peer down into the pit. Nothing. Nothing but depth and murk and silence.

The crystal fought through.

Aware your intent... forbid it... prepare to return HD at once... your mental condition unsatisfactory...

Pain slashed through his head. Blade sank to his knees and groaned. He fought to his feet and with an enormous effort blanked out the computer impulses. Oh no they didn't! They were not going to cheat him at the last moment.

"Come to me, Blade. Hurry."

He began to run. He had dropped his swordbelt and his feet were bare. He ran leaning forward, head down a bit, sure-footed, faster and faster and faster.

He leaped. With a last push of his legs he flung himself out and over the abyss. He soared over darkness and the microsecond it took seemed to Blade an eternity. He floated, arms outstretched, fingers tensed into talons, waiting...

He was going to fall short.

His reflexes were faster than his brain. His hands relaxed and he let his body go limp. His forearms struck the ledge and for a moment he hung by elbows alone while his fingers sought for a fissure, a hair-line crack in the stone—anything.

Blade began to slip. One elbow scraped off the ledge. His weight was dragging him down. His fingers found nothing but smoothness. He tensed them again, hooked them, trying by sheer strength to make his hands and wrists support him. His other elbow slipped off the ledge.

The fingers of his right hand slid into a crack and held. He dangled. The fissure was so minute that only his nails and fingertips supported him. Blade strained. Blade willed all his great strength into his right hand. He sought frantically with his left for another handhold.

He found it, deep and life-saving, wide enough to let his hand slip in and get a

firm purchase. With a moan of pain he relaxed his right hand. He dangled for yet another moment, gaining breath and new strength, then lurched up and got his right elbow over the rim. A moment later he was on the ledge, amidst the gallery of Hitt kings and queens.

Light came dim and murky from the flaring torch over the chasm. He made his way carefully through the glinting diamond images, brushing past them, unseeing and uncaring. Janina was waiting for him.

The beeping in his brain came again. *Prepare return to HD at once... prepare return to HD at once... prepare to —*

Blade damned them all and closed off his mind. Never. Never go back. Janina was waiting.

She had turned on her plinth. She watched as he left the assemblage of carbonized kings and queens and approached. She smiled.

"You came, Blade. At last."

Blade halted. She moved toward him. Her body ceased to glitter. No longer did the torchlight strike color from every facet. It laved a body that was warm and white and pink, that breathed sweetly, that gazed at Blade with love and held out its arms to him.

Blade heard a sound and wondered why he groaned. He had her, he had come to Janina, and she was in his arms. Why did he moan?

He kissed each perfect breast. Her fingers on his face were velvet feathers. She whispered of love, of the things they would do, and he knew that all was well. Yes, oh yes, they would do all those things together.

Her mouth was a well of tenderness which drew his tongue deep into itself. Her breath was perfume, her flesh sheer witchery, and her hands on his body were the kept promises of heaven after the lies of hell. Blade sank to his knees and Janina with him. They lay tight locked in embrace, kissing, and she whispered:

"Now, Blade. Now at last."

She stroked him gently. He was rigid, blood-engorged, ravening and, at the moment, more phallus than man. Such sweet torture was past bearing.

Janina whispered. "Ah, Blade. At last—at last—I will have you in me. Ah, Blade—a thousand years I have waited and been true. Ah, Blade—now."

Blade entered the valley of pleasure. Long, narrow, steep-sided ravine all pink and convoluted. Everything he had ever known, or wished for, increased a thousandfold. He knew then what death was. This was death. And yet not death, for it was life and beautiful beyond telling and when it was over there would be peace. He understood then, for Janina was both life and death, and they were both one.

Never had his lust been so tender. Never had he extended Paradise so long. Janina enfolded him with her legs and arms and caught all of him to and in her and there were still depths in her to seek. On he plunged, deeper into the red ravine.

Janina cried warning, but it was too late. They rolled over the brink of the abyss, still locked together, still loving, still cleaving one to the other.

She whispered as they fell. The last words he ever heard her speak:

"Fall with me, my love. Die with me. Do not be afraid."

The pain came then, splitting his brain, ripping him apart, and he screamed and clung to her. He knew. In those last moments he knew. He had lost. The computer had won. They were dragging him back to Home Dimension.

"*Janina—Janina—JANINA—*"

Silence. Yet she was in his arms. Silent. She did not breathe now, he was sure of it, and terror came and a fierce anger. *They* had killed her.

She was no longer soft. Her body, pressed to his, was hard and hurting and unresponsive.

"Janina?"

Silence.

They fell. Fell. On a ledge was the body of Galligantus. A black vulture crouched over it and tore at a bloody hole. They fell.

There was light now and Blade could see the bottom of the pit. Vast and covered with bones and skulls. Obscene things prowled there.

"Janina! I am afraid. Comfort me."

Silence. She was heavy in his arms, her flesh gone to stones, her eyes flat and unresponsive. Blade clung to her and sobbed because she was all he had.

They fell. A pit gaped in the bottom of the abyss and they fell on. Into fire and steam. Into pain.

The pain vanished. They were no longer falling. He gazed about and began to laugh. He was walking in London, in crowded London, and it was raining. Janina glittered in the rain and it fell from her eyes like tears. She was an image, a statue, and she wore roller skates and he was pulling her along behind him on a leash. People stared.

A policeman came up to Blade and said, "You can't go about like that, you know. Not ruddy likely you can't. Not in London Town."

"What do you mean?"

The bobby took off his helmet and scratched his head. He leered at Janina. "You'll have to get some clothes on her, you know. And put some on yourself while you're at it.

Blade looked down. He was naked.

"The time has come," the bobby said.

Blade stared at him. "What time?"

"To talk of lettuce and queens," said the policeman. "And submarines and postage stamps. Any ruddy fool knows that."

"You're the ruddy fool." said Blade. "That is not the way it goes at all."

"Sassinawficer, are you? Comealongnowgoirg to runuin."

Blade swung at him and missed. Too late he saw the club coming. Explosion. A little cartoonist sat in his skull and inked in the following: #!****

Chapter 18

Richard Blade remained in the nursing home three weeks. J came every day to see him, after the first week during which he was permitted no visitors, and Lord Leighton came twice. At no time was either man permitted to talk shop—no mention was made of the computer or of Dimension X. The brain specialist in charge of Blade was England's best, and so famous that he took no guff from his Lordship.

The first week in hospital was vague to Blade. By the beginning of the second week he had recovered sufficiently for the specialist to clap him on the back and say, "We'll have you out of here soon. You're hard as carbon steel and twice as strong. I don't know what brought you here—though I do have some pretty weird things on my tapes—and I judge that I am not going to be told. So be it. But whatever it was, Mr. Blade, you would be wise to stay away from it for a time."

When he left the nursing home J was waiting in a taxi. "How do you feel, dear boy? You look marvelous."

It was true. Blade did look marvelous. His hair had grown out thick and healthy, he was down to his best weight, and he ignored J to a point of rudeness to watch a pretty girl wriggle past. His eyes followed the tidy little rump under the mini.

"Richard?"

"Sorry, sir."

J laughed and sucked on his pipe. He went so far as to pat Blade's shoulder, and J was not a toucher.

"Don't be sorry. It's a good sign. I gather that Sir Rathburne was right. He tells me that you have made a complete recovery and now all that is required is rest and relaxation."

Another pretty girl passed and smiled at Blade.

"I'll get the relaxation," he told J. "I am not so sure about the rest."

As they moved into traffic J said, "I told the driver to go to the Tower. That all right? Lord L would like a word with you—and I did think that you might like to see the statue. You were the one who brought it back."

"Sure, sir. No sweat."

J nearly dropped his pipe. Blade grinned. "Just another of my Americanisms, sir. Expressive, though. I'm in the pink and ready for—"

J said "Bear? I believe that is the expression."

"Wrong. Girls."

J positively beamed. "Good. Fine. I prescribe it, even though you do tend to overdo."

They rode for a block or so in silence. J said, "Do you feel any different, Richard? Now that the crystal has been removed?"

"No, sir. I didn't even know they had taken it out until Sir Rathburne told me. I don't remember much of anything about my first week in hospital. But I feel fine now."

"It was Lord L's idea that the crystal come out," said J. "Mine too, of course, but

he mentioned it first. He feels badly, Richard. Really shaken. He blames himself because we came so near to losing you."

Blade nodded. "It was a pretty bad trip, sir."

"I know. But at least the pressure is off now. For a time, at least. The statue you brought back is worth billions of pounds. And, of course, there are new problems."

Blade listened politely and with half an ear. He did not really care about the diamond statue or DX at the moment. He had an enormous yen for food and wine and, to quote the Yanks again, dames.

He knew there would be future incursions into Dimension X. No use kidding himself. Someone would go again through the computer. Blade? He did not know at the moment. Time and fading memories changed things. If he must, if his country really needed him and no one else could do the job, he would go. Leave it at that.

They reached the Tower and went through the complex security checks. Lord L, in a soiled white smock and as fragile as ever, greeted Blade and J and bade them come with him. They followed him to his quarters.

"I cleared out a closet and put her in it," he explained. "As good as the Bank of England. Better. We can't let *them* see her yet. There are problems, my boy, problems."

Blade said that J had so informed him.

Lord J grunted. "Yes. Many problems. But they will be solved in time. She will be broken up and sold off in a way that will not ruin the market. Billions, Richard. Billions! She is going to pay for all our experiments. *All* of them. As of this moment Project DX is in the black. The Prime Minister is very happy with us."

They entered His Lordship's suite and went straight to his bedroom. He pointed to a large closet. "I keep her in there. Sometimes at night when I can't sleep I open the door and put a light on her and just look. I have a very odd sensation at times—as though she were real, flesh and blood, and I in love with her. Did you experience any of those sensations, Richard?"

"I don't remember, sir."

It might return in time, as his memories of other ventures into Dimension X did, but at the moment she was just a life-size statue of diamond. She glittered and threw back the light and extended her arms. Her naked body was without flaw or blemish.

"She is absolutely lovely," said J. "It is a pity we must break her up."

Lord L rubbed his hump and scowled. "Don't be a fool, J. England needs the money. *We* need the money. In a few days I would like to get together and have a talk. I have some ideas that will astound you."

"I would rather not hear them at the moment," J said tartly.

Blade left them mildly squabbling and approached the diamond statue. Regal and incredibly beautiful, she transformed the closet into a palace.

Palace?

Something stirred in his brain, moved and stirred and slithered to the threshold of consciousness and stopped dead. Blade took a last look at her and turned away. There for a moment he had known her name, for she *had* had a name and he *had* known it. He had known her and she had not been a statue. Or had she?

Her name? His lips moved and nearly formed a word. It would not come.

Perhaps later, when his brain had rested and some of the stress had gone, when the subconscious could do its work. This time out in Dimension X he had been insane, and now he was sane again in Home Dimension. He did not know just how that would work out, how it would affect his eventual memory.

Someday he might remember. Or never.