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# Undying World

*Blade Book 08*

*by Jeffrey Lord*

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## CHAPTER 1

It was unthinkable that Richard Blade, of all the men in the world, should be impotent. Yet it had happened. He was in the prime of life, with a massive and superbly conditioned body, a keen and highly trained mind, and yet the fact had to be faced—he was a member of the limp phallus club. ^»

He did not believe it at first—could not believe it. Nor could he bring himself to confide in anyone, not even Dr. Saxton Colby, the psychiatrist for Project Dimension X. In any case Dr. Colby—the only medical man in England with a security clearance high enough to enable him to work with the Project—had enough on his mind at the moment. Blade's replacement had gone through the computer once and had returned raving mad. He was now in a sanitarium in Scotland where, as Dr. Colby told J and Lord Leighton, he sat on his bed all day and stared at the wall.

"He repeats," the doctor said, "one sentence over and over. He never says anything else. Never."

*The worm has a thousand heads. The worm has a thousand heads.*

When Lord L and J asked for a prognosis, the doctor had shrugged and had given them a straight answer. "In my opinion the man will never be sane again. He's a vegetable now and he'll remain one. I don't know what he encountered out there in Dimension X, and I don't want to know, but it was horrible enough to drive him right out of his mind. Either that or the computer itself is to blame. The stress of going through the machine, of having the molecular structure of his cortex altered, was enough to send him around the bend."

J had little to say. He had long been bitterly opposed to the Project. Lord Leighton's viewpoint was different from that of J or Dr. Colby. To the old man it was a simple manifestation of the law of averages. It was bound to happen sooner or later and now it had.

"Most unfortunate," his Lordship said, "but I refuse to blame myself or the computer. The lad was

simply not up to it. I doubt that any man is up to it—with the single exception of Richard Blade."

Dr. Colby departed to catch a train back to Scotland. J and Lord Leighton were alone in the restricted area of the Tower Computer Complex. His Lordship sat like a gnome behind his old desk, his polio-ruined legs sprawled before him; now and then he rubbed the pain in his humped back. He regarded J with yellow lion eyes in which lurked a question.

"You're not going to mention any of this to the boy?"

Lord L, who was somewhere in his eighties, only referred to Richard Blade as a boy when he was preparing to make a sentimental pitch. J knew this. He narrowed his eyes at the old man. He knew what was coming and he intended to have no part of it, in fact to fight it every step of the way. Blade, whom he loved as his own son, had suffered enough, had done far more than his share in the damnable adventure called Project Dimension X.

But he decided to bide his time. The old man was a formidable opponent and J did not like to confront him except in cases of dire necessity. For the moment he temporized.

"I won't have to tell him anything," he said. "Richard was there when you brought Dexter back through the computer. He saw the state the man was in, so he must know. Who better? Richard has been out in that hell seven times."

Lord L opened his mouth, then closed it. He sensed J's mood and decided to alter his tactics. He would, of course, get his way in the end.

"It really is too bad about Dexter," he said mildly. "Of course he will be taken care of as long as he lives. But I just don't understand it. We must have failed somewhere in the tests—the man had a weakness we didn't detect. Richard never suffered any permanent ill effects."

J was silent. Lord L doodled on a scrap of paper and sighed. "I suppose we shall just have to begin training another man." He beamed his sweetest smile at J. "Unless, of course, we can prevail on the boy to—"

J had had enough. The smarmy old bastard. Who in bloody hell did he think he was fooling?

He told the old man to stop using the collective pronoun. "I am not having any part of it," he said. "Richard is retired, and if I have anything to do with it he's going to stay retired. I know what's going on in that scheming old brain, Leighton, and I will advise Blade against listening to you. I also intend to tell him what happened to Dexter—exactly and in detail—that the man is a hopeless maniac and will never be well again."

The old boffin did not flare as J expected. Instead he contrived to look hurt but continued to smile. "As though I would ask the lad to come back, after all he has done. You must think of me as an insensitive monster, J, if you believe that. I know the terrors the dear boy has faced on his trips through the computer. I know the dreadful strain he has been under, and that he has discharged his patriotic duty to England many times over. If it were not for the fact that we are so close to a breakthrough in teleportation, actually on the brink of being able to mine DX, to bring back every sort of treasure from DX into our own dimension, I wouldn't dream of even suggesting—"

J could not listen to any more. He placed his Homburg squarely on his head and walked to the door. There he turned and pointed his rolled umbrella at his Lordship like a spear.

"The hell you wouldn't dream of suggesting. You will! And I can't stop you. But I can damn well warn Dick, tell him about that poor fellow up in Scotland and advise him with all my heart not to listen to you."

After J left, Lord Leighton sat for a moment behind his desk. Presently he got up and paced the office, dragging his feet, rubbing the pain in his hunched back, his eyes half closed. His thin white hair floated like a halo over a pink scalp, giving him a saintly air that was misleading. But he was no sinner, either. He was a scientist, one of the best in the world, and right now he had a job to do.

He hated the necessity of sending Richard Blade to Dimension X again, but how did they expect him to work with imperfect instruments? Other men simply could not do the job, he thought. Why couldn't J understand his position? Why did J insist on making him out to be such an inhumane monster?

He took a list of names from a desk drawer and examined it, ticking off one name after the other. He shook his head. They were all good men—Robbins, Stanbury, Hunt, Swinton, Peterson—all adequately trained and conditioned, as much as any man could be for an adventure in Dimension X. But they all had one fault in common. They lacked perfection. Only Richard Blade was perfect for the job at hand. And they all lacked experience. Only Blade had that, had been through the computer, had survived in Dimension X and had managed to return with his health and sanity. Not that there hadn't been a few complications—there had. No denying the boy had had some bad times. There had been the drinking, the sexual fury, the total blackouts and the bouts of depression. One had to expect that when a brain was exposed to the computer so many times.

Yet the boy had survived. His body was healthy and his mind clear. And he would, if it was put to him the right way, go through the computer again. Of that Lord Leighton was certain.

He picked up a phone and dialed Blade's flat. Let J rant all he liked, he thought, Project DX came first. While he waited, he crumpled the list of names and flung it at a wastebasket. None of them would do. None of them could survive out there. Only Blade could do it.

The phone rang on and on. Lord L scowled. Where could the lad be? He had been calling for a week now, and never any answer. And yet Blade must be in London. He was not a man to disobey orders and it was understood that he was never to leave the city without giving MI6A an address and phone number. In point of fact, Blade was supposed to be on twenty-four-hour call. Lord L knew little of MI6A and cared less. He knew J had been in MI6 before being assigned to Project DX security and, he supposed, that meant that Blade was still some sort of secret agent, and still bound by the agency's rules.

Lord L slammed the phone down. Where in bloody damnation was the lad!

J would know, of course, but then he couldn't very well ask J. The man was dead set against Blade making another trip through the computer. The trouble with J was that he had a bloody father complex.

J did know where Richard Blade was. When he had left Lord L, he took a taxi directly to his own office in Copra House, off Threadneedle Street near Bart Lane, where he was now sitting, reading the report on Blade. For the past month he had had a tail on him.

The first signs of spring had come to London and several of the tall arched windows were open in J's office. A lemony sun drenched the grimy city and there was a subtle difference in the sounds and smells. J paid no attention to it as he pored over the report. He wondered if Blade knew he was being followed? Probably. Blade had been a top operative back before Project DX and he would not have forgotten much. He knew he was being tailed and made no attempt to lose the shadow. He was probably laughing. He just didn't give a damn.

J went to a window and stood staring down into Lothbury. There was a vendor with a mass of yellow crocuses for sale. J flicked the sheaf of paper against his teeth. Blade knew he was being

followed, of course, but he must wonder why. Yet he had made no effort to check with J, not even a phone call.

J dialed the number of Blade's flat and listened for five minutes. Same old story—not home... or not answering. He hadn't seen Blade in nearly a fortnight. Blade was avoiding him, but why?

J went over the report again. Same story there, too. Blade was sleeping around—brothels, clubs, bars. When he was in his flat he usually had a woman with him. He wasn't drinking too much, which J supposed was something to be thankful for, but certainly he wasn't living a normal life.

And the doctors! J rifled through the pages of the report. More than a dozen doctors, half of them psychiatrists. Harley Street . Baker Street . Half Moon Street . Even one in Edinburgh . Blade had gone all that way, paid the doctors from his own pocket instead of entering it on his unlimited expense account. Why? What was wrong with Richard Blade?

At the moment Blade was back in Harley Street . He was in the treatment room of a famous specialist and he was also in a bit of a dilemma. He and the specialist, a Dr. Poindexter, were gazing at an X-ray of Blade's skull. The doctor was puzzled and Blade couldn't blame him. That small faint shadow in his left frontal lobe, at the top of his brain in the neocortex, was the thin wafer of crystal implanted some months before so that Blade might receive thought impulses from Home Dimension while he was himself in X Dimension. It had not worked perfectly, there had been lapses, but it hadn't troubled Blade. He had nearly forgotten it was there.

Dr. Poindexter was on it like a hawk. "It could be a tumor," he said gravely, "though it is early on to be sure. It certainly calls for an exploratory."

Blade cursed himself for not having foreseen this. He couldn't tell the good man what it was, and he had no intention of allowing his skull to be opened again. Damn security and the Official Secrets Act! There were times when they bound a man like a net of steel cable.

The doctor rubbed his hands. He was cheerful. "Yes, indeed. We shall certainly have to go in there and have a look."

Blade had been doing a great deal of reading of late. He was not drinking too much, and it had become his habit, after each sexual failure, to go to his flat, lock himself in, and read from a stack of books. Most were overdue and he owed the library a small fortune.

Now, as he prepared for a graceful retreat, he said, "The tumor, whatever it is, seems to be in the wrong part of my brain to be causing my trouble. Sex, as I understand it, is controlled by the paleocortex, what you people call the limbic system. Of course, if it is a tumor (which it wasn't—it was Lord L's damned crystal) I suppose the effect could spread to other parts of my brain?"

Dr. Poindexter looked startled, then frowned. Plainly he did not approve of amateur diagnosticians. He thought again that there was something decidedly odd about this handsome young man with the strange shadow in his brain.

"If you know that much," the doctor said, "you surely know that all parts of the brain are closely interrelated. And you are right—if it is a tumor and it looks like one, it could certainly affect your sexual drive."

"That's not quite the problem, Doctor. There's nothing wrong with my sexual *drive*. If anything, I am in overdrive all the time. The trouble is that when I get right down to it, I can't *do* anything."

"Nothing happens at all? Not even a partial erection?"

Blade winced inwardly. It still hurt to admit it, even to a doctor. "Not even that, Doctor. Absolutely nothing."

Dr. Poindexter was a brain man not a sexologist, but he was interested. He flipped through the papers on his desk. "You're not married, I see. So it probably isn't a question of too much familiarity, of staleness, of a marriage gone sour."

"It is certainly not that."

The doctor pursed his lips and stared at Blade. "You have tried, I presume, with more than one... er... partner?"

Blade smiled. "In the last month, Doctor, I have tried it with fourteen partners."

Dr. Poindexter looked envious. "They were women you desired, that you really wanted? They were attractive? The ambiance—by that I mean the background, the setting and the time, they were all satisfactory? You were not rushed, or hurried, worried?"

Blade grew a little tired of the game. The man couldn't help him, it was obvious. He rose, his broad-shouldered bulk nearly filling the small room, and headed for the door.

"Nothing like that," he assured the doctor. "Two nights ago I had the most beautiful woman in London naked on a bed. Her husband was in South Africa and the servants had been sent away. Nothing happened, Doctor, absolutely nothing."

Dr. Poindexter followed him to the door of the treatment room. "It is not, I suppose, a question of alcohol?"

"I think not, Doctor. I have been a heavy drinker in my day, but not now."

The doctor held the door open. "I could recommend a psychiatrist—"

"Please don't," said Blade, smiling. "I have been to half-a-dozen already."

The doctor shook his head. "It wouldn't hurt to see another, you know, several perhaps. Sometimes it is just a question of finding the right man. In the meantime we can't neglect that thing in your brain. I'll set up a hospital date for you. They'll want to run some preliminary tests and—"

"Don't bother just now," Blade said. "I'll be in touch." It was a lie—he wasn't coming back.

The doctor sensed the truth and hastened to add, "You just can't neglect it, you know. It won't go away, and it could be dangerous—very dangerous."

It already has been, thought Blade. The X-rays had been taken by a technician and the doctor had not seen the great slash of scar on his skull, now concealed by his thick dark hair. Nor could the doctor, nor any of the doctors he had seen recently, know how his brain had been tortured and distorted by the computer over the past few years. He could not tell them and they would not have understood. It was a cheat and a waste of money and time, but he was desperate. Anxiety fed on itself and produced a feedback of fear.

Never again to have a woman? Suicide would be preferable.

He extricated himself, paid five guineas, left the aseptic chambers and entered the bright afternoon. London was burgeoning, wrapped in the promise of spring. Blade began to walk, feeling bitter, noting that his shadow was moving along on the opposite sidewalk, a bit ahead of him. Blade did not

know the man; J would hardly be so clumsy as to plant a familiar face on his tail. But Blade had made a check of his own. The man was from MI6, right enough, and it was nice of old J to be concerned. It would be better all around, of course, if Blade simply went to his boss and explained.

"Look, J, no need for you to worry. I'm in my right mind. I'm not drinking excessively. I'm in excellent health, certified by six doctors, and I'm worried and scared to death. I cannot achieve a hard-on, J, no matter what. Nothing works. I have had hormones shot into me until my arm looks like an addict's. Still nothing. But it's my worry, not yours, so take your man off and put him to doing something useful."

Blade could not do that. As he turned at last into Berkeley Street and headed for the Square—dare he keep this third date with Lady Margaret French-Taylor?—he knew that he simply didn't have the courage to confess to J, or to any of his friends, his peers, his own class. Why this should be so, he could not fathom. It was juvenile and stupid. And Blade was not a stupid man. In no sense was he a coward, in either a physical or moral way, yet he admitted to himself that not even under torture would he bring himself to tell another man that he was finished sexually.

He walked through Berkeley Square, thinking that it would be easier to tell the truth to a woman. He very nearly had two days ago. Lady Margaret French-Taylor—Meg to her friends and bedmates was the most beautiful woman in London and she was beginning to suspect. Blade grimaced now as he recalled the scene. He had turned coward at the last moment and pleaded too much brandy and fatigue. Meg had looked skeptical...

"I suppose it's possible, Richard, and yet I find it very strange in a big handsome brute like you. Something is dreadfully wrong. Do you suppose it could be me? Something about me, in your subconscious? You detest me? You don't really want me?" Blade tried to laugh it off and felt like all the fools in the world. "Of course I want you, Meg. I don't love you, and I certainly don't hate you, but I certainly *do* want you."

They were sitting at the little bar in her bedroom suite, both naked. Meg French-Taylor was a tall woman, just thirty, with firm high breasts and the long sinuous legs of a dancer. She had an Irish skin, moist and creamy; her mouth was voluptuous and her nose patrician. Before her marriage to doddering old Sir Hugh French-Taylor, she had been plain Maggie Kirkbride. She was a successful model and was seen monthly in the ladies' slick magazines. What the ancient knight contrived to do with her was a puzzle to her friends, as well as to the vulgar public, but she did not enlighten them. The truth was that she had married Sir Hugh for his money; he had married her for her beauty. They had made a bargain, each to go his own way. The knight to pursue his young workmen and waiters, she to quench a sexual appetite that had been long abuilding, for she had been chary of giving herself freely until she had status and money. Now that she had it, and her lawyers had all the proper papers signed by the old man locked in their strongboxes, she had let herself go. She was known as the lay of London and didn't care a whit. There was a lot of the natural aristocrat in Meg and now she could afford to let it show.

So now, as she toyed with Richard Blade's penis and got no response, she was not so much frustrated as puzzled. With her beauty and skills, she would have wagered on provoking a response in any man under eighty. Her husband was seventy-odd and she had stirred *him* on their first night. It had not happened again because he did not really like women sexually, but *it had* happened. And now from this gorgeous man, Blade, absolutely nothing.

Blade sipped his brandy and stroked her auburn hair. Meg was trying. She was also getting a bit disgusted with him. He was waiting for the gleam of pity in her green eyes, just as he was waiting for her to unsheath her claws. He did not have long to wait.

Meg stood up. "It is just no use, Richard. You must admit that I have tried. Whatever can it be?"

Blade looked at her over his brandy bell. "I don't know, Meg. I'm sorry. The only thing I know is that it can't be you. It isn't your fault."

Meg took up her glass. She pressed the brandy bell against one buoyant breast, then against the other. Her rose-pink nipples were hard and long.

"I'm going to have to do something," she told Blade without looking at him, "or you must do something. I'm all stirred up now and I'll never get to sleep unless something happens."

Blade was silent. It was an invitation that he did not feel like accepting. He had no objections to oral sex—he was a man of the world and had been a womanizer since his teens—but in this instance it was not the answer. Oral sex, to him, was only an adjunct, a pleasant enough fore-interlude to normal sex. And that he could not achieve. To hell, then, with any of it. Such were his feelings at the moment.

Meg spoke her feelings a moment later. She squinted at him and did not quite mask the pity or the contempt or the anger. It was not anything she could help—she was a woman, a disappointed woman, and she was a feline.

"A big chest, broad shoulders and legs like trees; they don't always tell the story, do they, Richard? But who would have guessed? Certainly I didn't. I thought we were going to have a wizard of a time in bed. Now it turns out that you are less than a man."

Meg had finished her brandy and gone to the phone. She called a man, someone called Reggie, and spoke briefly. When she hung up she looked coldly at Blade, still at the bar, naked on his stool, hating himself and the world and wondering what had happened to him.

Meg put on a robe. "You had better dress and leave," she told Blade. "I'm expecting someone. He'll be here soon."

"So I heard." He began to dress.

Before he left, Meg patted his cheek and kissed him. She smiled. "Richard, dear, don't be so glum. I'm sorry if I was nasty. But try to see my side—I'm one of those women who just have to have it once I get started. I like you a lot, you're very sweet and we can be good friends, but if you're impotent, incapable of satisfying me, then we had better know it, have it right out in the open and—"

He had almost struck her. Not a slap nor a backhand of contempt or insolence, but a blow of fury.

"I am not impotent," he had yelled. "I am not incapable. I don't know what has happened, I do not understand, but I am neither of those things. I am not, goddamn it, I am not!"

Meg did not guess how near she was to harm. She put her fingers on his mouth. "Richard, please. The people across the hall—and anyway you may be right. I'll tell you what, darling. We'll try again, shall we? Once more, Richard, and then if nothing happens, at least we'll know that we are not for each other. Now you really must go... my friend will be here soon."

Blade had slunk away, there was no other word for it, humiliated and disgusted. He drove down to Dorset, to his cottage on the Channel, and spent a night with booze and agony...

A taxi nearly struck Blade as he crossed Davies Street. The driver leaned to shake a fist at the big man. "Why the bleeding 'ell don't yer look where yer going, guv! The bloody effing street ain't no place to go dreaming."

Blade nodded and waved. The man was right. He turned into Mount Row and headed for Carlos Place. Meg was waiting. She had given him this last chance.

Blade could not understand why he was going back to Meg's place. He was a proud man, even an arrogant man at times, and he had no ill opinion of himself. He had earned every decoration the British Government could bestow; he had seven times faced the terrors of Dimension X and survived; in brain and physique he considered himself the equal of any man in the world.

Yet a limp bit of flesh between his legs was making a fool and a coward of him.

He did not really want to go to Meg's flat. He did not want to see Meg again. Or did he? Was he lying to himself? Did he want to see her, for one purpose—to show her how wrong she was?

He had reached her flat now and stood still, his finger poised over the button, hesitating in the foyer like a school boy about to enter his first brothel. People brushed past him, coming and going, and he did not see them.

Meg had been kindly, but explicit. She could not hide her pity or her disappointment and slight contempt, and Blade was consumed, as he was consumed now, with a baffled rage and hurt and a senseless shame that only a man could know. Nothing helped. Nothing could help or ever would until he was a complete man again.

"We'll try once again," she had promised. "The third time might be the charm. We will just have to see. And if nothing happens we will just have to say goodbye, Richard, for you will be no good to me. Now go home, love. Rest and don't drink too much. Goodbye. See you in two days."

Blade raised his finger once more and poised it over the button. One slight pressure and the buzzer would go. Meg was up there waiting. Ultimatum. Third time. Fail three times running and you are out. Rules of the game.

He watched his reflection in the brassy mirror of the mailboxes. He looked the same. Handsome by conventional standards—he had no false modesty—a big stalwart young man in the peak of condition. The face he shaved every morning, the body he lived in, bathed each day, took meticulous care of. What had happened to him? Where had it all gone wrong?

A girl said, "Excuse me, please."

He moved aside to let her snap open her mailbox. She gave him a sideways look of approval. A bright little brunette bird, a sharp and pretty nose, mini-skirted, legs glistening and sending a waft of clean flesh and perfume to him. Blade smiled faintly, but did not speak. She fumbled with her key, taking longer than necessary. Blade watched her, again slowly raising his finger to the button of Meg's flat. The girl got the door open, shot an open glance of invitation at Blade, then let the door shut behind her. There was disappointment in the wobble of her trim buttocks as she disappeared down a corridor.

Blade's finger hovered over the button. He could not press it. He was well over six feet, two hundred twenty pounds of muscle, and he lacked strength to move his finger a quarter of an inch. He left the foyer.

*Coward!*

He knew then what he was going to do. The man in Edinburgh had told him: "In some cases of psychological impotence, and I think yours falls into that category, cures have been effected by a complete change in environment. I know it works in some cases, though not all."

Blade, remembering in the taxi, smiled. He had said, "You mean take a long sea voyage?"

The Edinburgh doctor was an American, Harvard Med, who for family reasons had settled in Scotland. He had grinned at Blade and told him, "The sea voyage bit is Victorian, but that isn't what I meant. When I said a change of environment I meant a real *change* in environment. New job, new friends, new



hobbies, new country if possible, new every damned thing as near as you can come to it."

The taxi stopped outside the Tower. As he paid the man, Blade glanced back. J's man was also paying a cabby. Blade smiled. Within a few minutes now J would know where he was, and J would come running. J would suspect what he was about to do and J was not going to like it. J was dead set against Blade going through the computer again.

So was Blade, for that matter. Or had been. Now he had changed his mind. A complete and absolute change in environment?

The doctor in Edinburgh, all unsuspecting, might have been talking about Dimension X.

Lord Leighton, in a very few minutes now, was going to be very pleased. Blade did not give a damn one way or the other. The computer, he knew, had somehow bitched him up—was responsible for his impotency. He knew he would find danger out there—fear and suffering—and he might not make it back, but at the moment he was not in a mood to worry about that. With an older man it might be different, but he was a strong young animal and he could not go on living this sexless existence. Better Dimension X, whatever the hazards.

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## CHAPTER 2

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Lord Leighton's humped figure shuffled to the enormous instrument complex and pressed the red toggle. J was there, white faced and nervous, mouth open in last useless entreaty, still begging Blade to change his mind.

A few minutes before, as Lord L bound him into the chair with a web of electrodes, Blade had found the courage to try to explain to J.

"I must go, J. I don't want to go, but I must. I am in deep trouble and I must." He sought to recall the Edinburgh man's exact words. "I must seek out a highly successful sexual climate. Where else but Dimension X? I have never had any sexual difficulties there. I am going, J. Wish me luck."

Then Lord L pressed the red toggle. A mist filled the little computer chamber. A mist that soon dispelled. He was still in the chamber, bound to the chair, with Lord L fussing and using bad language.

"Something wrong, my boy. Probably minor. A circuit, a condenser or resistor. Have it fixed in no time. You better go down to the apartment and rest for a bit. I'll call you when I've put matters straight."

Blade opened his mouth and nothing came out. He knew then that the computer had him, but in a way he had not experienced before. No pain this time. He was struck dumb and now he was moving, his limbs not his own, subject to the will of the machine.

Blade tore away the encumbering electrodes. Flame hissed, smoke spurted and he felt nothing. He strode naked and free to the door of the chamber. J made a move to detain him and Blade struck him aside. J crumpled. Lord L cursed and pleaded. Blade found stairs and began to climb. His flesh was scorched here and there. He could smell the tar-paste Lord L had smeared on him.

Naked he mounted the long flight of stairs... moving now... an escalator. Men and women saw him and waved and smiled. No one minded his nakedness.

Blade wandered the crowded streets, trying to find the tube, the underground kiosk. The spring sun was pleasant on his bare hide. He began to achieve an enormous erection. Aha. That was more like it. The computer had come through for him. He was cured of impotency. He stopped to admire himself in a

shop window. The computer was a friend indeed.

He stopped to ask directions of a policeman. The man was obviously jealous of Blade, for after one glance at his erection he frowned and his voice was curt. But he told Blade how to find a subway that would take him to Hell.

Blade did not want to go to Hell, but he had no volition of his own in the matter. The computer was sending him to Hell and he was duty bound to obey. The machine was his friend.

He found the kiosk and took the stairs down. A lovely woman, a blonde, naked beneath her mink coat, bumped into him and smiled and asked directions.

"Such a burrow down here," she complained. "I am sure I will never find my way out. And I have to be in Paradise by five o'clock."

Blade apologized for not being able to help. He told her he was going in the opposite direction. Her smile was sad.

"You're making a terrible mistake," she said. "Why not change your mind and come with me?"

Blade shook his head. He was a slave, the computer his master, and how could he explain that?

The blonde opened her mink coat. Her breasts were resplendent, breathtaking, little pointed bombs of satin flesh. Her nipples crackled and gave off sparks. Around her waist was a garter belt made of puce neon. It kept flashing off and on—*follow me to Paradise*.

Blade left her and found his platform. He felt like a fool. It was foolish to take a train to Hell when he should be following the blonde to Paradise, but what could he do? The computer commanded.

He was alone on the platform. He heard the sound of a train approaching. The sound grew and grew into a roar, filling the bowels of the earth. Blade cringed. A terrible odor filled the platform, an odious stench that made Blade hold his nose. He wished the train would hurry up.

The train slid into the station. It was brightly lit and empty. The destination board said: *HELL*. Blade stepped aboard and the doors wheezed shut after him. The train lurched out of the station. Blade found that he was alone. There were no other passengers. He began to walk through the cars.

They were all the same. Bright and empty. Newly painted. The paint had a sulphur smell about it. Blade kept walking, through car after car, mile after mile. There was no end to the train.

Blade was tired of walking. He hung on to a strap and peered out a window. Strange. He had no reflection. The train roared along at great speed—*rackety clickety clack—rackety clickety clack*. Stations flashed past in a bright blur. Then he saw that they weren't stations at all, but shop windows, and in them the manikins were copulating. Blade thought it shameless of them. He glanced down at his own penis. It was gone.

He screamed. His penis was gone. There was nothing there but a black scar. Blade screamed again and raced back through all the cars, looking for his penis.

No good. It was not to be found. Blade reversed himself and ran toward the front of the train. Ran and ran and ran. At last he reached the front car. The headlight sent a bright shaft down the black tunnel. The rails glinted silver. The train crashed on and on. Blade glanced into the driver's compartment.

The blonde in the mink coat was running the train. She smiled at Blade and pushed the throttle up another notch. "I changed my mind," she told him. "I have decided to go with you to Hell. Maybe it won't be so bad. A man like you could make it Heaven."

Blade managed a smile. He did not go into the compartment. He moved so she could not see that he had no penis. She certainly would not want to go with him if she knew that.

The train left the tunnel and shot into the open air. The speed increased. The tracks led off on an upward slant. For a time they rolled through the sky, headed into the glare of the sun.

Blade thought that this was a hell of a way to run a subway, but when he complained to the blonde he found her replaced by a hag, naked and toothless, who grinned at him and dripped saliva on her shrunken breasts. Terror and revulsion gripped Blade. He began to run back through the cars.

The train dipped under water. It flashed past station after station; each platform was crowded with waiting commuters, patient, reading their papers, each with his or her feet planted in a cask of cement. They did not look up as the train roared past.

He glanced out the opposite window and screamed. Another train, its headlight an enormous moon, was approaching from a side track.

Collision. Wreck. No time to escape. The moon headlight bore down. Closer and closer.

The oncoming train whistled once: a warning shriek, a sobbing moan, a fearful blast that tore Blade's head apart. The train crashed through the window and ran him down, smashed him, flattened him, dismembered him. His arms were severed and his legs. His bowels gushed out. His head was lying on the floor of the train.

A high-heeled slipper appeared. It was attached to a beautiful leg. Blade saw the mink coat and through a slit in it he could see her luscious body. He saw she was really a blonde. He blinked his eyes at her, trying to get her attention, trying to get her to save him.

Blade began to scream. The blonde made a comforting noise and bent to pick up his head. She pressed it to her marvelous breasts and crooned to him.

"Don't you worry," she told him. "You kept your head. Or at least I have it now, and we'll find you another body. You just trust Lascivia and don't worry about a thing. Little old Lascivia will take good care of you."

She took a suitcase from the luggage rack and put Blade's head in it. The suitcase had a false bottom and the head fell out and through a hole in the floor, beneath the grinding, flashing wheels of the train.

Pain now. Darkness now. Nothing now. His last sob was of relief that this should be. Nothing was beautiful.

### CHAPTER 3

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Blade awoke. As usual, after he came through the computer, he was naked. He lay unmoving, alert, letting the head pains subside, doing nothing to attract attention or endanger himself. After a time he became aware of the silence. A silence he had never known before. Absolute silence.

Blade moved his head slightly. He seemed to be lying in a park of sorts, on artificial turf, and he got the impression that the plants and bushes and trees were made of plastic. Nothing moved. There was no wind. And that absolute, total, deadly silence. He brushed his hand over the turf and the sound was magnified a hundred times, sounding like a man walking through tall grass.

He could sense no danger. After so many times through the computer, he now adapted almost instantly to conditions in Dimension X. Had there been danger he would have known it. Slowly he got to

his feet, searching for the source of light that tossed a bright, yet lambent glow over everything. It was as bright as a soft and cloudy day, and yet he could have sworn that it was not day. As he turned he saw it. The gigantic moon hanging in the sky.

Blade lunged for a clump of bushes—they *were* plastic and sought to hide himself from that moon. Now his instincts shouted danger and he reacted.

He lay on his back, peering up through a slit in the plastic fronds, and studied the moon. He was impressed and even a bit awed, he who had seen so many fantastic sights and braved so many dangers in so many weird dimensions.

Blade made an instant calculation. Put that gigantic silver orb into HD ratio and it would not be fifty thousand miles from Earth. He could see cities and lakes and mountains and rivers; he could see canals and docks and ships; in the cities he could pick out some large individual buildings. He could see traffic moving, cars of some sort; he could make out what could only be an airport with planes landing and taking off.

Then he saw something else. Light towers, they must be tremendous structures, hundreds of feet high, from which huge spotlights were beamed on this place where he now was. There was the danger. He felt it. There were watchers up there. From now on he must keep under cover as much as possible. The chances were good that he had not been spotted, at least fifty-fifty, but he must take every precaution until he understood more about the situation. They might be friendly. He might want to seek out that great moon—if only to get away from the silence that was already beginning to get on his nerves. But that could wait. He had to explore his present world first.

As long as he remained in the park, in the shelter of the trees, he should be safe. Blade began to move cautiously through the plastic shrubbery. He needed clothing and a weapon. Soon he would need food and water.

Blade stumbled over the love-making couple. Back in Home Dimension, it would have been funny, in DX it could mean his life. Blade whirled in a defensive crouch, snarling like an animal, the sound ripping the silence to bits. He was ready for battle. You did not bother about polite apologies in DX. If the man, angry at being disturbed at his love-making, came at him with a weapon, Blade meant to take it away from him. *He* needed a weapon and—

Blade sensed something was wrong, or right from his point of view, and when he heard his own breath rasping, he realized what it was. Only *he* was breaking the silence. *They* had not made a sound. And nobody, not in any dimension, could make love without making *some* sound, some little noise.

And they did not move.

It struck Blade that they were afraid of him, were cringing in terror-stricken silence. No. It was not that kind of silence. It was the vast and all-pervading silence that only he was disturbing. These people, this pair of lovers, were not alive.

Corpses in a plastic park?

Blade crept to them. He had been assuming, from the situation, that they were lovers. He could be wrong about that. Have a look, he thought, but first try speech. What in the hell did you say in a situation like this?

He whispered: "Don't be afraid. I don't harm you."

His whisper sounded as if it were roaring from an amplifier. Damn this eerie silence.

No answer. He had not expected any. He was beside them now, vague forms in the silver light that was leaking through a canopy of tree branches. Now he could see them plainly. It was a man and a woman and they *had* been making love. They still were, in a way, though they did not move. They must have died in the very act.

Blade crept closer and studied them carefully. Were they dead or in some strange coma or trance? They looked alive in every detail but one—they did not move. They were unaware of his presence. They were like store dummies arranged in the act of love.

Dummies? Manikins? Blade reached out and touched the woman's leg. It had the texture of real and living flesh and yet not quite. She did not move at his touch, she did not breathe, she was dead. Yet there was no sense of real death, no stench, no corruption.

Blade looked about. Nearby was a path canopied by the high plastic trees. There was light enough to see and yet not be seen from that terrible moon that looked as though it might come crashing down any moment. He grabbed the man by the ankle and dragged him to the path. Always the gentleman, Blade thought grimly, even in Dimension X.

He stretched the body full in the light and began to study it carefully. The first thing that struck him was the beauty, for mere handsome would not do in this case, of the man. He was small in build, but perfectly proportioned. He looked about thirty in HD years and his skin was fine and beardless, his features perfection with a straight nose, well-formed mouth and small ears set close to his head. His eyes were open and staring at Blade, and for a moment life seemed to flicker in them. Blade put his ear to the man's chest and could have sworn that the smooth and hairless flesh was *warm*. Blade hunkered back in absolute puzzlement. He had run into some weird things in the various dimensions he had visited, but this one was—

Blade saw it then. Light glinted from something just behind and slightly above the man's right ear. Blade reached to touch it. It was a metal stud, thickish and about a half-inch long. Cold to his touch. An antenna. Obviously a means of receiving power. This was not a true man. This was a robot.

Richard Blade laughed, the sound loon-like, maniacal in the silence, and went back for the lady. No need to be a gentleman now. These were not dead people but merely depowered robots. Robots that had been making love in a park and had been cut off in the act.

The woman was lovely, a bit smaller in stature than the man, slim, well fashioned and with a fresh clear skin. She was about the same age as the man, thirty or so. She wore a miniskirt of plastic and a bra of the same material. The bra had been slipped up, still clipped at the back, to expose her fine small breasts. Nearby lay a pair of brief underpants. Behind her right ear was the same metal stud he had found on the man. Surely a means of receiving power, Blade thought, but more and more he was doubting the robot theory.

It was the small bandage and the wound beneath it that confused him. When he dragged the woman back to the path and stretched her out beside the man he spotted the bandage and removed it. The wound had been stitched and was beginning to scab over. Blade plucked away a bit of the scab to reveal pink new tissue. What sort of robots could be wounded like any mortal and heal the same way?

He began to go over the bodies again, this time with extreme care. The hair, brown in both cases, was silky and fine and had the same texture as his own. Goddamn it! Blade grew more puzzled and exasperated. Robots or humans... something between the two?

He could not figure it out. They were dead and not dead, human and not human, robots and not robots. Time to get on, to look elsewhere, to explore and seek for answers.

The man wore a light sleeveless jacket and a pair of what in Home Dimension would have been called Bermuda shorts. Both of the garments were of the same plastic material, as was the sandal-like footgear. Blade stripped the jacket from the man, tried it on and then tossed it away in disgust. It was far too small. He would have to look elsewhere for clothes. The man, he noticed, had no trace of chest hair.

Blade stared down at the couple with his chin in hand. They were both beautiful people—*that* had to be admitted; he wondered what had happened to them. If they were dead it was indeed a strange death, without corruption or decay, for the dying had not dimmed their eyes or distorted their faces. He shook his head. Perhaps they only slept.

Sleepers. The word suited. He nodded again and went on about his dangerous business.

## CHAPTER 4

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A few moments later he discovered that he had been living in a minuscule world while all about him was macroscopic reality. In the little sheltered bower by the path there had been only the three of them, Blade and the two stilled lovers, and reality was what Blade made of it.

He now pushed cautiously through the rubbery brush and came to a spot from which he could observe a lake, and all sense of Home D reality fled away. He saw what he saw and did not understand, but it did not frighten him. He had completed his adaptation to this new dimension. He was a different creature well equipped for survival, and he did not bother to ponder it. He was by now hungry and thirsty and he still needed clothing and weapons; he examined and noted and filed the information automatically in his expanded memory files.

A path circled the lake. There were benches, food stands, a dock and boats on the lake. And everywhere the sleepers. Hundreds of them. All of them beautiful, all of them with the same antenna behind their right ear, all of them halted in the very act of whatever they had been doing when death came, or the power had been cut off, or whatever it was that had stilled them. It was, he thought as he walked among them without fear, as though one gigantic heart had beat for them all and had stopped without warning.

They were all dressed much alike, similar to the lovers he had stumbled over, and he sought for a jacket and shorts that would fit him. Most of the men were too small. As he was about to leave the park he found a news-vendor, paper upheld and still standing outside his kiosk, who was bigger than any of the men he had seen yet. Blade disrobed the man and slipped into the clothes and, after bursting a few seams, found they would do.

He now had clothing and a weapon—a short knife picked up at the stand of a food-seller. The food was dry and stale—and there remained his thirst. He tried a fountain. It was dry. A thought struck him. He went back to the food-vendor's, searched and found a bottled drink. It was tepid and too sweet, but it quenched his thirst. He quickly drank one bottle, took another and went back to the park entrance.

All this while he had remained under cover as best he could. He began to doubt that his solitary figure could be spotted from that baleful moon, but it was best to take no chances. From the shelter of an archway he studied the moon again, with the ever-blazing spotlights like lesser moons, and saw that the illumination was far from perfect. There were shadows aplenty if he made crafty use of them. He set out.

All that night, or so he thought of it at the time, he crept through the giant city like a furtive rat, a scavenger for information. He had not gone six blocks before the obvious parallel struck him—it was as if Blade, a stranger and alone, had entered London or Manhattan to find every soul plunged into this strange, deathless death.

They were there in their hundreds of thousands, caught in every conceivable act. In stores and small shops, theaters and restaurants, hotels and apartments and factories and offices.

One thing he noted—none of the buildings were more than six floors tall.

Another matter, and this disgruntled him a bit—he found no weapons. He found other short-bladed knives, such as the one he had, but nothing else. No bows and arrows, spears, swords or lances. Nothing at all resembling a firearm. He explored a museum on a great wide avenue and found not even an antique sword. They had not been—were not, for he was by now convinced that they only slept—a martial people. Either that or they had been forbidden arms. From the concealing shadow of a doorway Blade looked at the close-hanging moon and wondered.

By now he realized that there was no day or night in this place, not as he knew it back in HD. The moon was always the same and the bland—yet bright—illumination was always the same.

The cars he found everywhere—parked, or garaged, or stopped in the midst of traffic—were also the same: standard, Jeep-like vehicles. He examined one and found no gas tank and no conventional engine. There was only the little stud-like antenna and what appeared to be a small dynamo activating the wheels. He skirted railyards where all freight and passenger traffic was stilled. By now he paid little attention to the sleepers. They were simply there, everywhere about, as they would have been there in a normal bustling city. Except that they did not bustle. They slept, frozen. He found no animals of any sort.

Hour after hour he explored, keeping in the shadow, now understanding there would be no dawn. He chose one apartment—house as typical and searched through it. The sleepers were at table, in bed, at play. A crowded elevator was stalled at the fourth floor. Blade left the apartment and entered a small hospital. One of the beautiful sleepers was in childbirth, the child a boy, halfway out of the womb. Blade examined the tiny body and found the stud behind the right ear. The antenna was full size.

On the next floor he found a male whose chest had been slashed open by the surgeon. Blade peered at the exposed heart. It was very like his own. For once and all, he decided these were not robots. They were sleepers.

He was tired. He found an empty apartment and ate from the enormous stocks of canned food available, then he slept for a few hours. Just before he dropped off he willed the crystal in his brain to communicate with Lord Leighton back in Home Dimension. He could not always establish contact, but when he did it was automatic. Blade's expanded memory file simply fed the information into the crystal and then stored Lord L's reply.

This time the crystal worked. When he awoke, refreshed, the answer was in his brain. Blade sat on the edge of the comfortable bed, scratching at his already thick stubble—he invariably grew a beard in DX—and let the message from Lord L flow into his conscious mind.

*Seems you have landed in unproductive dead world. Suggest you try establish contact with moon you describe, but leave this to you. Scene you describe fascinating but hardly see how it will benefit Project unless, repeat unless, you can find source of power and possibly reanimate. This also your discretion. In any case suggest if you linger in this megapolis do try to locate power source now shut off. Secret of this could be invaluable in HD.*

That was all. Blade yawned and wondered at Lord L's use of the word "megapolis." His subconscious brain, his memory file and the crystal must have fed the word to his Lordship. It was true. He realized it now as he walked to a window and cautiously peered out. Everything was as he had left it for a few hours' sleep.

Megapolis. He had found no open spaces, other than the parks, in all his hours of walking. When he

had spied from high points of vantage, he had seen nothing but the city. It went on and on and on. This Dimension X, with its plastic foliage, had no countryside. It was all one vast nightmare of a city.

Loneliness, the longing to hear a human voice, Blade had never felt the need so keenly before, And yet Lord L was wrong about landing in a dead world. Blade was sure of that. He sensed it. This was not a dead world. It was, rather, an undying world, a world of sleepers.

Sleepers. A million sleepers. How did one account for it?

He found the bathroom and tried the shower handles. No water.

He went into the kitchen, ate from cans and drank the bottled drink, and then set about making a spear. This he did by using a curtain pole and lashing the short-bladed knife to it with wire from what was apparently a TV set. Blade grinned. Even when these people had been unsleeping, their world had not been perfect.

When his spear was ready, he set out again. Find the power source. Orders were orders, yes, but it was easier for Lord L to order than for Blade to do. On the whole he preferred to linger among the sleepers for a time, to search for the power source, than to contact the moon as the old boy suggested. He did not like those spotlights nor the sensation of being watched. He did not, in fact, care much at all for that huge silver eye in the sky. All of Blade's animal cunning, his instinct, told him that when danger came, it would come from the moon.

But Blade's instinct could be wrong. He had gone about six blocks, skulking along in the shadows, when he heard the sound. For the first time it was a sound not of his own making. He halted, frozen, as quiet as any sleeper, listening. Sweat sprang out on him and his heart thudded in his chest. He was not afraid—indeed he welcomed the sound, even if it meant danger—but tension built in him as he willed the sound to come again. It did not. Blade opened his mouth, hardly breathed, and was once again at one with the absolute silence.

And yet there had been a sound. His mind was not playing tricks. He stayed where he was, silent and unmoving, and tried to reconstruct the sound. Just what kind of a sound had it been? He strained to recover the aural sensation.

A pinging sound. No—too mild a term. A clang, a slight clanging sound. Metal, then, being lifted, touched or moved in some way. *Concentrate, Blade.*

Metal, a large piece of metal being lifted and dropped, or let fall accidentally, a short distance away. That was as close as he could come to it.

Blade let his gaze rove out of the shadows where he lurked. Not far away from him, in the middle of the street, was a kiosk. He had examined one already and found that it housed a manhole cover, a huge disc of metal. Even his great strength had not been able to budge it and he had no tools. He had peered through a hole in the center of the disc and decided that it covered nothing but a sewer. Possibly it was a very large sewer, and he meant to explore it later, but now—

He darted for the kiosk. It was full in the light from the spotlights on the moon. He knelt beside the sewer lid and examined it again. Yes. Such a round of metal, lifted and dropped back into its bed, would make exactly the sound he had heard. But not this particular sewer lid, for the sound had not come from this direction. It had been behind him.

Blade scuttled back into the shadows. He was afraid now, a healthy fear that had kept him alive many times, but along with his fear was relief and expectation. He was not alone in this place of silence and shadows and that loathsome moon. There was somebody, or something, down in those sewers.



Blade welcomed it, whatever it was.

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## CHAPTER 5

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What Blade did next was not typical of him. Perhaps it was the loneliness, the terrible silence, that caused him to forego his usual caution. Ordinarily, from a position of weakness, he would have laid a snare, made the enemy come to him. At least he would have scouted cannily ahead, would have made sure of the nature of his enemy before coming to a direct confrontation. He did none of these things.

He searched in the shadowed street until he found a shop. He entered, ignoring the sleepers frozen in the attitudes of buying and selling, and searched until he found what he wanted—a simple crowbar. It lay on a half-opened crate in the back room of the shop. Blade cursed himself as a fool. He had been thinking of weapons in terms of bladed instruments, of swords and daggers and the like. There were plenty of weapons about. The crowbar was a weapon. So was the heavy sledge hammer he picked up and took with him.

Blade crouched in the shop entrance for five minutes, not moving, listening. Only silence. No sign of anything moving. They, it, whoever, must have returned to their sewer burrow. Making just one mistake—dropping that sewer lid half an inch.

As he waited, he detached the knife from the curtain-rod shaft and stuck it in his belt. When he was sure he was not watched, he darted back to the kiosk. Another reason for going into the sewers was to get away from that spying moon with its searchlights and, another thought occurred, from the possibility of being watched through powerful telescopes.

He pried the edge of the sewer lid up with the crowbar. It slipped away several times; he cursed softly. At last he got the bar far enough in for leverage and heaved, putting all his great strength into it. The lid moved several inches out of its bed, enough for Blade to get his fingers under the edge. He tried to lift it, to move it just enough and without sound. It was useless, too much even for him. The damn thing must weigh over a thousand pounds.

Again he resorted to the crowbar, a pitifully inadequate tool, to move the lid an inch at a time. When he had enough space for a full hand-hold he lost his patience, gripped it, straightened with a curse and put every bit of effort into it. His arm muscles bulged and the great sinews of his back and legs popped as he heaved upward.

It was a mistake. He moved the mammoth lid but could not hold it, could not lower it gently. It got away from him and spun and fell with a resounding clang. For a moment his ears rang as if he were inside a bell. Blade cursed. Nothing like announcing your coming. He was making a lot of mistakes, far too many, and he wondered when he would pay for them.

The dark hole gaped beneath him. Blade picked up the sledge hammer and knelt by the hole. There was no ladder. No sound came from below. What light slanted into the kiosk showed him part of a bricked arch, nothing more. He listened for running water. None.

Blade pondered. Another mistake. He should have searched about for some means of making light, but he had not and now time was against him. He could not assume that whoever was down there was deaf.

He dropped the crowbar into the pit and listened. Hardly a second elapsed before he heard it strike, a soft sound. Between twenty and thirty feet and soft bottom; mud or sand or, just possibly, more of the artificial turf. He must make up his mind.

Blade clutched the sledge hammer near the head, gripped the edge of the lid ring with one powerful hand, and let himself dangle down into the pit. His swinging legs made gallows shadows on the illuminated are of brick. He let go, thinking as he fell that at least he was getting away from that accursed ever-glowing moon.

He fell easily, bending his knees and rolling in what must be sand or earth. He scooped up a handful of the stuff and sniffed it. There was a faint, hardly discernible odor of old sewage. This sewer had not been used for a long time.

Blade wasted precious moments in groping for the crowbar. It might come in handy again. Just as his fingers closed over it, he looked up to see lights approaching from his left. A score of torches held high and burning straight with no flickering. Blade grimaced and turned to his right.

Another dazzle of torches approached from the right. He was trapped between them. Blade made a rapid calculation. There was more room to the right than to the left. He ran that way. The sewer was narrow here and, now that he could see a bit, he did not want to be trapped in a thirty-foot alley when there might be a better site farther on. He had the feeling now. Battle lay ahead.

His hunch was right—not altogether a hunch because the torches to his right were strung out, those to his left cramped—and as the sewer began to widen he saw someone watching him from a niche in the wall. Nothing more than a shadow, but Blade was sure it moved. When he sprang toward it and tried to grasp it, the shadow became flesh and blood and spat at him, hissed and clawed like a cat, then vanished. Blade wiped a trickle of blood from his face and grinned. He had just touched a bare female breast, warm and pulsing, firm and springy. Real flesh. He had smelled her, too; sweat and a female odor. Not too clean, perhaps, but human. Whoever they were, these sewer people now converging on him, they were real flesh and blood beings. With them he should be able to cope. At least it was better than those beautiful sleepers above.

Blade kept moving to his right. The sewer widened, and kept widening until he reckoned it at some ninety feet across. Beyond this point it began to narrow again. Here he must make his stand.

Both groups of torches were converging on him. They were held high and thrust ahead; Blade could see little of the bearers or the figures behind them. As the light grew he could make out more detail about him: the wide area in which he was trapped must be some sort of living quarters, for he saw crude tables and chairs. There were shelves and ledges in the walls containing what looked like bedrolls and blankets. A dripping water-jar hung from the ceiling and he knew a sudden and terrible thirst for real water.

Hastily he stripped off the jacket and trousers he had taken from the sleepers. He did not know the relationship between these sewer people and the beautiful people above, but it might be just as well to come as a stranger, naked and prepared to do battle or make friends and, as always he must, to establish his supremacy by guile or strength. Long experience had taught him that to survive in Dimension X he must rule or, at the very least, share the power.

They were crowding him now. The torches flared and sparked. Blade hefted the sledge hammer and swung it in an arc. It was well balanced with a long shaft and a sixteen-pound head. A good enough mace. In his left hand he gripped the small crowbar for use as a fending weapon.

As the torch bearers approached from both sides, the light increased until Blade could make them out. They were human, right enough, as he understood human—men, women and children—all staring at him, pointing and whispering among themselves. The women were bare-breasted, the children naked, and the men wore baggy trousers of a material resembling denim. The men were hirsute of chest, arms and back—everywhere but on their heads. They were all bald.

None spoke to Blade. No one raised his voice. They whispered and kept their distance. Beyond the

first fringe, some twenty feet from him, Blade saw several of the bald men in conference, whispering and gesturing among themselves. It was time to take the first step.

Richard Blade could be quite a ham when he chose to be, when it suited his purpose and might save his life. Now he twirled the sledge hammer over his head. It made a humming sound and the torchlight was reflected from the burnished metal.

"I come as a friend," said Blade, "or as an enemy. The choice is yours." The words came loud and firm, from deep in his chest. It was his parade ground voice and another trick to establish authority.

As he spoke a silence fell over the assembly. The whispers stopped. The staring went on. Children clung to their mothers but none whimpered.

Blade smiled at them. He let the hammer swing idly back and forth at his side. He feigned impatience. "I know you have tongues. I heard you speak among yourselves. Why are you silent now? Which is it to be—friend or enemy?"

There was a renewed buzz of whispering among the women. The men were silent. Several of the women pointed at Blade's genitals, nodding and whispering. One laughed.

At last a man pushed his way through the throng. He came to within a dozen feet of Blade and halted. He carried a long bar of iron or steel, pointed at one end and hooked at the other. Blade instantly judged it to be the natural weapon of these people: some five feet long, an inch thick, hooked and pointed, it would be lethal. And it could move those enormous sewer lids.

Blade swung his hammer in menace. "Keep your distance, my friend. Until it is decided if you are my friend."

"I am Sart," said the man. His voice was baritone and matter of fact. He did not smile, nor did he frown. He leaned on his iron bar, his bald pate shining in the torches and stared at Blade—not at Blade's face but at his genitals, just as the women had done. The big man from Home Dimension began to wonder what the hell went on. Were they all sex maniacs?

The man who called himself Sart pointed at Blade's penis. "That, stranger. Does it function? Can you make children?"

Blade did not let his face betray his astonishment. How could this sewer creature, this man of Dimension X, possibly know of Blade's sexual troubles back in Home Dimension? It was fantastic and incredible, an impossible coincidence.

Blade said, "It works. And I can have children. What is it to you?"

A strange prelude to combat, this.

Sart smiled for the first time, more with his eyes than with his brown-stained teeth. He lifted his heavy iron bar and twirled it like a baton. "It is not so much to me, stranger. It might be a great deal to you—the difference whether you live or die. We Gnomen need children. If you can make them, and you can prove this, then we will permit you to live and become a slave. If you cannot make children we will kill you. It is as simple as that."

Blade had been watching the throng about him. Several men, all armed with the feral iron bars, were inching toward him, so spaced as to make a circle and come at him from all sides.

He raised his hammer and shook it at Sart. "Tell your friends to keep back or we will never finish this talk."

Sart raised a hand and the men halted. Sart was again leaning on his bar. "Your final answer, stranger?"

Blade had already made his decision. No submission. No slavery. The matter would have to be decided here and now. He fixed a glittering eye on Sart. "The answer is still yes, I can have children like any normal man. As to becoming a slave—the answer is no. That will never happen. I will never submit and you will have to kill me... after I kill a great many of you. Does that suit your purpose, Sart?"

Something changed in the man's eyes. They were well set apart, intelligent, and of a deep brown such as is found in dogs and some apes. Blade waited patiently. Sart was thinking. Sart was in a dilemma; Blade couldn't imagine what it could be.

Blade watched the crowd. He saw one of the men giving instructions to a young girl, saw her glance once at Blade, then disappear into the tunnel. Somehow he knew, instinctively and without really knowing, that the girl was the one he had surprised in the niche, the one who had scratched him. He brushed a crumb of dried blood from his cheek.

"I have sent for instructions," said the man called Sart. "I am only a third chief of this section, and as much as I would like to kill you, I dare not. Not without orders from Jantor or Sybelline. If you can have children and I kill you without orders, I would be banished to the five-mile pits. I would not like that. So we will just have to wait and see."

This did not suit Blade. He decided to provoke a fight, keep the impetus with him, present the real leaders, when and if they appeared, with *afait accompli*. There was a time to talk and a time to strike. The talk could come later, when he had established himself as someone to reckon with.

He began to taunt Sart. "What makes you so sure you can kill me?"

Sart did not answer for a moment. Then he stepped back and called to a man in the crowd. The man flung one of the sharpened iron bars. Sart caught it deftly. He put his own bar aside and held the new bar in front of him at arms' length. Slowly he began to exert pressure on the bar. His facial expression did not change as the muscles in his arms, chest and forearms rippled and bunched. He bent the bar into a horseshoe and flung it at Blade's feet.

"I can do the same to you," said Sart. He was not even breathing hard.

Blade was impressed and careful not to show it. He swiftly picked up the bar, tested it a moment, and then began to straighten it. It took every ounce of his strength. Sweat popped out on his face and he could hear his muscles cracking. When he had bent the bar into a semblance of its original form he flung it back at Sart.

The Gnomon nodded in reluctant approval. "You are strong. I admit it. It would be a pleasure and an honor to kill you. But I dare not, not without orders. More than anything else I dread the five-mile pits."

"I will solve your problem," said Blade. He picked up a handful of the sand and flung it in the man's face.

"I provoke you," he cried. "All your people can bear witness. Defend yourself, Sart. You're a coward and a braggart and if you do not fight I will kill you anyway."

This thing must be done before the leaders and reinforcements arrived.

Sart snatched up his iron bar and held it before him in a defensive position. He called out. "You all heard him. It is the stranger who forces this fight, not I."

Some of the women hissed. Two of the men leaped out to stand at Sart's side. They menaced Blade,

who was slowly advancing, with their bars. Blade smiled. "I had thought to fight only you, Sart, but if you are coward enough to fight three to one, then that's all right with me."

All the better, Blade thought. If he could beat down three of them, he would be in an even stronger position.

Sart spoke to the men flanking him. "Do not kill him unless you must. You, Hobbidance, from the left. And you, Obidikut, from the right."

So it was to be three to one. Blade whirled the sledge hammer over his head and sprang at Sart, giving the men on either side of him a chance to move in if they chose. They moved, but they were slow and they were trying not to kill him. Blade feinted a blow with the sledge and, when Sart raised his bar to defend, halted the blow in midair. He thrust, sword-like, over the bar and caught Sart squarely on the jaw with the sixteen-pound head. Sart went down.

The man on his left, seeing this, forgot his orders and made a vicious swipe with the hooked end of his bar. Blade parried with his hammer and, using the crowbar in his left hand like a dagger, thrust hard at the man's chest. The sharp end of the crowbar went into flesh and the blood spurted. The man, he who had been called Hobbidance, fell to his knees and began to cough blood. He made strangling sounds and clutched at his belly and throat.

The remaining Gnomon moved in with amazing speed, nearly decapitating Blade with a swing of his bar. The hooked point grazed Blade's head and moved his hair as it made a swishing sound. Blade moved away, backhanding the kneeling man with the crowbar, and cast a glance at Sart. He was dead to the world.

The Gnomon called Obidikut reversed his bar and rushed at Blade, trying to impale him. Blade parried and stepped aside, seeking to trip the man as he evaded the lunge. He tried to use a dagger stroke with the crowbar and failed in that also. The Gnomon now reversed his bar again and, using short strokes, kept swiping at Blade with the hooked end.

Blade moved carefully backward, between the two fallen men, heedful of grasping hands. Sart might be feigning. Blade sought to get his back to the wall, but before he could get into position the rush came in all its fury. This Obidikut was shorter than Sart, and not so powerful looking, and his brown eyes did not gleam with the same intelligence, but he was of the stuff that makes berserkers. He fell on Blade with grunts and cries, flailing away with his iron bar in a never-ceasing rain of deadly strokes.

Blade parried with the hammer and the crowbar. All he could do was parry. He never seemed to get a chance to strike a blow. The hammer began to weigh a hundred pounds. Sparks danced and flew and a steady clanging of iron on iron filled the tunnel. The Gnomon was tireless. On he came, on and on, forcing Blade away from the wall and into a circle. Blade retreated and kept retreating. It was all he could do, all he could manage, the only way he could stay alive. The Gnomon swung and poked and hooked with his bar, never stopping, never tiring.

Blade began to know despair and just a tinge of fear. He was wrong about this Obidikut—the man was not human. At least his lungs and muscles were not human. The man was made of the same stuff as his spear bar-iron. Blade had met his match at last and knew it. Guile then and—luck.

Once again he was retreating. Moving back toward the body of Sart. The man's bar lay by his side. Blade began to plan his move. He must bring it off or die, for he was in the last throes. His lungs were balloons filled with pain instead of air. His muscles were weak and quivering, beginning to spasm as fatigue overtook him. All he had left was his will.

Blade parried and parried again. The next blow, a terrible swipe as the Gnomon sensed victory,

snapped off the hammer-head and sent it flailing into the crowd. Blade was left with only the haft and the crowbar. He flung the haft at the Gnoman. For the first time the man smiled as the useless piece of wood bounced off his chest.

Blade hurled the crowbar. It bounced off the bar with a clang. Blade turned to run. He pretended to trip over Sart's body and went to his knees. The watchers, for the most part silent until now, let out a sudden cry for blood, a frenzied merciless screaming for Blade's death.

Blade counted on the rush. He had two plans, but strength for only one. If Obidikut played it cautiously, if he did not rush, then Blade knew he was dead. He could fight on but he could not win.

The Gnoman rushed. Blade twisted on his knees, faked getting up, then fell to his knees once more. He snatched at Sart's bar and planted the hooked end firmly in the sand, inclining the point toward the rushing Gnoman. In doing so he took one final and terrible risk—the man's last blow.

The lethal bar whispered over Blade, brushing his skull under the thick hair. Blade knelt firm, holding the inclined bar, watching the pointed end impale the rushing man just below the rib cage. So great was the rush, so furious the last onslaught, that the sharp bar penetrated the chest and the man's back, and stood out behind him half a foot.

Obidikut dropped his own bar. He stared at Blade in what seemed mild surprise. Blade snatched up the bar and leaped away, using his last strength and cunning, pretending to be a confident winner when he had so nearly been a loser. He stepped over the body of Hobbidance and stood leaning on the bar, half smiling, trying to give the easy impression of I told you so.

The Gnoman still had not fallen. He actually smiled at Blade. He fingered the bar transfixing him as though it were some strange ornament and a bit uncomfortable. He walked around in a few short circles, making odd noises in his throat. The crowd was silent again. They seemed to have forgotten Blade. They watched the Gnoman as he walked about, with the iron bar through him. No one made an effort to help him, to speak to him, to pull out the bar in his guts.

Blade did not like it. Why didn't the man die instead of staggering about like a broken toy? He used the moment to improve his position, getting his back to a wall, filling his lungs and feeling his strength return. He brushed sweat from his streaming forehead and watched the Gnoman still on his feet.

The man went to his knees. He groped in the sand and found the crowbar Blade had flung. He raised it and brandished it at Blade—a last gesture of defiance—then fell forward, dead.

The crowd watched Blade. Scores of eyes glittered at him. Men were silent and did not come to challenge him. Women hissed and held their children close. They did not seem to hate Blade, nor to admire him. They paid no attention to the bodies.

Sart groaned again and got slowly to his knees. Blade watched him in wonder. The man had taken a sixteen-pound iron hammer-head on the jaw and now he was getting up. His jaw did not appear to be broken, though Sart was spitting blood and teeth. Blade tightened his grip on Sart's bar. Maybe it wasn't over yet. And Blade, though his outward facade was calm and confident, did not feel up to another battle. His guts churned, his knees trembled and he was bathed in sweat.

But Sart did not get to his feet. He glanced about him, at the bodies of his two friends, then looked at Blade. He began to crawl toward Blade on his knees, his bloody mouth gaping as he spoke.

"You have won," Sart gasped. "By our laws, that makes you master and me slave. So be it. I prostrate myself to you." He crawled nearer to Blade.

"Keep your distance," said Blade. "And I wish no slaves. As far as I am concerned, you are a free

man. And more—I told you I would be friends. My word still holds. So get on your feet and act like a man."

The crowd watched in silence, not even whispering now.

"I plan no treachery," said Sart. "I wish but to kiss your feet so that all will know I am your slave."

Blade replied, "I say again that I want no slave. But I want you as a friend if—"

Sart's eyes were pleading. He whispered so that only Blade heard. "You do not understand, master. I must be your slave now. Only you can protect me. I have failed in my duty and if you do not take me for slave I will be sent to the five-mile pits. I beg you, I grovel before you, I ask for mercy. Take me for your slave before Jantor and Sybelline arrive. They have no mercy. But if you take me for slave and speak for me, if you save me from the pits, I will be both slave and friend. I swear it."

Blade decided to risk it. He was still in a desperate position and Sart might serve him well in many ways.

He assented. "I take you for my slave, Sart."

Sart wriggled forward and kissed Blade's foot in full view of the silent crowd. Then he wiped blood from his ruined mouth and stood up near Blade. "I pledge loyalty, master." To the crowd at large he spoke, "You have all seen and heard. This stranger has defeated me and taken me for his slave. From this time on, I am under his protection."

One of the men in the crowd called back. "We have seen, Sart. We have heard. But what of Jantor and of Sybelline? Suppose they decide to kill this stranger after all? What of you then, Sart?"

Sart did not answer them. He got to his feet and stood near Blade, who pointed the sharp end of the bar at him and said, "Keep your distance yet a time, my new friend and slave. And talk if your mouth is not too sore. Who is Jantor? And this Sybelline? Speak swiftly now, for I must know as much of them as possible before I meet them."

Sart managed to look hurt. He said, "You need not fear me, master. When Sart makes a vow, he keeps it. And as to Jantor and Sybelline—they rule down here. And there is no time to tell you anything. They approach now."

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## CHAPTER 6

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A great hairy frog of a man stood before Blade. By his side was a slim and still lovely woman with snow-white hair. They were backed up by a crowd of armed guards.

"I am Jantor, leader of the Gnomes," the man said. He turned to the woman. "This is Sybelline, queen." He looked around him at the bodies and at Sart kneeling near Blade in slavehood.

Jantor fixed his attention on Blade. "You killed them in fair fight?" he asked.

Blade nodded. "Ask your own people," he said.

There was assent from the crowd. Jantor ordered the bodies dragged away and this was done. Then he advanced to Blade and stared at his genitals.

"You are well equipped. I hope it is not all show. Can you father children?"

Blade began to wish he had a pair of pants. Why this obsession with his potency? The Gnomes had

children. There were several staring at him at the moment.

But wisely he asked no questions. He was exhausted and his life depended on Jantor's whim. Both men knew it. Jantor, with a wave of his hand, summoned a hundred men to stand beside him. They were all armed with the cruel iron bars.

So Blade said, "Yes. I can have children."

Jantor, his great bald head gleaming, smiled slightly and said, "I hope you do not lie to me. I need you. All the Gnomen need you. For I alone of all the men can have children. All these you see are mine—and the work grows too much for me. I am no longer a young man. So you have a choice, stranger. Live and make children, or die here and now. Which will it be?"

Blade decided to try his charm. He smiled back at the toad-like man and laughed. "That is no hard choice to make. And I am called Blade in my own land. Richard Blade."

Jantor waved a careless hand. "I do not care about your name, nor where you came from. You agree, then? Good! Come with me."

In all this time the white-haired woman had not spoken. But she had been watching Blade intently with long green eyes. Blade especially noted her eyes, for green was not the color of Gnomen eyes, and he also made careful note of her slim and graceful body, wrapped in a black robe, and her firm and unwrinkled complexion. Only her snowy hair bespoke her age. He guessed then that this woman, this Sybelline, was the real power among the Gnomen.

A moment later his guess was confirmed. Jantor fixed an eye on the anxious Sart and gave an order. "That one to the five-mile pits." Six armed men moved forward.

Blade held up a hand. He explained that Sart was now his slave. He spoke loudly, firmly, coming on as strong as he dared. He knew that his position was still tenuous, balanced on the razor's edge, but he pressed matters a bit. He could not afford to let Jantor win an unqualified victory.

Jantor grew angry. He did not like being defied. Blade gripped his iron bar and made ready for the rush that would, no doubt, kill him. Then the woman whispered in Jantor's ear for a moment. She smiled at Blade with dazzling white teeth, but did not address him.

Jantor scowled, then shrugged his hairy shoulders in resignation. He nodded at Blade. "Very well. Sart is slave to you from this day on. You are responsible for him. Do not forget that. Under our law a master is responsible for the crimes of his slave, for his every deed. Now will you come with me? There is work to be done."

For the next several days Blade led a strange existence. He was put out to stud.

There was no other word for it. Blade was spared, given a comfortable bricked-in apartment off a secondary tunnel, and put to work. He was, so to speak, on probation. If he could produce children—the gestation period of the Gnomen women was only seven months—his life would be spared. When Jantor died, Blade might well become King in his stead.

Jantor and Sybelline had not minced words. They were both fundamentalists, pragmatic in the extreme, and had evinced little interest in the big stranger other than his capacity to plant his seed in Gnomen women.

So now Blade was working. He was—and Blade could be vulgar when he chose—screwing for a living, to be more exact, for his life. And he was, thank God, potent again. He had better be. It was hard to believe he had been impotent now that he must achieve erection from ten to fifteen times a day.



At the moment, he was resting between jobs. Sart was in another room preparing a meal. Blade lay on his soft bed and contemplated his surroundings. The apartment was furnished and decorated with articles brought into the sewers from above. He knew by this time that the sleepers aboveground were called Morphi and that they had been asleep for, what he reckoned in HD time, would be a century or more. Other than this he knew very little. He had tried questioning Sart, with little result. The man proved to be, so far, loyal and simple. He simply did not know anything of Gnomes history. By questioning him and studying him, Blade grasped the essential fact about these Gnomes—they had a very brief attention span. About that of a three-year-old in HD. Sart was a case in point. When a thing was past, he forgot it, and he did not think of the future except in terms of punishment. He was, as were all the common Gnomes, deathly afraid of the five-mile pits. But mostly the Gnomes lived in the present.

Sart pushed his head through the door curtain. "It is time, master."

Blade nodded wearily. "Send her in."

The woman who entered was short and muscular, with thick, bowed legs. She was bare-breasted and wore the simple denim skirt of the Gnomes women. Her eyes were the usual brown, her nose pug and her mouth wide. She did not smell very clean, but by now Blade was used to that. None of the ordinary Gnomes women were clean. Nor the men, for that matter.

The woman did not look at Blade or speak. She walked to the bed and tumbled on it. Blade sighed and mounted her. It was over soon and she left, still without speaking or looking directly at him.

Blade called to Sart. "I will eat now and have a bath and a change of clothes. No more women for an hour. Tell them."

"Yes, master."

Blade lay on the bed, weary, thinking that perhaps it would be best if he got out of this situation—if he could do it alive—and somehow make his way to the giant moon. He had not seen that monster since his descent into the sewers, but he had picked up stray bits of information about it.

The moon, as he thought of it, was inhabited by a superior race of beings called the Selenes. The Gnomes called them orfolk and were afraid of them. Blade, with the little information he could gather, guessed that the Selenes had warred with the Morphi and the Selenes had won. Somehow they had managed to cut off the power and put the Morphi into a death-like trance. How or why or when, he had no idea. Sart did not know, or would not tell. Blade didn't think that his slave was lying or being devious; the Gnomes were simply a low form of human animal that lived entirely for the present.

Blade moved restlessly on the bed. He heard Sart push through the door hanging and say something to the line of women waiting outside. Blade grinned wryly at the thought of the strange queue—a line a block long of women waiting, hoping to be made pregnant by a strange man.

For a moment, furious impatience raged in Blade. He wanted to be up and out and about, doing and discovering, finding out things, exploiting this Dimension X for England, and yet here he was at stud and no better than any other prisoner—no better off than Sart, really. In fact he didn't have the freedom of Sart, who could come and go as he pleased. Let Blade poke his head out of the apartment and there were fifty men armed with the bars.

Only his sense of humor saved Blade, or had up to now. He finally laughed at himself and took his bath, humming a snatch of remembered tune...*I'll never love again*... had his lunch and dressed in some of the plastic clothes looted from above. He was stalling as long as he could. He was tired. So far that day he had serviced ten women—he ticked them off on a slate—and he did not really feel up to more female flesh at the moment. If only Jantor or Sybelline would send for him, take some notice of his

existence. They ruled, so they must be of good intelligence, and from them he might gain some answers. At least escape from the deadly boredom that pressed in on him like a black cloud. Blade let a curse escape him. All he did—night and day, day and night—was service women. When he thought of all the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth in despair that he had done back in HD, he could not believe that he was the same man.

He had made Sart bathe and comb out his beard. The man had filled the apartment with his stink. Now Sart took the food tray away and said, "It is time, master. They are growing impatient."

Blade scowled at him. "Let them be impatient. So am I, to no purpose. I have an idea, Sart. Why not you instead of me? I'm sure you'll enjoy it. I need a rest."

Sart gave him a shocked look. "That is forbidden, master. Only you are to have the women."

"Who would know the difference?"

Sart pointed at Blade and then at his own squat and powerful body covered with hair. "The women, of course. They would tell. Jantor and Sybelline would hear. They would kill you and send me to the pits. No, master, you must keep on. Shall I send the next one in now?"

Blade sighed and began to undress again. "Yes, I suppose so. Send her in."

And it was with the next woman that his boredom and futility began to vanish. He recognized her immediately. It was the young and shapely girl who had clawed him, and who later had been sent to fetch Jantor and Sybelline. And there was something more. This was the third or fourth time she had been to him for copulation. Blade, who was in a foul mood, decided to have some fun with her at least. Why did she keep returning to his bed, over and over again?

When the girl entered and walked toward the bed Blade stopped her. He beckoned. "Come here, girl. How are you called?"

She did not answer. She stood staring at the floor. She wore only the denim skirt, and she was slim and small waisted, with long, well-formed legs.

Blade roughened his voice. "I asked you a question. What is your name?"

She did not speak. Blade studied her. Her breasts were large and high thrusting, with a great deal of point. She was dirty and she smelled a bit, as they all did; her long dark hair was a tangle of medusa snarls.

"Look at me," said Blade.

Slowly she raised her head. Her eyes, of Gnomen deep brown, had a tint of red in them. She met Blade's gaze for a moment, then lowered her eyes once more, but not before he had seen an intelligence, a comprehension, that none of the other women had displayed.

By now Blade was both interested and irritated. It also occurred to him that the more time he spent with this one, the more rest he would get. He badly needed it. She was the most beautiful of the lot, but he felt no sexual craving. He badly needed a respite.

He stalked to her, seized her by the hair, none too gently, and pulled her head back. He put his face close to hers and growled. "Tell me your name, girl!"

She was trembling. Fear moved in her eyes, fear and something else. Later, remembering, Blade was to recall that she looked at him as a grateful and obedient dog looks at its master.

"Norn," she gasped. "I am called Norn." Her voice was high-pitched, quavery with fear, yet not unpleasant.

Blade released her. He smiled. "So you do have a tongue—and a name. Then tell me, Norn, why do you keep coming back?"

The brown eyes widened, then narrowed, then veiled. She shook her head. "I do not understand, master. I do not come back. This is my first time."

Blade laughed. "You are a little liar, Norn. This is the third, maybe the fourth, time that you've come to me."

Norn shook her head. "No."

"Yes, and you do not leave here until you tell the truth and explain why. Sart?"

"Yes, master?" Sart stepped into the room, glancing nervously from Blade to the girl.

Blade kept his eyes on the girl, who once again was staring at the floor.

"Fetch water, Sart, and the cloths and brushes. Hurry up. I am curious about this one. I want to see what she really looks like."

Sart hesitated. Plainly he did not like this development. "But master, there are so many waiting. The line grows longer all the time. Is it wise to waste time with this one? I do not think that Jantor—"

Blade made an extremely nasty remark about Jantor, and Sart hurried to do as he was told. The girl broke suddenly for the draped entrance. Blade was on her in an instant. She fought him for a moment, kicking and biting and scratching, then suddenly went limp in his arms. She pressed against him and laid her head on his huge chest. Blade, with a sinking feeling, recognized submission.

The girl whispered up to him. "I love."

That, he thought coldly, is all I need. Yet he did not push her from him. She might be useful and there was something about her as yet unexplained. Meantime, so long as he dallied with her, he would not have to face the impatient queue waiting for him outside. Sart came back with a large jar of water, cloths, coarse brushes and a box of fine white sand. Gnomes did not understand the use of soap. This puzzled Blade, for there was certainly plenty of it in the city above the sewers.

"Hold her," Blade commanded. "We'll just have a little scrub-down and see what's under the dirt."

But Norn would not let Sart touch her. She spat at him and clawed at his eyes. She turned to Blade. "You. I love you."

Direct little creature, he thought, with dismay. But he was in it now; might as well finish up. He thought again of the long line of females outside and grimaced. The longer it took the better.

She took off her little denim mini and stood naked before him. Blade began his task, working as gently as possible with the water and sand.

Norn stood patiently as he scrubbed her. When he finished she emerged glowing and lovely, much younger than he would have guessed. Clean and shining, staring at him with dog-like devotion, she hardly looked fourteen, an extremely well-developed fourteen. As he rather tenderly dried her breasts, he convinced himself that this was no child.

Blade seated the girl on the bed and struggled to comb and brush out the worst of the tangles in her hair. Sart hovered, complaining, until Blade sent him out of the room.

As he left Sart made a final plea. "This is not wise, master. It will surely get back to Jantor and Sybelline that you have taken a favorite. They will send the guards. I do not want you to be slain, master, and—"

Blade grinned. "That I believe. You worry about your own skin and for that I do not blame you. But remember that you pledged obedience to me. So obey.. OUT!"

Blade did what he could with her hair and tossed the comb and brush aside. Her regarded her. Not too bad. He sat on the bed beside her and took her hand. She curled over against him and reached up to stroke his bearded cheek.

After a moment he said, "Now, my little Norn, let's have some truth from you—nothing but truth. You will no longer pretend to be stupid and you will not persist in the lie that you're in love with me. That is not why you come again and again, and I must know why."

She brushed her fingers through his chest hair. She let out a long sigh and said, "All right, Blade. You are too clever for me. But it is truth that I love you. I have tasted you. Now no other man will do. Certainly no common Gnomon, even if it were not forbidden. I would have you all for my own, Blade."

When he cuffed her lightly, a look of ecstasy crossed her face. She brushed her fingers over the spot he had struck, as if it had been a kiss instead of a blow.

Blade knew then that she was telling the truth, but not all of it. He spoke gently. "If you lie again, the next blow will be harder. You come to spy on me, Norn. Is that not so?"

She pressed against him. Her hands sought him and Blade could feel himself being aroused by her touch. He pulled her hands away.

"Admit it, Norn. You spy, don't you?"

She nodded. "Yes. I spy for Sybelline, not Jantor. I am handmaid to Sybelline and she would know everything of you. But the other is also true—my body loves yours and so I must visit you again and again. I knew it was not wise, for now you have found me out, but I could not help myself."

Her hands were plucking at him again. It was like flower petals brushing his penis. Blade felt a genuine excitement rising in him, the first in all his days of sexual activity. But he pulled her hands away again.

"Later for that. First you must answer questions. Why does Sybelline spy on me? What am I to her? What does she want to know?"

Norn pulled away from him and stretched out on the bed. She propped herself on an elbow, chin in palm, and regarded him for a long time before she spoke. The look she gave him, and her tone, revealed that she had entirely dropped the mask.

"All right, Blade. I did not come here to talk, but if you must talk let us get it over with. I do not know exactly why Sybelline spies on you through me, but I know that she has her reasons. She tells me nothing. I merely obey. My orders were to find out all I could about you, in any way I could. To find out if you are indeed the man you have boasted of being."

He smiled faintly. "And what did you tell her?"

For the first time he heard her laugh. Her teeth were good. "I told her that you are indeed a man. In a few years, if you work steadily, the Gnomon population will be rebuilt."

Blade did not show the frown he felt. That idea he did not like at all: stud for an entire nation, quite

literally the father of a country. This life was not for him. That very night, he thought, he would contact Lord L through the crystal and ask to be recalled to Home Dimension.

Norn lay back on the bed. She raised her knees and looked at Blade. "Please, Blade. Your slave is right, you know. If we are too long the other women will be come suspicious and report us. Please hurry."

Blade laid down beside her. She might be a liar and a spy, but he didn't think she was lying about her need of him. If she really was enamored of him, he would be a fool not to exploit it. At the moment he was a sexual captive with no points of advantage, and he could be killed at Jantor's whim or at the whim of Sybelline.

Somehow Blade thought that his best chances lay with Sybelline.

He set out to torture Norn a bit. He penetrated and then withdrew. She moaned and clutched at him frantically. How different from the other Gnomen women he had been servicing like a prize bull or stallion. They all lay unmoving and would not look at him, would not have submitted at all but for Jantor's stern orders.

Norn continued to writhe and moan. "Please, please, Blade. I love you. Hurry—hurry—"

He teased her and held off. "You are not telling me everything, Norn. If we are to be friends I must trust you, and I cannot do that until you tell me everything. Now what is Sybelline up to?"

The girl closed her eyes and gasped. "I know little. This much I can tell you... Sybelline bade me to observe you and, when I thought the time was right, to warn you."

Blade thrust into her. "Warn me of what?"

Norn groaned deep in her throat. "That trouble is coming. Trouble with Jantor. Sybelline wants you on her side and she will give you great rewards. But you must wait—wait and do nothing. If you act too soon all will be ruined. You are to wait and be obedient and cause no trouble..."

"I can do little else," said Blade bitterly. "I'm a prisoner and as helpless as any of you."

Norn reached for him. She wrapped strong legs about him and tugged him to her.

"Not forever, Blade. I will be messenger. I will visit you again and again and when the time is right I will take you to Sybelline. Now—I have told you all my secrets. I know of nothing more. Will you go on denying me? I love you, Blade. Take pity..."

Blade took pity. And for the first time in days actually enjoyed it.

## CHAPTER 7

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That same night Jantor sent an armed guard of twenty men to fetch Blade. Sart was permitted to accompany Blade. As they wound through the narrow, maze-like tunnels that connected the main sewers, Blade found it hard not to remain untouched by Sart's fear. The slave was trembling and sweating and his voice broke as he whispered.

"I warned you, master. I warned you. Jantor has found out about that woman, that Norn, and now he suspects you and Sybelline of plotting against him. We are finished, master. You will be killed and I will be sent to the five-mile pits. Oh, I warned you, I warned you."

Blade's nerves were none too good. He was without weapons. His spear bar, the one he had taken from Sart, had disappeared the first night as he slept. But he did not like whining, and he cuffed Sart so hard that the sturdy Gnoman went down in a daze. Blade pulled him to his feet as the guards watched impassively.

"That will be all from you," said Blade. "From this time on you will not speak until I give you leave."

They entered a much wider and higher main sewer than any he had seen before. The cobbled trough was dry, covered with sand and some rank weeds that were not made of plastic. In the air, there lingered the effluvia of long-ago sewage. Blade and Sart, surrounded by the guards, made a right turn and continued along the main sewer. They passed a vast cavern in which fires glowed and sparks flew as metal clanged on metal. It was a forge.

Blade whispered to Sart. "You may speak: What do they make in there?"

Sart, sullen and unforgiving, whispered back that the iron spear bars were made there. He himself had worked there for a short time.

"Just the bars? Nothing else?" Blade had long been puzzled by their lack of weaponry. Granted that the Gnomen were none too bright, were creatures of the moment with a brief attention span and small intelligence, he wondered why they had not developed other weapons.

Sart answered his question. "What else should they make but the bars, master? What else is needed?"

Blade shrugged and let it go at that. But he would keep the forge in mind.

Jantor was waiting in a vast, domed chamber with brick walls and a floor of clean white sand. Iron railings and stairs led to the top of the dome, where Blade saw the underside of one of those enormous sewer lids. There was probably a kiosk above it and the eternal sleepers and that treacherous spying moon, waiting. For what? He had the cold, disturbing feeling that the orbfolk, and that moon, were waiting for him, and being patient. As though they knew the first act must be played out in the sewers.

The guards pushed Blade and Sart forward and retired to wait outside. Blade stood blinking in the flare of torches held in wall sconces. Sart clung to Blade's heels, muttering to himself and wringing his hands. Blade knew the man's terror was genuine. At the moment Blade himself was not feeling particularly valiant. His position was weak. He was at the mercy of Jantor. Anything he did now would have to be bravado and bluff.

Jantor spoke from the shadows. "This way, Blade. You will kneel before the throne, and your slave with you."

Blade never knew for sure, but it may have been his sense of humor that saved him. As he made his way toward the voice of Jantor he saw that the "throne" was an armchair, a simple comfortable-looking armchair made of plastic, set on a raised platform of raw planks. The "throne" had undoubtedly been looted from one of the shops above.

Blade had the sense not to laugh. That may have saved him, too. Sart threw himself sprawling on the sand, beating his head against it, while Blade stood, arms akimbo, and regarded Jantor.

"I kneel to no throne and no man," Blade said. "This is not meant as disrespect for you, Jantor. It is just my way."

Jantor looked down at Blade from his armchair throne, his dome of baldness glistening in the torchlight. Jantor leaned forward to stare at Blade, his Gnomen brown eyes narrowed and catching red

sparks from the torches.

He spoke calmly enough. "Sart, this slave of yours, has not told you of the five-mile pits?"

Blade shook his head. "He has not. He goes into a faint at the mention of them."

Jantor nodded. "He is perhaps wiser than you. You do not fear the pits because you do not know them. But I know them. I have been in them. Listen well, Blade, and learn. I tell you this in warning, for I have use for you and I do not wish either to kill you or send you to the pits."

Blade interrupted. "Must I stand? I am weary, Jantor. I have been working long hours making children for you."

Jantor showed his stubby brown teeth. "That I can understand. For a long time I carried the burden alone. And I produced children. It remains to be seen, Blade, if you can do the same. So far you have done nothing. So far not a woman has missed her bloody time."

Blade crossed his big arms calmly. He knew he was not sterile. He had a child—a boy—back in Home Dimension, a boy he could never claim and whom he had never seen.

"It is too early," he told Jantor, "Give it time."

Jantor nodded. "Yes. But let me tell you of the pits."

He waved a hand and from the shadows came a girl. She was carrying a chair, a metal frame with a plastic seat. Blade was a trifle startled. She had been there all the time, so quiet and blended with the shadow that he had not suspected her presence. The girl put the chair down before Blade. She did not look at him but stood silent and motionless, staring at the floor as most Gnomes women did. She was hardly more than a child, perhaps twelve, but she looked clean, and her coarse dark hair sparkled in the light of the torches. She had taut little cupcake breasts and her waist was tiny. Her legs were short but thin and not yet beginning to bow. Instead of the usual denim skirt, she was wearing a plastic skirt and between her small breasts there dangled a delicately worked iron chain.

"This is my daughter," said Jantor. "I have many, of course, but this one I claim for my own. Her name is Alixe and she is yours as long as you live."

For once Blade was speechless. The little speech of Jantor's had sounded very like a command. Fury flashed in him and he stilled it with an effort. He did not like his life so arranged for him. Yet he must be realistic, bide his time and wait, be patient, and as soon as possible get the reins into his own hands. Either that or send an emergency call through the crystal in his brain. He would ask Lord Leighton to abort the mission and snatch him back through the computer—if he lived that long.

Blade said: "I thank you, Jantor. I will treasure her."

Jantor grunted. "Do not treasure her—use her!"

Blade stroked the girl's hair and tilted her face upward. Her eyes, wide-set and deep brown, peered into his with no expression. She was pretty, well favored for a Gnome girl, and her teeth were white even.

Blade smiled at her. "And you, Alixe? How do you feel about this?"

It would be a graceful way out if she refused him. And of course she would be spying for Jantor just as Norn was spying for Sybelline.

She had a chiming, childish voice. "I do as my father wishes, man Blade. He commands and I obey."

If he says I am yours, then that is the truth of it. I am yours."

Blade tapped her soft chin with his finger. "And you do not mind?"

She regarded him solemnly. "I do not think I will mind. You are well favored, man Blade, and it is time I left off being a child and became a woman. I will bear you many children and—"

"If he can have them," broke in Jantor. "Go, Alixe, and wait outside. When Blade returns to his quarters you will go with him."

Blade did not protest. It would have done no good. He contented himself with a few ripe and silent curses and with kicking Sart, who was still groveling in the sand and making fearful sounds in his throat.

"Stand up," he commanded, "and try to act like a man instead of a slave. Go outside and wait for me. I would talk with Jantor alone."

Jantor made no objection as Sart left the chamber, but an odd look lingered on his hairy toad-like countenance and he looked puzzled. The skin wrinkled on his shiny pate and Blade thought he was frowning. It was hard to be sure in the dim light.

When Jantor spoke his voice was calm, almost friendly.

"You ask the impossible of Sart," he said. "He is a slave. You made him one when you defeated him, so it follows that if he is a slave he cannot act like a man."

It was so near to syllogistic logic that Blade was again taken aback. He recognized it as a warning not to underestimate Jantor. Was the man shrewd or merely cunning? Both qualities were dangerous and only time would tell. Blade decided to change the subject.

He sat down in the chair provided by Alixe. "I'd like to hear of these five-mile pits. You have been in them?"

Jantor nodded. "For a long time. I was put there by the Morphi, the ones who sleep above us, for daring to presume above my station. I was put in a cell five miles down, Blade, where there is only darkness and silence such as you have never dreamed of. A little longer and I would have gone blind, as most do in the pits."

Blade felt cold along his spine. It was an ordeal he would not want to face and Jantor's matter-of-fact attitude somehow made it worse.

"All sentences to the pits are for life," said Jantor.

Blade grunted. "That cannot be long."

Jantor leaned toward him, chin in hand. He seemed to smile again. "Sometimes it was. The Morphi were cruel and clever, far superior to any Gnomen, and they did not put us in the pits to die quickly and easily. Food and water were dropped into the cells by tubes and there was something in the food to make a man live a long time. I do not know what it was because I do not understand such matters, but I know I lived when I should have died. Then the sweet bomb was dropped just in time to save me from blindness."

Blade stared. "The sweet bomb?" He was fast revising his opinion of Jantor. Here was one Gnoman who could remember and think in the manner of Blade himself. He wondered at the cause of it and guessed that the massive doses of additives and vitamins that Jantor had taken in his food while imprisoned must have developed his brain power far beyond that of the ordinary Gnomen.



"Yes," Jantor was saying. "It was called the sweet bomb because it filled the land and our sewers here below with a perfume such as I have never known before or since. It preserved the bodies of the Morphi, whose power had been cut off, and it made all Gnomen males powerless to produce children. Every man's potency was killed except mine. I was in the five-mile pits and the effect of the sweet bomb did not penetrate that far. So when I was rescued and could see again, I found that I was the only man who could make children.

Now do you begin to understand, Blade, why I do not wish to kill you or put you in the pits? Why I want to be your friend and share rule with you? Between us we can produce a new and better race. When the time comes, and it all be long in coming, my people can move up and out of the sewers and inherit the good life of the Morphi. We will learn to live as they lived and to use the things they used. Did I tell you why I was sent to the pits?"

Blade shook his head. "Only that you presumed above your station."

Jantor's great hairy belly shook as he laughed. "Yes, I did. I do not brag when I say that I was always more intelligent than other Gnomen. My own belief is that I am only half Gnomen. I think my father was a Morphi, banished to the sewers for some crime. That was their way. They banished their criminals to the sewers just as they put us, the Gnomen, in the pits. But never mind—when I was a very young man I ventured up there, out of sewers, and I asked questions. I see now that I was a fool, but I was young and I wanted only to escape the sewers and live like the Morphi. I did not last long. There was a fight and I killed several of the Morphi with my spear bar. I was sent to the five-mile pits."

Blade craned his head in bad light, trying to see Jantor's thick neck and ears. Jantor guessed what Blade was looking for and said, "The power stud is there, but not developed. All half breeds have them, a wart of half-flesh and half-metal. Sybelline has one. She is also a half-breed. Her mother was a Morphi, raped by a Gnomon who went mad, ascended to one of the kiosks and seized the first Morphi woman who passed. He died in the pits, of course. When the child was born, for some strange reason it was not aborted, but it was sent into the sewers. The child was Sybelline. And now, Blade, we get to the important matter."

Blade had a sinking feeling. He had been expecting something like this. He was, as so many times before in X Dimension, going to be in the middle of warring factions. Norn had said it—trouble was coming—and now Jantor was about to say it.

Jantor was silent for a long time. He stared at Blade, unblinking. Absently, as though his mind were elsewhere, he wet a finger and traced a fylfot—or swastika—on his bald head. Blade had noticed this before among Gnomen males—Sart sometimes did it—and because he knew what Jantor was thinking and did not want to hear it, he sought to forestall matters by asking a question.

He gave Jantor an inquiring look. "You make a sign to your god?" He did not dwell on the significance of the fylfot. By this time he knew that various XDs developed in curious and coincidental parallels with Home Dimension.

"What? Oh, this." Jantor wet his finger again and made the sign on his bald head. "It is a habit. We Gnomen have no gods of our own. When the Morphi had power they were our gods. All Gnomen were told to worship them, though I never did. Now they sleep and there are no gods at all. It is not important."

Blade persisted. "But the Morphi themselves—did they not have gods?"

Jantor nodded. "For a long time. They were made to worship the Moon people, the Selenes, what we Gnomen call the orbfolk. And do not ask me what gods the orbfolk worship because I do not know. What I do know is that just before the sweet bomb was dropped the Morphi declared themselves

independent of the Moon and refused to worship them any longer.

Blade began to understand a little. "A rebellion. And the Selenes punished the Morphi by dropping the sweet bomb and cutting off their power."

Again Jantor nodded. "The orbfolk are clever and patient and plan long ahead. When they are ready, if that time ever comes, they will turn the power on again and the sleepers up there will awaken. They will have learned a lesson, or so the orbfolk will think, and all will be as before—except that there will be no Gnomen race. That, Blade, is why you are here, why I have spared your life and why I talk to you now in confidence. You are going to help me, Blade. Together we may do it. If we fail, the consequences will be the same for all. Death."

Jantor scowled at Blade. "In your case, of course, the consequences may come a bit sooner than for the rest of us."

Blade shrugged his great shoulders. There was no way out of it, just as there was no way of avoiding a similar scene with Sybelline. That would come soon enough. He was indeed in the middle.

"What do you want of me, Jantor?"

Again Jantor made the fylfot sign on his shiny head and regarded Blade with narrowed eyes. He said, "I have not asked you whence you came or why you came. I do not really care. It is enough that you are here. But I saw you fight and kill and so I judge you the match of any five Gnomen. That is why I guard you with twenty, with another fifty in reserve. I think you can lead men, even stupid Gnomen. But not even that is of prime importance. What is important is that you may be able to produce children. Those children should be at least half again as intelligent as the average Gnoman now alive, though I pride myself that my children will also be intelligent. So between us, Blade, as the only two men with power to reproduce, we can found a better race."

Blade, as was his habit in DX to avoid friction when it was pointless, appeared to go along. No sense in telling Jantor that he, Blade, was not going to be around.

So he nodded and frowned and said, "That will take a long time."

"I know." Jantor leaned forward. "And I do not intend to wait that long. I have figured something out, Blade. We Gnomen are not flesh-and-blood machines as are the Morphi." Jantor grinned. "We are not so beautiful or so clever or perfect. But we have no power studs behind our ears and our life essence cannot be turned off by switching a lever."

And Jantor fingered his own mutant stub behind his ear. He grinned again. "Only Sybelline and I have these, and it is of no matter. We gain by it, not lose. Our power cannot be shut off and still we are half as smart as the Morphi and twice as smart as the Gnomen."

Blade agreed. "I can see why you are king."

"Yes. Sybelline and I rule because we are the only two capable of it. But neither of us has the brain or the power that you have, Blade. You are far more intelligent than the two of us. I would be a fool not to admit it, and I am not a fool."

Jantor was now talking freely and Blade thought it time to heed Lord L's admonition and ask a key question.

"The power source of the Morphi," he said. "If you could show me that, Jantor, and I can understand the workings of it, it could mean great things." A thought struck Blade and he began to improvise. "For instance, Jantor—if *I can* manipulate the power source, and *I can* restore the sleepers to life, then they will

be the slaves and you the masters. Do you not see it? As long as you and your people control the power source, the Morphi must do as they are bidden or you simply turn off the power and put them to sleep again. Think, Jantor. There need be no war. You Gnomes will simply move up out of the sewers and take over. All that you have dreamed of will come true."

Jantor was watching him with an odd expression. He said, "And what of the orbfolk, the Moon people? they see and know everything."

Blade was skeptical. "Everything?"

Jantor nodded. "They knew the instant you appeared. They followed every move you made—as we Gnomes did, for that matter. My scouts tracked you through the city step by step—saw everything you did, then reported back to me and to Sybelline."

Blade believed him. It explained why they had been so alert, why they had been waiting for him when he entered the sewers.

Now he gave grudging acknowledgement. "They are stealthy. I am trained in such matters and I did not suspect—not until the sewer lid was dropped."

"That fool," said Jantor, "is now in the five-mile pits."

Blade went back to his argument. Lord Leighton was right. If this mission was to be fruitful at all it could only be in the discovery of the power source. He was sure that it must be broadcast through air space, beamed in the manner of radio or television waves. If he could ferret out that secret and understand it and get it back to Home Dimension, then England would have a secret that no other nation possessed. It would, thought Blade, justify the expense and the pain and the terror of all the expeditions into Dimension X. Blade decided that as long as there was any hope of finding the power source, he would not ask Lord L to abort the mission.

"So what," said Blade, "if the orbfolk know what we do? What can they do? They cannot shut off our power. You said this yourself. And we can be clever. We will show them that we are no threat to them. We will ask for peace, to be let alone. It may well be that they will leave us alone. We can even agree to worship them as gods. What matter as long as you do not really believe it?"

Jantor nodded slowly. "You make it sound easy, Blade, and I know that it will not be. You may be right about the orbfolk. They are patient and they plan for eternity, and they will not move against us at first, maybe never. We could agree to worship them, as you say, and no harm done there." He was silent for a moment, said, "To have the Morphi city up there... to have them as our slaves... would be a Gnome dream come true."

Suddenly Jantor looked glum. "No! I am a fool to listen to you. It is too soon to move. There are too many details, too much to be done. My people are not ready for that life yet, and how do we know that the Morphi would cooperate? There might be struggle and rebellion—all would end in disaster. The Morphi might choose to die, or to sleep again, rather than be slaves to us."

Blade leaned in his chair and pointed a finger at Jantor. "They will not. I assure you of that. As long as we control the power source they will obey. I swear it to you, Jantor. Listen to me. Believe me. Given a choice between life and the sleeping death, given only that choice and no other, the Morphi will choose life. I will stake my own life on it. All we need do is to make certain that we control the power source. I can see to that.

"Now, Jantor, think well. Now is the time to act. *Now!* Not a generation from now. Tell me of this power source. Take me to it. Let me study it and make my decision."

Jantor shook his head and once more made the fylfot sign on his head. "You have all but convinced me, Blade. I think you have something of the power in you. But I cannot help you in this. I do not know the source of the power."

Blade looked blankly at him. "You do not know? You are king—intelligent, ruler of the Gnomen—and you do not know?"

Jantor scowled. "Do not make me sound as stupid as my people, Blade. No Gnomans have this information. I doubt that many of the Morphi themselves knew where the power came from. There is only one person who knows."

Blade guessed. "Sybelline?"

"Yes. Sybelline. She alone. I do not know how she knows but she does. Once I doubted, back when I first became king and began to plan, but she convinced me. She disappeared and I crept up to a kiosk to watch the city streets. At a time she had promised, the sleepers came alive again. They wakened and moved, and for an instant all was as it had been before—for just an instant. Then they slept again. She knows. She keeps the secret in her head."

After a moment Jantor added, "Why do you think I have not killed Sybelline before this?"

Blade could see the labyrinth of intrigue before him. He had no choice but to enter.

"Perhaps," he said, "I can prevail on Sybelline to show me the power source. It is worth trying. Is she friendly to me?"

Jantor guffawed and slapped his belly. "She is friendly indeed. She desires you, Blade, even though she is long past childbearing. And more than that she will plot with you against me. She will whisper to you—in bed if she can get you there—that you and she can rule better than Jantor."

Blade did not answer. What was there to say? Jantor was right. Norn had already hinted at trouble to come.

Jantor might have been reading his mind. "Sybelline will soon make overtures to you, Blade. You will pretend to fall in with her. You will seek the location of the power source. You will plot against me in everything but deed. You will agree to whatever she suggests, but you will take no action."

Blade was curious. "You trust me so far, Jantor?"

"I trust you not at all, Blade, but I have spies also. And I have a thousand good men with spear bars while Sybelline cannot muster fifty. If you betray me, Blade, it will be bloody war and I will win. All my plans will be smashed and the Gnomen may become a dying race, but you and Sybelline will die first. It is a simple choice, Blade. Play me false and suffer. Be loyal and serve me and, in time, rule with me. You are much younger than I am. Would it not be a comfort in your old age to rule and to look upon the thousands of your children and grandchildren?"

Blade would have spoken again, but Jantor waved him silent. "Go now. Keep me informed through the little one, Alixe. Use her well, Blade, and keep her carefully. She is very dear to me."

"And a spy to you," said Blade as he left.

He heard Jantor laugh.

## CHAPTER 8

It was the habit of Sybelline, now and again, to sleep with her son Wilf. He had been fathered by a Gnomon long ago—she had long since forgotten the man's name—and so was only one-quarter Morphi. This showed only in his features, which were regular and well formed, and he had a full head of hair. Otherwise his body was that of a Gnomon, squat, powerful and bowlegged. Wilf was not as intelligent as Sybelline would have liked, nor was he much of a bed partner, but bed was the one place they could talk without danger of being overheard. Sybelline well knew that Jantor had spies planted among her bodyguard. When she slept with these young Gnomen, as she had with most of them, she was careful to guard her tongue.

Wilf, having tried dutifully to satisfy his mother, was at the moment getting dressed in the plastic garments on which his mother insisted. She had always detested the Gnomen half of her, and did everything she could to forget it. Her apartment was filled with furniture and hangings looted from the city above and her cupboards were stocked with Morphi food. She preferred Morphi liquids to good Gnomon water. Left to herself and in her own province, she was in all things more Morphi than Gnomon. Only when she must deal with the creature Jantor, who possessed brute power along with a desire to see her dead, did Sybelline smile and don a Gnomon robe and a mask of hypocrisy. It had not been easy but she had managed. For she, and she alone, knew the secret of the power.

Sybelline, naked on the comfortable bed taken from a Morphi apartment, watched as Wilf finished dressing. He had not satisfied her, he seldom did, and she knew that he longed to be gone. Wilf puzzled her at times. She had taught herself to read Morphi and had studied their books. No Gnomon, even Jantor himself, could decipher the strange right to left, top to bottom, dot and squiggle script of the Morphi.

Sybelline believed Wilf to be asexual. He did not really care for copulation in any fashion. Neither the Gnomon nor the Morphi had any concept of incest or homosexuality, so it did not figure in her thoughts. Wilf was a brooder, a loner—sullen and introspective. He never came to see her unless she sent for him. Now, thinking his duty discharged, he longed to get away.

Sybelline patted the bed beside her. She pulled a cover over her nakedness. "Come and talk a bit, Wilf."

Wilf frowned and looked sulky. "About what, Sybel? I have things to do."

She frowned in her turn. "We all have things to do. And sooner than you think. Now come and talk to me, or listen while I talk. It is important."

Wilf scowled but did as he was told. "And dangerous," he said as he sat beside her on the bed. "You do not have to tell me. You are still plotting against Jantor. You still have that crazy dream of eliminating Jantor and taking over the city up there, of awakening the sleepers and ruling alone. When will you learn, Sybel? It cannot be done. Jantor is too cunning and too strong. You are not deceiving him. He has a thousand spear bars; you have fifty men who are not even trained to use spear bars and whom you use mostly for bedmates. I tell you, Mother, you are going to get us all killed or put in the five-mile pits."

Only when he was distressed and anxious did Wilf call her Mother. She patted his cheek to calm him.

"In the past that may have been true," she confessed. "That is why I have waited and waited. But now it is different. You have heard of the man Blade?"

Wilf nodded. "I caught a glimpse of him as he was being escorted to his quarters. He is strange looking. I cannot imagine where he came from. He looks powerful and dangerous, and it is said that he can make children. But what is all that to us?"

Wilf, like all Gnomen except Jantor, was sterile.

"It is everything to us," said Sybelline. It was the Gnomen in Wilf that made him so stupid. She must explain everything to him.

"I have sent Norn to him," she continued. "When the time is right I will have him brought to me. I think, with this Blade on my side, I can defeat Jantor."

Wilf was silent. He was thinking of the momentary glimpse he had caught of the man Blade. An odd thing had happened to Wilf. He had hardly dared to look at Blade. There had been something thrilling about that muscled, bearded man and something terrible. Wilf, now that he thought of it again, admitted to himself that such a man was capable of anything. He could serve such a man and be happy doing it. But it would never come to anything. His mother was a dreamer.

To humor her he said, "How do you propose to get him on your side? He did not look like a fool. He will know where the strength lies. If he takes sides it will be with Jantor. And he is a prisoner, not a free man. Jantor spares him only so that he can make children."

Sybelline patted his cheek again, rather absently. He was really not much use to her. Except in one thing—she was sure she could trust him.

She gave him a little push. "Go then. I know you long to be away from me. But promise me this—when the time comes to face Jantor, you will be loyal."

Wilf promised, and left her. An easy enough promise, he thought. Sybelline would go on plotting and planning and nothing would ever come of it. He wondered if she would ever die, as the Gnomen died? She had told him that the Morphi—and she was half-Morphi—never died, never aged, that they changed their blood once a month and ate certain chemicals which kept them always young and beautiful.

Other things she had told him, things she had read in the Morphi books. The population was stringently controlled. When it reached a certain figure a lottery was held and all the adult Morphi drew numbers. Those with storage numbers were depowered and stacked in warehouses. They were sprayed with a rubbery plastic that formed a capsule and so preserved them against a time when they might be wanted. Wilf had pondered that a long time. He had seen death, real death, among the Gnomen, and he could not decide which was better—to die and rot, or to be stored in a warehouse.

Wilf went to his own apartment and once more attacked the task he had set himself—to learn to read Morphi. He had stolen the books from his mother.

After Wilf had gone Sybelline got up and looked at herself in a full-length mirror. If only her hair had not turned white. The cursed Gnomen blood. Even her pubic hair was grizzled.

But for the white hair, she could have passed for a young woman. There was no fat on her and her legs were long and still taut-muscled. Her breasts did not sag and her waist was trim and small. She had the beautiful Morphi features and wide-set eyes. And much more than half, she thought now, of Morphi brain. Who better than she to rule the sleepers when they came awake? Certainly not Jantor, that savage Gnomon, though she knew he cherished the same dream.

Sybelline bathed, put on a robe and sent for Norn. When the girl entered Sybelline was at her mirror, working carefully on her face. She ignored the girl for a moment while watching her carefully in the mirror. Norn was a problem she had not foreseen.

Norn waited patiently, her eyes downcast. She had just come from visiting Blade; she was happy and

fulfilled.

Sybelline sensed all this—Norn exuded it—and she frowned in the mirror. She had not intended this. She meant to have Blade for herself.

When at last she spoke to Norn her tone was cold. "You have been with Blade?"

The girl nodded. "You know that, mistress. You sent me."

Sybelline narrowed her green eyes. "I do know that, you little fool. But what of him? How is it with him? What does he say and do? How does he feel about the offer I made? Will he come to me when I send for him? I send you to spy and bring me back answers, Norn, not just to bed him."

Norn, afraid of Sybelline, tried not to show it. She well knew how cruel and vicious the older woman could be. More so than Jantor.

She did her best to placate the woman. "He hears me and he understands. He will come to you when and if he can, and he will listen to your plans. He does not promise anything. He was taken to see Jantor and was gone a long time. I do not know of what they spoke, but the child Alixe returned with Blade. Jantor gave her to him. I do not think Blade wants her, for he prefers me, but he is a captive and must do as he is told and so Alixe remains. I do not think he beds her."

Sybelline brushed her flowing white tresses into a Psyche knot and caught them with a colorful plastic ribbon. "Alixe, eh? The daughter that Jantor claims and beds?"

Norn nodded. "The same."

"Hmmm... and you say he gave her to Blade?"

"So Blade told me. It did not make him happy."

"Jantor is cunning," said Sybelline. "He sends Alixe to Blade to amuse him and also to spy."

"I thought that," said Norn. "Just as you sent me to spy. But with me it is different. I love the man Blade. I want only him. I would be his woman."

Sybelline said nothing to that, only smiled at herself in the mirror. When Norn had served her purpose—but that could wait.

"I have observed something else," said Norn.

Sybelline swerved on her stool. "Well? Am I to beg for this information?"

"The child Alixe is a troublemaker," said Norn. "I have watched her closely and when I could I spoke to her. I do not have much time with Blade, as you know, for all the other women are jealous and the line is long, but I have observed. Alixe is a stupid child, a stubborn child. She makes trouble for the pure joy of making it. I think this is so, for I cannot believe that Jantor told her to act so."

Sybelline did not betray her interest. A vague, half-formed idea crept into her mind. She knew how much Jantor cared for his little Alixe, how he would bed no other but she, and what a wrench it must have been to deliver her to Blade. Of course Jantor meant to take her back as soon as he could. But meanwhile—

Was there any way the child-woman Alixe could be used?

"Continue," she commanded Norn. "Tell me, how does Alixe act? How does she make trouble?"

"The man Blade has a servant," explained Norn. "He is called Sart. He is really a slave, for the man Blade defeated him in battle and spared his life, but the man Blade does not call him slave and—"

"I know all that," said Sybelline. "Get to the important matter."

"Blade will have nothing to do with her, will not bed her. I do not understand this but it is so."

"That is nothing remarkable," said Sybelline in scorn. "After he has bedded ten to fifteen Gnomes a day, his is fatigued."

"Perhaps that is it. But the child Alixe is unhappy. She is not really a child and has bedded her father since she was ten years. But Blade ignores her. She turns to the slave Sart and teases him. She touches him and offers herself and displays her body. The slave, Sart, is terrified."

Sybelline smiled. "I do not blame him. If he touches Jantor's child and bedmate he will be sent to the pits. But what of Blade in all this?"

Norn shook her head. "I do not think the man Blade really understands what is happening. He is strange in many ways I do not understand. And he is busy, of course. There is always a line of women to be serviced."

"Then Blade did not tell you this?"

"No. I went to wash, for Blade insists on it now, and I saw Alixe taunting the poor slave."

Sybelline's interest was growing with every word. "Taunting him—how? Exactly?"

Norn's tone was matter of fact. She was a Gnome female, albeit a beautiful one, and she regarded sex much as she did food and drink.

She explained: "Alixe was making Sart kneel before her, as a slave should, and she was making him kiss her parts. I was not seen for a moment, so I know it was not for my benefit. I saw Sart stop groveling and reach for her and she struck him in the face and laughed. She told him that if he touched her she would tell Jantor."

Sybelline was thoughtful. "And Blade suspects nothing of this?"

Norn shrugged. "I do not think so. He does not think as we do."

"I know that also," said Sybelline. "That is why I need him. I think he has more brain power than the Morphi, even perhaps as much as the Selenes, and I know he is a warrior. He would probably not notice such a trifle as Sart being plagued by Alixe. I doubt that it is important."

Norn looked doubtful. Association with Sybelline had made her more intelligent than most Gnome girls. Now she said, "It might cause trouble before you are ready for it, mistress."

But Sybelline's thoughts were elsewhere. She dismissed the girl and thought no more of the slave and Alixe. When she was alone, she began to dress carefully in Morphi clothing. She must go up into the city—alone and unseen, to face her own masters.

## CHAPTER 9

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There was no way in which Blade could have foreseen the disaster. True that he was not at his peak either physically or mentally, due to the strain of excessive copulation, but even at the height of his powers he could not have guessed that Alixe, beneath her childish exterior, was sexually precocious



beyond anything he could understand. The situation developed slowly, with Blade unaware of the emerging pattern.

During his brief periods of rest, he sought to get in touch with Lord Leighton and Home Dimension by means of the crystal implanted in his brain. He did not always succeed in making contact. When he did, the message came back: *Will abort mission if you demand. But unless in immediate peril insist you continue try to discover source of power. Suggest possible magnetic field-beams or rays of some sort. Final decision your discretion. L.*

That was pretty much that. He bided his time. He knew that the child Alixe spied on him and reported to Jantor, as Norn spied and reported to Sybelline. He sensed the crunch approaching and knew that he must take sides. Jantor had made his offer and had minced no words. Sybelline still did not contact him but through Norn, and the last word had been to wait. When Sybelline was ready, she would let him know.

Alixé tried to invade his bed and Blade constantly repulsed her. Her tantrums should have warned him, but he did not see. When he refused Alixe, she at times screamed and rolled on the floor and clawed and even threatened him.

"I will tell Jantor that you misuse me," she screamed. "I will have you sent to the five-mile pits."

"Do as you wish," he answered. "You are but a babe and I will have nothing to do with you. In any case I am exhausted. You know the task I have, and when I am finished for the day I wish nothing but rest. Continue to torment me, Alixe, and I will send you back to your father."

Alixé squatted at the foot of his bed and made faces at him. He could not believe that this was the same quiet child who had brought him the chair in Jantor's chambers.

"You are a liar," she told him. "You do not speak to Norn so, and she is but a little older than I am. As for being a babe, do you not know, are you such a fool, that you do not understand—I have bedded my father for the past two years!"

Nothing he encountered in Dimension X ever shocked Blade, nor did this information, but it was his first inkling that among the Gnomen there was no such thing as incest. Logically, when he had time to examine it, it made sense. Jantor, after all, had fathered *all* the Gnomen children now alive.

He let it pass without thought. "I care nothing for that," he told her coldly. "Stay or go, as you wish. But if you stay you will obey me. Now I have had enough of you. Go and amuse yourself while I sleep."

Blade awoke to find Alixe astride him, trying to arouse him. He cuffed her away, not gently, and she began to berate him.

Blade had had it. He seized her and laid her over his knee and began smacking her hard little buttocks with his open hand. He meant to hurt and he did. Alixe screamed at the top of her voice, interspersing the screams with foul oaths. He had never heard such filth pour from a child's mouth. He laid on all the harder.

Sart came rushing in. He pleaded with Blade.

"You risk our lives, master. She is Jantor's child and favorite. When you strike her, you strike Jantor. Please, master, I beg you. No more. It is sure to get back to Jantor and—"

One of the Gnomen women was waiting just outside the door. She had been waiting a long time, first in a long line, and she had grown impatient. When she heard the screams she could not control her curiosity and stepped through the hangings to see her herself.

When Blade saw her, he lost his temper. He released the screaming Alixe and pointed at the woman. "OUT!"

The woman scuttled for safety. Seconds later she told the other Gnomen females what she had seen and it passed down the line.

Alixé sought the safety of a corner and sulked, rubbing her bottom. Blade glowered at her. Sart trembled and sweated. He would have fallen to his knees except that Blade hated that, and at the moment he feared Blade even more than Jantor.

Fury and frustration burned in Blade. He dressed rapidly and spoke curtly to Sart. Pointing to Alixe, now quiet and watching with a cat-cunning smile, Blade said, "I am going out for a time. Take that little devil in charge while I am gone. If she causes trouble, you have my permission to beat her."

Sart stared at him. "Going out, master? You cannot. It is forbidden."

Blade used some Home Dimension words that Sart could not comprehend. "Forbidden or not," Blade insisted, "I go. I will try to see Jantor." He pointed to Alixe. "You are a curse and I can endure you no longer."

She made a face at him.

When Blade stepped outside his apartment, there was a ripple of sound from the waiting line of women. He regarded them distastefully. How he loathed women—all women.

There was but a single entrance to his apartment. The tunnel outside it had a dead end and at the other end was a subchief with a guard of twenty Gnomen armed with the spear bars. Blade strode toward them. The tunnel was narrow, not more than five feet across, and as Blade approached the subchief moved to block it. He leveled his bar at Blade, point first. Behind him his men moved into position, all with their cruel bars at the ready.

The subchief was taken by surprise. He had his orders concerning Blade, he knew how precious this big stranger was because he carried viable seed, and he knew that if anything happened to Blade that he, the subchief, must answer to Jantor. Until now Blade had caused no trouble. The subchief had scarcely seen him. His main task was to keep the women in order and see that there was no cheating in the line.

The subchief thrust his spear bar to within an inch of Blade's chest. "You cannot pass. It is forbidden."

Blade halted and scowled. He put his hands on his hips and stared at the man. "Take me to see Jantor. At once!"

The Gnoman shook his head. "That also is forbidden. You cannot go to Jantor when it pleases you. Jantor is king. Jantor will send for you when it pleases him."

Blade gazed past the man at the guard. Twenty of them. "You have plenty of men to guard me," he said. "You can spare one. Send him to Jantor. Tell him I must see him. Either I go to him or he comes to me."

The Gnoman, like all Gnomen except Jantor, had a low level of intelligence. He scratched the hair on his chest, made the sign of the fylfot on his bald head, and regarded Blade with dull eyes.

Blade put everything to the test. He pushed the man's spear bar aside with disdain and took a step forward. "You dare not kill me without orders from Jantor. You know that. Or perhaps you do not fear the five-mile pits?"

A moment of silence. For an instant Blade thought he had gone too far, that the man would impale him on the bar. Then the Gnomon lowered his weapon.

"I will send a man. But take another step and I will have you killed and face the penalty. You understand this?"

Blade smiled. He was already beginning to cool down. "I understand that. But I would ask a favor. I am sick of my apartment and sick of women—"

One of the guards laughed and said: "I wish I might share that sickness."

The subchief frowned and there was silence in the ranks. He turned to Blade again. "I am sorry for that, but I cannot help you."

Blade turned on his charm. "You could permit me to stroll a bit, to stretch my legs and free my brain, to cleanse my nostrils of the stench of women." He pointed to the main sewer just beyond the guard station. "A few paces up and down, what could it matter? And I have Jantor's ear, as you know. I could speak well of you, or ill."

Still the subchief hesitated. Blade cajoled. "Even if you send a man to Jantor you still have twenty, counting yourself. Ten before and ten behind. What can I do? How could I escape or cause you trouble even if I had a mind?"

The subchief pondered this for what seemed to Blade an eternity. This Gnomon, like all the ordinary ones, thought in slow motion. But at last the man nodded. "All right. A few paces up and down, no more."

Blade thanked him and added, "I will see that Jantor hears of your kindness."

Torches flared up and down the main sewer. The tunnel itself was very like the one into which Blade had first dropped. As he walked slowly up and down—he managed nearly a hundred yards before he was prodded back—he noticed one of the huge sewer lids overhead. There would be a kiosk up there, he supposed, and leaning against a nearby wall was a ladder. As he strolled past it a second time he examined it carefully. It would just reach the sewer lid. This must be one of the sally ports by which Jantor's men left the sewers and invaded the city above. Blade remembered the surprise he had felt when Jantor informed him that he had been watched from the beginning. How stealthy they were, these Gnomes, when it suited their purpose. But for that single clanging lid he might still be ignorant of their existence.

He paced the permitted distance a dozen times before the messenger returned, breathless from running. Blade watched as the man spoke to the subchief. They were again at the entrance to the tunnel leading back to Blade's apartment. The subchief came to Blade.

"Jantor has sent his answer. He cannot see you now. He is displeased that you sent to him. But he believes you that it is important and he will come to see you later. At no fixed time, but when he chooses. He warns you not to repeat this thing. He sends his love and desire to Alixe and longs to see her soon. That is all. You are to return to your apartment at once."

Blade, having worked off his anger, felt that he had won a small victory, unimportant as it was. He had lost his head and his temper, but nothing had had come of it. He was content. He smiled at the subchief and thanked him and once again promised that Jantor would hear good things of him.

As he made his way down the tunnel, past the waiting line of women, he could hear them whispering among themselves. None would meet his eye. They were a mangy lot, dirty and stupid, and he shivered a bit with apprehension. He could not keep up the stud game much longer. If only Norn would bring him

word that Sybelline was ready to see him, and if only he could figure out a way to meet the white-haired woman. He was near the breaking point and something must be done. He could not straddle the fence forever. He must soon commit himself, to either Jantor or Sybelline, and if all he heard was true, only Sybelline knew the secret of the power.

When he entered the apartment there was no sign of Sart or the child Alixe. Child? Blade scowled. Vixen. A bitch of tender years.

There were no sounds in the apartment. He went straight to his bedroom and undressed. Might as well get on with his duties, he thought. Sart was probably sleeping or busy with his household duties. Alixe was no doubt sulking in her own chamber. There were nine rooms in the apartment, but Blade, apart from the bath, bedroom, and the eating room, had paid them little attention. He had never been in Sart's room; beyond that lay several other chambers he had not investigated.

When he was ready he went to the door and called to the single guard who monitored the line. "Send the next one in."

He serviced three of the women, taking a brief respite between them, and knew he was through for the day. He was sure that he would never achieve another erection. He spoke to the guard. The women were sent away grumbling.

Blade called for Sart. He wanted food, a bath and sleep—long and blessed sleep.

Sart did not answer after repeated calls. Blade went looking for his man. He was not in the kitchen nor the bathroom; not in his sleeping chamber. Blade stroked his beard, puzzled. The man had to be here. There was no way he could get past the guards or pass through the only entrance without Blade knowing.

He took a torch from a wall sconce and went back along a dark corridor to the rooms he had not yet explored. With the torch flaring before him, he stalked through the gloom to the rearmost chamber.

"Sart?" he called.

From a dark corner came a whimpering sound. Blade thrust the torch in that direction. Sart was on his knees, cowering and groveling, covered with sweat and blood. On his shiny bald head were bloody streaks where he had made the fylfot sign. Blade came to stand beside him. His temper had grown short again.

"What is it now, fool? Get up. Why did you not answer my call?"

Sart whimpered and would not look at Blade. Blade nudged the Gnomon with his foot. "Get up, I said. What is it? What's wrong?"

Sart groveled, moved obscenely on his knees and tried to embrace Blade's legs. The great brute was crying. "Save me, master. Save me. I did not mean to do it. I swear I did not. But she taunted me. She would not leave me alone. I—"

Blade's brain went cold. He pushed Sart away from him, held the torch high and swept it about the chamber. Alixe was in a corner, broken and crumpled, her head twisted, her childish breasts bitten and bloody. Her slim thighs were covered with blood.

Blade went to stand beside her. He knelt and held the torch close. Her features were pulped and her mouth gaped toothlessly. Sart must have struck her a terrible blow with his fist. Blade made sure that she was dead and then turned to Sart.

The man wriggled toward Blade on his knees and began to beat his forehead against the sandy floor.

He trembled, sobbing and crying.

"I did it, master. I cannot remember much now, but I did it. She taunted me and I begged her to stop but she would not. When at last I made to take her, she laughed and struck me and said she would tell Jantor and have me sent to the pits for daring to touch her."

Blade had seen worse things in Dimension X, but not much worse. He felt ill. He kicked Sart away from him and said, "Get on your feet. Stop crying. And be quiet. I must have time to think."

He did not look at Alixe again. Poor stupid, spoiled little bitch. She had asked for it, no doubt of that, but none of that mattered now.

Blade was responsible for his slave. That was Gnomen law. He thought fast. As precious as he was to the Gnomen, he did not believe that it would counterbalance Jantor's first wild rage when he found out what had happened to his daughter. He was likely to have Blade slain on the spot or sent to the pits. As for Sart, that miserable creature was doomed beyond all saving.

Sart lumbered to his feet. He watched Blade, cringing and continually making the sign of the fylfot on his bald head, but now there was a crafty gleam in his reddish brown eyes. Suddenly Blade realized what was happening. Sart was thinking.

Gnomen did not weigh or consider words or ideas. A rare thought, when it came, was blurted out.

Sart said, "You must help me, master. Save me. Else I will swear that you did this thing."

Blade struck him, a terrible blow that knocked Sart sprawling across the chamber. He made no effort to rise but spat out teeth and looked up at Blade.

"I will, master. Blows will not change it. You must kill me or help me, or I will swear to Jantor that you killed his Alixe. He will believe me, for you have been seen quarreling with her. Remember the woman who entered unbidden and saw you striking her?"

Blade regarded him calmly, chin in hand. He was back in control of himself now. There was truth in what the man said. He had quarreled with Alixe and he had struck her; the impatient Gnomen woman had been a witness. Whether she would remember or not, or if her story ever reached Jantor's ears did not much matter now. The die was cast and the crunch was upon him.

Jantor was coming. He had sent word to that effect. Soon or late made no difference. Jantor was coming and he would expect to see his Alixe. Whether or not Sart's story was believed made no real difference. There was the Gnomen law—Blade was responsible for his slave's act.

Blade looked at Sart with distaste. He must use the slave as best he could, for what he had in mind could not be done alone. This was going to take all his skill and cunning and strength.

He kept his voice as calm and friendly as possible. He told Sart to get up. When the man shambled to his feet, looking distrustful, Blade continued in the same calm tone.

"You are right in one thing, Sart. I am in as much trouble as you are so something must be done. Are you man enough to fight for your life?"

Sart nodded. "I will fight, master, but how? We have no bars. We are prisoners. The guard outnumber us many to one. How can we fight?"

"Come," ordered Blade. "We will speak elsewhere. I do not like this place."

He lighted the way out of the chamber. He saw Sart glance once at the slight body in the corner and

again make the sign of the fylfot. Blade led the way to Sart's chamber, a small barren room with only a sleeping pad. He thrust the torch into an empty sconce.

"From this point on," said Blade, "we will forget what you have done. No word of it will be spoken. Do you understand that?"

Blade meant it. Recrimination or squeamishness was a luxury one could not afford in Dimension X.

Sart mumbled that he understood, but his eyes shifted and he did not look Blade in the face. He was thinking again and Blade left him to it.

"Time is important," Blade explained. "Jantor is coming to see me."

Sart trembled and nearly went to his knees again. "Jantor—here, master? When?"

"I do not know that. Late or early. Let us hope it is late. We must not be here when he comes."

Sart nodded. That he understood well enough. "But how, master? How can we escape? There is but one way out and twenty guards. They have arms and we have none. It is certain death."

Blade laughed at him. "It is certain death if we stay, for me, at least, and certainly either death or the pits for you. Do you think, Sart, that even if Jantor believes your lie that he will spare you? Think again, man! You are long overdue in the pits. Only the fact that I took you for slave saved you. Can you remember that far back?"

Sart let out a bubbling moan. "Not the five mile pits, master. I beg you kill me here and now. With blows or strangle me, anything, but I cannot go to the pits"

Blade smiled cruelly. "Yes. You would like me to kill you, and you would gain by it. But I would lose. I would then face Jantor alone. Who knows what he would believe? And I need you. You are going to fight for your life, Sart, as I must fight for mine. If you do not, if you fail me, then I will kill you."

Blade watched Sart's face, saw the small intelligence at work, waited patiently while the slave figured it out. At last he saw submission and resignation. Blade nodded. From now on Sart was only an extension of Blade and, out of fear and hope, would do as he was told.

"But how?" Sart asked again. "If I had a spear bar—"

"You will get one," said Blade grimly, "as I must, from the guards. Now listen well to me. You will approach them first, for you are a Gnoman and they will not be so suspicious..."

## CHAPTER 10

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Sybelline moved the mirror in her chamber and stepped into a narrow passage behind it. She readjusted the mirror and began to follow the passage on an upward slope. After a time she climbed a circular iron stair, removing a small iron lid, similar to a manhole cover in Home Dimension, and emerged in the basement of an upper-world apartment building. She paid no attention to the maintenance sleepers scattered about in their quasi-death. She had seen them a thousand times.

The service elevator, crammed with dustbins and a sweeping sleeper, was stalled between floors. Sybelline climbed six flights of stairs and let herself into a large, well-furnished apartment. She took a deep breath and sighed. This was her rightful place, here in Morphi luxury with fine clothes, servants, jewels and all the handsome men she wanted. Here she belonged.

She went to a window and stood looking out over the endless city. The silence hung like a pall; only her own movement disturbed it. She stood there for a long time gazing out at the pallid light, at the twilight world, at the sleepers and their plastic city. She had hated the Morphi all her life and still hated them. They had condemned her to the sewers because her mother had been raped by a Gnomon. How sweet it would be to repower them and then to rule them with an iron hand, to use them, to condemn some of them to the sewers and the five mile pits. It might be done. It could be done. But not yet. The Selenes, the orbfolk, were *her* masters. First that yoke must be broken. The man Blade might help her in that when the time was ripe.

She went to a closet and wheeled out a machine that much resembled a television set, but it had no wiring connections. She put it in the middle of the room. Next she found a long metal pole and joined it in telescopic sections. To the end of this, she attached a small mirror. She thrust the mirror end of the pole out of the window into a beam of light from the Moon and snapped the other end of the pole into a slot on the machine. She pressed a button; a needle-thin antenna rose from the machine. On its end was a ball mike. She watched the plastic screen of the machine. Nothing.

Sybelline twisted the mirror end of the pole, adjusting it until the screen began to glow. The Selenes used their powerful searchlights for messages as well as for illumination. She stood close to the screen and the ball microphone.

The face of Onta appeared. He was a bearded, placid-looking man with a high forehead, curly gray hair and narrow eyes. Like all Selenes, his head was much too big for his body and his neck accordingly thick to support it. His voice was gruff, flat and toneless, though this was probably due to the machine. She had never seen Onta in the flesh, nor any of the Selenes.

"Reverse," said Onta.

Sybelline pressed a button. Now the machine was picking up her image and transmitting it along the light waves to the Moon.

"What of the stranger?" Onta stared at her from the screen.

Sybelline was most careful. Onta could read facial expressions as easily as she read Morphi script.

"I know little of him," she said. "I have sent Norn to him to spy and sound him out, and I think I can control him when the time comes. But in the meantime Jantor has him captive and he is hard at work making babies."

Onta stared at her. "That does not suit our purpose. We wish the Gnomon race to die out. If this stranger is fertile and produces children, he will set our planning back many years. Even worse if he makes intelligent children. How is he called, this one?"

"Blade. Just that. I have had no chance to speak with him and have only seen him once. He is a killer. He killed two of the Gnomon that day. Jantor was there and I had no opportunity to learn more. Why do you not invade, Onta, as you have been promising for so long? Then you could question the man Blade to your heart's content. I grow weary of waiting. You make promises and do not keep them and—"

Onta held up a hand. The look in his eye silenced her. Sybelline caught herself and composed her features. She was still afraid of Onta and the Selenes. Rebellion was in her heart, but it was not yet time and he must not guess it. But when she had the man Blade on her side it would be different. She promised herself that.

Onta was watching her. He was head of the Department of Brain Secrets for the Selenes, and she knew how clever and ruthless he was.

"I will tell you one thing," said Onta, "and you had better listen and understand. Nothing must happen to this stranger Blade. Our scientists want him for study. This is of utmost importance. It takes precedence over everything. You understand?"

Sybelline kept her tone meek and calm. "I understand, Onta. I will see to it. What I do not understand is why you keep delaying the invasion. Are your promises so worthless? I have done my share, carried out my tasks, and for this I was to be made Queen of the Morphi when they are repowered. How much longer must I wait?"

Onta never smiled. Now his thin lips did move in a quirking motion. "You must learn patience, Sybelline, as we Selenes know it. We plan a thousand years ahead while you plan for a day. We will keep our promise when we are ready to keep it."

He read her face—she could not totally disguise her rage—and added, "But I can give you some comfort. The time grows near. The time when we will have need of the Morphi power. When that time comes you will be informed, and if you carry out your duties all our promises will be kept. Until that time nothing you say or think will change anything. Adjust yourself to that. Now, to more important business. Listen well and then see to it."

"You must get control of this man Blade. Get him away from Jantor. Stop him making children. Above all do not harm him until our scientists have examined him. I know, Sybelline, that you plot against Jantor, and I suspect that you plot against me. I advise you to carry out only the first plot—against Jantor. At once. I suggest open war."

Sybelline sneered at the machine. "With fifty men? And they more accustomed to bed than to spear bars? Jantor would be sure to win. I would lose everything."

Onta's tones were cold. "That is your affair. You are half Morphi and have the intelligence of whole Morphi blood. If you cannot outwit and defeat a Gnomon of the sewers then you deserve to lose."

Sybelline nearly lost her temper. "There are times when intelligence cannot stand up to brute force. If you would only send a small party to help me."

"No," said Onta, "not yet. We are not yet ready. You must handle it yourself. Farewell, Sybelline. Keep in touch at the regular times. And remember, above all things it is important that this stranger Blade not be harmed. Our top scientists have some very interesting theories about him, some of which I do not believe in, but they must have their chance to examine him. Keep it in mind. Goodbye."

His image faded from the screen. Sybelline, raging within, wheeled the machine back into the closet and stored away the mirror and telescopic shaft. She was trembling with frustration. Always the same. Promises that were never kept. While she grew old and wasted her life in the sewers.

She went into the kitchen and had a drink of the Morphi sweet, canned liquid. She chose a can with a cryptic symbol stamped on it. It meant intoxicant, but Sybelline did not care. She very seldom drank the stuff, but what better time than now. She would not go back to the sewers immediately. She would stay up here in the Morphi world, surrounded by the sleepers, drink and let her fantasies take over. For a little time, at least, she would be Queen. And she knew about the pills, to be found in most medicine cabinets, that would clear her head and relieve her sickness like magic.

Sybelline drank deeply. She finished two cans of the drink and started on another. She went to lie on a sofa and gaze out the window at the lambent gray light. Far over the city she could just make out the Government Building, where the city fathers slept. What would they do, she wondered, if she were to turn on the power, then confront them and ask for her reward? Sybelline shook her head. She knew. They would either send her to the pits or back to the sewers to labor, or they might even kill her. This



latter was only a slim possibility, for the Morphi rarely executed anyone. They did not have to.

She frowned. If she reactivated the Morphi, she would be betraying the Selenes and would have to answer for it. That would not be so bad if she could force the Morphi to fight for her. But how to do that?

By utter and absolute control of the power. With that threat held over them, she could make the Morphi do anything. She wondered if Jantor had the brains to think along similar lines. But how to accomplish it? The sheer physical problems were insurmountable. Who could she trust so much? Wilf? He was a sullen weakling—she never knew what was in his mind. She did not think he would betray her, but was he capable?

Norn would not do. She was only a pretty Gnomon, now crazed for sex with the man Blade. Love, she called it. Nor would any of her fifty guardsmen fit the task—they were good only to bed her and to report her every move to Jantor.

Sybelline had another can of the intoxicant and began to cry softly. At the same time she was suddenly overcome with sexual desire. She longed for Wilf, for any of her young guardsmen, even for the girl Norn or the man Blade. Why, oh why, was she so cheated of everything? Her fine brain, her body and her long life all wasted.

Suddenly she heard the fierce clamor of arms in the street below. A Gnomon voice screamed in death agony. There were harsh curses and the incessant beat of metal on metal.

Sybelline heard a shout, a stentorian bellow that could only come from Blade.

"Hurry, Sart. Help me pick it up. Heave, man. Heave!"

Sybelline ran to the window. To her left was one of the sewer kiosks. It had been knocked over, torn apart. Scattered around the ruins were four Gnomon bodies, some of them still twitching. Blade and his slave, Sart, were both covered with blood. They were in the act of heaving the great sewer lid back into its seating. Blade was still bellowing, his massive sinews shining with blood, his neck muscles bulging as he urged the slave to a final terrible effort.

A Gnomon guard was halfway out of the sewer opening. He swiped viciously with the hooked end of his bar. Blade leaped to escape the blow.

Blade let out a tremendous cry. "Now!"

They flung the sewer lid back into place. It pinched the Gnomon in half, his dying scream muted as the upper half of his body rolled away from the lower trunk, the hands and arms still alive.

Sybelline watched, frozen in mingled horror, excitement and an already beginning hope. This could be her chance. Blade had come to her. She must decide now, this instant, whether or not to commit herself.

Blade pointed to the building from which Sybelline watched. He shouted and gave Sart a shove and they were running toward it. Sybelline turned from the window and left the apartment, running to meet Blade. The intoxicant had made her unsteady and she fell several times. When she glanced down the stairwell from the second floor she saw them battered and bloody, resting on their spear bars, gasping for breath. Blade was examining a raw wound in the chest of his slave.

Sybelline shouted down the stairwell. "Blade."

The big man looked up. He was covered with sweat and blood; wounded in half-a-dozen places. Even his coarse black beard was matted with blood. But it was his eyes—cold, fierce eyes peering from that dreadful visage—that both frightened and inspired Sybelline. They were bleak eyes and at the same

time they flamed with the madness of battle. They stared up at her—alert, murderous and calculating—and Sybelline knew she had to go all the way. No retreat now.

"Up here," she said. "Quickly."

Blade nodded and gave Sart a little push. They began to climb the stairs, keeping the bloody spear bars at the ready.

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## CHAPTER 11

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Only when they entered the apartment did Blade's battle ecstasy begin to diminish. Wounds, the sight and scent of blood, the killing, had completed his transmogrification. His adaptation to DX was not complete and his only aim was survival. The thin wafer of crystal in his brain was his only link to Home Dimension; for the time being he had forgotten it.

And this woman, this white-haired Sybelline who claimed to be Queen of the sewer people, what of her? He set out at once to put her in her place.

"See to Sart's wounds," he commanded. "Mine are of no consequence. He is a murderer and a rogue, and has a slave's brain, but I need him. Patch him up as best you can."

When Sybelline hesitated, Blade raised his blood-encrusted spear bar. "Do as you are told."

She was stubborn. "We must talk, you and I. I have much to tell you and to ask of you."

"Later," he said gruffly. "Tend to Sart before he bleeds to death."

Blade went to stand at the window, keeping in the shadow, watching the shattered kiosk and the mammoth sewer lid. It did not move. Jantor and his men would not come that way, he thought. In any case, it would take awhile for Jantor to figure matters out and to take countermeasures.

The fight had been short and bloody, but it had gone better than Blade expected. He used Sart as a decoy, luring the subchief to talk, then Blade broke his neck with one terrible blow of his fist. He caught the Gnomans' spear bar as it dropped. Sart, driven by fear, carried out his orders. He plunged into the crowd of guardsmen and seized a bar before they knew what he was about. Blade came roaring in, yelling battle sounds to stun and frighten them and swinging his bar like a broadsword. He killed four of the guards before they realized what was happening. Sart killed three. Blade drove the demoralized Gnomen up the tunnel while Sart erected the ladder.

The guardsmen sent for help and began to fight back. Blade piled bodies before him as a barricade and held them at bay while Sart put his sturdy back to the sewer lid. At first he groaned that he could not budge it. Blade threatened him with a terrible fate and the slave, blood spurting from his wound, tried again and again. It moved just as a hundred Gnomen came running down the tunnel toward Blade. Blade leaped up the ladder and joined his strength to Sart's, together they moved the lid out of its bedding. Blade climbed over Sart's back into the kiosk, found it too confining and kicked it to bits. He reached down to pluck Sart up just before his legs were crushed by the bars.

Time ran out, and several of the Gnomen made it up the ladder in spite of Blade's flailing bar. Sart was near dead, so he could not help much in the brief bloody fray on the street, but Blade drove him and cursed him and together they had gotten the lid back in place, slicing a guardsman in half in the doing.

Blade turned away from the window. The battle had only begun. Jantor was an enemy now. He would find the body of Alixe and he would come after Blade and Sart. Jantor would think that Blade had

plotted against him, that he had thrown in with Sybelline because she knew the secret of the power.

Blade went to the door to watch. Sart was on the floor. Sybelline, revulsion on her smooth, unlined face, was examining his wound. She glanced up at Blade, her green eyes narrowed and calculating. He remembered that she was half Morphi. She would bear watching. Nevertheless he meant to use her as she, no doubt, would try to use him.

Sart had been struck over the heart with the hooked end of a spear bar. The cruel teeth had torn the flesh away, leaving a bloody gouge a foot long and two inches across. Blade knelt to see better. Only a thin flap of pink bloody tissue covered the heart. Blade watched the heart pulsing strongly like a caged thing against a slight barrier. He marveled at Sart's endurance.

Sybelline read his thoughts. "They are animals, the Gnomen. Beasts. Savages. Only a Gnoman could survive a wound like this."

Her breath came to his nostrils and he understood that she was drunk. To humble her, he said, "You are half Gnomen, so you should know. What have you been drinking? Fetch me some."

She came back with two of the symbol-marked cans. Blade sniffed the stuff. Not alcohol, as he knew it, but it was plainly an intoxicant and might do. He poured a can onto the wound and Sart bellowed at the sting. He moaned.

"Let me die, master. It is better. We have no chance. Jantor has a thousand men and he will be after us."

Blade grinned evilly. His face was a mask of caked and blackening blood. "You will not die yet. I forbid it. I order you to live as long as I need you."

He cracked an order at Sybelline and she, nearly sober now, cut a thick piece of plastic to fit, placing it over the wound as a shield. This she bound in place with strips cut from plastic sheets. When she was done, Sart was swathed in bandage from chin to waist.

Blade nudged the man with his foot. "Rest here a little time. Jantor will not come for a while and I must have words with Sybelline."

For the first time Sart really appeared to recognize the white-haired woman, to see in her the Sybelline who was Queen Consort to Jantor, if only in name. He nodded and groaned.

"So you have chosen, master. I think it is the wrong choice. She has no warriors."

As they went into another room Blade said, "He thinks we plotted this meeting, that I had it in mind all along."

Sybelline gazed at him. She liked him, yet hated him. She despised him, yet needed him. She knew she must be cautious, yet she found herself on her knees before him, not really willing it, not conscious of volition. She opened his blood-spattered front and took his softness into her hand for a moment. It was not really a sexual act, for both she and Blade knew it had nothing to do with sex. It was submission. Sybelline was shocked at herself, but what other course was open to her?

She handled him for a moment, then stood up. Their eyes met. Blade said: "You are right. We must talk. But first one thing must be understood—you know the secret of the Morphi power and I must know it. With it, we may be able to defeat Jantor and live. So that comes first. Show me the power."

Sybelline cradled her arms across her firm breasts. He did not understand. It was not so simple. There were the Selenes to be reckoned with. She remembered Onta's cold stares and knew that he, the Chief of Brain Secrets, had no concept of mercy.

But when she would have explained, Blade cut her short. He was curt, brutal. "All that can wait. Either show me or explain to me the source of the Morphi power—at once. Now! We have no time to waste."

Sybelline nodded. She knew when she was beaten. "We will have to go over the roofs," she told him. "A great distance. The Selenes will know. Their lights will pick up our images, code them and transmit them on the orbscreens. They will know and they will wonder."

"Let them," said Blade. "How likely are they to take action, and how soon?"

Sybelline smiled for the first time since their meeting. "Not soon, I think. They are patient and secure. They plan long ahead. We need not fear them immediately. But in the end they act. I spoke to Onta only a short time ago and—"

She had meant it to slip out but the look on his face filled her with sudden terror. She had only meant to let him know of her importance, something of her place in the scheme of things; now she wished she had not spoken.

Blade's eyes were agate hard on hers. He smiled a bit. But all he said was, "I might have known. You spy for the orb people. They have no doubt promised you vast rewards when the time comes. Good. I do not care. I hope you live to enjoy them. Now, let us go to the source of the power. My patience is short."

Sart was on his feet in the kitchen. He had a can of intoxicant in his hand. Nearby was a pile of empties. He gave Blade a dubious grin and hiccoughed, then doubled over in pain. Sybelline stared in distaste. There was nothing worse than a drunken Gnoman.

Blade scattered the cans with a kick. "So you are not yet dead?" he asked Sart. "Good. It is possible that I will be the one to kill you after all, if you disobey me in any small matter. Come."

Sybelline led them up winding stairs to the roof. For miles the rooftops stretched, an unbroken plain. There was no end to them or to the city. The silence shrouded them. The Moon swung its gigantic orb nearby and Blade studied it for a moment, watching the activity on it. He still feared it. If he were fortunate, he thought, he would get the secret of the power and be gone from Dimension X before the Selenes got into the act. Jantor was trouble enough, or would be when he caught up with them.

The three fled over the roofs. They passed high over squares, with the plastic parks and the thousands of sleepers.

When Sart complained and began to lag behind, Blade seized him in an iron grip, hustling him along. His own wounds were hurting and he was weary. He longed for food and a bath, for rest and treatment of his hurts, but all that would have to wait. They would have been spotted by now, by both the Selenes and the Gnomen. Every second counted. He had his orders straight from the old Lord himself—find the power.

They came to another park. In the center of it stood a circular building. A narrow catwalk connected the circular building with the apartment building on which they now stood.

Sybelline pointed to the catwalk. "We must cross that. There is a hatchway in the top of that building." She pointed to the circular structure. "Then we go underground. Below the five mile level. It will not be easy to come back up, Blade. There is no power for the lift unless you wish me to turn it on. If I do that the Morphi will awaken."

Blade was pondering, trying to claw some of the caked blood out of his beard. He itched all over. He watched a kiosk in the plastic park and saw movement. Gnomen. They were spotted, right enough,

and the Gnomen scouts were keeping pace with them through the sewers. Jantor knew exactly where they were.

Sart moaned at the mention of going underground. Blade told him to be silent. He looked at Sybelline. The trip had told on her. Her white hair straggled, and she breathed hard.

Blade said: "We may have to activate the Morphi. I have not yet decided. But one thing I know. The Gnomen have found us and we had better hurry." He pointed to the kiosk in the park. A dozen Gnomen soldiers had left it and one was pointing at them with his spear bar. The three of them were in clear silhouette against the curdled-buttermilk sky.

He gave the protesting Sart a push onto the catwalk. "Go first. Hurry."

Sart was a sewer rat and was unfamiliar with high places. He was terrified. He inched along until Blade prodded him with the sharp end of his spear bar. "Get along faster or I will put this through your guts." He meant it and Sart knew he meant it.

Blade held one of Sybelline's fists in a tight grip. He was taking no chances of losing her. But she came along docilely enough and, in fact, enjoyed his touch.

The Gnomen scouting party left the park and ran beneath the catwalk, shaking their spear bars and yowling insults. Sart would have hurled his bar down at them, but Blade prodded him on and said, "Keep it. You're going to need it."

They reached the roof of the circular building. Blade watched the Gnomen below. They were battering at a door, trying to gain entrance. There was something strange about this, and suddenly it ticked over in his mind. It was the first locked door he had encountered in the city.

Sybelline led them to a hatchway in the center of the roof. It was bolted down. As she knelt to unfasten the bolts, Blade asked, "What is this place?"

She cast him a sly look. "The place of government. The Morphi councils, all those in power and who have responsibility for running the city, they meet here."

Blade had an idea. He grinned at her. "And they now sleep here, is that it? The power was turned off while they were all here in consultation, discharging their civic duties? It was planned that way?"

Sybelline nodded. "It was. By order of the Selenes. I carried out the orders."

Blade was not surprised. "I should have known."

"You know now. You see that I hold nothing back. I have cast my lot with yours. If we win, I will expect reward; if we fail, I will die with you."

"Later," he said. "All that later. Get this thing open."

She lacked strength to draw the last bolt. Blade slammed it back with his spear bar. He threw open the hatch and stared into a shiny plastic hole. He turned on the woman. "What is this? You play tricks?"

It was a plastic tube, a chute similar to that used in Home Dimension for escape from aircraft. It was sleek and shiny and plunged into darkness at a 45-degree angle.

Sybelline smiled. "It is simple. A chute to the lower levels. Are you afraid, Blade?"

Sart was afraid. He stared at the gaping maw of the chute and wiped away sweat.

Blade said: "I am not afraid. But I am not a fool. You said the five mile level—in this thing? It will be

like a free fall. Our speed—"

"I will go first," said Sybelline. "Hurry. Fear nothing. There are braking fingers near the bottom and the landing will be soft and easy. Would I do it else?"

There was a crash from below as the door was battered in. The Gnomen would be on them in a few minutes. Jantor had made a decision. He was coming out of the sewers to fight. He was daring everything to come up into the city, to brave the orbfolk, in an effort to smash Blade and find the secret of the power for himself.

Sybelline was at the edge of the chute. Blade said, "Will they dare follow us down?"

She laughed. "Not the Gnomen. They all have courage and Jantor is cunning, even intelligent, but they will not risk the chute. We had better go now."

Blade nodded. "Go then."

Sybelline gathered her plastic skirt about her and gave a little leap. She landed on her bottom and flung her body backward with her arms trailing. As she disappeared she called out, "Slide in this manner. It is easier."

She was gone. Blade crooked a finger at Sart. "You."

Sart hung back. He began to whimper.

"Hold fast to your spear bar," said Blade. He picked the slave up and hurled him head first into the chute. "Wrong end first," he told the disappearing Sart, "but in your case no great matter."

There was another trap door nearby. Sounds of battering came from beneath it. Blade stalked to it and pounded with his spear bar. "Gnomen! Listen to me. This is Blade who speaks."

The noises ceased. A Gnoman voice growled in reply. "We know you, man Blade. What do you want?"

Blade glanced at the chute twenty paces away. He had plenty of time. "A parley," he told them. "I would send a message to Jantor."

Harsh laughter. The same voice said, "Who are you to ask for a parley? You who are as good as dead or in the pits. But I say this—surrender and come with us to Jantor and we will not harm you."

Blade smiled to himself and said, "I do not like the sound of your invitation. But I would have a parley with Jantor later on. Answer me this—does he know of the child Alixe?"

"He knows, and he has sworn to slice off your baby-maker and choke you with it."

Blade winced. Jantor was capable of it. He said: "Tell Jantor that I had no part in that. The slave, Sart, is guilty."

"But you protect him and you are responsible for him under law. You know all this, man Blade."

"Yes. I know. I could not prevent it. But I do not wish to speak of that now. Tell Jantor that I am after the secret of the power. I will get it. Tell him that if he bides his time—reins his anger—it will be to his advantage and to mine. I can be of great service to him and he to me. Bid him to think it out. His real danger is the Moon, not Blade, a woman and fifty bed-weakened guards. When I have the power, we can combine forces, and I will show him a way to defeat the orbfolk and take over the city for all time. Tell him that."

Another Gnoman voice spoke. "We will tell him, man Blade. But there is something Jantor bids us to tell you."

Blade gazed over the catwalk at the city roofs. Far off was another party of Gnomen hurrying toward him. He pounded once with his bar on the hatch. "Then tell me quickly. I cannot linger."

Laughter. "You see our parties, then. Surrender, man Blade. You and that whore Sybelline are doomed. Jantor is coming out of the sewers at last."

Blade tapped with his bar. "Jantor's message? Quickly or I go."

The second voice said: "Jantor sends word of the girl Norn. He has her and she confesses love for you. Jantor asks if you have love for her? If this is true, if you do have love for her, you would perhaps spare her what Jantor has in mind."

Blade kept an eye on the party of Gnomen. They were still distant enough for safety. "And what is that?"

He was told and Blade, hardened as he was, felt the sweat on him and his spine chill. And yet there was nothing he could do.

He rapped once again with his bar. "Tell Jantor to do as he likes. Norn is nothing to me. Tell him all I have said and that it is wiser to have me for a friend than an enemy. I go now. Later I will send word to Jantor."

Silence. The battering began again. Blade ran lightly across the roof and leaped into the chute.

## CHAPTER 12

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The tube was spiral. By the time Blade had whipped around the third twist of the helix, doubling back and back again, he was sliding at over a hundred miles an hour and gaining speed with every passing second. He lay on his back, arms trailing, and let the tube devour him. The plastic was sleek and cold. There was no sense of burn or pain as he plunged ever faster. And it was totally dark. Surely, he thought, the black of the dreaded five-mile pits could not be worse than this.

The tube was steeper now and he was into a near vertical fall around the spiral. The Gs were piling up and he began to black out. He fought to retain consciousness and made himself fix on a thought to the exclusion of everything else.

Down and down the rushing slide continued and he hung on grimly to sanity and thought—what of Norn? Had he meant what he told the Gnomen? Norn loved him. So what? He owed her nothing. She was a liability, a nuisance. All true. What did he care for her? Nothing.

Blade had adapted now, he was more Gnoman than the Gnomen; he was savage and barbaric, the kill craze lurking just below his surface.

Faster and faster. The plastic screamed as he passed. His backside heated as he approached maximum speed. If Sybelline had tricked him, he was dead. Down into nothing he sped.

Black invaded his brain. Fight it off. Think of Norn. Norn—Norn—what did he care? Nothing.

But Blade knew it wasn't true. He still retained enough of HD humanity to know that if he could save Norn he would—if he could save himself.

He was rushing into terrible heat. Sweat bathed him, poured from him in rivers. He must be approaching the five-mile limit. The heat was unbearable.

He clutched the spear bar, dragging it behind him. The iron heated now, as did his body, and once the bar nearly slipped from his sweat-sodden hand. He brought the bar up and cradled it across his chest. The plastic tube held him, screwing him down and down into the bowels of darkness.

Then he felt the flaps. Immediately he began to slow. Plastic fingers, semi-rigid, clutched at his body, gave as he passed, slowed him bit by bit and passed him on to larger and more rigid fingers. The spiral straightened and the angle lessened and his falling speed dwindled. He could think again.

Down one final glissade. He saw red torches flickering in keyhole silhouette. He shot out through the final orifice and fell lightly onto thick-padded plastic mats, like a feather drifting down. He was safe.

Blade stood up, weak-legged, his bar at the ready. All he could see was a ring of torches. The heat was terrible. Sweat cascaded from him. He heard an agonized sound and was surprised to find that he was making it. He was panting for breath.

A shadow moved. It was Sart, reaching for a torch. Blade called to him, his voice harsh and echoing in this vast domed chamber that he could not yet see.

"Where is Sybelline?"

"Here." She called from darkness and another torch sparked. "There is a ladder just before you. Guide on my torch."

The plastic mats were piled thirty feet high. Blade found the edge and the ladder. He looked down and saw her uplifted face. He climbed down. He felt weak and giddy. The deadly heat was the enemy.

Sybelline handed him a torch and lit it from her own. She watched him gravely, her green eyes sparkling, her full mouth set in a smile he could not fathom.

"Follow, Blade," she said.

Sart was lighting torches, far across an open space. Blade called to him. "Leave off that. Come to me."

Sybelline shrugged. "He is of no use. He will understand nothing."

"No matter. I want him under my eye."

They waited for Sart. Blade scuffed at the floor with his toe. It was artificial turf, plastic, as would be the great dome in which they stood. He could not see the sides or the top. A thought occurred to him.

"How come you to find torches at hand and to light them?"

"An ancient way—firesticks struck together. When the power is on the air is bright. This is not so in the sewers and the Gnomen have used firesticks for longer than I know."

Blade watched her. In the glow of the torches she looked much younger, almost desirable. Her flesh was firm and pink, unlined. Her breasts thrust at him. Her snowy hair took on a blue sheen. Sybelline saw him watching her and her smile was an invitation.

He bellowed to break the spell. "Sart! Another minute and I come after you."

"I am here, master."



Sart emerged from the shadow, holding his torch high. He was not sweating. Neither was the woman. Blade, salt water pouring from him, grimaced. "You do not suffer from heat?"

Both of them stared at his sweat-bathed visage. "Heat?" Blade cursed. "Never mind. Get on with it, Sybelline. Sart, stay close to me."

She led the way. They walked across a great smooth plain of plastic turf. She was following white glowing lines that made corridors.

The slave glanced about fearfully. "I do not like this place, master."

Sybelline laughed. "So long as the power is off you have nothing to fear. The mole rats are afraid of us and anyway they do not come this high except in time of famine."

Blade wiped sweat. "Mole rats? Tell me of this."

Those Gnomen had told him of the fate in store for Norn—to be flung into a pit of mole rats.

Sybelline stopped abruptly. She pointed her torch at something. "I will not have to tell you. They grow bolder than I thought. See yonder? It is a sleeper technician and the mole rats have been at him."

Sart whimpered. Blade cuffed him, but he was careful not to strike his wound. "You will be a man or I will not treat you as one. A sleeper cannot hurt you."

"Not this sleeper," said the woman. "This one will never harm anyone." Her voice quavered as if some of Sart's terror had passed to her. It was the first time Blade had seen weakness in her. He stepped forward to have a look at the thing.

It had been a Morphi sleeper. It had worn a white plastic coverall. This was torn and ripped and within it was all that remained of the sleeper. Something had fed on it. The face was gone, one of the arms, and the viscera had been hollowed out. One look was enough for Blade. He went back to Sybelline.

"You said the mole rats did not come this high. Yet that sleeper is eaten away. What is the truth of it? Are there likely to be others around?"

She had regained some of her composure and courage. She met his gaze without flinching. "I spoke truth as I knew it, but the power has been off for so long. They have become bold. And it may be a time of famine for them. How can I know? In ordinary times they never venture this high."

Sart whimpered again. "Let us go, master. I would rather face Jantor without a bar or go to the pits than be eaten by mole rats."

"Be quiet. Sybelline, lead on."

They began to walk again. As they went, Blade bade her describe what he could not see—simply to describe, not to place events in a framework of time. He could not fathom the Morphi or Gnomen concept of time and did not try. They could not explain and he could not understand. To try would be a waste of the very time that baffled him. For all he knew Sybelline was a thousand years old, HD time, or only ten. The Gnomen spoke of years, but what did they mean?

He listened intently, trying to relate Sybelline's words to his own concepts.

They had walked a mile across the plastic turf before he began to grasp it. The dome over them was a mile high. The power complex was some five miles square. When the power was on, all was brightly lit by air lights. The air was circulated and freshened automatically, and neither the Gnomen nor Morphi

were affected by heat.

The ultimate source of power, Sybelline explained, when it was crushed and milled to talcum powder smoothness, was common rock mined below the five level. After processing it was called ditramonium. A single large boulder, after treatment, furnished power for eleven Morphi days. Blade despaired at calculating that.

By now excitement was burning in him. This was it. Power from ordinary rocks. If he could wrest that secret from this Dimension X, take it back with him, hand it over to the HD scientists, then the Project was a success beyond even Lord L's wildest dreams. And perhaps that it would be the end of the experiments. Never again would he have to go through the computer.

Computers. It came to him like a lightning flash in his brain that Sybelline was at this very moment talking about computers. Thousands of them. Giant machines banked around the dome, silent now, but ready to hum into action when the power was restored—power that was somehow—and this was beyond his comprehension, sent through the air itself with no wires or cables. He struggled to bring the concept clear in his mind, to grasp what Sybelline was telling him. The power was *in* the air, everywhere. Every Morphi, from the moment of birth, picked up the power, was connected to it by means of the power stud in his neck. The technique was simple enough once you accepted the *a priori* fact of the power itself. It was nothing more than an old-fashioned trolley car taking its power from an electrically charged wire, except that there were no wires.

"How much farther?" Blade asked.

Sybelline waved her torch ahead. "Just there. A hundred paces or so."

Sart touched Blade's arm. "Something is following us. I think mole rats."

Blade and Sybelline spun around and held their torches high. Sart got behind them and made terrified sounds. Sybelline said, "He is right. See them—over there."

Blade saw them. More than a score of eyes winked red-yellow out of the gloom.

"They are blind," said Sybelline. "They have eyes that are open and shine, but they cannot see. I saw a dead mole rat once and heard a Morphi expert explain it. I do not wish to see another one."

The eyes crept closer. Blade hefted his bar. "Like it or not," he told her, "you are going to see one, if they will take the bait."

She peered at him. "Bait?"

"Me."

As he strode back toward the glowing eyes, torch in one hand—held high—his spear bar ready in the other, a theory leaked into his brain. A hunch, call it, but he knew he was right. He was drenched with sweat. His smell was strange and enticing to these creatures. That was why they were bold, why they followed. The mole rats were after *him*.

The glittering eyes fled. If they could not see, their hearing and smell more than compensated.

One pair of eyes did not run. They moved toward Blade, baleful and terror-gleaming, all the more frightening because they were dead eyes and still sparked hate and hunger at the big man. Blade caught a whiff of charnel odor and heard the creature sounds—a gobbling sound that screamed along his spine. The thing leaped.

For once Blade's courage nearly failed. He was a mass of terrified sweat. He longed to flee, but

dared not. He lunged with the sharp end of his spear bar and met the creature head on.

The mole rat reared, and slapped at the bar with huge spade paws. Blade nearly lost the bar. He dropped the torch between himself and the mole rat and the thing charged over the flame. It did not fear fire. Blade used two hands and thrust with all his strength. Fangs grated on the bar and the smell of the rat overwhelmed Blade. He fell back a step.

The rat charged again. Blade knelt and took the charge with his bar, much as he had killed the Gnomen, and the mole rat impaled itself. It did not die quickly or easily. It thrashed around on the bar, spurting gouts of black, foul-smelling blood, and Blade had an urge to vomit. He let go of the bar and stepped away, watching the death throes of the mole rat, keeping an eye out for new danger. He picked up the torch.

When the mole rat was dead he went close. The thing was as big as a wolfhound, with a long scaly tail and the body and snout of an enormous rat. The spade paws were those of a mole, the talons gleaming four inches long. The thing had a double set of shark-like teeth. Blade pulled out the bar and kicked the animal. It gave a last convulsive death shudder.

He wanted to drag it back with him but could not bring himself to touch it. It was loathsome and probably poisonous. The truth was that his nerves were screaming and he was still afraid of the thing, dead or not.

Sybelline called to him. "Leave it, Blade. The others will feed on it. That is how they live, by feeding on their old and dead."

Blade was glad of the excuse to walk away. He went back to join Sart and the woman. Sart stared at the blood on Blade's spear bar and made the sign of the fylfot on his bald head. When his eyes met Blade's they were filled with awe and admiration.

"I have never seen the like of that, master. Even Jantor would not walk into a nest of mole rats."

Sybelline nodded. "It is true. Even the Morphi fear them, though they killed many with poison and trapped some for examination."

"Let us get on," said Blade.

"Just over there," she said.

They approached what seemed to Blade to be a block house or bunker, not large, made of sturdy plastic blocks. Sybelline confirmed his guess that it was squarely in the center of the dome complex.

He examined the entrance with his torch. From the darkness behind them came gobbling sounds as the dead mole rat was devoured.

Blade looked at Sybelline and nodded at the entrance. "There will be sleepers in there?"

"Yes. Technicians on duty. It was dangerous duty and they were triple paid."

Blade smiled. "How do you know all this?" He had guessed, but he wanted to hear her say it.

She did not lie. "I know because it was I who turned off the power. You must know that."

"How did you gain admission and why did they trust you?"

It was her turn to smile. "There are as many fools among the Morphi as among the Gnomen, for all their brains. I used my body, what else? It was easier because it was forbidden—Morphi are forbidden to cohabit with Gnomen on penalty of death storage. Knowing the risk, they were all the more eager.

Come, I will show you the very table on which I lay."

Blade turned to Sart. "Stay here on guard."

Sart quivered. "But the mole rats, master. If they—"

Blade threatened him with a massive fist. "Take your choice. My anger or the possibility of mole rats. One is certain, the other not."

Sart grumbled but remained on guard, peering fearfully into the dark.

Blade waved his torch at Sybelline. "After you."

The interior of the bunker was cramped. With the aid of both torches they could see well enough. The place was sparsely furnished. Consoles covered the walls. There were dials and gauges and switches and toggles. Blade was reminded of Lord Leighton's master computer chamber. He inspected in silence for a moment, concentrating, activating the crystal in his brain so that everything he recorded would be passed on to Home Dimension without conscious effort on his part. Lord L would be listening in, and the old boffin would be in seventh heaven.

There were four sleepers. One sat at a console, his hand still raised to touch a toggle. One was stretched on a plastic cot, asleep, when a deeper sleep came. A third stood before a drawing board, a long stylus-like pen poised over blueprints.

Sybelline pointed to the fourth sleeper. "It was he... the last to have me. The others were watching and enjoying it even as they worked."

Blade grunted. "Voyeurs."

"I do not understand that word."

"Of no matter. Show me exactly."

She stepped to a table near a console. On it lay the fourth sleeper, face down, arms dangling, plastic clothing still in disarray. Like all the sleepers he was handsome, young looking, too pretty and healthy looking to be believed, even in this quasi-death.

Sex seemed to be the one constant in all the X Dimensions he had visited. No—there were other and regrettable constants—greed, hate, fear, lust for power.

And love. Not often, but he had found it from time to time.

Blade said, "Show me."

Sybelline's face had a swollen look. Her lips were fuller, pouting, and her eyes narrowed. She began to stroke her breasts lightly. She was remembering, harking back, and the visit to the scene of such pleasure and accomplishment was arousing her beyond bearing. She pointed at the sleeper on the table. "Move him. Roll him off. Then I will show you exactly. You can join me. Now. Hurry, I have longed for you, Blade, ever since I first set eyes on you."

Blade was cautious. He had no desire for her or for any woman at this time, but he did not want to offend her. He needed her.

"Later," he promised. "For now just show me."

She frowned at him but nodded. She went to the table. She pointed to the sleeper. "He lay just so, atop me. He was paying no attention other than to his own pleasure, and I reached back and pushed the

button—there. You see how simple it was?"

Blade saw. It was a single small black button set in a red plaque. He measured the distance with his eye and saw that it could be done. The position was right and her slim arms long enough. He nodded.

"I believe you." He examined the black button closely. "This shuts off the power. What turns it on?"

Sybelline pointed to a switch on a nearby console. "That was explained to me. I coaxed it from them. I had to know, you see, for part of my bargain with the Selenes was that when the time came I would be the one to turn on the power."

Blade pondered a moment, nearly gave the command to activate the power, then decided against it. He pointed to a tunnel-like opening in one wall of the bunker. "What is that?"

"What it seems. A passage to the power cube. I was also shown that."

"Show me now."

With her torch high she stepped into the narrow tunnel. Blade followed, concentrating fiercely so the thoughts could be transmitted via the brain crystal. He could send only facts and his own thoughts relevant to them; Lord L must work out the rest for himself if he could. It amused Blade to think that if the crystal was working, the scientific world back in HD would be buzzing in a matter of minutes, at least that part of it connected with Project DX.

The tunnel ended in a vaulted chamber no larger than an ordinary bathroom in HD. There was a pit in the center and the plastic floor sloped to it. From the pit, a circle as large as a common auto tire, there protruded a single metal rod. From the visible end was a mobile-like structure somewhat reminiscent of the filament in a light bulb.

Stacked around the walls of the chamber were plastic bags. Blade ripped one with the hook end of his bar and a fine powder seeped out. He caught some in his palm and tested it with his fingertips. It was white, fine as talcum, and had no odor. He looked at Sybelline.

"Ditramonium," she said. "Rock powder. How it works or why, I do not know. No one knows but the Select Five of the High Morphi Council."

Blade nodded upward. "Those who meet in the circular building up there?"

"Yes."

Blade started back through the tunnel to the main bunker. "Come," he told her, "and obey me exactly."

When they were in the bunker he went to the table and moved the sleeper who had been making love to Sybelline when she pressed the OFF button. He motioned to her.

"Lie on the table exactly as you were. Say nothing, do nothing. Observe and listen."

Sybelline balked. "I do not like this, Blade. Not at all. I will lie on the table gladly, but only if you are atop me. What use is a sleeper—"

He gave her a grim stare. "Do as you are bid. I am going to turn on the power."

Her jaw dropped and her green eyes widened. For the first time she seemed more Gnomen than Morphi. She made the sign of the fylfot over her left breast. "Have you gone mad, Blade?"

"I do not think so," he said calmly, "but I am very curious. I will turn on the power for the count of

ten. On that count of ten you will turn it off again. Be sure you can reach the button. Now get ready."

Sybelline most unwillingly clambered on the table. She lay with her gown up and Blade replaced the sleeper between her outflung thighs. The sleeper's head nestled on her shoulder. Blade went to the entrance and looked back. "I will remain here. I want to observe both inside and out. I will bid Sart do likewise. All you have to do is listen to my count and press the button at ten. Are you ready?"

She glared at him. "This is a fool's trick. If something goes wrong we lose everything."

"I will take that risk," Blade told her. He gave the startled slave instructions and then went back into the bunker. He went to the *ON* switch and reached for it. "Be ready," he said. "Do exactly as I ordered."

He pressed the switch and ran for the door.

There was no sound, no humming, no machine noises, just the light. Sourceless light that was in the air itself, soft, limpid, the glow of a billion candles. Blade began to count aloud.

"One—two—"

He stood squarely in the doorway, his glance swiveling in and out with each count.

The four sleepers did not see him at first. They did not know they had been asleep. Each, in smooth continuity, went about completing the act in which he had been caught.

The plastic-turfed complex stretched for miles. The dome top glittered nearly out of sight. Dozens of mole rats scampered in panic for dark holes gnawed in the base of the dome. Millions of lights blinked on the endless banks of computers lining the complex. Faraway figures moved, hauling something on a cart. Nearer to Blade a man crawled toward them on his hands and knees. He looked Gnomen and he was bleeding.

The sleeper on the cot stirred and tossed restlessly. The sleeper at the drawing board made a line with his stylus and looked at the sleeper atop Sybelline. "Good, eh? For an old one."

The sleeper at the console adjusted the toggle and laughed. "We had better keep her down here with us. If she talks we have had it. We can turn her over to the new crew and—"

"Three—four—five—"

The sleeper atop Sybelline groaned and rolled off her. "Yes, you are right. We will keep her for our private needs." He smiled down at Sybelline. "What of that, woman? You agree? We will treat you well."

Sart had dropped his bar and fallen to his knees, his eyes rolling in terror. Blade pointed to the man crawling toward them, the bleeding man. He whispered. "Get him. Help him.

"Six—seven—"

The sleeper on the table with Sybelline slapped at her arm in sudden alarm. "Get away from that button, you whore."

The sleeper at the console whirled toward Blade, staring in astonishment. "Who counts? Who are you?"

"Eight—"

The sleeper at the drawing board leaped toward a square box on a wall. "Something is wrong here—the all-points alarm. I—"

"Nine—"

Sybelline lost her head. She pulled away from the Morphi and tried frantically to reach the *OFF* button. The Morphi slapped her hard and pushed her off the table away from the button. The man on the cot woke and stared, rubbing his eyes. "What in the name of all the fylfots goes on?"

Sart did not obey Blade. He crept into the doorway to be near his master. The former sleepers saw him and yelled in unison. "Gnomen. Attack—attack—"

"Ten!"

Sybelline screamed and lunged for the *OFF* button. She was knocked down. Blade went plunging into the knot of struggling Morphi. One held Sybelline and three leaped at him. He laid about him with the bar, drove them to retreat and reached with the hooked end of his bar to press the button. They were coming at him again. The power failed. Darkness.

Blade took his torch from a sconce and waved it about. The four Morphi men, sleepers once more, lay huddled on the floor of the bunker.

Sybelline recovered her torch and did not conceal her anger. "I told you, Blade. They nearly overcame us. You are too bold. We will take no more chances like that."

He could have told her that only boldness plus guile had kept him alive through a procession of DXs, but all he said was, "Be quiet."

He was content. He knew what he had to know. When he turned on the power again the Morphi would resume the continuity of their lives with no sense of lost time. The sleepers would never know they had slept. This, he hoped, would give him the element of surprise, an opening wedge, a way to baffle and puzzle them until he could sway them to his thinking. But that must wait.

Blade led the way out of the bunker and pointed. "I saw a Gnoman crawling this way. He was hurt. Hold your torches high."

Sybelline was incredulous. "A common Gnoman down here? I do not believe it. They would not dare it. Not one alone."

"I know what I saw." Blade waved his torch and shouted. "You out there! Give sign of yourself. We will help you."

A faint cry came from the darkness. "Sybelline! I am hurt. Aid me."

Blade watched her and did not think she was acting. She gasped in amazement. "Wilf! My son. I do not understand this—"

Sart stopped shaking long enough to say, "It could be a trick of Jantor's, master."

"A strange trick," said Blade, "to send one wounded man against me. Come on." He strode into the darkness.

Wilf lay in a pool of blood. Sybelline held a torch while Blade examined him. He was badly bitten, mostly on the legs, and some of the wounds were deep. At the moment he was unconscious, but Blade thought he would survive. He bade Sart pick up the wounded man and carry him back to the bunker.

Sart grumbled and complained of his own wound but he obeyed. Blade and Sybelline followed him. The woman was silent.

"I accept your surprise," said Blade at last. "But I must know of this. You say he is your son?"

She shrugged. "One of them. My favorite. I have many sons and daughters among the Gnomen. I do not know what has become of them."

Blade guessed at what she meant by favorite. He knew the Gnomen attitude toward incest. They did not recognize it nor did he mention it now.

He said, "I find it most strange that he would suddenly appear in this place."

Sybelline shrugged again. "So do I. I have no understanding of this, nor of Wilf, for that matter. He is only a quarter Morphi, you know, and not of great intelligence. He has always been secretive and keeps his thoughts to himself."

"We will see about his intelligence. One thing I know—the Morphi, even you who are half Morphi, all make the same mistake. You consistently underestimate the intelligence of *some* of the Gnomen—perhaps all of them. It is my thought that the native intelligence is there, but has never been allowed to develop."

He saw her look and forgot it. She was incapable of understanding.

Wilf was placed on the table in the bunker. Blade found a kit and tended the wounds. He used ointments and powders and bound the raw sores with plastic bandages. As he finished, he was aware that Wilf was feigning unconsciousness. He smiled down at him and slapped his face lightly. Blade had the beginnings of a plan and if the lad was intelligent enough...

"You do not fool me," he told Wilf. "I know you listen and understand. Open your eyes and explain how you came here."

Sart was once again on guard in the door. Sybelline held a torch and peered down at her son. Wilf opened his eyes and stared at his mother sullenly. Sybelline was just as sullen when she spoke to him.

"This is the man Blade, Wilf. You will do well to answer him. How came you here, and why?"

Wilf scowled. He held up a bandaged arm, then stared down at his bitten legs. "The mole rats nearly killed me. I lost my spear bar."

Blade knew one thing. Wilf had courage. Blade made his voice friendly. "You did not come down the chute?"

Wilf looked at Blade a long time before answering. Suddenly he smiled. He ignored his mother and smiled and Blade saw what he had seen so often in Dimension X—awe, hero worship and a willingness to serve. He could use such things. Wilf could not have come at a better time.

"No," said Wilf. "I did not come by the chute, though I know of it."

"How much do you know of it?" Sybelline's tone spoke her emotions. She was not pleased with her son.

Blade glared. "Do not interrupt."

"I can read Morphi script," said Wilf. "I go up into the city any time it pleases me. For long I have done this. I have explored, Mother. I have followed you and you never knew. I have studied the Moon and the orbfolk through telescopes. I have watched and listened when you spoke to Onta, the Selene. I—"

Blade put a hand over his mouth. "Enough." He looked at Sybelline. She did not meet his eye.

"I have no interest in any of that," said Blade. "How came you here, if not by the chute?"



Wilf laughed, eager to talk to Blade. "I found old drawings in the rock mine files. There are passages that lead down past the pits—"

Sart groaned from the door. "The five mile pits!"

Blade silenced him. "Go on, Wilf."

"As I saw, I found old drawings. They marked out passages that have been long forgotten. With the aid of such a map I was able to find my way down here. It was easy enough at first. It led me down past the pits—they are all dead there now—and I found a ramp that leads directly into this place. All went well until the mole rats attacked me."

Blade nodded. "You have such a map with you?"

Wilf was wearing the plastic shorts of the Morphi. He reached into a pocket and drew out a folded square of plastic, tattered and stained. Blade took it from him. He did not examine it but tapped it with a finger and looked at Sybelline. "What other way is there back to the city level?"

Sybelline shrugged. "Without the power for the lifts there is only one—an escape ladder. I know where it is. In my time I have never known of anyone using it. But I have read that back in other times the young Morphi, the athletes, contested each other to see who could climb it in the shortest time."

Blade pondered that, calculating. They were about six miles deep. He was not going to climb any such ladder if he could help it. He doubted his ability to do so. The heat was telling on him and his sweat never stopped dripping.

"The ladder ends in a sub-1 basement of the Government Building," said Sybelline.

That settled it. By now the circular building would be alive with Jantor's men.

He began to question Wilf about Jantor. All that Wilf could tell him was that Jantor was moving his troops up into the city. He was taking over and defying the orbfolk. Women and children remained in the sewers until the issue was settled one way or the other.

Wilf gave Blade a sly look and said, "I have something else to tell you, but it is for your ears only."

Blade nodded at Sybelline. "Go stand with Sart. Both of you out of hearing."

She crossed her arms over her firm breasts and scowled. "I will not. You plan to betray me with my own son."

Blade jerked a thumb at the door. "Go, I say. If there is betrayal it will not be on my part."

She left them reluctantly. Blade bent to hear Wilf's whisper. "It is said that Jantor has had second thoughts. He knows now that it was Sart who murdered Alixe, not you. A guard has remembered hearing screams while you were absent. Jantor wishes to parley and again be friends, if you will turn over Sart to him for punishment."

Blade stroked his beard. "That poor fool. I could not—"

"And Sybelline," said Wilf. "Jantor wishes to destroy her also."

Blade stared down at him. "She is your mother."

Wilf shrugged. "What of that? Anyway I propose nothing. I merely say what I have heard. And there is more."

Blade waited, his face grim. Wilf hurried on. "I also heard that more than a hundred of the Gnomes females have missed their bloody time. All have lain with you."

And Wilf added, slyly, "This may have some bearing on matters, I think. It is why Jantor is willing to be reasonable."

Blade felt no thrill of fatherhood. A hundred pregnant women spoke well of his performance as a man; it did nothing for his ego, the impact diminished by the numbers involved. And yet the boy was right. Jantor was thinking now that Blade was proven a baby-maker; it would be folly to kill him. Jantor could not rebuild the Gnomes race alone. There was only Blade.

On the whole Blade was pleased. He now had a bargaining point where he had lacked one before. But it did nothing to solve his immediate problems.

He called Sart and Sybelline into the bunker and explained to them and to Wilf what must be done.

## CHAPTER 13

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There was plenty of food and canned liquids in the bunker. Blade took a supply with him, also two fresh torches. It was a calculated risk, leaving the three of them behind, but there was little else he could do. Sart was a cipher and he was setting Wilf and Sybelline to watch each other. Both wanted power and the good life, and both still needed him to help them to those things.

He found the ramp and began the climb. Mole rats lurked after him but did not attack. Now and again he saw the glistening bones of a mole rat that had been eaten by its brethren. The heat was worse than the mole rats; it left him weak, dehydrated and giddy. He stopped often to rest.

The ramp ended in a long corridor of darkness and when he saw the first iron door he knew where he was—at the five-mile level. One of the doors was ajar and Blade pushed it with his foot. On the floor a skeleton had crumbled to dust. Blade swept his torch around the tiny chamber and saw the tubes through which food and drink were dropped to keep the prisoner alive, in total darkness, so long as he could stand it. Blade stood for a moment in deep thought. He had never underestimated Jantor, and now he began to grasp the iron will of the Gnomes chief. To survive in one of these pits, to be at the edge of blindness, and yet to come back, to keep sanity, that was an awesome achievement.

He rested and consulted the map. Wilf had marked the way with a red stylus. It was a circuitous route, slow and difficult, leading through a maze of long disused tunnels and ending far from the inhabited sewers. This did not please Blade. It would take him hours to make the ascent and even when he reached the city level he would be far from the center of action. He was tempted to ignore the map and seek a shortcut but decided against it. It would be easy to get lost down here. He could wander forever, or until he died or was snatched back by the computer. And his mission would be unfulfilled.

The mission—the secret of how rock dust was converted into power and how that power was transmitted through space. At the moment it looked hopeless; he was no nearer to the secret than he had been on first awakening in this Dimension X. Sybelline could not help him, nor Wilf. Certainly not Jantor. That left the Morphi elders, the ruling clique, or possibly the Selenes. Blade wiped at his sweat and combed out his beard with filthy fingers. It might come to that. Onta, the Selene Chief of Brain Secrets, might know the answer. But how in the hell was he—

The crystal in his brain, as though on cue, began to feed him thoughts. Lord Leighton was sending brain waves.

*Time short here in HD as computer return phase upcoming—if miss this phase will mean long*

*wait to recover you—urgent you discover how rock dust converted to power—crystal function perfect, am following you, noting all information as fed.*

Blade, sweating in the stygian depths, emitted a few choice HD words and began to climb again.

As he made his way through passage after passage, tunnel after tunnel, the heat began to decrease. He started to feel better. But now he faced the added burden of a time limit. There had been no head pains yet, so his return was not imminent, but he did not want to miss the return phase and stay on in this DX. He still had no real concept of Morphi or Gnomen time, and in any case did not want to risk it.

Blade came to a ladder set into a wall—it was marked on Wilf's map—and climbed a hundred feet into another passage. While on the ladder he made a confession to himself—he was becoming something of a coward after so many trips into DX. He was not as bold as he had been earlier, or perhaps not so foolish. He did not really know which it was.

He toiled on. The air grew better as the heat decreased. He came to a short tunnel that led into a sewer—very nearly walking into danger like a fool. As he was about to leave the cover of the tunnel, he heard Gnomen voices and ducked back just in time. He stomped out his torches, leaving him for the moment in total darkness.

Blade ran softly back to the mouth of the tunnel and saw torches coming toward him. He retreated a few steps and threw himself on his belly, watching as a procession of Gnomen women, with now and then a guard, filed past the slot-like opening of the tunnel. The women were laughing and talking among themselves. The guards, carrying spear bars, were sullen and kept urging them along. As the last of the women vanished from view, Blade moved closer to the tunnel entrance.

A single Gnomen guard was bringing up the rear. For some reason, he had fallen behind and was making no effort to catch up. He carried a torch and was trailing his spear bar along behind him in a casual manner, mumbling to himself as he passed the tunnel where Blade lurked.

It was over in seconds. Blade reached with the hook end of his bar, caught the man's denim breeches, pulled him into the tunnel mouth, tripped him and put the sharp end of the bar to his throat. He swept up the fallen torch and thrust it close to the astounded man's face.

"No sound," said Blake, "or I'll have your throat out. You know who I am?"

The guard nodded. He was typically Gnomen, bald and hairy, squat and muscular. He did not show fear nor was he inclined to make a fight of it. He stared up at Blade with dull brown eyes and nodded. "I know. You are the man Blade."

"Right," said Blade. "Do you want to die?"

The guard made the sign of the fylfot on his bald head. And answered calmly enough. "Not if it can be avoided."

Blade held the torch so it revealed his face. He smiled. "It can—if you answer me truthfully and cause no trouble. Who are those women? Why are they guarded and where do they go?"

To his surprise the Gnoman chuckled. "You of all people have a right to know that, man Blade. They are the women who have missed their bloody time. Or so Jantor says. They are with child, or so Jantor believes, and he sends them far down for protection and safety. So whatever happens they will have their babies and the Gnomen race will go on."

"I believe that," said Blade. "But why? What is it that threatens them and the children they may have?"

"There is much activity on the Moon," said the guard. "Jantor fears that they will invade or drop a

destroy bomb. He is not sure of this, but he takes precautions. It is hard to tell about the orbfolk—they may do nothing."

"*That*," said Blade aloud, but to himself, "is all I need now, an invasion by the Selenes."

The Gnoman was silent. Blade punched the spear bar a bit into his throat. "Where is Jantor now?"

"Up in the city of the Morphi. All the best warriors are. I, curse it, was not chosen. Instead I have to guard women. I am missing everything, the killing and the rape. All my life I have dreamed of having a beautiful Morphi woman even when it meant the pits to even think so. Now when there are thousands of sleepers ready for the taking I will miss it. I swear by every damned fylfot that it is unfair."

Blade knew a momentary sickness in his guts. But this was Dimension X. He had seen worse. He made his voice casual. "Jantor gives his consent to this?"

The Gnoman shook his head. "No. Not to the rape. But what of that? Jantor cannot be everywhere. As for the killing of the Morphi males, he has ordered it in person—not all, of course. We Gnomen will need slaves when we take over."

Jantor would have his hands full, Blade thought. He remembered thousands upon thousands of Morphi women up there in the city, all lovely and helpless sleepers. No wonder Jantor had forbidden rape. How could you keep an army together and under discipline in such circumstances?

He pressed the spear bar deeper into the man's flesh. For the first time the Gnoman showed fear. "You are going to slay me?"

"Maybe not. Do you know of the girl Norn?"

"I know of her. If she is anything to you I feel sorry for you."

"Why? Where is she?" Blade scowled and poked again with the spear bar.

The Gnoman hesitated and his eyes turned shifty. "I had forgotten. It was whispered that she was something to you. If I tell you, will you spare me?"

Blade kicked him in the face. "You are in no position to make bargains. Tell me before the count of three." He leaned on the bar.

The Gnoman guard, gasping for breath, spat out the words. "She is in the city, in the Hall of Entertainment, suspended over the mole rat pit. I would like to see that too, but I never will. It is said that the Morphi kept a hundred mole rats in that pit at one time. Starved them, studied them, watched them eat each other."

Blade eased the pressure on the bar. "Jantor thinks I will come to save Norn. Is that it?"

"How would I know that, man Blade? I am only a sewer guard who does what he is told."

Blade reasoned that for the moment Norn was safe enough. Uncomfortable, certainly terrified, but safe. Jantor was using her for bait, not for the mole rats. He would not destroy her until he was certain the ruse had failed.

He prodded the Gnoman. "How would you like to go up to the city and get your share of the sleeper women? Even join in the killing?"

The man grinned. "I would like it, man Blade. But how? My subchief gave me orders. If he finds me disobedient, he will kill me."

"That is your concern," said Blade. "You should be able to evade him. And if you do not take this chance, I will kill you now. So what do you say?"

"I will do it, man Blade. But what must I do?"

Blade took the man's bar and hurled it far down the tunnel. "Get up now. How are you called?"

"I am Dork."

"Then listen well, Dork. You will lead me to the city level by the shortest way, avoiding the main sewers. You will walk two paces before me. No more, no less. If you turn, or drop your torch, or shout, or in any manner betray me I will put my bar through you from behind. You grasp all this?"

Dork nodded. "And if I serve you well?"

Blade prodded him back to where he had stomped out the torches. "Pick up one torch and light it from this one. If you serve me well, I will give you freedom when we are up in the city. What you do then is your own concern. You agree?"

Dork nodded. He lit the torch. "I will serve you, and hope my subchief does not catch me. It will be worth the risk for a chance at a Morphi woman."

Blade prodded him again. "Then we go. You do know a short way up to the city?"

"Of course I know, man Blade. I have lived in the sewers all my life. And I will not betray you. For one, I do not want a spear bar through me and for two, I have been badly cheated by Jantor and my chiefs. I would kill you if I could, man Blade, but since I do not think I will get that chance I will serve you and also serve myself. I will show all that Dork is not to be cheated of his share of killing and loot. Mind it now—we turn off just ahead."

As Blade followed Dork along an upward-slanting, narrow passage, dank and slippery underfoot, he debated whether to kill Dork when the guard had served his purpose. He decided not. One more rape or killing would not make all that difference in the vast carnage he knew he would find in the city.

Dork led him into a subbasement, up ladders and stairs into a full basement where maintenance sleepers lay about, so far unharmed by Jantor's hordes. They were one floor below city level now and Blade kept his bar point close to Dork's back. If the Gnomans had treachery in mind, it would come soon.

There was an open freight elevator stalled halfway between floors. Blade bade Dork haul boxes and they climbed by means of them atop the elevator. From that vantage, they could just peer out at ground floor level. They were in an apartment house and the front doors were open. Blade made Dork lie flat on his belly while he, Blade, popped his head up for a quick look. The sound of the dying city was now loud, now fading, as the Gnomen shattered the silence with their cries of fury and triumph, an incessant babble of savagery.

A score of sleeper bodies were piled in the lobby. Blade, in one fast glance, noted no females among them. They were all the beautiful male sleepers and they had all been mutilated—either the power stud behind their ears had been gouged out or the heads had been cut off. Jantor knew what he was about. Even were the power to come on, these poor corpses could not be reactivated.

The bodies were naked. The Gnomen would be casting away their denim breeches and donning Morphi garb. Blade ducked down and told Dork what he had seen. Dork nodded and said, "What else? The time of the Gnomen has come at last. I have kept my word to you, man Blade. Can I go now and see to my share of Morphi women and loot? You promised."

"In a little time," Blade promised. "I need you still. Come. We must go higher."

Dork nodded. "Only hurry or I will lose out."

Blade peered into the lobby again. A band of Gnomen rushed past the open doors, screaming in fierce glee. Several had the heads of Morphi males impaled on their spear bars. Many carried cans of intoxicant and drank as they ran. One Gnoman came staggering along with a case of the stuff.

Blade nodded in satisfaction. Drunken Gnomen would be easier to elude and trick. Dork licked his lips and said, "They will drink it all, the fylfot desecrating bastards, before I can join them."

"Then hurry," ordered Blade. He poked Dork with his bar. "Up the stairs."

The stairs and some of the hallways were littered with Morphi sleepers. The males butchered behind the ears, the power stud gone, and the females stripped and well used.

Dork licked his thick lips again. "They have been here right enough, many of them. Now I must take their leavings." He made a move toward one of the females.

Blade cuffed him hard. "Not before me. Try again and I will forget my promise and kill you. Up—to the top floor."

There was a vacant apartment on the sixth floor. There were no sleepers—either male or female—though there were several in the corridor. Blade made Dork stand at a window and explain the city layout to him. As the man talked, Blade drew a crude map on the reverse side of the plastic parchment Wilf had given him.

Dork, in a frenzy to be gone, spoke rapidly and pointed out place after place, answered questions, chafing and grumbling as Blade insisted on a complete orientation. He pointed out the circular Government Building far across the city. "Jantor is certain to make his headquarters there," he said. "He is cunning. He will de-stud the Morphi leaders before he does anything else."

Blade agreed. In any case he must return to the Government Building sooner or later. The chute was there, and the chute was his only means of communication with Wilf and Sybelline waiting down in the power complex.

He prodded Dork. "Where is the Hall of Entertainment?"

The man pointed. "Yonder, to the left. It is not far. But if you think to save your Norn from the mole rats, let me warn you—for you kept your word and did not kill me—that she will be heavily guarded."

Blade studied the structure. It covered several blocks, and was but four stories tall. It was a square building. From each corner colored pennants appeared to stand out in a breeze, but this was deceiving. They were of reinforced plastic. There was no wind in the plastic city.

He kept Dork yet a moment. "Where would the mole-rat pit be?"

"That I cannot say. I have never been there, though I know what it is. And I do not like mole rats enough to go looking for them. Can I go now? I have told you all I know."

Blade gave him leave. "Go. Keep your mouth shut about me. If I am taken and see Jantor through any doing of yours, I will tell him how you deserted your trust."

Dork made the sign of the fylfot on his shiny head. "Never fear. I have never seen you, man Blade."

Blade watched as the Gnoman stalked into the kitchen. He came out carrying two cans of intoxicant and drinking from a third. He grinned at Blade. "Good. The first time in all my miserable life that I have tasted it. Ho-hah—I think I am going to like living the Morphi life."

Blade gave him a curt farewell. "Go carefully or you will not enjoy it long. And keep my warning in mind, Dork."

"I will, man Blade. Farewell."

Blade, as near the window as he dared, watched Dork leave the building. He was already staggering. Blade shook his head. The Gnomen were not used to the canned intoxicant. Probably more than half of Jantor's troops were drunk by now, drunk and useless.

The street below was quiet. From afar, toward the Government Building, came a hubbub of drunken, looting Gnomen. This quarter of the infinite city, Blade thought, had been pretty well sacked and it was not likely that they would return in force. The city stretched to the horizon and beyond, forever as far as Blade knew, and there would be always new loot and fresh Morphi females to rape. Another hazard that Jantor faced—before long his forces were going to be spread thin, would lose contact with him and each other as they ranged farther and farther afield.

For a few moments Blade lingered at the window. He found an angle from which he could observe the Moon. Even with his naked eye, he could discern great activity among the Selenes and he wondered what it meant. More of the great searchlights were trained on the city; there was a great bustle and movement of vehicles; a huge fleet of what appeared to be small and oddly formed aircraft were hovering over landing ports. Blade watched all this and pondered what Sybelline had confessed to him—the Selenes knew about him and were anxious to keep him alive so their scientists could study him. Blade smiled faintly. He, too, was anxious to stay alive. Just how this was to be accomplished he could not at the moment say. He had a plan of sorts, but implementing it was another matter. As he stared out at the drab buttermilk sky, at the eternal twilight, at the Selene Moon and the monstrous searchlights, he knew it would take all his guile, strength and luck to get out of this one.

Norn? He really did not want to think about the girl, but his conscience nagged. Ridiculous, for one could not afford a conscience in Dimension X. But there it was. She was of no importance to him. She loved, not he. Good sense bade him make for the Government Building and a parley with Jantor. It might even be the easiest and best way of assuring Norn's life.

Blade sighed and damned himself. He had accepted the girl's love, and in so doing he had incurred responsibility.

He searched the other apartments on the top floor. In the last one, near the stairs, he found a female sleeper naked on her bed, well raped but otherwise unharmed. On the floor beside her there was a male sleeper with his power stud hacked out. Blade, studying the gruesome scene, realized for the first time that the Morphi sleepers bled a bit when wounded—not much, in all cases, only a seepage of dark blood, but they did bleed.

Near the bed was a pair of Gnomen denim breeches. The clothes of the male sleeper were missing. Blade got out of his own clothes and stepped into the denim breeches. They were tight but he managed. He had enough chest and body hair to fool the Gnomen, but he also had a full head of hair, which would give him away immediately. He went into the kitchen and found soap but no water. Using a can of sweet drink, he lathered his head and began to shave. It was a slow and painful process.

When his head was bald he was still not satisfied. He was not bald enough. Gnomen had no hair roots.

He went back into the bedroom, meaning to smear some of the blood from the Morphi male sleeper on himself, when he noticed the door set back in an alcove. It was locked. Blade went to glance down into the street. It was quiet, deserted but for mutilated and raped sleepers and a few overturned cars. The building was quiet. He had to strain to hear the rampaging of the Gnomen hordes far off across the

endless city. By direction and the faintness of the sounds, the main body of Gnomen had moved well beyond the Government Building.

He went back to the locked door and attacked it with his spear bar. The plastic panels were tough but in less than a minute he had it down. He stepped in.

It was a small lab of some sort. For a moment he could not figure it out, then he remembered that the Morphi, when active, changed their blood once a month.

There was a naked Morphi female sleeper on a table. Beside her on a wheeled stand was a tall plastic flask somewhat resembling a water cooler back in HD. Tubes led from the flask to the sleeper on the table. Blade stepped nearer and studied her carefully. She had been in the act of changing her blood when the power stopped, and because of the locked door she was untouched by Gnomen.

As he bent over her Blade was aware of a reaction in his loins. He knew it for what it was, quite apart from the physical fact of an erection. He had been in Dimension X long enough, too long, and he was beginning to overadapt. She was lovely, this sleeper, so far inviolate, and as he gazed down at the slim body and perfect small breasts, the sleek texture of the skin and the sweet curve of thighs, he could not deny the urge to mount her.

Yet he did deny it, could still deny it. He concentrated on his examination of the sleeper, not touching her, and saw what he had missed before. In the inner crook of each elbow was a small metal ring containing a springed valve. The blood tubes had plastic nozzles that fitted into the valves. Blade went to the upright flask and turned a lever. Blood began to flow into the sleeper and to drain from her at the same time. The old blood went into the top of the flask, while the new drained from the bottom. Blade nodded. Quite a feat. Change your own blood. Do it yourself. No doubt it explained why the Morphi never aged, never lost their beauty.

He yanked the inflowing tube out of her arm. Dark blood dripped. Blade bent and let it spray on his shaven head. He smeared it on his face and chest. He soaked his spear bar with it.

He left the apartment and went down to the street. The disguise was the best he could come up with. At a distance it might work. He hunched over to conceal his tallness and began to shamble, as did the Gnomen. He saw nothing but sleepers as he made his way toward the Hall of Entertainment.

Blade passed through a park that the Gnomen had missed. Here the sleepers were untouched, the males with their power studs intact and the females unravished. As he made his way through and out of the park he counted about five hundred males. He knew then how to combat the Gnomen. The Morphi outnumbered them by the hundreds of thousands. Repower the Morphi and the rebellion of the sewer people would be crushed.

Blade did not want that. An idea had come to glow and grow in his mind. He was going to have a shot at carrying it out. He could do no less than try. There must be a way in which the Gnomen and the Morphi could live together in peace and mutual respect.

## CHAPTER 14

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Sart tried to remember what it was that the man Blade had whispered to him before he left the power complex. Sart could think better when Blade was there to prompt him. Now, as he stood guard at the door of the bunker and watched Wilf and Sybelline whisper, Sart strained his limited mentality trying to recall Blade's words. Something about the button. The black button in the red plaque. They were not to touch it, not until the man Blade sent a message. If they tried to touch it he, Sart, was to stop them. Kill



them if he must. Was that it? Did he remember rightly?

Sybelline and her son-paramour, Wilf, sat close together on the table where she had so recently simulated the love act. The white-haired woman was still sexually aroused, but she did not want Wilf. She wanted Blade.

Intuition told her that she would never have Blade, that he had no interest in her, that he had been hard put to conceal his revulsion when she offered herself. Rage began to build in her, anger at Blade and Wilf, who seemed so content to serve him. Her own son and lover had turned against her.

But it was not a time to think of pleasure. That could wait. Sybelline saw her chance to be Queen of the Morphi slipping away. What was Blade doing up there? Betraying her? Striking a bargain with Jantor? And what would the Selenes, Onta, think and do when she did not communicate with them? She had been a fool, Sybelline brooded, to allow herself to be trapped down here six miles from the scene of action. Blade had outsmarted her.

True that she had made submission to him, but that was only a formality. She had done it before, with other masters, and it never meant anything. She was Sybelline. She was meant to rule. Soon now she must act or her chance would be forever gone.

Wilf watched his mother and kept his thoughts to himself. He desired nothing but to serve the man Blade. He had never seen anyone like Blade, nor dreamed that such a being could exist. How like a god he was, and Wilf had read enough in Morphi not to believe in God. But in Blade he saw divinity incarnate. He saw nothing impossible to Blade. Blade was capable of ruling the Gnomen and the Morphi, and perhaps even of defeating the Selenes. Wilf cherished his fantasies. If Blade succeeded then he—Wilf—would sit at his right hand and share all his triumphs.

"He has been gone a long while," said Sybelline, "and still no message down the chute." She glanced at an indicator on the bunker wall. It would buzz and register with a sweep hand whenever something touched the plastic pads beneath the chute.

Wilf stared at her. He was getting a feeling about his mother. He had never trusted her, but now he trusted her even less. He knew her better than she suspected. He knew she had contempt for him, underrated him. He sensed that she was brooding and unhappy and this might lead to anything. Sybelline was capable of doing rash and unpleasant things, for all her intelligence.

"He had a long way to go," said Wilf. "Six miles—and with mole rats and Gnomen to contend with. My trip down was hard enough; his journey up will be more so. He may be dead by now."

He did not really think so, but he wanted to see her reaction.

It was mixed, half smile and half frown. "I need him," she said, "and I wish I did not. I am a bit afraid of him. I think he wants power for himself."

Wilf laughed. "And you want it for yourself."

Sybelline admitted to it. "I should have it. I have waited long and endured much." Her green eyes narrowed. "And you, Wilf, are you after power also?"

He thought a moment before saying, "Not for myself. I would not mind sharing it with the man Blade. Mostly I desire knowledge—I want to know for the sake of knowing." He pointed to the consoles surrounding them, to the dials and gauges and toggles, to the tunnel leading to the master power cube.

"How does it all work? Why? Why are the Gnomen the lower orders, the Morphi our masters and the Selenes theirs? Why?"

Sybelline sneered at him. "You are a fool, even if you are my son. Knowledge is power, I admit that, but it is impossible to have power and use it to your own advantage without fully understanding it. That is the difference between us. You fret your meager brains about the whys of power. I want it—now—to use for myself."

Sart spoke from the door. "The mole rats are creeping closer again. They are over their scare."

Sybelline looked at him in contempt. She had made her decision and knew what to do. This was an opening.

"Go and kill one or two with your spear bar," she told him. "Give the others something to eat."

Sart came into the light of the torches. He made the sign of the fylfot on his bald head. "Me? Face the mole rats? I cannot, Sybelline. I have always been in terror of them. I cannot face them."

Sybelline looked at Wilf. He was heavily bandaged and could barely move. He was little better than Sart, she thought.

But at least Wilf had ideas. He pointed to a corner of the bunker. On the wall hung a red plastic cylinder with a short hose attached. Blade would have compared it to a fire extinguisher in Home Dimension.

"The laughing powder," he said. "It works on Gnomen and Morphi, why not on mole rats."

Sybelline knew of the powder in the little tank. She had seen it in use. Wilf had only read of it. Sart had done neither, but had heard the stories. One squirt of powder from the tank and you began to laugh. You could not stop. You grew weak with laughter, your head ached, your bones turned to slop, you fell and could not move. All this from one light whiff of the powder. A heavier dosage and you died laughing. It was all the weapon the Morphi had ever needed to control the Gnomen. They had others, more powerful weapons, but neither Wilf nor Sybelline understood them.

Sart stared at the cylinder in awe. He shook his head. "I dare not use it. I might harm myself. I do not understand it."

Sybelline made a sound of contempt. "Why Blade spared your miserable life, I will never comprehend."

Sart scratched his head and admitted that he did not understand it either. Sybelline snatched his spear bar from him before he knew what was happening. "Come with me," she commanded. "We do not need the laughing powder for mole rats. I will show you how it is done. Fetch one of the torches," she ordered Sart.

Wilf watched them go with a lack of concern. He hoped the mole rats would eat them both. If so, they would serve a double purpose. Their deaths would leave him a clear field with the man Blade and provide food to keep the mole rats at bay. Wilf stretched out full length on the table and began to fantasize again. What would it be like to kiss the feet of the man Blade?

Sart was right about the mole rats. They had greatly increased in numbers and formed a gobbling, sinister-eyed circle around the bunker. Sart, near to panic, held the torch high and waved it. The creatures held their ground.

Sybelline readied the spear bar. "Go just in front of me," she ordered. "There to the right, that big one. If I can kill him they will be satisfied for a time."

Sart gibbered in fear. He clutched at his heavily bandaged torso. "My wound," he complained. "It pains me greatly. I may fall and be eaten. I cannot do this thing. I—"

"Turn around," said the woman. "Let me see. Perhaps the bandage and the shield have come loose."

She knew the exact location of Sart's grievous wound. She readied the sharp end of the bar. As he turned, she thrust hard at the shield protecting his heart. The keen point went deep, easily piercing the plastic shield, the heart behind it and grating on bone in his spine.

Sart was a Gnomon and brave. He glared at her, reached for her with his bare hands, tried to walk along the bar impaling him to get at her. Sybelline retreated, still holding to the bar, seeking to retrieve it and strike again. Sart grabbed the bar with blood-slippery hand and sought to pull it out of his body. Failing that he tried to pull himself along it, to push it behind him, out of his flesh, so he could reach her. At last, beginning to panic, Sybelline released the bar. But it was too late for Sart. He went to his knees, blood pouring from his mouth. The mole rats picked up the scent and went into a frenzy.

Sart stopped twitching. The mole rats began to close in. Sybelline tugged the bar out of Sart's body and ran for the safety of the bunker. The horde of mole rats was already ripping and tearing at the body.

Sybelline was gasping for breath when she entered the bunker, still carrying the blood-stained spear bar.

Wilf sat up. "What happened?"

Sybelline was shaking, her voice trembled. "The mole rats got Sart. We killed one and he slipped in the blood. They were on him before he could get up. I could do nothing. I had to flee to save my own life." She found a towel and wiped blood from the bar. Her gown was badly spattered.

Wilf stared at her. He rested on an elbow and listened to the terrible sounds out there in the dark. He did not believe her. Sart was stupid, but not that stupid. And while he was brave enough in other matters he was a coward where mole rats were concerned. Sart would never have gotten close enough to the creatures to slip and be eaten by them.

Wilf smiled at his mother. "You lie to me. You killed him and fed him to the mole rats."

Sybelline smiled back at him. "Yes, I did. So what matter? Now move over and perform for your mother, Wilf. All that blood has excited me."

She got on the table with him, pulled up her bloody gown and opened her thighs. She cradled his head on her breasts.

"I command," she whispered. "You are my son and you must obey."

Wilf did not have to be urged. He did not really want to but he was young in Gnomon years and he was ready instantly. Sybelline, as usual, spoke no words and did not moan or even move very much. She simply engulfed him. She was quite capable of taking her pleasure and thinking at the same time. She did both now.

When it was over she patted his head and said, "Sleep now for a time. I will watch for Blade's message. It cannot be long and we must be ready. I will waken you the moment it comes."

Wilf, sleepy and dazed, realized that she had used her body and his to make a fool of him. He sought to struggle up, off the table. He looked at her. Something was wrong. Something in her smile was—

Sybelline had the cylinder in her hands and was pointing the hose nozzle at him. A fine spray of powder, under great pressure, hit him in the face. Wilf began to laugh.

She gave him another squirt, and another, and left him in laughter, too weak to move. She picked up the spear bar and began to gouge the power studs out of the necks of the four sleeper technicians. It was

bloody work but no matter, she was already covered with blood.

## CHAPTER 15

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Richard Blade made his way through the ravished city. He kept to the shadows as much as possible, noticing that more and more of the searchlights were being beamed at the city from the Moon. The Selenes were up to something, no doubt of that. Nor was there any doubt that they knew precisely what was going on down here.

The streets and squares were littered with Morphi sleepers, the females all raped and most of the men either destudded or beheaded. But the wandering, drunken squads of Gnomen were careless killers. They had missed some of the men, who slept unharmed. They were also fighting among themselves. Near one particularly beautiful Morphi female were two dead Gnomen. Each had a spear bar through him. Blade smiled grimly. Cans of intoxicant lay nearby. They had killed each other over the women. He was about to turn away when he noticed an iron chain and a medallion about the neck of one of the dead Gnomen. He had been a subchief. Blade stripped the body of the chain and medal and hung it about his own neck. The authority it carried might come in handy when his disguise was put to the test.

That was not long in coming. He was nearing the Hall of Entertainment, slipping from door to door, when a Gnoman emerged from a building ahead of him. The man was laden with loot and was dragging a female Morphi along by the hair. Blade hailed him. Might as well know now if his disguise worked. The Gnoman did not look drunk and it would be a fair test.

"You, there," he called in a voice of authority, "why are you lagging behind your group? Where are the others?"

The Gnoman, startled, dropped his loot and whirled to face Blade. He clutched his bar in one hand and with the other held fast to the hair of the woman sleeper. He peered at Blade with red-brown eyes. His tone was bellicose.

"Who are you? What is it to you what I do?"

"I am Yorick," Blade improvised, "and I am a subchief. I act on the orders of Jantor. There are too many strays and skulkers and I am sent to round them up. How are you called, man?"

The Gnoman stared at the iron chain and medallion and became less sullen. "I am Tortat, from the far outer sewers. My group has gone to the Government Building on orders."

"Why are you not with them? And why do you carry that female sleeper with you?"

The man let go the hair and the body slumped to the street. He grinned at Blade. "I took a fancy to her. She is best of all I have found and so I carry her with me. When the notion takes me again I will have her handy."

Blade pushed it a bit, wanting to test matters still further. "Leave her and be off to your group, Tortat. You can take the rest of your loot. Cause no more trouble and I will forget this. Go now."

The Gnoman glowered and narrowed his eyes at Blade. Blade moved his bar into thrust position.

The advantage fell to Blade. The Gnoman grumbled and fell back. "You are big for a Gnoman. How came you by all that blood? It masks your face."

Blade pushed his advantage. "Go, I said. Never mind the blood. I carry out my orders and kill Morphi instead of looking for loot and females. Now, if you are not gone by a three count your name

goes to Jantor for punishment."

The man held up a hand. "I go—I go—but I beg leave to wait for my comrade. He will not be long."

"Comrade?" Blade had not bargained on two. He turned wary and moved his bar into a defensive position. The Gnomon turned to shout into the foyer of the building he had just left.

"Porfax. Hurry up, you fool. There is an officer here who says we must join our group."

Blade moved so he could peer into the foyer. Another Gnomon was topping a female sleeper, copulating furiously. He answered without looking up from his work. "A moment, Tortat, a moment. I am nearly finished."

Blade broke off the encounter. He walked away, growling back to the Gnomon, Tortat. "Let him finish. Then both get to your group. You may not have heard, but Jantor is punishing all lawbreakers by feeding them to the mole rats. It is your choice."

Blade rounded a corner and broke into a run. His disguise had worked well enough thus far. Then the first head pain struck him.

The agony blinded him. A streak of black lightning in his brain. He reeled into another foyer and fell to his knees, clutching his temples. He damned the computer—not now, not yet, not while he still had hopes of completing his mission. He still had a bare chance to bring peace into this devastated and terror-ridden DX.

The pain eased. It was only the preliminary groping of the computer as it moved near the return phase. Blade concentrated with all his power, trying to get through to Lord Leighton by the crystal.

Almost immediately the crystal reversed itself, the surge alternated to feedback from HD, and Blade, though grateful that the pain was gone, began to curse as he deciphered Lord L's thoughts in his own mind. The damned old fool. At a time like this!

*If possible explore use of quarks and partons by scientists DX. Projection here of information received so far indicates possible accelerator capable of 500 million, correct, billion, repeat billion electron volts. Quantum also possible theory with quanta, i.e., packages, transmitted in units for powering each organism Morphi. Realize this complex but unable simplify. Urge you at all costs contact DX form of life for this information—in following priority: method transferring rock to power—method transmitting through space, re latter explore magnetohydrodynamics, also cryogenic sub-surface—this latter definite possible in view of your sewer people—do best for England—hurry—return phase approaching. Leighton.*

Blade sat on the floor of the foyer and swore. He rubbed his shaven, blood-smeared head. An afterthought of Lord L's popped into his brain via crystal.

*...proud of you. Renaming this mission Prometheus. Also alert for possible triple or quadruple breeder reactors. Keep close contact. Crystal working perfectly. LL.*

Blade said some nasty words. All that scientific garbage—did the old man really think that Blade was able to comprehend it, much less obtain information by bluff on the basis of a garbled message which meant nothing at all to Blade? He was more at home in Morphi than he was in the scientific gibberish Lord L had just planted in his brain.

Such thinking was a form of self-pity and Blade knew it. It would never do. He had no time for self-pity, no time for anything but survival and, just possibly, some answers.

He waited to be sure there would be no more head pains, then continued on to the Hall of

Entertainment. He had to smile as he approached the massive building. Lord L would explode if he knew that Blade, far from looking for "quarks and partons," was trying to save a Gnoman girl from mole rats. Just at that moment it would have pleased Blade beyond measure to suspend both Lord L and the Prime Minister over a pit of mole rats.

The lobby doors of the Hall of Entertainment stood open. Blade, from a doorway across the way, could see on a diagonal through the lobby and into the inner recesses of the hall. Half a dozen Gnomen troopers lounged about the lobby. They did not look happy. They would be, Blade pondered, part of the guard left to stand watch over Norn, if indeed Jantor was using her as bait.

There was no sign of the girl. He would have to go into the hall to test the trap. All he could see, apart from the lobby, was a maze of corridors. Blade hefted his spear bar and strode boldly across the street and into the lobby. Audacity was the only way. He bent over to conceal his tallness and shambled, wondering once again why he was risking everything for the sake of one Gnoman girl. It could not be love—he scarcely knew her other than sexually—and so it must be sentiment, and sentiment was extremely dangerous in Dimension X.

Most of the Gnomen soldiers ignored him. Three were playing dice and did not even look up. One fellow, a sub-subchief, glanced at Blade and made a vague gesture of salute.

"Have you come to relieve us?" the man asked. "Where are the others?"

Blade answered, "They are close behind. How is the girl Norn?"

The Gnoman shrugged. "As before. She no longer weeps or screams. What word from Jantor?"

"That you are relieved. You can join your group again and get back to killing Morphi. I will take over here."

They were all looking at him now. The dice players had stopped. The sub-subchief rubbed his sleek head. "You alone will take over?"

Blade snapped his voice at them. "No, you fool. My unit is just behind me. They are attending to some details that were overlooked and that Jantor is going to hear about. Many of the Morphi males are untouched and many of the females unraped. This carelessness cannot be tolerated. Jantor has given strict orders that every female be raped. He has good reason for this, which you would not understand. So be off with you. I order it. See that not one Morphi woman is overlooked."

It worked. The six Gnomen licked their lips, made the sign of the fylfot and took off. Blade stood alone in the huge lobby.

He counted nine doors opening off the lobby. He chose a central one and shoved it with his foot, his spear bar ready. At once he heard the dreadful and familiar sound of mole rats, a gnashing and gobbling noise of blind fury and hunger. He stepped through the door.

Blade was in the rear circular aisle of a down-slanting arena. Wide aisles led down between rows of seats to a center stage. Part of the stage floor was missing, revealing a pit, and over the pit hung the girl Norn. She hung limply, swaying a bit, her head collapsed forward on her bare breasts. She was unconscious. From the pit below her welled the sounds of the mole rats.

Then he saw the chain move. The girl's body moved slowly downward, closer to the pit opening. Then it stopped. Norn had endured this inhuman torture for hours. It was just as well she was unconscious.

For a few seconds Blade stood mentally digesting the incredible scene. The seats of the arena were

filled with Morphi spectators, male and female, and they were untouched. They sat or stood or lay about as they had been when the power went off. On that part of the stage still intact were actors, both men and women, one with his hand outstretched in dramatic declaration. Near Blade, leaning against a railing, was a Morphi vendor with a tray of sweet canned drink and plastic-wrapped food. Blade gave him a push with his foot and the vendor tumbled over, scattering the contents of his tray.

The ceiling of the arena was of transparent plastic, a skylight admitting the milky rays of the Moon and, Blade noted, the harsher beam of a searchlight.

He started down the aisle toward the stage. He leaped to the stage and moved to the edge of the pit. Norn did not move. He called to her.

"Norn? It is Blade. Can you hear?"

No answer. Her lithe naked body twirled on the chain. Blade peered down into the pit. They knew he was there, blind or not. They were leaping and snarling, gobbling, snashing, an obscene wriggling mass of slimy bodies. One big fellow leaped higher than the rest and its cruel spade claws slashed at the pit wall not four feet below Blade.

"Norn?" Still no answer. Under the mass of mole rats he could see shiny bones. The big one leaped again, closer this time. Fear and hatred surged in Blade and he nearly flung his spear bar.

Norn's body seemed unhurt. He studied the chains. She was suspended by irons around her wrists and a collar about her neck. These led to a master chain suspended from the flies over the stage. A belt around her narrow waist, with yet another chain leading off to one side, carried her weight and prevented the irons from cutting her flesh. Thoughtful of Jantor, Blade thought grimly. He does not wish to give me damaged goods.

He circled the pit. To draw her in he would use the chain that was attached to the waist belt. It was out of reach, belayed around a peg high on a wall. He cast about for something to stand on. Norn opened her eyes and gazed at him.

For a moment she could not speak. Her mouth was dry and her lips encrusted. She looked down at the writhing mass of horror; her body convulsed as she sought to scream and brought out only a parched sound. Her glance came back to Blade and there was no recognition.

He called to her. "Norn. It is Blade. Don't look at them. I'll have you safe in a minute." How could she have known him, with his head shaven and reeking of blood. Furiously he sought for something to stand on. He could not reach that damned chain and the stage was bare.

Norn spoke in a cracked voice. "Blade? Is it you, man Blade?"

"It is," Blade snapped. "Save your breath. Don't look down. Just believe that I am here and nothing is going to happen to you."

She said, "It is a trap, man Blade. Jantor knew you would come here."

"I know that." Blade leaped from the stage. He pushed a Morphi sleeper from a seat and with a great heave wrenched the seat from its fittings. "I expect Jantor any moment," he told her as he leaped back onto the stage. "That is no great problem. He still needs me and I need him."

By standing on the seat he could reach the chain. He undid it and began to pull her toward him. The mole rats, sensing the cheat, set up a renewed cry. Norn closed her eyes and retched.

Blade caught her feet, then her waist. He tied the chain again so she could not swing back over the pit. There was now the problem of getting the irons off her.

"There are clasps," she whispered. "I cannot touch them or I would have given up and dropped into the pit long ago. You see them? Where the chains fit into the wrist irons and the collar."

Blade found the joins and twisted the irons loose. Norn clung to him, trembling. "I did not think you would come, man Blade. I did not think you had love for me."

Blade did not answer. He had a decision to make. Should he go to Jantor or wait for Jantor to come to him? Time became increasingly important as the computer wound toward the return phase. He had thought to get Jantor and the Morphi leaders together, to arrange a truce, to get them to unite against the orfolk. To succeed he must first get Jantor to call off the rape and havoc, then send a message to Sybelline and Wilf bidding them turn on the power. With the Morphi elders as prisoners, and with Blade in command, there was a bare chance that something could be worked out.

"Blade?" Norn was stroking his cheek.

He did not love her, but he could not refuse her comfort. He held her close to him and gazed out over the crowded arena. The sleepers stared back at him, some in the act of applauding. From the pits came the hungry snarls.

What had gone wrong? Where was Jantor? Surely by now his spies would have told him that Blade had taken the bait.

He stroked Norn's hair. "Can you walk?"

"Not well. I am sore and stiff. My legs pain and I have not eaten or drunk. But I will try."

"I'll carry you." He tossed her over his shoulder.

"Where do we go?"

"To find Jantor."

Her mouth was against his ear, her whisper husky with fear. "No need for that. See?"

All around the arena, doors were opening. Gnomen troopers blocked them. They were in the wings and behind the sets and in the flies overhead. They all carried spear bars; Blade recognized the scarlet-dyed denims and the red fylfots drawn on each bald head. These were Jantor's personal bodyguard, the best and most intelligent of the Gnomen.

A subchief advanced to within six feet of Blade and the girl and held up his hand. All the Gnomen halted. Blade could feel Norn trembling.

The subchief peered at Blade in puzzlement, as though he did not really believe what he was seeing.

"I am the man Blade," he said calmly. "The blood is Morphi blood, not Gnomen, and I am as impatient to see Jantor as he to see me. Where is he?"

The subchief pointed with his spear bar. Jantor, as hairy and toad-like as ever, wearing a purple plastic cape, was striding down the aisle toward the stage. He did not smile or frown, but kept his deep-set brown eyes firmly on Blade and the girl. His voice, when at last he spoke, had the coarse gravelly quality that Blade remembered.

Jantor wasted no words. "Where is Sybelline?" He paused just below the stage, looking up at Blade.

Blade was very conscious of the pit. A wrong answer now, a wrong move, a misunderstanding or tantrum on Jantor's part, and both he and Norn would be food for the mole rats. Not even a desperation message via the crystal could snatch him back to HD before his flesh was gnawed from his bones.



"In the power complex," he said. "Six miles below. She is awaiting my signal to turn on the power."

Jantor watched him with hard eyes. He gestured around the arena with its hundreds of sleepers. "There has been a slip-up here. All males intact and no female raped. I am served by fools. How would you send this message, Blade?"

Only the truth would serve him now. "There is a chute atop the Government Building. It leads to the power complex. I will send my message down the chute, attached to some object of weight."

Jantor nearly smiled. "Will send, Blade, with some weighty body? Perhaps your corpse!"

"Perhaps. But hear me, Jantor. It was not my intention to send *any* message until I had conferred with you."

"To what purpose, Blade?" He pointed with his bar at the sleepers. "You think I want them awake? Am I a fool, then? There are many of them, even after all we have killed or depowered, and few of us. They have terrible weapons and we have only spear bars. You are a fool, Blade, or you are mad. Turn the power on and they will destroy you as certainly as they will me. And you are a double fool to trust Sybelline, for I have long suspected her of being a traitor, of betraying us to the orbfolk."

"That is true." Blade nodded. "She is in touch with the Selenes, but she has not yet betrayed us. She wants me. She thinks that together we can rule both the Morphi and the Gnomen, and make a peace with the Selenes. She has been promised much by the orbfolk. If you will have patience, Jantor, and give me leave, I think I can handle Sybelline."

Jantor said harshly, "She is as vicious as a mole rat." He stroked his bald head. "I do not like your ideas, Blade. I do not know if it is better to kill you now and have done with that worry or to listen to you."

Blade bluffed. He smiled. "Listen to me for a few moments. You can always kill me later. But first—you know I had nothing to do with the rape and death of Alixe?"

Jantor stroked his beard. "I know that. It was Sart. I know also that you and he killed many of my best men when you escaped. For this I can forgive you, for it was a natural thing to do. But Sart must be given to me. Does he still live?"

"No," lied Blade, not knowing he spoke truth. "He died of his wound. Sybelline is with her son Wilf in the power complex, no one else."

Jantor snorted. "Her pup and lover. But that is nothing against him. In fact I have nothing against Wilf except his choice of mothers."

"It was my thought," said Blade, "that we go together to the Government Building and make prisoners of the Morphi elders, the high council. Only when we have them in absolute security, and the power complex also, will we repower them and make an effort to come to terms. That way we hold the power over them and they must treat with us."

Jantor was thinking hard and frowning as he did so. "That might have worked but for one thing—I have sliced all the elders to bits. I cannot put them together again and so we cannot treat with them. So we dare not turn on the power. The Morphi, without leaders, will riot. They will turn on us, and on equal terms Gnomen cannot defeat the Morphi. No, man Blade, you had better leave matters to me. We must kill Sybelline and Wilf and go on with the destruction of the Morphi. I see no other way."

Already Blade had an alternative plan. "You cannot do that. Admit it. This city goes on forever. Your task will never be finished. And there will always be the danger that someone, sometime, will turn on the

power."

Jantor nodded in agreement. "I know that. I will just have to do the best I can, for as long as I can. One thing I do know—I have come out of the sewers at last and I am not going back—nor are my people."

"Only listen a moment longer," Blade begged. "There are still the Selenes. They can control the Morphi. If I can make contact with them, set up a parley, it may be that the Selenes will force the Morphi to keep the peace when they are repowered."

"You are being a fool again!" Jantor spat. "The orbfolk care nothing for either Morphi or Gnomen. We are less than mole rats to them. They care nothing for what goes on down here."

"You have not been watching their Moon lately," said Blade slyly. "They are worried about something. And it was the Selenes who seduced Sybelline with promises, who got her to turn off the Morphi power by treachery. Why?"

Jantor scowled. "How should I know that? I dare not think as high as the Moon. I know the Selenes can do as they like with all of us and we are helpless against it."

"I know something that you do not, Jantor. The Selenes are much interested in me. Very interested. They do not want anything to happen to me. Do you not see it? I can use myself as a bargaining point. And I will if I must. But all this can be worked out later. I think we had better go to the Government Building and send a guard of your best men down the chute to take control of the power complex. I am something of your mind in that. I do not trust Sybelline too far."

There was no sound, but Blade felt an odd tingling in his body. The light changed, became mellow, brighter and more cheery. There was a murmur, ever growing, of crowd noises. A babble that in this context was terrifying—laughter and coughing and sneezes and chatter and cat calling. There was a movement of bodies and feet.

The light grew, mellow and bright and sourceless. Blade was as dumb-stricken as Jantor and his men.

Blade was looking directly at the Morphi actor with his hand out in a motion of declamation: the hand swept up and out and the actor's voice came strong and fluid, resonant. "I say to you, my love, that be I as low as a Gnoman, or as high as a Selene, nothing will ever change my regard for you. I—"

Blade had only time to think that it must have been a very bad play.

Jantor leaped at him, screaming. "Treachery! The power. The power is on!"

Someone in the audience shouted. "Gnomen—Gnomen! Invasion. Call the patrols. Gnomen—Gnomen—"

Morphi women began to scream. The actor rushed at Jantor. Blade ducked, caught the man and flung him over his shoulder into the pit of mole rats.

Jantor raised his spear bar to thrust at Blade but he did not follow through. He was paralysed with shock and fear. Blade seized the moment.

He bellowed at Jantor and the Gnomen near him. "This was no treachery of mine. It's Sybelline. Follow me. Obey. We still have a chance. Come on!"

The Morphi began to close in. They were more intelligent and came out of shock faster than the Gnomen. Some of the men were trying to wrestle spear bars away from the Gnomen while a continuous

cry went up for patrols. Blade did not want to meet any patrols.

He ran a Morphi through with his bar and then began to lay about him with the hooked end. He shouted at Jantor and the guardsmen. "Fight, damn you, fight! Kill them! Follow me and fight your way out!"

To Norn he said, "Stay close to me."

Blade battered his way through the crowd. The Gnomen were beginning to fight now, heeding his instructions, clotting together in an entanglement of spear bars and making for the street. The Morphi audience, without weapons and dependent on their patrols, fell back before the onslaught. Blade led the way, swinging the bar in murderous circles, crushing and maiming, feeling the battle rage soar in him.

It could not last. He knew that. No doubt they were all as good as dead or in the five mile pits. The patrols would come and they would have weapons with which neither the Gnomen nor Blade could cope.

At the moment he did not care. There was no time to consciously think it out, so he followed his instinct to kill Morphi.

Flesh and blood was to be preferred over plastic. Sweat, hair and smells were better than eternal beauty, power studs and brains that could be shut off at the will of a few leaders. Tainted blood was better than blood that was changed every month. Eternal beauty, youth and sex was all right except that the price was too high.

Somewhere, off over the city, Blade heard a siren.

## CHAPTER 16

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The sirens were like none Blade had ever heard—a continuous, high-pitched hooting. He caught a glimpse of cars speeding past. Each car contained six Morphi. They wore arm brassards and snouty gas masks; each had a cylinder strapped to his back and carried a nozzled hose at the ready.

Norn pressed against Blade, clinging to his arm. Jantor was just behind. They were in an alley, some dozen buildings from the square and the Hall of Entertainment, and by some miracle they had not been spotted.

"Those masks?" asked Blade. "Why do they wear them?"

Jantor grimly explained about the laughing death powder.

"Come on," Blade commanded. "Hurry and go quietly. Down to the sub-1 basements. Go before me, Norn. Quickly."

Jantor began to reveal a fatalistic side. "It is hopeless. We cannot fight them on even terms. They have powder cannon as well and will set them up on every corner. As soon as they organize, we are doomed. I say to stand and kill as many as possible before we die."

Blade called a halt. They were in a sub-1 basement, a large area evidently used for storage. Three Morphi workers, just coming awake, were slashed to bits by spear bars. Blade made a fast count. Just over a hundred of Jantor's guard.

"My people are dispersed all over the city," Jantor continued. "I have no communication with them. They will all be hunted down."

Blade became angry. "You have a choice," he said curtly. "Go and give yourself up, or listen to me and obey. I tell you it is *no* hopeless."

Jantor leaned on his bar and scowled around at his men. "What say you?"

To a man they shouted, "We obey you, Jantor."

Jantor nodded at Blade. "And I, for this time, will obey you. Very well, how do you propose to get us out of this?"

Blade beckoned him to one side. "Some must be sacrificed. You choose them, say thirty men. They must go up and over the roofs, expose themselves, and draw the patrols *away* from the Government Building. Be sure they understand that—away from the Government Building."

Jantor nodded. "They will all die."

"I know. Choose them quickly."

Blade waited with Norn while it was done. The chosen men did not question the order. They filed out and up a stair that would lead them to the roof. They knew nothing of operating the lifts, now with power restored.

Jantor said, "And now what?"

"We must remain in the basements and hack our way through the walls, heading for the Government Building. The walls are thin and no match for our bars. Begin."

"But the direction? I cannot—"

"I can. Follow me." During his last moments above ground level, Blade had oriented himself. By bearing straight ahead and keeping the fronting street always to his right, they would reach the square surrounding the Government Building. How to cross the square was another matter. But he would leave that bridge until time to cross it. In a matter of seconds, Blade battered a hole through the thin plastic and stepped into the next basement. He told Jantor, "You take the next wall, and the man after you the next, and so on. Just enough so we can pass single file. Always a fresh man at work. Hurry now. Come on, come on!"

He fell to the rear of the line with Jantor and Norn. Jantor's spirits were sinking again. "We are fools. What if we do reach Government Building? That is the first place the patrols will go after they realize what has happened."

Blade put an arm around Norn. "I am counting a great deal on that. It will take them time to realize just what *has* happened. I thought you wrong to destroy the council of elders, but now it may save us. The Morphi will be confused and leaderless. They have just come awake without knowing they have been asleep. Most of them will have no idea of what is happening. Some will know that there are Gnomen above-ground and they will leave it to someone else to handle. Has there ever been a Gnomen rebellion before?"

With some pride Jantor said, "I am the first who ever dared."

"Good. Chaos and confusion will work for us. The patrols are sure to go after the decoys. Will you other Gnomen, those scattered about the city, put up a fight?"

Jantor nodded gloomily. "They will die fighting, as best they can. Most of them are drunk, though, and will be no match for the patrols."

"They will still buy us time," said Blade. "Now you, Jantor, go to the fore and keep your men at it. Push them. Kill whoever slackens, as an example. Let no Morphi escape to tell the patrols where we are."

When the big Gnomes king had gone, Norn looked at Blade and whispered, "Is not this all a lie, man Blade? You do not really think we can escape and live?"

Blade met her glance. "You are right. We have no chance—unless we can find masks to guard against the powder. That would change everything."

"I know where there are masks," said Norn. "Great crates of them. Thousands of them."

Blade kissed her. "Where?"

"In the basement of a building on the square across from the Government Building. I followed Sybelline one time and saw them. I thought nothing—"

Blade did not hear her. He seized her arm and ran to the head of the line where another wall was being pierced. Jantor plunged through the opening with a great shout. Five Morphi, surprised at a game of chance, tried to scurry off in terror. Jantor speared one and his men two more. Blade, on Jantor's heels, hurled his spear bar at the fourth. But it was the fifth and last Morphi who nearly did them in. He did not flee.

Instead he snatched a canister from a wall rack and directed a fine spray of compressed powder at Jantor. One of the king's subchiefs leaped in time to take the spray squarely in the face.

A dozen spear bars tore the Morphi to pieces. The subchief collapsed, laughing, agony in his brown eyes. Jantor knelt, and for a moment stroked the man's head. Then he rose and lifted his bar.

"It was a gallant thing he did for me. I cannot leave him for them to find." He smashed the man's skull.

Blade picked up the canister and examined it. It was small, with no straps for carrying on the back. Instead it could be carried in one hand and operated by pressing a button. There was no hose.

He held it up for all to see. "Keep on the lookout for these. And for the larger cylinders. Maybe we can turn their own weapons against them."

"They will have masks," said Jantor.

"So will we if our luck holds," Blade answered, and explained what Norn had told him.

Blade had reckoned very near. Four more walls down and he ordered a halt. He whispered to Jantor. "Absolute silence. I will go ahead with Norn and seek the masks."

With Norn slipping along behind him, Blade ascended to the first basement, then up more stairs to a door that opened on a lobby. He cracked it open and peered out. The lobby was strewn with a mix of Morphi and Gnomes corpses. "Stay here," he told Norn. "I must pretend to be a corpse."

Blade slid out the door on his belly. He moved like a snake among the real dead to the entrance where, lying between bloody and depowered Morphi males, he could see out into the square and across to the circular Government Building. One glance was enough. There were cars and foot patrols all about the entrance and scattered about the square. Near the plastic portico was a slim barreled cannon on a high tripod. Three Morphi manned it. A hose ran from four tall, connected cylinders to the breech of the cannon. Blade winced. He did not have to see the cannon in action to guess that it could cover the square with a high-pressure jet of laughing death powder. The masks! Without them there was no hope and—

He heard a high wailing scream and something came plummeting down to splash in the square. Then another and another. Blade felt sick and wondered if he had gone mad? He stared at the oozing red bodies of Morphi women. They had jumped?

Another high scream and a body splashed just outside the entrance. Blade thought he could hear similar screams from all directions now. What the hell was going on? He crawled back to where Norn waited. She had heard the screams and when he told her what he had seen she smiled.

"It is nothing you can prevent, man Blade, nor is it important to us. The Morphi women have discovered that they have been raped by Gnomen. So they kill themselves. Some will jump, some use the little knives, some the death powder. It is their custom. Those who do not commit suicide—and there will be some—will be sent down to the sewers."

Blade knew he was hard, coarsened by his many lives in Dimension X, but this dented him. He fought back his revulsion. "Jantor knew of this custom?"

"Of course. It is why he insisted that every Morphi woman be raped. It saves the trouble of killing them and gives pleasure to the troops. It aids in decimating the Morphi as they would decimate the Gnomen. Of course he knew. Jantor planned it so."

Blade listened to the screams, imagined those he could not hear, coming from far out over the endless city, and spoke harshly to Norn. "Crawl to the door, feigning death, be very careful. Spot the building where the masks are stored and point it out to me. Hurry!"

## CHAPTER 17

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As soon as she pressed the power button, Sybelline took the lift and was whisked upward at breathtaking speed. Six miles in fifteen seconds. The lift car was stabo-energized, had its own gravity, and she felt no ill effects.

Sybelline wore a mask and carried the powder cylinder. She was risking everything. Time was short and the line thin. She must contact Onta, Chief of Brain Secrets on the Moon, to ask for instructions. Only with the aid of the Selenes could she survive; could she realize her ambition to rule. She held one high card, though. The orbfolk wanted Blade.

She rode the lift to the vestibule of the high council room. The narthex was circular, high-domed and littered with bodies of male and female Morphi. One Morphi was just cutting her own throat with a short-bladed knife as Sybelline entered the chamber. The white-haired woman knelt and asked, "Why?"

The woman mistook Sybelline for a full-blooded Morphi and laughed blood as she died. "I have been raped by the Gnomen. What else is there? How is it that you escaped?"

The woman died and Sybelline went through a corridor into the council room. So that was it. Jantor was cunning, and his revenge ironic, except that it was misdirected. The Selenes had dropped the sweet bomb that sterilized the Gnomen—not the Morphi, Jantor, like the savage he was, was striking back at anything in his way.

Sybelline wore the mask and carried the powder gun at the ready. She entered the main council room. The Gnomen had been there and left. The male elders had been torn apart with spear bars and the only woman on the council, one Ejata, lay slumped in a corner. She had a little knife in her hand.

Sybelline approached her. She felt nothing but hatred. She bent over the woman. "Why do you still live? Have you not been raped?"

Ejata was an elder, her hair nearly as white as Sybelline's own. She smiled faintly and pointed the knife at her bloodstained thighs. "Well raped. At least fifty of the beasts had me. But now I find out a strange thing... but who are you, woman?"

Sybelline kept on the mask. "Never mind that. What is so strange?"

Ejata held up the knife. "I have no courage to kill myself."

Sybelline took the knife. "You wish me to do it for you?"

"Please do."

Sybelline cut her throat.

From the square came the high hooting of patrol sirens. She ran to a window. Morphi police were setting up a powder cannon near the main entrance. Cars were converging on the square from all directions. The Morphi militia would be here in a moment to see what had happened to the council. She must hide!

But where?

Fear crawled over her slim body like sweat trickling. She needed time. If she could hide, escape the first search, it was unlikely that the Morphi would waste much time in this place. They would be busy hunting down Gnomen.

There was no place to hide. The council room was spacious and barren, no closets or anterooms. She must join the dead.

Then she heard the whine of an ascending lift. Sybelline lay down beside the female Morphi she had just killed. She tugged up her gown, tore it and dipped the little knife in gore not her own. She stained her throat with the blood, inflicting faint cuts to aid the cheat, and took several deep breaths. She could pass for Morphi but for her green eyes. She must keep them shut and hope there was no member of the Morphi guard who would be puzzled by the presence of two females at the council.

They were in the room now... voices and footsteps... the curt commands of a captain.

"Nothing here. All dead."

"We have no government, then."

"Not your worry. The militia will form a provisional one. Half of you to the down lift at once, and the other half down the chute. We must protect the power complex at all costs. Be wary. The Gnomen are more cunning than we knew. The chute may be blocked or they may have a force in the complex. You know what to do. Go!"

"But this—the elders? Should we not—"

"Go, I said. This mess can be cleaned up later. Go."

They were gone. Sybelline waited a few minutes, then got to her feet and went to the window again. From this vantage she had a full view of the square. Across the artificial turf women were leaping from roofs and high windows. Their high screams mingled, forming the sound of a continual shrilling. Sybelline smiled. Let them kill themselves, the more the better. She had taken many women as lovers but she did not really like them. Women always caused her more trouble than men.

She went to the head of the table. The elder of elders, grave and patrician even in death, and still beautiful as were all the Morphi, sat in his chair. He had been scarcely mutilated, but for the power stud

hooked from his neck.

Sybelline pushed him out of the chair and sat down. She knew just what to do. She had waited long for this moment.

Sybelline gazed at a row of buttons set into the table. She pressed one of them. A panel slid back and a screen, similar to the one in her apartment, slid out and up. She pressed another button. A rod with a mirror end shot out from the end of the table and at the same time a window opened. The rod pushed out into the beam of a searchlight. She twiddled an adjustment dial. The image of Onta appeared on the screen.

The Chief of Brain Secrets looked the same—massive head and thick neck, the neat graying hair and beard—but his words were sarcastic and his smile ironic. He plucked at his beard with well-kept fingers.

"Reverse," he ordered.

She pressed the button.

Onta said, "I see you have realized one ambition. You are in the chair of power, if not the seat."

She dared as she had not dared before. "This is no time for subtlety, Onta. Action is needed, at once. You are aware of what is happening down here?"

Onta actually smiled. "Of course I know. I approve. Let them destroy each other."

Sybelline scowled into the machine. "If they do that, whom do I rule?"

"You still cherish that dream?"

"I do. And you promised me, Onta."

Onta hooded his eyes. His smile was not pleasant. "So I did, Sybelline. And you promised me Blade—unharmd. Instead you have turned on the Morphi power and started a massacre. The man Blade is sure to be slain. He is no good to us dead. All promises are void."

"I could not wait, Onta. I dared not. And Blade may not be dead. He is cunning and a great warrior. But you must know all this. You Selenes know everything."

"Not quite," confessed Onta. "Even we cannot see into basements. Your man Blade has gone underground. I think not the sewers, but somewhere."

A thought struck her. "He may come here, Onta. He knows of this place. I may keep my word yet. Can you help me?"

His face was cruel. "Why should I? You are nothing to me."

"For the man Blade, then? If I can save him for you?"

Onta nodded. "To that I agree. Produce Blade for me, unharmd and fit to be examined by our scientists, and the deal is on again. The moment I am sure of Blade, I will stop the fighting and make you Queen."

"You promise to enforce this?"

Onta smiled into his beard. "I promise. The more easily because I do not think you can do it, Sybelline. I think you have lost. You might be wise to destroy yourself as the Morphi women are doing. I know that rape holds no terrors for you, but there are other things worse."



From the square outside there came a sudden clamor. Shouts and the brutal clash of arms, bellowing and screaming, the sibilant hiss of the powder cannon as it fired—*shutt—shutt—shutt—*

"There is fighting in the square," said Sybelline.

Onta nodded on the screen. "I see it." It was the sound of Blade's voice, raised above the din, that sent Sybelline scurrying to the window again. Behind her Onta's voice said, "He risks everything. Save him. Get him atop the building and I will send a car. The moment he is safe you are Queen."

Sybelline gazed at the battle in the square. Blade and some fifty Gnomen, all wearing masks, were fighting their way toward the powder cannon. The big man's voice, magnified by the speaker in the mask, roared metallicly over the melee.

"Jantor—take twenty men and fight into the building. I will take the cannon. Seize the council chamber and look for Sybelline."

Sybelline gazed, both enraptured and aghast, as Blade fought with the spear bar. Morphi bodies went down and were trampled. Blade had formed his small contingent into a moving square and they slashed through the disorganized Morphi like mole rats through flesh. With the masks they were more than a match for the beautiful people.

She spoke without looking at the screen. "Blade is winning. Soon he will have the powder cannon and command the square."

Onta said, "I know. I also know what is in his mind. He will try to make peace. Between the Gnomen and the Morphi, between you and Jantor. But did you hear? If Jantor gets to you first he will kill you. He will not share the rule with you."

She turned back to the screen. Onta was watching her with a cruel smile. "What can I do, Onta? Jantor is on his way up here."

Onta smiled again. "You really need me, don't you? Do you swear absolute obedience? no more treachery?"

Sybelline fell to her knees, just as she had before Blade. "I do, I do."

Onta nodded. "Very well. I will trust you this last time. Make the polyphone ready."

She pressed one of the buttons. A microphone with a thimble size head rose from the table.

"Move it to the screen."

Sybelline pressed another button. The mike swept around in a semicircular groove until it faced Onta's image. Sybelline heard lifts whining upward—who had shown Jantor how to use them?—and screamed at Onta, "Hurry! Jantor will be here in seconds."

Onta nodded and smiled. His voice was sinister. "You have a powder cylinder. Defend yourself. Keep your mask on. I will impose my will on the Morphi, but you must handle the Gnomen and Jantor and Blade. Ready? Close to the polyphone, then."

Onta took over her mind and voice. She spoke and it was his voice, not hers that went over the polyphone and into the power surge and into every Morphi brain. Brains conditioned to obey. Onta's voice, through Sybelline, was transcoded into thought and all Morphi in the endless city received it simultaneously.

*Cease fighting. Keep to your homes. The police and militia will disband. You have nothing to*

*fear from the Gnomen. Act on these orders at once. There will be instant and terrible punishment for all who disobey.*

Sybelline ran to the window. Blade had taken the powder cannon and was fumbling with the mechanism. Heaps of mutilated Morphi lay about the gun. Blade was training the cannon on a battalion of Morphi police about to charge in an effort to retake the gun. They had no masks and would be slaughtered.

She screamed from the high window. "No, Blade, no! It is over. Come to me, quickly. Do you hear me, man Blade, do you hear?"

Blade heard. In the sudden silence he could not help but hear. He glanced up at her and then, puzzled, at the Morphi who were vanishing from the square. They were quitting.

He waved to Sybelline. She waved back and called, "To me quickly. Before Jantor—"

Nearby a clot of Gnomen were tearing the power studs out of wounded Morphi. Blade bellowed at them. "Leave off that. No more killing. There is a truce."

One of Jantor's subchiefs raised his mask and growled at Blade. "I heard nothing of any truce."

Blade grinned at the man. "Nor I. But follow my orders nonetheless. No more killing. So be it."

Blade ran for the great foyer of the Government Building.

Sybelline was seated at the head of the long council table when Jantor burst into the chamber. There was no mistaking his hairy bulk, even in the mask, though she did not recognize any of the other Gnomen crowding in behind him. Sybelline wore her mask and kept the powder cylinder at the ready. Not that it was very helpful to her. The laughing death powder was ineffective against masks and the Gnomen all carried spear bars. All but one, a slight figure she could not identify.

Jantor stopped and raised his bar. His escort waited behind him. Sybelline raised her hand in greeting, then pushed the powder cylinder away from her to show good will.

Before she spoke, Sybelline glanced at the screen. It was dark, empty, as gray and dreary as a cataract. She was on her own. Where in the name of all fylfots was Blade? She was, for one of the few times in her life, filled with terror.

Jantor was in no hurry. He held up a hand for silence and leaned on his bar. Sybelline repressed a shudder of revulsion. He was the toad king. He thought he had won.

As Jantor opened his mouth, she cut him off. "The fight is over, Jantor. You have won—we have won. The Morphi are not fighting. I arranged this. I have been in touch with the Selenes and they have ordered the Morphi to cease fighting. They also agree that we should rule together in the city as we did in the sewers. We are to be the equals of the Morphi from this time on."

Jantor smiled and rubbed a bloody hand over his bald head. "As I recall, Sybelline, that was not such a good arrangement. Why should I share anything with you, or with the Morphi, now that I have won?"

She gazed at the screen in desperation. Why did not Onta reappear to help her? But she knew the answer without seeking far. Onta had his own plans, his own games to play.

Sybelline continued to bluff, forced herself to appear calm. "You could have done nothing without the man Blade. He is coming now. You had best *not* do anything without his knowledge and consent."

Jantor took a step toward her and raised his bar. "I know how much I owe to Blade and I disclaim it. Now that the Morphi have stopped fighting, I can kill Blade as easily as I am going to kill you. I am not going to share anything with you, Sybelline, even life."

Jantor raised the spear bar, the pointed end toward her, and flexed his great muscles to hurl it. Blade, flinging Gnomen aside like dolls, wrenched the bar from Jantor's grasp. "You are a fool and so am I, but I am not so easy to kill. I say—enough. We are going to talk, not kill, and there will be agreement among us and also with the Morphi—even with the Selenes. I give you my word—"

They were all watching Blade, listening. None saw the slender figure steal behind Sybelline and thrust with the short-bladed knife. Sybelline screamed. Blood gushed from her mouth.

Norn hacked at the woman three more times, viciously, carving out gouges of flesh near the desiccated power stud that had never functioned, before Blade got to her and pulled her away, struggling and screaming invective.

She clawed at Blade. "I love you, man Blade, but you are a fool. She must die—die!"

Jantor smiled and, relaxing on his retrieved spear bar, said, "For a female, she has good sense."

Sybelline toppled from the chair. Blade flung Norn from him and knelt beside her. She was dying. She spoke through blood and he thought she laughed. "All for nothing, Blade. I would have had a child by you. You sired so many—and none for me."

A voice came into the chamber like low thunder. "She is dead, as you will all be in one hundred counts if you do not listen and obey. You, called Blade, look into the screen."

Blade gently released the body and stared at the TV-like machine on the table. An image formed. A thick-necked man with a graying beard and a huge head. His voice was like restrained thunder.

The Gnomen—even Jantor—were on their knees, groveling. Blade sneered at them and at the image on the screen. "Who are you and what do you want of me?"

The image smiled. "I want *you*, Blade. But that later. Press the last button on the right."

Blade saw the row of buttons on the table and did so. The dome of the chamber rolled back and they all stared at the huge malignant hanging Moon. Something was falling toward the city.

With his unaided eye Blade could make it out distinctly. It was a bomb, the largest bomb he had ever seen. Falling, spinning counter-clockwise, controlled by vanes, growing larger and larger with the passing of each count.

"I am Onta," said the image on the screen. "I speak only to you, Blade. A thirty count has passed. I can stop the bomb any time before a hundred. Speak. I can hear you."

Blade felt himself losing his cool. He was frightened. "What do you want of me?"

"Only you," said Onta. "We Selenes want to talk to you, examine you. You will not be harmed. We ask only that you submit to various tests."

"If I agree you will stop the bomb?"

"I will. There is a fifty count now. This is not a honey bomb. That was a mistake. This is an acid fire bomb. It will destroy everything and everyone, now and forever into infinity and eternity."

"Stop it!" yelled Blade. "I will do just as you wish."

Jantor was groveling at Blade's feet, his hairy arms about Blade's knees, slobbering something in such terror that Blade could not make out the words. He kicked the Gnomes king away from him and yelled at the image. "I said I agree. I promise. Stop the bomb!"

"A forty count," said Onta relentlessly. He was deliberately prolonging the anguish. "I hope it is a good bargain, Blade. I hope you are worth it. We Selenes are weary of the Morphi and the Gnomes and I, for one, would just as well let the bomb fall. But I have superiors who think otherwise. A twenty-five count now, I think."

Blade began to feel ashamed of his panic. His nerves were going, almost gone, but he must hold on. His head was full of pain. The computer was reaching, but it was not yet time. The pain was not severe enough. The computer could not save him.

Blade shook his fist at the face on the screen. He let flow a string of profanity that would have made Lord Leighton, himself skilled in the art of foul-mouthing, turn a deep red.

Blade got angry. "I have agreed. I have no more to say."

Onta was laughing and near choked as he said, "A fifteen count and I stop the bomb."

Blade looked up. The great breast-shaped bomb, with elongated nipple and vanes, lingered in the milk sky, hovering. Blade felt that he could have reached out and touched it. Roughly speaking, he thought, it was about the size of Big Ben. It was absurd, fantastic. But *it had* stopped.

He was bone weary now. He looked at the screen. "What must I do?"

"Go to the roof and wait. You will find a pad there near the chute. A magnacar will come for you. It will arrive in a count of five. You will enter it and lie prone. Do nothing else."

"I agree."

"Go now."

Norn cried out and clutched at him. Blade told Jantor to seize her. The Gnomes watched in silence as he climbed a short ladder through the open dome and went to the pad near the chute. He gazed up and around him. There was nothing but the enormous bomb now partially blocking the view of that thing he had always feared and distrusted since landing in this Dimension X—the Moon.

The magnacar was there. It was the size of a large coffin with a transparent bottom. The top whined open and a mechanical voice said, "Enter and lie prone. Touch nothing."

Blade obeyed, thinking that the Selenes must have mastered the secret of magnetic fields. The car had no motor or engine of any sort. If the car moved he was not aware of it. There was no sense of motion. All the same he was aware of passing the bomb.

He was prone and staring down through the transparent bottom when he saw it. The bomb struck the city. Onta had lied to him. Onta had intended all along to destroy the city. The Selenes were weary of the Morphi and the Gnomes. Blade was more than a little weary himself, of everything.

Below him was a fire such as he had never dreamed could exist. The air itself was aflame. The flame resolved itself into lava that flowed thick and sluggish and destroying, covering and obliterating the city as a hundred gallons of paint would cover and obscure a child's desk globe in HD.

It was over—forever over for the Gnomes and the Morphi... or was it? The thought ticked in his brain and he clung to it. If the women pregnant by him had gone deep enough...

## CHAPTER 18

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The parallelism was so exact in so many ways, and so grotesquely different in so many others, that Blade withdrew into his shell and made no attempt to probe or understand the Selenes. In any case the head pains were getting steadily worse. The computer would take him back soon, if he survived.

He knew only one thing—the crystal had ceased to function the moment he landed on the Selene Moon.

He did not see Onta. He saw nobody but a medium-sized, mediocre-appearing person who introduced himself as Zampa. The magnacar had deposited him in a spacious, sterile docking area lined with white tile. Blade decided it was a laboratory.

Zampa wore a neat gray business suit with a thin black tie and stiff attached collar, patent leather pumps and thin dark socks. He appeared middle aged with a lined face, graying hair and the pocks of a bad case of long ago acne. He extended his hand and Blade, not caring one way or the other, shook it, finding it moist and plumpish.

"Welcome to Selena," said Zampa. "We were worried about you. You must have had some terrible times down there."

There were two easy chairs in a corner of the lab. Blade sank into one, Zampa into the other. He was offered no refreshment or a bath or any change of costume.

Zampa did offer what might have been an apology. "We wish to examine you, to, conduct the first series of tests, while you are in your, er, shall we say primitive state. Do you mind?"

"Would it matter if I did?"

Zampa smiled. "Not in the least."

Blade stared at the man who called himself Zampa. His eyes were the only thing remarkable about him. They were pink and green—a pink dot and concentric rings of green, forming a bull's-eye. Other than that he might have been any slightly weary London businessman. Blade wondered if such were the case? Was it all a computer joke with Lord Leighton made up as Zampa? To hell with it. He was too exhausted to speculate.

Blade said: "You did not keep your promise. You dropped the bomb."

Zampa leaned toward him. "Onta made the promise, not I. Not that it matters. I would have done the same. A promise is only words and words are only meaningful when they serve one's own purpose. It was time to find a final solution to the Morphi and Gnomen problem and we have done so. But for your presence down there—and how we did fear for you, Blade—we would have done so much sooner. You have caused us a great deal of worry, you know. We dared not invade for fear you would act wrong-headedly—fight on their side and be killed."

Blade nodded. "I would have, too."

"Umm—so we feared. And we dared not drop the bomb until we had you safely away from there. You see our dilemma?"

"I can see," said Blade calmly, "that you Selenes are a bunch of liars. If I had to make a choice I would prefer the Gnomen or the Morphi to you people." For the first time he noticed the only way in which this Zampa resembled Onta—the head was too big and the neck too thick.

Zampa smiled and took a little red book from a breast pocket of his well-cut jacket. "Liar? Ummm, yes, here it is. One of our people who was sent into another dimension and got back safely—the only one so far, I am afraid—he mentions the words lie and liar in his report."

There was no help for it. Despite his fatigue, his bone weariness, his many wounds and his very real lack of interest, Blade came alert. He had to. Lord L would expect it. And he still had a job to do—if it could be done.

He watched Zampa. "You have sent a man into another dimension?"

"I said so, did I not? Only one has come back thus far, which leaves, I am afraid, some hundred odd roaming around out there whom we will never recover."

How many in his own Home Dimension? Blade could not help grinning. This was going to startle old Lord L.

Zampa was very patient. He tapped well-kempt fingers on his knee. "What do you call the dimension from which you come?"

"Home Dimension. HD."

Zampa studied his book again. "That would correspond to our S Dimension, I suppose. How are you sent and recovered?"

Blade explained as best he could. Zampa listened without interruption, then crooked a finger and said, "Follow me, please."

He might have been in the Tower computer complex but for the silence. Millions of tiny lights winked and blinked but there was not the faintest hum. Zampa led Blade into an inner chamber and pointed to a square pad of shiny material that might have been linoleum but for a metallic glisten. There was no chair, no wires or electrodes or consoles.

Zampa pointed to the pad. "We stand our subject on that and attune power to him by what our experts call sympathetic surge."

Blade asked, "You are not a scientist?"

Zampa laughed heartily. "Dear me, no. I am what we call a friendly relations officer. I have been trained to make you like and trust me, Blade."

Blade scowled. "I've got news for you, friend. You've got one hell of a job ahead of you."

Zampa thumbed through his red book and put it away at last. He looked at Blade. "Some of those words I do not have listed. But do I take the meaning correctly—that I will not succeed in my job?"

"Could be," said Blade, and he smiled coldly.

Zampa's smile was warm. "But you are wrong. I am very good at my work. Let us get back to our chairs and be comfortable."

Just then a head pain struck Blade. He laughed to conceal it. He said, "Maybe you are at that, Zampa, and part of your job must be to keep me happy and cooperative?"

"It is indeed."

"Then tell me about the ditramonium. How did the Morphi make it out of ordinary rock and how was the power transmitted without wires?"

Zampa looked at the red book. "Wires—wires? I do not have that word either. But no matter. Of course I will tell you about the ditramonium—even I am scientist enough for that."

Blade did not quite believe him. "You *will* tell me?"

Zampa shrugged. "Why not? Ditramonium is no longer important to us. For perhaps, say, a viginillion of counts, or as some reckon it, 1000 novemdecillions, the stuff called ditramonium was necessary to us. It was our source of power as it was to the Morphi. We, as a matter of fact, *invented* the Morphi and powered them with our ditramonium. A wrong and costly experiment, I am afraid. There must be, I think, fools in every dimension.

"However—and after I have satisfied your curiosity in this, Blade, I will expect *you* to start answering questions—we began to run short of rock. No rock, no ditramonium. Which is why Onta and his people conspired to shut off the power down there, to conserve the rock against our own needs. I do not know just how Onta did it and I do not want to know—he is not a person to my taste. But of course we all know that such things must be done."

"How well I know." Blade was grim.

"Yes, I suppose so. But let me get on. Our scientists were all working like mad on an alternate source of power, a substitute for ditramonium, and not many counts ago they found it. You see, then? Our new power is far better than ditramonium and much less troublesome and expensive to produce."

Blade nodded. "So you did not need the city nor the Morphi, and certainly not the Gnomen?"

Zampa made a wiping gesture with his hand. "Need them? Of course not. The Morphi were a failed experiment and the Gnomen were animals, not as interesting, really, as the mole rats in their deep sewers. Forget them, Blade. They are now extinct."

Blade said nothing. He let his facial expression say nothing. No use warning Zampa if, as just might be, the few Gnomen women and their guards had gone deep enough to escape the fire. They would live and have his babies. Suddenly, and Blade could not quite understand it, he very much wanted this to be true.

Zampa was watching him with an odd smile. Blade nodded and had to acknowledge, "You are good at your work. But you were going to explain ditramonium to me."

"I cannot really *explain* that but perhaps I can show you." Zampa tore a blank page from his notebook and scribbled on it. He handed the bit of paper to Blade.

qs' + ut = zoa - SEL to 1/2 P

thus transference of ut to 1/2 + P = PM (packet motivation) to final, realized, of:

s=s

s-zo

leading to

t' = B (t+b (ut/oz)to ° ° th)

Blade scanned it for a moment and said, "Thanks a lot." Zampa looked puzzled. "It is all there. I'm afraid that it is the best I can do."

Blade put the paper in his pocket. He scrubbed at his beard, grinned and nodded. He was acting now, so Zampa would not suspect the pain that was ripping his brain apart. Perhaps if Zampa knew

Blade was about to leave him and the Selene Moon, there just might be some way to detain him. He reckoned on a few minutes yet before the HD computer grabbed him.

He smiled and smiled. Soon Zampa would think he was dealing with an idiot. But it hurt... it hurt terribly.

"You have been kind," said Blade, "and I admit I did not think you could make me like you. But you're good. You've gotten around me. Now if I can help you I will. But first I would like to know just what is in store for me. It is not a secret?"

Zampa waved his little book and laughed. "No secret. But there's no hurry, none at all. You will soon be out of my hands, of course, but I can make a guess. For a great many counts you will be given tests and examined. I do not know the details of all that. Eventually an effort will be made to send you back to the very dimension from which you came and—"

Blade writhed in agony and did not let it show. "You mean that I am to be sent through *your* computer?"

Zampa nodded, all smiles. "I believe so. And they hope to bring you back. The purpose, of course, is to establish communication, a working relationship, between your dimension and our own. If this can be accomplished you will, naturally, receive great honor. You may even be made an honorary Selene."

Blade's body was wrenched. Pain flowed. He saw Zampa's smile detach itself and come toward him. Blade retreated. He groaned, screamed, writhed, suffered. The smile pursued him. His guts flowed from him, turned to snares and tried to capture the smile. No luck His own mouth, no beard now, detached and went to meet the smile.

The smile—the smile—the smile

Blade grunted in last agony. "Cheshire—cheshire—cheshire—"

The smile of Zampa spoke: "Cheshire? Let me see. I do not think I have that word either. Is it a Gnomes word?"

Blade had gone. Only his mouth remained. His mouth said, "A Gnomes word? Who Gnomes?—hah—hah—I think, Zampa man, that Blade and the Gnomes have screwed you. Time will tell, but I feel sure that the end is not a dead and silent hell. Ba—by—pa—goose—bug off, Zampa baby..."

For the last time Zampa was seen clearly... Zampa saying, so seriously as he rifed his little book, "I do not believe I have that word either..."

The nurse was button cute, petite, and had the legs to go with the Dior-designed mini-uniforms so recently permitted at St. Barts—over the bitter cries of Head Nurse Olvey, who had piano legs in parentheses.

But Dior was for Nurse Hawkins, definitely. Blade, with only a sheet over him, watched her with pleasure. When she had just now taken his temperature there had definitely been a happening.

Nurse Hawkins came back to his bed. She glanced down and turned a slow pink.

Blade did not even mind her archness as she said, "My word, but aren't we a naughty, naughty boy."

There was nothing to say. There were a million things to think of and he did not think of any of them. He reached for Nurse Hawkins' hand and gave it a squeeze. For a moment she permitted it, smiling at



him and repeating: "Wearea naughty boy."

Blade resorted to an Americanism. "You haven't seen anything yet, baby."

Nurse Hawkins turned severe. "I should hope not."

Then she relented. "You have a visitor," she said softly.

J came in, fussing as usual, his Homburg and rolled umbrella clutched in his hand.

"How are you, my dear boy? Don't tell me if you'd rather not. Lie if you like. Stay here as long as you please. Lord Leighton is dying to get his hooks into you. I know how you dread the debriefing." He shot a look at Nurse Hawkins. "If we could be alone, please?"

They were alone. J said, "The formula you brought back is gibberish. Nonsense. Lord L is most unhappy."

"I couldn't care less," said Richard Blade. He glanced down at the sheet. The tented arch was just subsiding.

"I think I'm happy," said Blade. "In fact I am sure of it."