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Ice Dragon

Blade Book 10

by Jeffrey Lord

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## Chapter 1

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Richard Blade had the habit of cultivating new physical skills whenever he had the time for it. Therefore it was not surprising that J's orders to report for a new Dimension X mission found him rock-climbing in Wales. He no longer needed to stay at the little cottage on the Dorset seashore, even while awaiting orders. A modified American two-way survival radio made it possible for MI6's powerful transmitter to reach him anywhere in the British Isles.

So between the intensive sessions of weapons training and unarmed combat, the casual women, the nights on the town, and the voracious reading, he piled climbing gear into the trunk of the MG and trundled off to northern Wales, to test himself against its crags and cliffs. He supposed this compulsion to test his body to the limit would pass someday. But although forty was looming on the horizon, he was still at the peak of his physical powers. The doctors attached to the Dimension X Project had assured him that he had many years, many more than most men, before his body would start to decline.

The doctors should certainly know. Each of the nine times he had returned from whatever dimension Lord Leighton's giant computers had hurled him into, he had been poked, prodded, monitored, X-rayed, and generally examined almost cell by cell. By now the doctors (among them several of England's most brilliant medical minds, working faithfully without any idea of what project Blade was working on) should know his physical makeup better than any man's had ever been known before. They also assured him that so far there were no signs of major damage from all the stresses his brain had endured from those same computers.

That was a good thing to consider, as the MG purred westward through gray stone, thatched-roof villages just coming awake, on the last lap to London. It was a clear brisk autumn morning, the sky marred only by the blur of smog over the great city itself, and the trees by the road were beginning to flame scarlet and orange.

Of course, all the probing and testing hardly stemmed from any disinterested concern for Blade's health. He was a much-glorified guinea pig, whose reactions were of the utmost scientific interest, and so far he was the only guinea pig the Dimension X Project had. The only other man who had traveled into Dimension X had returned permanently insane. J, the head of the special intelligence section MI6, Lord Leighton, the creator of the computers, and the Prime Minister himself were industriously looking for other candidates, but even for that the medical probings were vital. What qualities did Blade have that kept him sane during his other-dimensional adventures? Did other men have them also? If not naturally, could they be induced by proper training? Blade knew that on the research staff of the Project were at

least two of the finest psychologists in the world; would they someday be put to finding ways of conditioning other men's minds into imitations of his own? That, frankly, was a rather unpleasant thought, but he knew that Lord Leighton was quite capable of insisting on it to keep the project going—and both J and the Prime Minister would probably approve. He would have to ask J when they met in London how the search for other candidates was going.

It was nearly eleven before he swung the MG off the highway and plunged into the tangled, traffic-filled streets of London's West End. A little after noon he drew up into the garage behind the building that contained his new apartment. He climbed the stairs to the third floor, carefully unpacked and stowed away his climbing gear, then fixed himself a light lunch. It was usually wiser to go through the computer on a reasonably empty stomach, but it was nearly six hours before he had to be at the Tower.

The apartment was a new indulgence, five rooms in a newly renovated Victorian building, an indulgence that absorbed a large part of the two thousand-pound tax-free bonus to his salary that was his only financial reward for his work on the project. But the new apartment had space for his growing collection of books and weapons, for fitting up one room as a dojo for his weapons training (walls and ceiling as well as the floor padded to avoid disturbing the neighbors), for entertaining in the unlikely event that he ever did so. It also served to support his new "cover" as a young—well, middle-aged-man—about-town living comfortably if not extravagantly off a fortune made by three previous generations in the jute and copra trade.

Blade did not find this role entirely congenial. It involved being considered a deplorably eligible bachelor and fending off approaches made by matrimonially inclined ladies and, even worse, by their mothers. Also it was an image that his father had always loathed with a purple and loudly expressed passion. His father, in spite of having all the appropriate money and credentials for a life of gilded ease, had distinguished himself in forty years of public service, including honors gained in both world wars. And he had passed on to his only son the firm conviction that those born to wealth and position should work five times as hard as the ordinary man, in order to be considered deserving of their privileges. Since that son had grown up with a keen if practically oriented mind, a superb physique, and a taste for adventure, it had been easy for him to respond to his father's urgings. Blade had been recruited by MI6 while still at Oxford, and had never looked back since.

After lunch he stacked the dishes in the kitchen for the cleaning woman to cope with tomorrow morning, put himself through a vigorous hour of limbering and testing exercises, then pulled a book from his increasingly well-stocked shelves and sat down to read for the remaining hours until it was time to leave for the Tower. He had acquired a habit of voracious reading the year before, when he had been tormented by an impotence that was eventually cured only by his eighth trip through the computer.

At the time he had devoured books on psychology and physiology like a starving man sitting down at a banquet, and accumulated a collection that many practicing professionals in both fields might have envied. Since then, he had been more wide-ranging in his reading habits, covering military history, geography, geology, anthropology—a dozen different fields.

He wanted to train himself to be the best possible observer of the worlds in which he traveled. Also, he wanted to understand each one as well as he could, so that if he took action in a situation, he would stand a chance of doing the right thing. Both J and Lord L had enthusiastically taken up the notion of his doing something to help the people of each dimension if possible, rather than simply observing, adventuring, grabbing whatever might be useful to England, and coming home. But this also made his job even more complex and demanding.

The afternoon wore on; he read with less and less attention, until the clock finally crept around to four

thirty. It was time to leave for the Tower.

He left the MG in the garage and took a taxi. By the time it had battled its way through the evening rush hour to the Tower, it was nearly six. He left the taxi outside the gate like any ordinary visitor and walked the rest of the way in, until the escort of grim-faced Special Branch men materialized out of the damp shadows cast by the ancient walls and took him in tow.

Both J and Lord Leighton were waiting at the head of the elevator shaft. That meant that either the computer's main sequence hadn't been initiated, or else that Lord Leighton had finally and miraculously found somebody he trusted to initiate at least its first phase. Blade looked at them closely, suddenly even more conscious than usual that this might be the last time he saw these two men who trusted him—and whom he trusted—in a very special way, men who had given him an opportunity to satisfy his craving for adventure in a way beyond even the imagination of most people.

There was J—tall, craggy-faced, slightly stooped now with his sixty-plus years, as always exuding an air of imperturbability and urbanity. He might have been a successful stockbroker or a Harley Street practitioner, at least to anybody who didn't know his record. He had been surviving Gestapo interrogations when Blade was still in diapers. Even after age had finally brought him behind a desk he had remained a partisan of the field operatives against the office types. Add to this the fact that he had never married, and it was not surprising that J loved Blade like the son he would never have.

And there was Lord Leighton. If J was a father, Lord L reminded Blade of the gleefully wicked old grandfather, waving aside all the father's prescriptions and proscriptions as he cheerfully led his grandson astray. The scientist was not always cheerful, of course. Sometimes in fact he could be downright maddening, since he never bothered about conventional good manners. But how such a buoyant spirit could dwell in Leighton's hunchbacked body, how he could overcome his eighty-odd years and his polio-twisted legs and his deformed spine to create computers beyond anything the rest of the world dreamed possible—this was a continuing miracle to Blade. It left him a little in awe of the old man; Blade hoped (not very optimistically) that he could cope with age and declining powers half as well when they came upon him.

Blade waited until the door had shut behind them and the elevator had begun its plunge to the level of the computer complex, two hundred feet below the Tower, before asking any serious questions. Then he turned to J and said, "How is the search for a replacement coming along, sir?"

J frowned. "Not at all well, unfortunately. The psychologist who was in charge of developing the testing program for new candidates also developed a few—ah, personal vices—which required his being taken off the project. Nothing nasty, you understand. We just sent him back to private practice, carefully wrapped in the Official Secrets Act. But this does mean bringing in somebody new, and by the time he has been cleared and briefed, three or four months' work will be gone. So it will be that much longer before we can test out anybody who might come forward to replace you as thoroughly as Lord Leighton insists be done."

"No helping it, I'm afraid," said the scientist. "Rather a silly proposition to send somebody through the computer and have him come back insane or not at all. Waste of effort." The offhand manner, Blade strongly suspected, concealed very real scruples about endangering a man's life or sanity. He also suspected that Lord Leighton would sooner have admitted to burgling Buckingham Palace than to the possession of anything so unscientific as a conscience. But Leighton was hurrying on to another topic.

"No new people, I'm afraid. But we do have some new circuitry that should cope with the time distortion we suffered last time. The installation required some alteration in Modules A2 and A4, but—" and

Leighton was off into one of his interminable technical discussions that neither Blade nor J ever pretended to understand. Blade gathered only that Lord Leighton had developed (or thought he had developed) some method of coping with the problem that had suddenly popped out of nowhere on the last trip—Dimension X and Home Dimension time getting badly out of phase with each other. On that last trip, to the Ocean world and its beleaguered Kingdom of Royth, nine months spent there had been only a little more than four months to Lord Leighton and J. It was obviously something to be eliminated or at least brought under control. Blade could not have agreed more heartily with Lord Leighton's notion that the fewer wild variables in the project the better, particularly when he was going to be left holding the baby if one of these variables came up spectacularly the wrong way.

The technical lecture took them all the way down to the computer room itself. Once they had entered the main room, jammed full from floor to ceiling and almost from wall to wall with the huge gray crackled-finish bulks of the computers and their hanging festoons of riotously colored wiring, Lord L at once returned to the business at hand. He ushered J to a chair, then went over to the main control console and began taking readings from the dials, while Blade went to the dressing chamber to begin his personal preparations.

In spite of the fantastically complex and still not completely predictable processes involved in shifting him into a new dimension, Blade's own preparations had long since become a stereotyped, monotonous routine. He went into the dressing room. He took off all his clothes. He smeared himself all over with a black greasy goo with the consistency of liquid tar and the smell of greatly overaged turpentine, supposed to prevent burns from the electrodes that would be attached all over his body. He put on a loincloth. This was largely a symbolic gesture; he had arrived nine successive times in Dimension X naked as a newborn babe. He stepped out of the dressing room and walked over to the glass booth in the middle of the room, the booth with its rubber floor and its chair that looked remarkably like an American electric chair. He sat down in the chair and waited while the cobra-headed electrodes were attached to every possible and impossible portion of his body until he sat in the middle of an insane tangle of multi-colored wires, radiating off in all directions into the guts of the computer that loomed over him on all sides.

Then, finally, the routine was broken as Lord Leighton turned from the master console to look at him and raise a gnarled and bony hand in a final farewell.

"Ready, Richard?"

"Ready, sir."

The hand came down and closed the master switch. There was a long moment in which Blade began to wonder if somewhere in those infinitely complex guts of the computer a circuit had failed and nothing was going to happen. Then he felt the chair shudder under him and begin to sink. It sank and sank, down into a black shaft, until Lord Leighton and J were only tiny white faces looking down an immensely deep shaft at him, then still farther down until they were gone and there was nothing above him, around him, or below him except blackness.

Now the blackness faded to gray, to silver, to a searing blue, and he found himself still in the chair, but now the chair stood in the middle of a vast yellow sandy desert, with a raw blue sky overhead. It was perched on some sort of metal rack, and looking down he saw that the rack itself rested on two parallel metal rails that stretched away only a few inches above the sand to the distant horizon.

He had just long enough to absorb all the details, then the chair began to move with a sibilant moan, building speed rapidly, the sand flashing past, the wind tearing in an oddly painless fashion at his body. He felt the acceleration building, and knew that he was racing across the desert at a speed that would

soon take him through the sound barrier. In fact, he saw it looming up on the horizon ahead of him, clearly indicated by neon letters—Sound Barrier. He passed through it in total silence, but with a sensation of having been hurled at tremendous speed through a miles-thick wall of jellied soup.

Then all at once there was a sharp and audible jolt, two, three—and the hurtling chair suddenly whipped forward with a tremendous bang and flung him out into space. He was conscious of spreading out hands and feet to stabilize himself as he tumbled wildly through a sky that was no longer blue but gray, then once again black, feeling the tumbling ease, feeling himself flatten out as though he were swimming, still moving forward, endlessly forward, through the blackness.

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## Chapter 2

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Blade came back to consciousness lying flat on his face, his nose and mouth pressed into damp cold earth that smelled of mold and moss and old evergreen needles, his head throbbing with the inevitable searing headache that always followed a transition. Yet the discomforts were the most welcome thing possible, telling him that he had indeed made the full transition safely, and not wound up somewhere in the limbo of distorted sensations that lay between Home Dimension and wherever he was now. The possibility of ending up in such a limbo was the one thing that bothered him more than any possible form of death or mutilation he might suffer in any new world he might reach.

Gradually the headache faded, the disorientation faded also, and strength and coordination returned to his sprawled limbs. He became conscious of more sensations from the world around him—the chirp of birds, the squeals and skittering feet of small animals in the shrubbery, the swishing and creak of branches moving in the wind. He also became conscious of a chill breeze playing over his bare skin. Reaching upward, he grabbed a conveniently drooping branch and pulled himself to his feet. He had to lean against the rough trunk of the tree for a moment until a fit of dizziness passed, then stepped out from under the tree and looked around him.

He was standing on the slope of either a very high hill or a rather low mountain, near the upper fringes of a forest of pinelike trees that covered its base. Looking up toward the summit, he could see the trees becoming sparser and sparser, giving way finally to bare rock and gray-green shrubs and creepers. Even farther up, at the point where the looming slope met the blue sky, there was the glint of unmelted snow fields.

In the other direction, the forested slopes unrolled themselves downward into a narrow valley before rising sharply on the other side in a bare cliff that formed the base of another hill, rising as high on its side of the valley as Blade's did on its. The valley thus formed ran roughly north and south, as far as Blade could tell from the sun. To the south of the two flanking hills were yet more hills and hummocks, suggesting a whole range spreading east and west, many miles wide and perhaps many hundreds of miles long. Through the valley itself ran a fair-sized river; Blade caught its silver-blue glimmer through the black-green masses of the trees. Then he turned to the north.

Part of the view to the north was cut off by the swell of the hill, but he could see enough to suddenly feel a chill from more than the breeze. To the north was a flat plain, and far away on the remote horizon of that plain was another silver-blue hue glimmering in the sky. Not the friendly' glimmer of a river, but the steel cold glare of endless miles of ice hurling back the sun. He had once seen the same thing from the deck of a ship approaching the Greenland ice cap. Out there on the northern plain, many miles away but glaring so fiercely that it was visible here, a vast glacial mass was marching south. For a moment he

almost fancied he could hear the grinding roar of the billions of tons of ice scraping their way forward, stripping the countryside down to sterile bedrock, and the hill beneath his feet seemed to shudder in anticipation of the glaciers hurling themselves at it or perhaps over it.

Then he laughed, and the sensation passed. Glaciers took centuries, if not millennia, to cover the distance that separated him from that sinister ice. By the time the ice began pushing at the hill where he was standing, his great-great-great grandchildren (if any) would be old men and women. Still, glaciers relatively so near meant bitter winters, a short growing season (if any), and therefore better chances of finding human habitation if he made his way south. Even in mid-afternoon the temperature was barely above fifty, suggesting nights far too chilly for the comfort or even safety of a naked man. He would do well to head down into the valley, where he might at least find water and more shelter from the wind. Taking a last look at the blue glare on the horizon, he turned and began his descent.

He moved cautiously down the slope, eyes and ears alert for signs of human activity or dangerous animals, carefully avoiding twigs that might give off telltale crackings and patches of bare earth that would retain conspicuous footprints. He had no reason to believe that either man or large animal was within fifty miles of him; he had certainly seen nothing to indicate either from his original perch high on the hills. It was a matter of professional caution, nothing more.

The coniferous trees of the upper slopes gave way to hardwoods as he descended. He was able to find a broken branch sound enough to make a useful club. As the slope steepened, he found himself using it more and more as a climbing staff, one hand wielding it, the other reaching out for branches and saplings to grasp, or even handholds in the outcroppings of rock. He slipped and fell several times, the last time down an eight-foot drop that ended in a mass of prickly bushes. These broke his fall enough to keep him from breaking anything else, but he arose well scratched.

The wind faded as he descended deeper and deeper into the shelter of the valley. But the light was fading almost as rapidly. By the time he again saw the glimmer of the river through the trees, it was twilight, and he realized that darkness would overtake him on the move if he kept on going. It was time to make as much of a camp as he could.

The forest floor was thick with mulch, and the still waters along the banks of the river heavily grown with weeds and rushes. Pulling up rushes and laying them down as fast as they dried on turned-up mulch, then laying as many branches as he could on the reeds, Blade contrived himself an almost comfortable bed. Lying down, he distributed the rest of the branches over himself in as complete a cover as possible, placed the club within easy reach, and began planning his next day's travels and how to get food. A layer of animal fat smeared over his body would go a long way toward keeping out the cold, and even raw meat would be better than none at all. He was still working out details when the fatigue of many hours' hard traveling caught up with him and he fell asleep.

A shaft of sunlight stabbing squarely through a gap in the trees into his eyes brought him awake the next morning. He was fully alert within seconds, rose, and climbed down to the edge of the river, to drink. It was only after he had drunk his fill that he became aware of the silence lying over the forest like a fog. The wind had almost totally died, so even the faint swish and rustle it had made in the treetops was gone. But the silence was heavier even than that. The sounds of forest life he had noticed the afternoon before were gone, as though all the birds and small animals had suddenly been stricken mute. In this heavy stillness, the solitary gurgle and cluck of the river tumbling over the stones and roots along its banks sounded loud and ominous, rather than cheerful. Blade was at once on edge. It was with an especially firm grip on his club that he moved out, heading south along the riverbank, less alert now for man or beast than for some clue as to what had stricken square miles of the forest into silence during the night.

He estimated he had been on the move for the better part of an hour before he stepped out from behind a tree and found himself staring at a rough trail. To his right it led upward into the gloom of the forest, to his left it made a right-angle bend and ran off parallel to the riverbank, heading south. He ducked back behind the tree and spent a few moments mentally flipping a coin as to which way he should go, then decided that the way along the riverbank looked more promising. He stepped onto the path and continued on his way, all his senses screwed up to a still higher pitch of alertness.

He came upon the bridge suddenly. A sharp bend in the path still farther to the left, a gap in the trees, and visible through it the splintered planks and snapped-off pilings of a wooden bridge, the fast-flowing river curling with little flecks of foam around the debris. Blade turned off the path and crept through the trees to the riverbank.

From close up, the sight of the bridge was even more disquieting. There was no sign of explosion, yet Blade found it hard to believe that anything else could have completely ripped to pieces a bridge fifty feet long and set on foot-thick piles. Some of the piles had been snapped cleanly in two like matchsticks. Others, incredibly, seemed to have been bitten through, the broken ends furrowed and scarred by gouges that undeniably looked like the marks of giant teeth.

But the opposite bank of the river presented an even more disagreeable spectacle, one even more certain to rouse unpleasant speculations and imaginings than the ruined bridge. Here, no doubt, there had once been another path, leading off into the forest to the homes of whatever people had made the path. Now, however, something had plowed a swath sixty feet wide through the forest where the path had been, splintered or uprooted trees lying in a hideous tangle like a child's Tinker Toys dumped on the floor. Still-green leaves showed that the shambles was only a few hours old.

Blade realized now why the forest had been shocked into silence. Sometime during the night, while he slept his chilly but deep sleep on his bough bed, some—being—with the power of a medium-sized tank and the ferocity of a hungry tiger had come smashing through the forest from the east, as far as the bridge. After ripping the bridge apart as though it were a cardboard box, it—or perhaps they?—had gone back into the forest along the same path.

Blade would not have survived his first mission as an agent if he had not been able to control his instincts, which at the moment were strongly calling out for a hasty retreat. Having calmed himself, he began considering ways of crossing the river and following the trail of smashed trees to wherever it led. The bridge was useless, the river too deep and swift to ford. Bitter cold though it was, he would have to swim it. He half-walked, half-slid down to the bank, threw his club aside to leave both hands free, and slipped into the water.

Before he had stopped shuddering from the cold of the water that seemed to flow straight from the heart of those glaciers to the north, the current had him, whirling him out into midstream so fast that the rushes he grasped to slow himself snapped off in his hand. In midstream the current was moving him as fast as he could have jogged, and there was a moment when a submerged rock rasped at him and flipped him head down. He lunged his head into the air again, spitting and coughing, then thrashed furiously across the current until suddenly he felt its tug lessen. A moment later he could reach out and grasp a projecting root on the far bank. Shaking with cold, waving arms and legs frantically to restore life to them, he scrambled onto the bank and began to make his way back to the path. In the short time he had been in the river, it had carried him nearly a hundred yards downstream.

The best route back to the bridge was straight along the riverbank, though "straight" meant a bruising, skin-tearing scramble over boulders, past close-grown trees, through thorny patches of undergrowth. He was sweating, scratched, and swearing before he had covered fifty yards. It was just beyond that point

that he found the body.

It lay half-concealed under a bush, one arm thrown around the squat trunk in a stiffened embrace as though the bush were an object of passion. The body was flour-white, completely drained of blood, and not surprisingly—one leg was missing just above the knee. The same monstrous jaws that had snapped off the pilings of the bridge had left their mark on the stump of the leg they had severed with a single bite. A trail of blood stretched away from the body, leading back toward the bridge.

Blade bent down and took a close look at the body. It was a man, in late middle age to judge from the wrinkles and the gray in his hair and beard, deeply tanned and hard-muscled through much outdoor living. He wore crudely tanned leather breeches, shapeless leather boots with wood soles and leather thongs, and a fur jacket with the fur worn inside. A leather pouch at his belt held flint and steel and a few hard crackers. This Blade appropriated. The man had no weapons on him, and Blade could not quite bring himself to take the clothes, apart from the fact that the man was both shorter and slimmer than Blade.

A few minutes' more scrambling brought him back to the bridge and the swath of smashed trees stretching off under the sun as far as he could see. Most of the ground along the riverbank was either churned up or buried under the debris, but in one undisturbed patch a footprint stood out clear and bold. Blade knelt to make a close inspection.

The footprint—if such it was—was an oval nearly two feet in diameter, sunk more than a foot into the ground. Deeper yet were a dozen or so smaller holes in the bottom of the larger one, as though a hobnailed boot had been pressed into the ground. The forward edge of the oval showed still other, shallower cuts, suggesting six-inch claws.

It was while examining the footprint that Blade first became conscious of the odor clinging to the smashed and splintered trees. It was not a strong odor, but distinctly unpleasant even as weak as it was. It was musky, damp, with vague hints of something fetid and rotten, like a skunk's odor, and with a hint even beyond that of deadly cold. Even in the full sun, Blade felt a chill as he took a deep breath and filled his lungs with the odor—then coughed and gagged.

The footprints and the odor together removed Blade's last glimmering hopes that the ruined forest was the result of some natural accident or even the work of some human machine. Whatever had the power of a tank and the savagery of a tiger was a living creature, a living creature that left footprints two feet in diameter. Beyond that Blade knew nothing else about it, but only hoped he did not have to meet it in his present inadequately equipped state. Although what would be adequate equipment for self-defense against something certainly no smaller than an elephant and perhaps as large as a dinosaur? An anti-tank gun, perhaps? Fortunately the creature or creatures were probably many hours away by now.

Setting out to follow the trail of ruin through the forest, Blade soon found it easier to move along one side or the other of the swath of tumbled trees, and avoid the continuous clambering over fallen trunks and stumbling over jutting branches. In the sun it was warm enough to work up a sweat, and Blade soon found himself wishing that the dead man had included a canteen with his gear. Thorns and broken branches jabbed at his already well-used skin, fallen logs turned under his feet and tumbled him to the ground, insects buzzed and whined about his head, shrieked nerve-wrackingly in his ears, clustered around the oozes of blood from minor scratches. He broke off another branch and kept waving it around his head to drive off the insects.

The sun marched up to the zenith, glared down from the blue for a while, gilding the air in the forest where shafts of light struck through the trees, then began its crawl down toward night. Blade began to



wonder if he was on a fool's errand, and whether this path might be leading him nowhere except to the lair of whatever monsters had made it. If so, he would do well to turn around and make it back to the stream, where at least he could find water, before darkness. There he could perhaps contrive a raft or at least roll a log into the river and let the swift current carry him away to a more promising spot.

But something in the back of his mind kept prodding him onward, telling him over and over again that he was on the right course. Such intuitions had come to him before in tight spots; he had learned the wisdom of following them.

It must have been approaching five in the afternoon when he stumbled into the clearing. The neatly sawed-off stumps of the trees on its fringes and the piles of logs in the center told him it was man-made, and what cheered him even more was the axe stuck into one of the stumps: Not only was it a better weapon than the club; more important, it was an unmistakable sign of recent human presence. He swung the axe around his head several times in a flourish of joy before moving on.

Gradually other signs of human presence began to accumulate. Horse droppings—cold and hardening fast. Beehives—overturned, smashed like bottles hurled against a concrete wall—deserted by their inhabitants. Ants were already climbing up the debris to get at the dripping honey. A tree-house perched some thirty feet up in the crotch of a moss-grown forest giant heavy with overripe blue-green fruit. A small plank bridge over an even smaller ravine. Then, on the other side of the bridge, another body.

A woman this time. Young—in fact hardly more than a girl—naked, the caked blood between her thighs showing what had happened to her before massive blows had caved in her skull and had broken arms, legs, and ribs. This finally confirmed a suspicion that had been growing in Blade for some time. Whatever human habitation had been near here, it had been involved in last night's catastrophe and it and its people swept away.

But the dead girl also added a new dimension to the disaster. The wreckage in the forest, the dead man, the footprints—these were the work of some monstrous beast. But the dead girl was an unmistakable sign of violence done by men to men. He might find himself with a human opponent to fight before long.

He took time to lower the body into the ravine and cover it with leaves and branches. Then he moved on, axe swinging with deceptive looseness in one huge hand, yet ready to strike at a second's warning. Another body—a shaggy pony, head caved in, flies buzzing around the staring eyes. A pig running loose, scuttling frantically into the woods at the sight of him. A site used for many campfires, banked with soot-caked stones set in clay and piled high with ashes and bits of charcoal.

Now he could see in the middle distance the sun striking through the trees over a broad arc across his front. A clearing lay ahead. He gripped the axe with both hands and slipped forward, pausing behind each tree to watch and listen for any movement his approach might have stirred up. He came to the last tree, gripped the axe still more tightly, and pushed his head cautiously out.

The ruined village sprawled across the clearing in the fading light.

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### Chapter 3

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Blade was not surprised; he had been expecting something like this. But the blind, malignant ferocity that had gone into wiping out the village and its people was more than he had expected. Both the beasts and

whatever men worked with them or in their wake had been here. He saw toothmarks on roofbeams as thick as a man's body, footprints into which the bodies of villagers had been trampled and squeezed into red jam over which the insects buzzed, and far too many other bodies hacked and mangled by human-wielded weapons. Some of these were festooned by masses of foul-smelling sticky brown threads, like adhesive tape, wrapped around their limbs. Inside the ruined houses there were signs of hurried looting, by men who had smashed everything they couldn't or wouldn't carry away.

A child's doll on the planks of a walkway, roughly torn in half, sawdust trickling out. A pile of red-caked glass on the ground, where a dozen jars of some housewife's preserves had been hurled against a wall. A dog lying on the path, twitching feebly, its legs broken, whimpering until Blade ended its misery with his axe. Rounding every corner, peering into the half-shadows of each ruined hut, brought new horrors to view. When he came to where an elderly man had been pinned to the wall of his house by spikes through both hands and then used as a target for throwing knives, even Blade's hardened sensibilities and his empty stomach could not keep him from bending over and retching himself even emptier. After the heaving had passed, he remained kneeling in the damp shade for several minutes, until his peripheral vision told him of something moving toward him, stopping to watch him. He rose and turned to look.

A girl was standing at the edge of the forest, staring at him with wide, terror-filled eyes. He had just time to notice her dark blond hair, the fur tunic she was wearing, the long bare tanned legs, and the pouch at her belt, before her terror overcame her and she turned and ran.

If her panic had not made her too muddle-headed to plunge straight into the forest, Blade would never have caught her, because she was as quick off the mark as a bolting rabbit. For all his longer legs and superb physique, Blade was hard put to keep her in sight for a minute or two, then gradually began to gain on her. She kept on, even though the looks she kept throwing back over her shoulder must have told her he was gaining. As he closed the distance, he reached out to grab her by the tunic, felt his hands close on the fur—then with a frantic eel-like wriggling and a snapping of thongs she tore herself out of it and ran on naked. It took Blade a moment of standing there with the empty tunic in his hands and a stupid expression on his face to recover, then his legs churned and he was off in pursuit once more.

It did not take him as long to overtake the girl the second time, because her legs and wind were starting to fade. He could see the sweat glazing her bare back and heard the rasp of breath in her throat as he drew closer. As he reached for her, his hands going about her waist, she spun cat-quick and threw herself against him, her knee snapping up toward his groin and her clawed hands darting for his eyes.

Only his lightning reflexes and his unarmed combat training saved him from painful damage. He spun to the right, pivoting on his right leg while his left shot up, then stiffened, swept across, clubbing the girl in the right hip. She spun off her feet, and before she could move Blade had dropped on her, immobilizing her body with his own weight while his muscular arms pinned hers to the ground. As he did this, he began to speak to her in a low, slow, reassuring tone, not taking much care with his choice of words, only trying to convey a sense of friendliness and calm. It worked. Gradually the stark terror of a netted bird left her eyes and he felt her lithe body relax under him. He let go of her arms and stood up.

"Who are you?"

"I—I-my name is Rena."

"Was this your village?"

"Oh—I—yes. I—" and she burst into tears. Blade put his arms around her and held her against him while she choked and sobbed and gasped out words like "the Ice Dragons" and "murdered, murdered

everybody they didn't take away." Gradually she calmed, but as she did so Blade was aware that the pressure of her slim, delicately curved body against his was beginning to arouse him, and looking into her eyes he saw the beginning of a strange arousal there, too.

Stepping back a pace, he put his arms on her shoulders and looked straight at her. There was a long pause while he watched her eyes, to see whether acceptance or revulsion would show there, then moved his hands gently down the rounded slope of her shoulders to cup her breasts. She gave a little gasp, but Blade felt the small brownish nipples rising to delicately firm points against his palms. She gave a louder gasp now, and her own hands rose seemingly of their own accord to press against his chest and wander from there up to his face and down again, feeling the massive muscles of his arms and torso, over his board-hard and board-flat stomach, down to wrap work-hardened but delicate fingers around his swollen manhood.

Now it was his turn to gasp as his urgency increased. He drew his own hands down from her breasts, down to her hips, to cup her buttocks and pull her against him still harder. As he did so, she let her knees bend and folded herself backward, down to the ground. He followed her, and as he bent down on top of her she spread her legs and let him into her. Again she gasped, and her legs bent again, rising and locking around his back as he drove deep into her, at first as gently as he could, then with ever increasing force and speed as his control slipped. But her passion mounted to match his, and in the end his wild spurting into her and her twisting and moaning were almost at the same moment. He rolled off her after a little while, then pulled her gently against him again, as he would have done with a kitten or a child. After a while her eyes, closed during her climax, fluttered open, and her weather-chapped lips crinkled faintly in a smile.

"I—you are not a Dragon Master, I know now. They—if they see a woman they want, they—" She could not go on. Blade nodded and held her again. Gradually, the relaxation of tension and the new trust in him that their lovemaking had brought to her loosened her tongue, and bit by bit, still halting, she told him of herself, her village, and what had happened to it.

Rena's village—she knew it as East Pass Town—had been one of the northernmost villages of the Treduki—the "Coldlanders"—as opposed to the Graduki—the "Warmlanders," who lived in the warmer, temperate regions of this world, rather than farther north, nearer the glaciers. The glaciers had been advancing south for many generations, grinding out of existence one Treduk community after another, and driving the people farther and farther south. Some had, over the centuries, given up and tried to flee all the way to the cities of the Graduki. But these despised the Treduki as barbarians. Those who fled were usually killed outright or enslaved; at times they might be allowed to live free but confined to menial tasks and poor areas. In the end this discouraged refugees.

But the Treduki in their turn saw how physically feeble the Graduki seemed as a result of their reliance on machines, and in turn came to despise them. Blade could understand why the Treduki might despise a more mechanized people, if Rena's endurance, muscles, and genuine skill in unarmed combat were typical of her people.

But neither the glaciers nor the undeclared war between the two peoples was the greatest danger any more. In the past few years the Ice Dragons had come, monstrous creatures that swarmed out of the night to fall on Treduk villages. The Dragons smashed and slaughtered with their stamping feet and their lashing tails and their terrible jaws. And the men who rode and controlled them, the Dragon Masters, added to the horrors by orgies of looting and raping, and by capturing with the sticky webs scores of younger men and women, to carry them away to the north and an unknown and unthinkable fate. Rena had at first feared Blade was a Dragon Master returned to visit the scene of the raid of the previous night. Rena and perhaps a few others had escaped by simply running into the forest at the first sound of the

Dragons crashing into the town's walls. But most of the people had either failed to run, or decided to stay and actively fight with their weapons—spears, axes, swords, pikes, bows, and what Blade recognized from Rena's description as crude but workable black-powder guns.

The Ice Dragons particularly intrigued Blade. It took him many patient questions and much soothing of Rena's trembling and shivering at the memory of seeing them looming out of the night, to get anything like a coherent description of them out of her. They were apparently enormous—Blade realized that his guess about dinosaur-sized creatures had been right—incredibly savage, and apparently invulnerable to any weapons the Treduki possessed. (That was another reason for their hatred of the Graduki—the latter, it appeared, possessed weapons that could have sliced the Ice Dragons and their Masters into little pieces or broiled them like steaks in a matter of seconds. But they would not make these available to the despised Treduki.) The Dragon Masters rode on the backs of their mounts, and controlled them with small rods—ridiculously small, it seemed to Rena, to have any effect on such great beasts. Perhaps the Dragon Masters themselves had advanced knowledge, like the Graduki?

That seemed to Blade a virtual certainty. The Ice Dragons did not sound like the product of any sort of natural evolution that he was prepared to believe in, at least not on this world. Moreover, from Rena's account, he had the impression that the worsening of the climate that brought the glaciers south—and presumably north from the opposite pole—had moved in with unnatural speed. But the earlier days of the glaciation were far back in a now legend-haunted past, so he could not be sure.

Whatever was abroad in this world, it deserved more inquiry. But the first step in that would have to be finding clothes and food, then making his way with Rena to the nearest surviving Treduk village. Rena indicated that the town of Irdna would be—if not stricken by the Ice Dragons also—off to the south and about two hours away. The day was wearing on; Blade knew it was time to equip themselves and move out.

Rena was understandably reluctant to return to the wreckage of the village which hid the mangled bodies of her family. Blade scrounged the necessary gear for their cross-country hike, though he found it a thoroughly unpleasant job. It involved burrowing into the ruins of cottages and shops and finding in nearly every one the bodies of villagers—chest crushed in by falling timbers, limbs bitten off by Ice Dragon jaws, some showing signs of torture and mutilation by the Dragon Masters. As he had expected, most of the young men and women were entirely gone—spirited away on the backs of the Dragons. After a quick meal of salted meat and crackers, they dressed themselves and began the hike to Irdna.

Rena's idea of two hours walking was rather generous. It was well into the evening before they met the Irdnan patrols flung out along the riverbank toward EastPass. The Irdnans were suspicious of Blade until Rena explained who he was, and somewhat reserved even after that. He understood their attitude; living out here on a frontier in constant deadly danger had made the Treduki draw in on themselves and become cautious with strangers. He made no attempt to question the Irdnan patrol, but simply fell in behind them for the last miles of the march to the town.

He was impressed by the discipline and order of the patrol. Although they all wore the tunic-breeches-boot combination that seemed to be standard among the Treduki, it was as close to a uniform as the crude materials and tailoring permitted. Most of them carried long, heavy flintlock muskets as well as swords or axes. Their leader, a youngish man named Nilando with a Viking-style blond beard and braided hair, carried a large pistol with a silvered mounting and wore a chain of heavy brass links around his thick, tanned neck. The patrol kept good march order, and there was much looking from side to side of the path until finally the gate towers of Irdna came in sight beyond the treetops.

Irdna was many times the size of EastPass Town. Not only was its wall of stone and brick, but it was

further surrounded by fields laboriously hacked out of the forest, in which anemic crops of grain were beginning to sprout. It lay close to the riverbank, and alongside a pier mounting several small guns on swivel mounts lay a number of stout, slab-sided boats.

Nilando turned to Blade after the gate had slammed shut behind them and said gruffly, "Rena tells me you saw nothing of the Ice Dragons' attack on her village. Is that right?"

"It is. I had traveled far that day, and—"

"No matter. There would have been nothing you could have done in any case. But we bring all survivors of Ice Dragon attacks before our town leaders. They send what the survivors tell them to the Council of Resistance in Tengran."

"The Council of Resistance?" Blade sensed that there was something here that Nilando might not reveal if he thought Blade was probing directly.

"We of the Treduki are sworn to resist the Ice Dragons and their Masters to the death. Our hearts are not rotted by warmth like those of the Graduki. So from each survivor of an attack we learn what he saw and heard, and the Council adds it to their great books. Someday we will use what is in those books to destroy the Ice Dragons and make the ice go back north, to where the legends say it once was."

Blade shook his head. He could hardly explain to this tough young soldier that his people were fighting a foredoomed battle, as hopeless as that of a tribe of savages against a modern army. Nor did he really feel like undercutting the man's courage by even trying to do so.

Nilando went on. "Rena has made us believe that you are no Dragon Master, and I trust the word of a Free Woman of the Treduki. Even more do I trust one who would have been my betrothed within the space of another moon's waning. But until we know what you are, we must confine you. It will be only for a few days, and you need have little fear for yourself. We are not the Graduki, to slay or enslave a stranger merely because he is a stranger." He and Blade shook hands, then two of the patrol stepped forward and led Blade away.

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## Chapter 4

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The sparse comforts of the room in the town hall where Blade was confined did more to increase his confidence in the Treduki than all Nilando's promises, however sincere the man might be. The room had a rough wooden bedstead with a straw-filled mattress and plenty of pillows and coarse wool blankets, a chair, a table with a water jug and eating utensils on top of it, a large chest, and in one corner a wooden bucket with a lid. It was, Blade suspected, hardly more uncomfortable than the rooms in which many of the Irdnans themselves lived. Only the locked door with the armed sentry outside suggested that he was not a guest.

The light coming in through the bars of the single high window gradually turned red, then faded away entirely, and the sounds of daytime gradually gave way to those of evening and night. An elderly woman brought in a large loaf of coarse gray bread, an equally large lump of pale yellow cheese, a pot of stew, a handful of apples, and a bucket from which she filled the water jug. Blade thanked her and proceeded to dismantle the meal with an appetite sharpened by the day's activities and unhindered by any fear of poison or drugs. Nothing about the tough, proud Treduki suggested they would do such a thing, even to

a person more dangerous than himself—except perhaps to a Dragon Master. If one of those could be somehow captured and interrogated, he might reveal much of what was going on up there to the north where the Dragons laired. Or rather, where whoever was responsible for the Dragons caused them to lair.

The more he considered what he had seen and heard, the more he was convinced that at some point along the line from the first advance of the glaciers to the Ice Dragons and their Masters a superior technology was operating. Not that of the Graduki either. Unless those people were extraordinarily willing to cut off their noses to spite their faces, they could hardly be responsible for systematically creating an ice age simply to attack the Treduki. Especially when one considered that the Graduk-Treduk rivalry had apparently become really serious only after the glaciers began their march.

Even if the Graduki were not responsible for the glaciation, they were certainly the people whom Blade had to approach while in this dimension. As much as he liked the Treduki, he had to face the fact that they had little to teach him or give him to bring back to Home Dimension. Possibly the Graduki didn't either, since Blade was not at all sure how good the Treduki were at recognizing a "superior" technology. But the Treduki had so far shown nothing that would have caused surprise in the days of Oliver Cromwell. Even if he wanted to help them in their resistance to the ice and its monstrous spawn, he would also need to meet the Graduki and find ways of making use of their superior technology for that purpose.

But how to get to the Graduki, without simply fleeing into the forest or stealing a boat and making his way down the river? That would betray the considerable trust Nilando and Rena had already placed in him, and besides, what he had heard suggested that the nearest Graduk settlement was at least two thousand miles farther south. He would be doing well to cross that distance unhampered by natural accidents, let alone by hostile Treduki.

The question kept his mind working for a time, but it was not so urgent that he felt inclined to lose sleep over it, and fatigue gradually crept over him without resistance. His last thoughts as he drifted off to sleep were erotic memories of Rena.

He was awakened by a continuous blaring of trumpets from the wall, interspersed with the occasional boom of the guns on the river pier. Crimson light from torches was pouring in through the cell window. He heard shouts of anger, screams of panic, feet pounding past in all directions and in all numbers from one man to a score, ponies neighing, pigs squealing, the clatter of weapons, and the rumble of cartwheels. He hurled himself out of bed and snatched up his clothes, jerking them on as though the devil himself were knocking at the door. That might not be too far from the truth. Only one thing could be making the Irdnans turn out like this in the middle of the night.

The sentry at the door was gone, but the door was still locked. Blade shook the bars until they rattled and clanged like a smithy, bellowed in a voice louder than the panic-stricken livestock, and finally picked up the table and began swinging it against the lock. Wood splintered and smashed, metal groaned and twisted. He nearly had the lock freed when two guards came running up with pistols in their hands.

"Let me out, you idiots!" Blade yelled. "I'm a fighting man in my own land. I can help you."

"N-n-no one can help us n-n-now," moaned one of the guards. "Only maybe the Keeper of the Gates of the Dark World. The Ice Dragons are on us!"

"Damn you!" roared Blade. "All the more reason to let me out. Do you want to let a man die like a trapped animal here?" The two guards looked at each other, and some of the panic faded from their

eyes. Dying on one's feet was a message they understood. One of them pulled out a key and turned it in the battered lock. Miraculously it still functioned, and the door clicked open.

As the door swung free, the noise outside grew to a terrible droning roar that seemed to come from all sides at once. The two guards took off at a dead run, leaving Blade to make his own way out of the cell.

The hall was almost deserted. The few people scuttling aimlessly about had too much on their minds to notice Blade. None were prepared to challenge him when he ran down to the cellar to where he suspected the armory would be, and was rewarded by the sights of muskets, pikes, and bows. He had no idea of how to handle a flintlock muzzleloader and obviously would have no time to learn; tonight it was going to be cold steel for him. He snatched up an axe in one hand and hooked the thong through his belt, and with the other hand scooped up a five-foot bow and a quiver of arrows. Even in the seconds that this took, the noise outside rose still further, until it seemed that the robust stone arches of the building and its heavy roof timbers must crumble, crack, and fall down about his ears. As he sprinted up the stairs again, it was like running in a dream—the clatter of his boots on the stone stairs was noiseless in all the surrounding uproar.

The hall was deserted now, but outside he could see figures running past in a noon-bright glare far brighter than anything the torches could conceivably be giving off. He ran to the door and, momentarily cautious, pushed his head out for a preliminary look.

Irdna was built around a central square, with the town hall and other public buildings in the middle of the square. The shops and houses stood in two concentric rectangles around it, their windowless outer walls forming extra barriers to anyone penetrating into the town even if they breached the outer wall.

Blade saw that the rooftops and walls had sprouted clusters of armed men. Two additional groups had stationed themselves in the main square, each facing down one of the wide streets that led to the two main gates. Both streets had also been blocked with overturned carts, and Blade saw working parties busily piling timbers and sacks of grain to strengthen the barricades. All the people—a good proportion of the fighters were women—seemed armed to the teeth, with firearms, cold steel, and bows. The parties facing the streets each had a small artillery piece on a four-wheeled carriage, and Blade saw fuses smoldering and shot stacked ready for use.

Hundreds of old people and children were pouring into the square, huddling against the walls of the inner layer of buildings and avoiding both the streets and the open center of the town square. Blade wondered why they had not stayed in their homes, then remembered the way the village houses had been pushed in on themselves. Anyone caught in his house would be likely to die under the collapsing rubble, while in the open he might at least run. And no doubt the people had vain, vague hopes that the walls and the fighting parties would keep the Ice Dragons from ever reaching the center of town.

Abruptly the droning roar ceased, and what seemed in contrast a dead silence fell down on the town. But it was only in contrast. As Blade's ears recovered from the strain, he could make out a continuous crunching and snorting from outside the walls. Then the blue-white glare also died, but not before Blade saw a pair of vast and hideous fanged heads rise on immensely long necks over the main gate of Irdna. Half a dozen muskets let fly into the sudden darkness, then the crunching and snorting in turn died. There was a moment of genuine silence during which Blade found himself holding his breath—and then a series of thunderous crashes from all around the walls. It seemed that a giant was bowling twenty-ton boulders against the town's walls.

More guns went off, then the crashes came again, this time in ragged synchronization. In the moment of silence that followed, Blade heard leaders yelling to their men to hold their fire until they had a clear

target. As the Ice Dragons rammed themselves against the town walls a third time, now all moving together, Blade strode over to the guards facing the main gate. Their leader turned around and stared at Blade.

"Nilando!"

"How did you get out?" exclaimed the Irdnan. "I thought—" Whatever he thought vanished in the thunder of another thrust by the Ice Dragons, sounding as though the very glaciers that were their homes were pushing against the walls of Irdna. Nilando turned back to watch the gate until the groan of its tortured timbers had died away, then repeated his question. Blade was just about to answer when in his turn he was cut off by the battering-ram crash of the attacking monsters, and then by a wild cry that somehow rose over all the crashes and screams that should have drowned it out.

"They're over the east wall!"

The east wall was invisible behind the roofs of houses and shops, but the roar and crash of falling stones and the crackle of splintering timbers told its own frightful story, as did the continuous flashes as the eastern guards fired as fast as they could load their muskets. Then Blade saw glints as they dropped their muskets and pistols, and more glints as some snatched out swords and axes. Others leaped wildly down from second- or third-story roofs, preferring broken limbs or heads to death at the hands of what was plowing into the town behind them. Another fanged head rose up, something white and shrieking writhing in its teeth. Directly ahead, three more monstrous shapes rose once again over the main gate and lunged forward in a deadly wedge. The main gate screamed in a final agony of dying metal and timber and gave inward.

Instantly the cannon the guard party was manning went off with a tremendous flare of flame and smoke and a roar that would at other times have been deafening, but now sounded to Blade no louder than the popping of a paper bag. Then the musketeers were forming up into a single line, raising their weapons to their shoulders, and firing a savage rolling volley that made dust and stone chips spurt all around the gate as balls smashed into the wall. Some of the grapeshot from the cannon and some of the musket balls must have hit the Ice Dragons, but they paid no more attention to them than Blade would have to a mosquito bite. Behind the first three Blade saw more heads rising, and he nocked an arrow to his bow and pulled back, waiting until one of the beasts held its head motionless long enough to permit a shot at the eyes. Those antique muskets the Irdnans were using might have some advantages over a longbow, but accuracy would not be one of them. Other archers were also forming up and letting fly, both from the square and from the rooftops.

Whether the volleys stung the Ice Dragons or, more likely, gave their Masters a moment's pause, the massed monsters coming through the gate slowed for a moment and milled about. Blade looked off to the right, toward the broken east wall, and saw more heads looming there too, as more Ice Dragons poured through the breach and ramped and raged about amid the buildings on that side of town, snatching the last few defenders screaming from the roofs. But they showed no signs of pushing on into the town square from that direction.

Blade looked back to the gate attack just in time to see the whole mass surge forward, a wall of flesh on a forest of tree-trunk legs, and the musketeers and archers let go another massed volley. Then the Dragon formation split apart, as two at each end of the line hurled themselves at the houses on either side of the street, like rugby players ramming a hole in the opposing defenses for the ball carrier. Blade heard timbers crack, stones cascade into the street, ponies and livestock scream as they died in the collapsing buildings, and the fighters of Irdna do the same as they fell to their deaths on the stone streets or felt fanged jaws close around them. In the darkness, Blade dimly saw the capture webs flick out, snatching



still others up from the streets or down from the roofs and windows.

The Dragons closed ranks, moved forward, opened again, and again buildings fell and men and animals gave their death cries. Now the Dragons were less than fifty yards away and their odor marched before them like a mephitic wall. Some of the men of Irdna, tough as they were, stared with panic-stricken faces at the death lumbering slowly and inexorably toward them, but most, including Nilando, simply gripped their weapons tighter, licked their lips or sipped from their canteens, and waited to die on their native earth. Then the Dragons reared up, and as one of them turned slightly sideways Blade caught his first clear glimpse of a Dragon Master.

In every limb and feature Blade could see, the Master was human. But he was dressed from the neck down in a shimmering silver suit, slightly bagged at the joints and showing signs of extra padding on the torso, and his head was concealed in a spherical silver helmet with a dead-black visor. In each hand he carried the short stave or wand that Rena had mentioned, and as he flicked them forward and backward along the Dragon's neck Blade could see the monster responding. The Master looked in fact like nothing as much as a cross between a moonwalking astronaut and a medieval knight, and it was easy to guess that the helmet and suit provided virtually complete protection from any missile. But if one were to close in, and strike full force at a Dragon Master with, let us say, an axe—supposing the Dragon permitted one to close—what then? Blade found he had a great desire to gather in one of the Dragon Masters and with him perhaps a few clues to the menace that threatened this dimension.

But for the moment there was no time to do any of the planning such a move would require. The wall of Dragons reared up now once more, came down with all their legs thudding into the ground like pile drivers, then moved forward at a steadily increasing pace. Before this avalanche of flesh there was nothing except death to be found by staying, and Blade, Nilando, and the others scattered before the rush. Blade saw one man stumble over the pile of shot, and before he could recover his stride a huge head swooped down like the bucket of a power shovel and then swooped up again, with the man firmly clamped in its teeth. Others met the same fate; still others simply failed to clear the path of the onrushing Dragons and vanished under the massive feet, moving forward with a thunder that drowned out even final screams.

"Irdna has fallen," gasped Nilando as they reached the street that led out of the square toward the river gate and the pier and the boats beyond it. "But I think we may get many people clear if we get the river gate open and have boats ready. The Ice Dragons cannot swim and I much doubt if they can plow through virgin forest as fast as our river can take us south." He began shouting orders to the men of the party that had been guarding the river approach to the square. Some had already fled; most were stubbornly waiting on rooftops and in windows, letting off muskets and bows whenever they thought they had a target, waiting for the Ice Dragons to finish them off. It was a determination to defend their town to the death that Blade could have admired more if it had not been so blind. Even one of their fellow Irdnans, who presumably loved his town no less than they, now felt that it was time to seek safety and the chance to fight another day.

The men on the roof recognized Nilando and began disappearing into windows and trap doors to head downstairs, or simply sliding down the wood drainpipes at the corners of the roof. One of the first to join Blade and Nilando was Rena, with a knife in her belt and a pistol as long as her arm in one hand. She seemed none the worse for her experiences of the day before, although her eyes were wide and alert as she stared around her. Nilando embraced her, then sent her off toward the river.

Backing slowly toward the gate, Nilando's party picked up men and women in twos and threes. The screams from the square were even more hideous than before, as the Ice Dragons raged and slaughtered the people huddled against the buildings with jaws and tails and trampling feet. The roar of the dragons,

the fading crackle of musketry from the remaining defenders, the crash of falling buildings, and the screams of dying people blended into a death cry from the town of Irdna .

The Dragons in the square—or their Masters—were so concerned with systematically killing or capturing what lay within easy reach that Nilando's party, forty or more armed men and women, was able to reach the river gate unmolested, even unnoticed. Looking up as Nilando and one of the men set themselves to turning the cranks that released the bars and opened the gates, Blade was relieved to see none of the hideous Dragon heads towering above the gate. As the gate swung open, with creaks and groans hopefully inaudible above the noise behind them, he was even more relieved to see the town's boats still bobbing at the pier.

"It seems the chief Dragon Master—" began Nilando, turning to Blade. But the sentence was chopped off by a hiss and a roar like an erupting geyser as a Dragon in the forest to their left gave tongue, then surged out into the open in a single lunge that toppled full-grown trees like ninepins in all directions.

The party scattered, some toward the river, some back toward the walls. Blade stood his ground, then lifted his axe and darted to the left as the Dragon Master urged it to the right, cutting off the people running toward the boats. In a matter of seconds the Dragon's whole right side was exposed to Blade, both beast and rider apparently completely unaware of his presence.

Now! He ran forward, as fast as he had ever covered ground before in his life, crossing the forty yards between him and the Dragon in seconds. He leaped up onto the knee of one of the splayed-out legs, saw the Dragon Master turn toward him and shift one of the control wands, leaped again onto the creature's back, and swung the axe full force with every muscle in his body behind it into the Dragon Master's chest.

The Dragon Master sailed off his perch, wands still clutched in his hands, like a shot from a cannon. He landed twenty feet away and lay motionless while several bolder spirits from the party ran in and started clubbing him savagely with their axes and stabbing and slashing at him with pikes and swords. Blade, meanwhile, was hacking furiously at the Dragon's neck where two small metal studs protruded through the thick hide. Here was where the control wands had been applied; here if anywhere the monster might be vulnerable.

As he kept hacking, scarring the metal and gradually chewing out chunks of scaled hide around the studs, the Dragon kept slowly on along the course which its Master had set. On its own, it seemed to have no perception of anything not directly in front of its eyes. In fact, even that seemed to be lacking, as the creature kept straight on as though running on rails until it rammed into one of the guardhouses at the end of the bridge. Stones and timbers flew.

At that exact moment, Blade's flashing axe finally sank through the haggled and scarred hide and severed something—flesh or metal, he didn't know which—deep within. There was a spurt of purplish fluid that stung like acid, and an even larger cloud of blue smoke spewed from the now open wound. The creature jerked convulsively, reared up on its hind legs so suddenly that Blade slid down its back onto the tail and was tossed with bruising force by that flailing tail halfway across the clearing, then collapsed into the ruins of the guardhouse. A moment later, something in its neck exploded like a bomb, spraying bits of flesh, drops of purple goo, and unidentifiable chunks of metal in all directions. After that, two more bombs went off, one in the skull and the other near the base of the tail. Again, smoke and debris spewed up and pattered down or drifted away.

Blade quickly recovered from his fall and ran to where the Dragon Master had landed. He would have liked to try opening the helmet and suit on the spot, but instead Nilando was at his elbow, ordering four

men to seize the Dragon Master, bind him in case he was not dead, and carry him to the boats. Then he turned to Blade.

"Blade, there will be a statue of you in the townsquare of Irdna when it is rebuilt. We have slain a Dragon Master, captured his body, and killed his Dragon as well. Never before have all three been done at once and by the same man." He looked sharply at Blade. "You did not seem surprised at the explosions within the creature. Do you think that a high knowledge is at work among the Dragons, as among the Graduki?"

Blade nodded.

"Such has been my thought for some time. But we can talk of this later. Now it is time to flee downriver in the boats before the Dragon Masters see us, and our victory is wasted." He turned away and began urging the laggards and those who had run away from the river toward the pier. Blade followed him, reflecting that Nilando would be a man for the Dragon Masters to reckon with, particularly if he could ever be equipped with weapons capable of slaying Dragons.

Behind him darkness had fallen over Irdna as the last few torches on the wall went out, but Blade could see monstrous shapes still lumbering about dimly in the shadows, and hear the crashes and screams rising up from the dying town. He took a last look, then swung his purple-stained axe up on his shoulder and strode toward the pier.

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## Chapter 5

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Some forty men and women got safely away from Irdna in the boats; whether there were any other survivors of the town, neither Blade nor Nilando had any idea. It seemed possible, for Irdna was a far larger community than East Pass Town and far harder for the Ice Dragons to completely surround. That the Dragon Masters had in fact been unable to do so, that only the one Dragon had been posted to guard the entire south and river sides of the town, suggested as much. The Dragons, it seemed, might be neither terribly numerous nor completely invulnerable—or if they were numerous, then their Masters were such wretchedly poor generals that they failed to use those numbers properly.

But all these weaknesses of the Dragons were too subtle for any of the party except Nilando and Blade to be aware of, and even the two leaders knew that taking advantage of the weaknesses was a matter for the future. Most of the survivors were too glad to be alive, and too fearful of yet being overtaken by the rampaging hordes of Dragons, to think of anything but putting as many miles between them and the enemy as possible. Nilando would rather have taken them up a tributary of the river, to another large village some miles up that tributary, but they insisted on pressing on to Tengran. They preferred cramped, exhausting days of travel in the boats to the comforts of any town that might be within range of the Dragons.

So sails, oars, and the current took the five boats steadily southward for three full days. There were fish in the river and nuts, roots, and game to eat, the water of the river ran clear, and the sun vanished only once behind a flurry of rain clouds. It was not an unpleasant trip, and during the nights, with the boats drawn up on shore and all the people except the posted sentries sleeping around campfires, Blade and Nilando had time to examine the body of the Dragon Master and his gear.

Afterward, Blade could understand how the Dragon Masters had seemed to possess an invulnerability that could hardly fail to arouse a superstitious dread in their victims. Under the silver outer layer, itself a

tough plastic-like material impossible to cut, tear, or burn, the Master wore a complete head-to-toe covering of tiny discs fastened to a heavily padded backing. It was like a medieval knight's chain mail, except that the material of the discs was tougher and more flexible than steel, and the padding behind it both softer and stronger than the leather and wool undergarments of the knights. Neither sword blades nor axes nor arrows and musket balls fired even at pointblank range would drive through into the Master's body. The helmet was equally invulnerable, being of the same material as the discs, with a nearly opaque faceplate. A pouch on his belt carried what appeared to be concentrated energy rations, and he wore a sabre-like sword and a long dagger as well.

Blade realized after the examination that he had accidentally hit on just the right method of dealing with the Dragon Masters—assuming that Treduk fighters could be trained to the speed and agility required. Knock the Master out of his saddle with a strong blow, then immobilize him while one pounded on him with the heaviest weapons possible. Inside that superb protection was only a human being—a strong and fit one, to be sure—and sooner or later internal injuries would take their toll. If the Treduk cannon had been accurate enough to pick Masters off the backs of their Dragons, the Treduki could have decimated the ranks of their enemies years ago. As it was, they had no weapon that could strike down a Dragon Master from a distance. Only a close-in grapple would do the job.

The wands were interesting to Blade in another way. They represented a technology possibly as far beyond that of the suits as the suits were beyond the medieval armor they resembled. The wands were cylinders of the same tough material as the discs, about two feet long and two inches in diameter. Inside was a mass of electronic microcircuitry that Blade could not remotely understand; he did recognize that it was far beyond even what the far-seeing genius of Lord Leighton recognized as theoretically possible. Here was certainly something worth getting back to Home Dimension. If Lord Leighton were turned loose on one of the wands, he might find a way to duplicate its circuitry and put England at one bound fifty years ahead of the rest of the world in electronics.

Blade's respect for Nilando still further increased during those nights when they sat over the suit, the body, and the wands. Although he was quite incapable of understanding the technology involved, his knowledge of Graduk science had made him aware that such things were perfectly natural, with nothing of magic about them. This was more than could be said of some of his followers, whom Blade several times had to drive away with threats when they wanted to throw body and gear into the river, rather than risk the curses that might fall on them for carrying these things with them. Only Nilando's authority, strained to the limit, and the awe in which Blade himself was held for having slain the Dragon and its Master, prevented ugly and perhaps violent scenes.

Nor did Nilando show concern that Blade seemed far more familiar with advanced learning than he himself. He was no Graduk, that was for certain—who had ever heard of one such treating Treduki as equals, or even as human beings, and risking his life for them as Blade had done? They were all arrogant cowards. Although, Nilando admitted, there were rumors that some among the Graduki favored aiding the Treduki to resist the Dragons and the glaciers. But these were rumors only. The Graduki sat in their luxurious towns, enslaved or killed the odd Treduk, flew their patrols over Treduk territory, and did nothing else.

They saw such patrols flying over twice during the voyage downstream, but both times the patrolling craft was too high for Blade to make out any details of the silent racing silver shape. That was yet another thing that would have to wait until he had moved into Graduk territories.

The morning of the fourth day arrived. The campfires were doused with leather buckets of water from the river and the wet ashes dug under, the blankets rolled and tied, the cooking pots scoured with sand and stacked. The whole party chattered and even laughed as they climbed aboard the boats. At last they

were nearing Tengran, a town that, short of the very laws of nature being suspended, would be yet safe from the Dragons. The town lived from river traffic and fishing, and stood on an island several miles out in the middle of a vast lake formed where the river was backed up by a mountain range. Unable to break through, the river had turned its course west for many days' travel before finding a weak spot in the mountains and pouring through them in a series of rapids that only light boats with expert crews could navigate. These rapids divided the Treduki into two groups by dividing the river that was their main link. Nilando emphasized, however, that in spite of their relative immunity to the attacks of the Ice Dragons, who seldom made their way through the mountain passes, the southern Treduki were generous with aid to their more afflicted and exposed northern brothers. They themselves had suffered far more from Graduk slave raids and attacks when those were at their height.

The mountains were barely visible pushing up over the horizon as the boats moved into midstream and set sail to a following breeze. But over the next hours Blade saw the peaks rise steadily higher and higher until they made a wall against the southern sky, a wall of blue-gray separated from the blue sky by a line of white-sparkling snow caps, with their craggy sides seamed by the silver threads of streams fed by the melting snows. The mountains loomed tall at the southern end of the vast lake when finally the boats reached it shortly after noon, rearing up almost straight from the placid waters. The breeze had died away to a feeble whisper, and the people were breaking out the oars and preparing to row the last miles to Tengran, now clearly visible in the center of the lake, when Nilando suddenly caught Blade by the arm and pointed toward the sky above the mountain peaks.

"Graduk patrol fliers! Three of them! And low, too!"

Blade followed the pointing finger and saw that the man was right. In a V-formation three swept-winged silver shapes were racing over the mountains and beginning an unmistakable descent toward the lake. The people in the boats were turning now to stare, and beginning to mutter nervously, finger their muskets and other weapons, and swear aloud they had never seen Graduk patrollers do anything like this.

The three machines were approaching too fast for there to be any hope of the boats scuttling back to shore in time to avoid them, if indeed the boats were their intended prey. They passed over the island barely a thousand feet up. Blade saw puffs of gray smoke rising above the rooftops of Tengran as alarm fires were ignited-or perhaps futile guns fired. Then, still in perfect formation, the three machines extended long ski-like undercarriages from beneath their fuselages and touched down as delicately as birds, in spite of their massive size and weight. They skated across the water like skimmed stones in feather clouds of spray, slowly losing speed and sinking deeper as they did so.

Even in the tension of the moment, Blade felt a brief surge of disappointment. From their shape, the whistle and roar as they came down, and the smell of the fumes blowing across the water from the exhaust nozzles, the Graduk machines seemed hardly more than jet-powered seaplanes. If this was typical of the "advanced science" of the Graduki, he found it hard to believe that they could be responsible for the electronics of the wands. But if not the Graduki or at least some among them, then who? He had thought he might be approaching the end of the mystery, but now it seemed to have suddenly whipped away out of sight. He felt like a man staggering along an endless tunnel.

The three fliers had now turned completely around and were slowly approaching the boats. As they approached, Blade noticed turrets on top of each one turning slowly and training long black tubes on the boats. Then hatches opened in the gleaming metal flanks and helmeted men in blue uniforms, carrying smaller black tubes, climbed out on the wings. One of these men spoke through an amplifier, his harsh voice booming across the water.

"All right, we've got you surrounded. Throw your weapons over the side and row toward us." Blade

was reminded of Home Dimension policemen coping with an unruly mob, and the bellowing Graduki seemed to be producing much the same reaction among the people in the boats as policemen often did. These were now cursing openly, shaking their fists, hurling obscenities (but as yet nothing more solid) across the water at the blue figures. Far from throwing their weapons overboard, Blade saw some, Rena among them, fumbling for arrows or powder-horns.

Suddenly all the people in the five boats shouted together. From behind the flier that lay between them and the island, three more boats appeared, broad-beamed, many-oared craft in which the glint of weapons was clearly visible above the thrashing oars. But it was a shout that quickly turned into gasps and screams of horror, as the plane swung its turret sharply around and the black tube depressed and fired.

There was nothing visible in the air, but the patch of water toward which the tube was pointing leaped into the air like an erupting geyser in a spout of spray and steam. Seconds later the hiss of boiling water and the crackle of superheated air chased each other across the distance to Blade's ears. Their flying machines might be no better than Home Dimension's, but Graduk weaponry was clearly well beyond human practice, if not theory.

The boats slowed but did not stop. They continued to advance on the fliers, and now Blade saw men scurrying forward in each one and clustering around small cannon mounted in the bows. Perhaps they hoped that however hostile the Graduki seemed, on this occasion at least they would not push that hostility to the point of open violence.

The men in the approaching boats and the people watching them hopefully had about thirty seconds to indulge those hopes. During those thirty seconds half a dozen of the blue-clad soldiers scrambled over the top of the nearest flier to the other wing, lined up, and aimed their tubes toward the boats. Blade swallowed, hoping he was wrong about what he saw coming.

He was not. With an ear-torturing crackle, both turret and soldiers opened fire together on the center boat. It was as if it had suddenly been dropped into the whirling blades of a buzz-saw. Amid the boil of steam and spray, Blade saw the hull part in the middle, the timbers on either side of the cut turning black in an instant. Men hurled themselves over the side, writhed in the boiling water, or whiffed out of existence in puffs of smoke as the invisible beam flicked across the decks of the two sinking portions. It touched the cannon; powder flared up in a cloud of smoke, charred bodies flew into the air, the cannon itself was suddenly a darkened blob of melted metal.

The turret swung its heavy weapon to the next boat, while smaller flecks of steam and foam in the disturbed water around the sinking halves of the first one showed where the soldiers were picking off the survivors one by one with their lighter weapons. The turret beam chopped into the second boat, this time sweeping along its deck from fore to aft before swinging down to punch the hull open. As the screams of the burning men came across the water, something snapped in the watchers around Blade.

He heard Nilando scream, "No, you fools!" and then a dozen muskets went off around him and as many bowstrings twanged. One huge woodsman rose to his full height, whipped his axe up and over his head, and hurled it across the water at the soldiers on the nearest flier. It struck the wing with a sharp clang, bounced high, slid down the smooth metal, and vanished into the water of the lake. The woodsman clawed at his beard and swore.

Now more blue-clad soldiers were pouring out of all three fliers, and two of the three were turning their turret weapons toward the Tengan boats. Blade saw the third one caught in the middle of its frantic retreat, its oars sliced off one by one, as though a cruel schoolboy were pulling the legs and wings off a

fly. Then he heard Nilando shouting again, his voice as close to panic as Blade had ever heard it, shouting at his people to stop. More muskets went off and Blade saw two of the soldiers drop to the wings and lie still, another one stagger and drop his weapon. Then Nilando swore a futile, incoherent oath, grabbed Rena by the arm, and jerked her over the side.

They had barely vanished when the crackle of the heatbeamers tore at Blade's ears again, louder than ever this time, and a hideous scream and the sudden smell of charred flesh made him swing around. The woodsman was falling, falling in two pieces; a beam had chopped through his body at one stroke. His torso toppled over the side with another scream and vanished in a churning blast of steam as another beam picked it off; his legs fell to the bottom of the boat and lay there, looking like something left after a fire in a butcher shop.

Then Blade realized that the beams were crackling all around him and other men and women were dying hideous deaths as the Graduk beam-men picked them off one by one. The Irdnans were being used for target practice! Blade was filled with a fury as searing as the beams playing around him; at that moment he could have torn one of the beam-men limb from limb without a second thought.

Instead he too snarled an oath and plunged over the side, on the side of the boat away from the fliers. The water bit ice-cold at his heated skin as he dove under, stroking himself far down until the bubbling and splashing as the beams tore into the surface of the water was far above him. He turned, even his capacious lungs beginning to scream and ache, and pushed upward, still trying to put distance between himself and the killers aboard the fliers.

His head broke through the silver roof that was the surface and his lungs of their own volition swelled with a mighty gulp of fresh air. Then the crackle and hiss of a striking beam slammed down around him like a wall cutting off the whole world, and he felt a blast-furnace-hot whip crack across his temple: He drifted down again into a blackness that seemed the only thing offering a cool refuge from the torturing heat.

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## Chapter 6

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The first conclusion Blade's foggy mind reached after he again became aware of his surroundings was that if he was aware of his surroundings he was presumably not dead. The second was that since he appeared to be sitting or lying on a vibrating metal floor he was presumably no longer in the water. That was as much as his mind was up to recognizing for a considerable time, until the ache in his head and the pain in his scalp faded somewhat.

He was propped up in a sitting position with his back against the blue-painted metal wall of a semi-cylindrical chamber about six feet high and twenty feet long. The metal behind and under him was vibrating continuously, and from this and the unmistakable distant roar of jet engines he realized he was aboard one of the Graduk fliers. Presumably a prisoner, as he was chained to the wall by two long chains hooked to a leather belt around his waist, and his hands and feet were bound painfully tightly together by black tape. Otherwise he was naked.

Looking around the compartment, he saw Nilando, Rena, two other men and another woman from among the Irdnans, all of them likewise stripped, bound, and chained, several of them also roughly bandaged. Lifting his own bound hands to the sore area of his own scalp, he discovered that his entire head had been shaved and a large bandage covered the entire side of his scalp where the heatbeam blast

had struck. His opinion of the Graduki went up about two-tenths of a percent in response to this indication of some mild concern for the health of those Treduki not used for target practice in the water. But he would still have cheerfully dismembered any or all of the four blue-uniformed figures that sat clutching their beamers in seats facing the prisoners. Beyond those four, others sat facing forward. Blade forced himself to full alertness and began a careful study of his surroundings for a clue as to how to escape.

Escape was definitely the first thing to think of, if all his fellow prisoners were able to travel, and if the plane did not land so far inside Graduk territory that there would be no hope of reaching friendly territory on foot. It had to be a high priority, because so far the Graduki—or at least those he had met—did not look of much use for any of the projects he might want to undertake in this dimension. Nilando had said they would do nothing against the Ice Dragons, either in cooperation with the Treduki or on their own. This rather ruled out getting their help in finding out more about what was going on up in the glacier-covered portions of the world. Nor would they be likely to set him and Nilando and the others free, so that they might return to the Treduk towns and teach their people what had been learned about Dragon Masters and their vulnerable points. Blade realized they would not even be likely to release him alone, assuming he wished to abandon his companions—he had been captured in the company of the barbarous Treduki and therefore would be one in the eyes of his captors.

In fact, he could not even be sure that the Graduki were planning to leave him and the others alive for very long. There was a delight in slaughter that seemed fairly well-rooted in Graduk nature, judging from the way the soldiers had picked off the people in the boats. But whatever the prospects, there was the fact that no escape would be possible until the flier landed.

Another two hours went by before the floor tilted downward and the landing gear went down with a loud clanking. As the floor continued to tilt, Blade watched his companions closely. They were all conscious now, but the guards had growled ominously at his attempts to speak to them, so he and Nilando had watched each other in silence. As far as he could tell, none were seriously hurt. But two hours' flying plus however long they had been in the air while he was unconscious added up to an enormous distance. They would most likely be many, many hundreds of miles inside Graduk territory. It would be a long walk home.

Unless perhaps that rumored faction of pro-Treduk Graduki actually existed, and he could somehow make contact with them? But how? Such a faction would most likely be operating underground, hard to find, suspicious of strangers, and hardly likely to accept him or his companions at the drop of a hat. It was something to watch for, certainly, but not expect to find.

The engines were now definitely being throttled back, and the floor tilted even more steeply. Moments later he felt a shuddering and a roar as the hydro-skis slid down onto a watery surface and spray shot up to drum like hail on the belly of the flier. The flier skimmed along until it had lost enough speed for the hydro-skis to cease bearing it. Then there was an abrupt slowing, a series of jolts, a dying whistle as the engines were cut off, and the sound of waves sloshing against the outside of the fuselage as it settled down into the water.

Seconds later there was a whine from aft as an auxiliary propulsion system cut in. The flier began moving again, gently rocking and heaving—and sometimes not so gently—under the impact of the waves. It moved forward slowly, across water that, whatever it was, clearly was not as calm as the lake.

During the minutes of the rocking and heaving, the guards unbuckled their seat belts, checked their uniforms and gear in the manner of soldiers everywhere and in every age, then moved aft to deal with the prisoners. They unchained them, cut the tapes binding their feet with knives, then jerked them roughly to



their feet. Nilando glared at the man who pulled Rena up by her hair, fondling her with his other hand as he did so—and was rewarded by a jackbooted foot slamming into his stomach. He crashed back against the wall, gasping, with a look of fury in his eyes hotter than the heatbeams. The guard backed off hastily, fingering his beamer.

A hatch clanged open, and the guards motioned to the prisoners. Blade took the lead and balancing as well as he could without the use of his bound hands, stepped out through the hatch onto the wing. A noticeable breeze was kicking up waves high enough to send water washing well over the wing. The water did not seem as cold to Blade's feet as the water of the river or the lake—here they seemed to be farther from the chilling influence of the glaciers.

The fliers appeared to have landed in a bay a good two miles wide, formed by two long wooded points jutting out at either end to largely shelter it from the open sea. The shore appeared largely composed of sheer cliffs; with forest cover extending from the edge of the cliffs back to the line of hills that formed the landward horizon. The only break in the rocks was a small beach barely a hundred yards long. From the beach a large powerboat was making its way toward the flier; half a dozen of the familiar blue-uniformed figures crouched in it.

Blade was surprised that the flier had landed in this apparently wild and remote bay, but before he could speculate further the boat had reached the flier. One of the men in it threw out a line which the guards aboard the flier hauled in. Under the muzzles of beamers aboard both flier and boat, the prisoners scrambled into the boat, several of them having to be fished out of the water in the process. Then the engine purred and the boat swung in a sharp turn away from the flier. Even before the prisoners had reached the beach, the flier had fired up its engines, raced across the bay, and leaped into the air, to vanish toward the south.

A few yards up from the beach, hidden in the trees, was a narrow road paved with a pebbled gray plastic. A large truck-like vehicle more than forty feet long stood in the shade, its slab sides coming so close to the ground that Blade could not make out whether it ran on wheels, tracks, or for all he knew, feet. The guards loaded the prisoners into the truck through the rear door, but none climbed inside after them.

Left alone for the first time after many hours of enforced silence, the prisoners burst out into a gabble of oaths, questions, lamentations, and complaints. Even Nilando cursed quietly. Only Blade was silent. When the others had run out of breath, he looked at Nilando and asked quietly, "Is this the usual Graduk method, or are we getting special treatment?"

"It is the first time I have ever heard of one of their slaving patrols raiding so far north. It must be very costly to send those great machines all that way to pick up a few prisoners."

Blade nodded. "It would be. But I think they had more in mind than just a few prisoners for slavery. I think they were trying to frighten the people of Tengran. Have the Tengrans been doing anything the Graduki would consider particularly bad?"

Nilando frowned as he tried to think out an answer to this question. "Nothing that I know for certain. The Ice Dragons do not approach Tengran, so it has never asked for help. Nor have its people ever asked for refuge in the south. They are brave."

"If the Ice Dragons cannot swim, the Tengrans are also quite safe," Blade reminded him. "Do the Ice Dragons merely not attack Tengran, or do they avoid the whole area?" He had the feeling that something was beginning to take shape out of the fog of ignorance through which he had been groping for nearly a

week, or might take shape if he kept prodding Nilando, trying to squeeze information out of the man.

"I have heard tales," said Nilando slowly, "that the Ice Dragons do not come within a day's fast walking of the shores of the lake. But they are only tales. If they were true, I do not see why many thousands of our people have not settled by the lake in search of safety."

"Unless," said Blade, also speaking slowly, also trying to define his own thoughts, "Tengran had some reason for not wanting too many people to see what they are doing?"

"By the High Hills!" exploded Nilando. "Are you trying to say that they may be the creators of the Ice Dragons? Then we must escape, so we can lead all the Treduki against these monstrous people and throw them all into their own lake. They—"

"No, damn you!" exploded Blade, losing his temper. "I didn't mean that! I meant—" and there he stopped, because he was very far from sure he had a theory he could explain to Nilando. And he was very sure that if his theory was correct the worst thing he could do was explain it anywhere he might be overheard by Graduk soldiers. They might be silent and sadistic, but they probably were not stupid enough to entirely ignore what they overheard.

Fortunately, the van ended the exchange by starting up with a whine, a clatter, and a series of jolts that sent all the people inside bouncing about like corn in a popper. Nilando swore again.

The driver of the truck must have had frustrated ambitions to be the Graduk equivalent of a racing driver, because the truck swayed, jolted, and lurched wildly along. The prisoners inside kept bouncing about and picking up bruises and gouges from the bare metal interior for the better part of an hour. They were also getting hungry and thirsty. Blade managed to keep his mind off his present discomforts and his dubious prospects by turning his theory over and over in his mind, and also by trying to guess what sort of motor drove the truck. It gave off a continuous, unvarying, maddening whine, somewhat like an enormous mosquito trying to sing bass.

Without any warning or slowing, the brakes went on and the van slammed to a stop so sudden that all six prisoners flew like bowling balls the full length of the interior and crashed into the front wall. In the silence that followed the sudden cut-off of the motor, Blade heard a new sound coming from outside—the growl and murmur of an angry mob.

There was nothing for a moment that Blade could make out except a formless and incoherent roar. Then he began to make out single voices shouting specific words

"Kill the Treduki!"

"Treduki bring disease to our people!"

"The arena is for the rich. The money spent on slave raids is taken from the poor!"

"The Treduk animals feast while we starve!"

—and others more or less as ominous. It seemed the truck was surrounded by some group in opposition to the Graduk government. But it was a howling and perhaps armed mob, and its slogans seemed to have nothing to do with the Ice Dragons and much to do with murdering Treduki. Blade had seldom felt quite as helpless as he did now, sitting locked and bound in a truck surrounded by a mob that might be hostile to his guards but was likely to prove even more hostile to him.

A moment later the van began rocking back and forth, and the shouts from outside took on the rhythmic quality of a sailor's heaving chanty. Blade grimaced. The mob had decided to try overturning the truck. No doubt it weighed a good many tons, but several hundred determined people can push hard. And after they got it over, then what? Set it on fire? Yes. Blade heard a new shout: "Burn the animals in their cage! Burn out the disease from our cities!"

Blade saw Rena turn white, and Nilando put an arm around her to comfort her, although the Irdnan's own face was tight-drawn and pale itself. The rocking grew more violent; several times Blade felt one set of wheels rise completely clear of the ground and slam back. Once he heard a scream and a crunch as somebody didn't jump back fast enough from the descending truck.

Then the scream of a siren cut through the uproar outside, just as the truck heaved up more mightily than before, reached its point of balance, and went over. Whether anybody was under it when it hit Blade didn't notice; he was too busy bracing himself as well as he could to keep his brains from being bashed out against the walls. As it was he went head over heels and landed with a spine-jarring crash that momentarily made his head swim and added bruises to most of the places that hadn't already been bruised in the course of the trip.

As he lay there, battered and coldly determined that the next person who touched him or tried to make him do anything was going to be killed, the truck door crashed open. He twisted himself around until he faced the light and then lurched to his feet, his bound hands raised clublike. Two of the soldiers squatted in the opening, their beamers leveled at him.

"Outside!" one of them snapped. Blade moved slowly forward, hearing the others behind him groaning and staggering to their feet, until he was squarely between the two soldiers. One of them prodded him in the hip with the butt of his beamer.

Blade spun on his left foot and his right foot shot out like a stone flying from an explosion, smashing into the soldier's stomach and catapulting him through the open door. Before the other could bring his beamer up and aim it, Blade swung his bound hands against the man's head in a hammer-blow that slammed him against the edge of the door. Blade heard the soldier's skull crack. Then he leaped through the door into the sunlight, far too angry to be cautious but not too angry to notice what was around him.

The mob still surrounded the overturned truck at least a thousand strong, but they had backed away a little. From the overturned van to another similar one about thirty feet away a double line of men in blue uniforms made a clear alley. Blade at first thought these were more soldiers. Then he noticed the different cut of the uniforms, and that these men were armed with heavy barreled, green-painted pistol—like weapons with wide mouths, rather than the too-familiar black heatbeamers. He saw some of these turning toward him, staring and raising their weapons—then he suddenly had too much to do to look more.

Four soldiers came running around the end of the truck but made the fatal mistake of not blasting Blade on the spot. Like the men he had already taken out, they found him too close in before they could fire, and after that there was nothing they could do but flee or die. He butted the first one in the stomach, and the soldier screamed out all the breath in his body as he shot into the air and crashed against the man behind him. They went down together, and Blade leaped forward and crashed his bare foot down full force on the second man's chest. He saw a third soldier raise his beamer to firing position, threw himself backward under it, and swept the man off his feet and hard up against the sharp edge of the open truck door. The man fell forward tonelessly, but before he hit the ground Blade found himself suddenly staring into the muzzle of the fourth soldier's beamer.

There was no flashing of his life before his eyes, because the moment of staring at the beamer and knowing that it was about to chop him into charred pieces didn't last long enough. Then the soldier suddenly dropped his beamer into the dust, threw up his hands, and fell backward with a thud.

In the sudden silence that followed the soldier's collapse, Blade saw eyes in the mob turning from him to the double file of armed men, then on to the rest of the prisoners clustered behind him. Then one of the police-types snapped, "All right, you bastards! In the van! Now!" It was certainly a policeman's type of voice, and Blade could no more swallow that than he had swallowed the soldier's treatment. Not now. He lunged forward, and as he threw his arms to the left for a swinging blow at the nearest man's head, two more beyond that one had time to whip up their weapons and aim them at Blade. He felt a sudden fierce itching all over his body, as if every inch of it were covered with a blazing rash, then his knees would no longer hold him up. He knew he was falling forward, vaguely wondered if there was yet a part of his skin unbruised, felt himself hit and the gravel drive into his skin, then slipped on down into blackness.

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## Chapter 7

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This time, the first thing Blade became aware of was lying naked in a soft bed, his skin covered from head to toe with a soothing ointment, a faint hint of perfume in the air, and distant music in his ears. All together, it seemed so improbable that he decided he was not going to stay awake and try to orient himself, but would go back to sleep. He did so.

The second time he awoke the room was dark and both the perfume and the music were gone. So was the ointment. He looked at his skin where it had been smeared with the ointment, and saw that the bruises and scratches had faded as much as they would have normally in three or four days. However, he was still groggy—drugged? he asked himself—and so went back to sleep again.

The third time he awoke, he noticed that there was someone else in the room. At first glance this someone looked so much like Lord Leighton that for a moment Blade had the most disorienting sensation of all—that of having been snatched back to Home Dimension in his sleep. But a closer look showed him that the visitor was definitely not Lord Leighton. It was indeed possible he was not even human.

He was about five and a half feet tall, bandy-legged and squat as a chimpanzee, with appropriately long arms. His head was notably more cylindrical than the human norm, his eyes larger, and his ears far larger and more protruding. His hair was white and formed a fringe around a largely bald scalp. And that scalp, and every other inch of exposed skin, was a glowing sea blue.

"Well," he said as he saw Blade stir and gape. "I see you are finally really awake. You need not be afraid. You are now among friends."

Blade nodded slowly. Then, knowing it was an unoriginal and perhaps tactless thing to say:

"Who are you?"

"I? I am Stramod. I was one of the Ice Master's early experiments in genetics. I did not please him, because I was still too complex and too human, which of course has been very satisfactory to me. I grant you, I am somewhat odd to look at, but—" He broke off and grinned at the blank look Blade realized

must be spreading across his face. "But indeed I am lacking in manners. I forget that you have not been given our discourse so you would not know the Ice Master from the Seven Sorcerers of Septhran Mountain." He rose. "I will go and speak to Doctor Leyndt and she will come and perhaps together we can explain." He strode out, moving with grace and even some dignity in spite of his simian appearance.

He returned a few minutes later with a companion, from her white tunic presumably Doctor Leyndt. She was decidedly human, and strikingly beautiful. No, perhaps handsome would be a better word. There was no hint of delicacy or softness in her face, body, or stance—all were perfectly balanced. But definitely attractive. The hair, even done up as it was, shone with a rich auburn sheen, the lips were full, the wide mouth made Blade want to see it smile, and the body under that tunic was most definitely that of a woman, a mature woman with all the curves ripened.

Her voice was measured, low, almost emotionless. As with her physical qualities, her voice was a perfect balance between too much and too little expression. So was her choice of words. "You must have realized that you are no longer destined for Treniga Arena, and are no longer in the hands of the Conciliators' soldiery. But I'm sure you want to know much more than that. Stramod and I will do our best to tell you."

In fact, she explained, he had indeed been kept under sedation for more than four days, while the rest of the rescued Treduki were interrogated. Blade had appeared to be their leader, and a man of outstanding abilities, but they had to be sure he could be trusted before they tried to enlist him as an ally. So they had closely questioned all the others, to find out as much as possible of the way the others saw him, then gone to him directly. All the interrogation led to the conclusion that Blade was as able as he appeared, and trustworthy as far as this could be measured and judged for now. So they would answer any questions he might ask.

How had they known he had slain a Dragon Master? Oh, that was quite simple. Others had escaped from Irdna and reached Tengran even before Blade's party, talking of the destruction of the town and of the death of a Dragon Master at the hands of a huge man who yet moved like a striking snake. And in Tengran there were agents who reported such news to the headquarters of the movement in Treniga, the Graduk capital.

Yes, there was indeed a movement of those among the Graduki who would form an alliance with the Treduki and use the combined skills of the two peoples to beat back the Ice Dragons and perhaps even the glaciers. It was the movement's agents that secretly kept the area around Tengran's lake free of Dragons, driving them off with sonic blasts from the nerve-pistols that Blade himself had met.

It was obvious, however, that the Conciliators, the ruling oligarchy among the Graduki, also had agents in Tengran, who had picked up the same information and told their masters. And the Conciliators had responded with the raid that had gathered in Blade and his companions and also killed as many Tengrans as possible to remind them of Graduk weaponry and perhaps make them afraid to cooperate further with the movement's agents.

But it had been possible to foil the Conciliator's scheme, exploiting for this purpose the very prejudice against Treduki that the Conciliators gave as one of their main reasons for rejecting any notion of joint resistance. The mass of the people regarded Treduki as disease-ridden animals and their kidnapping for slavery or for the grand arenas an expensive luxury of the upper classes. There was an organized movement afoot to force the Council to end such raids. That movement had grown so strong that it had bribed officials of the Supreme Council to reveal the route along which the latest batch of Treduki were being smuggled into Treniga after being landed at a remote bay where none would see them. And since her movement, the Union for Cooperation, had infiltrated the other one, what was known to its leaders

was soon known to the Union's.

After that it was a simple matter for those leaders of the anti-Treduk movement who were also leaders of the Union (she smiled as she said that, and Blade's anticipation was rewarded ten times over—it gave her a radiance like a great rose in full bloom) to call out their followers and stage a riot at a convenient place on the road to Treniga. After that, fifteen Union people carefully disguised as Civil Guards and equally carefully placed nearby in advance had come charging to the rescue. They had intimidated the rioters (who might very well have actually killed Blade and his companions), dealt with those soldiers not already dealt with more drastically by Blade, and made off with all the prisoners.

Blade himself, she went on severely, had very seriously complicated what had been planned as a comparatively neat and quiet affair by killing the soldiers. Not that she had any love for the Conciliators' killer-squads, she added hastily, seeing Blade's face flare with rage at the memory of how those soldiers had killed right and left and then humiliated the survivors. But the deaths of five soldiers would make the affair much more noteworthy than they had planned. And the Conciliators might well launch a dangerously thorough manhunt in pursuit of a man who, hands bound, could yet kill so many of their soldiers single-handed.

By this time, no doubt, he was wanting to know more about the Union. For many Graduki, including perhaps herself, the desire to help the Treduki smash the Ice Dragons perhaps rose from guilt—guilt that the Ice Master himself was (or had been) Graduk. As for who the Ice Master was, there Stramod could tell a better story than she could. For he himself was an early creation of the Ice Master, and he and those like him could say much about the nature of the enemy. Blade, by now becoming slightly bored, said politely that nothing was more important than knowing the nature of the enemy, and nodded to the mutant to tell his story.

The Ice Master, it seemed, was actually the greatest scientist the Graduki had ever produced. His field had been biology and genetics, and with that knowledge plus great surgical skills he had been the first to design living creatures to specific requirements, as one would design a van or a warflier. He had succeeded in developing many such versions of the lower animals; then he had started on humans.

"I am one of his earlier creations, where he still knew such a thing as caution—not scruples, merely caution out of fear of failure. There were others like me, and because our minds were almost normal, we soon revolted against the Master. By this time he had gone on and created many less normal beings from human stock, using them for guards, slaves, gifts to his allies on the Supreme Council, and so on. We had to fight them, and in the fighting many of them and many of us were killed. But we made such an uproar that the secret of what he was doing could no longer be kept. His allies on the Council fell from office, and he himself was forced to flee. He went north into the glacier land, taking with him some of his creations and no doubt much of his equipment, for otherwise how could he have created the Ice Dragons? Their riders are no problem; they are merely prisoners from the villages, trained and conditioned. But the Ice Dragons show that he must have advanced his knowledge much beyond even what it was when he fled. In twenty years one can do much."

One can indeed, thought Blade. But he was not sure whether that included a biologist and surgeon learning the physics and electronics necessary to create by the hundreds the wands and Masters' suits. And how did the Ice Master keep himself supplied, if indeed he skulked in the icy wastes to the north? No, the Union leaders were either not considering all the facts—or considering them and rejecting the conclusion to which they might lead.

"In any case," Stramod was going on, "five years ago the Ice Dragons appeared, ravaging Treduk villages. The Council immediately decided that the Ice Master was creating them, and sending them out

as a warning of his new powers. If we aided the Treduki, the Master might hurl something far worse than the Dragons against us—a mutated plague virus, or worse. They expelled from their ranks all who would not accept this, and the Conciliators now rule as a dictatorship."

"We must be somewhat just to them," put in Doctor Leyndt. "The people fear and despise the Treduki so much that an alliance with them would probably have brought down the people's wrath on the head of any Council that proposed it."

"True enough," said Stramod sourly. "Your people, Leyndt, are not noted for tolerance of the strange or different." There was an ugly bitterness on the blue face as he said that.

Leyndt put a gentle hand on his arm. "Don't let it fester, my comrade. You have found a home here, and work to do—work that in the end will confound and convert those who scorned you."

"I hope so," he said shortly.

Leyndt went on. "But the Ice Dragons must be stopped, first, and then the Ice Master's allies tracked down, his lair discovered, and both destroyed. Our Union has sworn this, but we also know that we must operate in the shadows, to the very end. The Council would willingly destroy us for risking the wrath of the Ice Master; the people for cooperating with the disease-ridden Treduki. Perhaps afterward, when the Ice Master is gone and the Treduki have fought side by side with us against him, we can reveal what we have done. But I fear that we shall all of us, even if successful, go to the cremation chambers in the end with none knowing how much we have done." She said the last with a sober pride.

Blade was nodding. Though he now knew much, he still wanted to know more. "But that is only the last twenty years, you said? What about the glaciers? Nilando said they had been advancing for a thousand years." He tried to strike a light note. "I doubt the Ice Master was responsible for those, even if he now lives among them."

"You're right," said Leyndt with a smile, and as she smiled she again seemed to glow with a clean, calm flame. "Our astronomers were fairly primitive a thousand years ago, but what they left in their records is enough to suggest what happened. A vast mass of gas and dust moved into our planetary system from interstellar space and cut off much of the light of our sun from our planet for over two hundred years. Over two-thirds of the population died during those two centuries, with most fleeing into the tropics and becoming our ancestors. Those who stayed farther from the equator found themselves too busy surviving to retain much of their civilization, and so they became the ancestors of the Treduki.

"After two centuries, the cloud drifted out of the system again, and disappeared into space. But the damage had been done. Our world's climate had been altered, and the glaciers were inexorably on the march, faster and farther than they could ever have done in the normal course of climatic cycles. The cloud was a most rare and strange astronomical phenomenon, from what we know today. One of the few things about which the Council still permits free debate is its nature and origins. The astronomers are divided into factions that battle almost as savagely as the Treduki battle against the Ice Dragons."

Blade wondered if any of the astronomers had thrown into the debate the theory he himself now held. No doubt it would have been violently attacked. But the uproar might have started some people thinking along new lines. Or, as he had asked himself before—perhaps people had already gone through the same line of reasoning as he had, but shied away from the conclusion to which it led? He would not be surprised. It was a frightening conclusion.

Consider. Electronics beyond anything even the Graduki appeared to have. Ice Dragons in numbers that

would have required a huge biological factory. How to build and supply one in the northern wastes? And a thousand years ago, a cloud of dust and gas moving purposefully from interstellar space, hanging in place long enough to tip the world's climate toward a new, fast-moving glacial age, and then departing. A cloud for which the astronomers could not agree on a natural explanation.

Answer. There was no natural explanation. The Ice Master had allies, beings from beyond this world, beyond its planetary system, allies who had come to this world with the gas cloud and now lurked along with the Ice Master and his—or their—creations in the glacial wastes. Why they had come, altering the world's climate and now aiding the Ice Master, Blade did not know. Nor did he know why the Ice Master had allied himself with them.

But that this world's troubles had origins beyond the human Blade was as certain as if he had seen it carved in the living ice of the glaciers. And in contemplating all of it for the first time, from beginning to end, he found himself feeling as cold as if he himself were frozen into the heart of a glacier.

These people did not know their real enemy. So he would have two battles. First, convincing them he was right. Second, leading them against the enemy. And in the process, learning more about this tantalizingly glimpsed horror from the stars, and then learning how to fight it—or perhaps learning that there was no way to fight it at all? Blade for the first time, was seriously concerned that all his skills and training might be unable to help these people cope with their problem. And at that thought, he went even colder. Futility was not a good feeling.

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## Chapter 8

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Since the Unionists had been keeping Blade confined to bed to simplify his interrogation rather than because his health required it, they let him up the next day. The place to which the rescued prisoners had been taken was in appearance an expensive private health resort back in the hills nearly a hundred miles north of Treniga. Actually it was the largest Union facility. Doctor Leyndt's reputation for curing the Graduk elite of the consequences of their numerous vices was so great that it acted as a shield for any institution with which she chose to become associated. So the resort headquarters housed most of the Union's records (insofar as they dared to write anything down), laboratories for research into methods of dealing with the Ice Master and the glaciers, and a floating population of between forty and sixty Union people plus other transients such as Blade and his companions. The Union people were not complacent about their security; guards patrolled the roads and radar scanned the sky and the land from the top of a nearby hill. But for the first time since arriving in this dimension, Blade felt that he could sit still in one place, look around him, and decide what to do for these people and what to take from them.

He spent much time in the laboratories, and there further confirmed his beliefs that the Dragon wands were far beyond Graduk knowledge. In some things, such as the power charges that supplied the beamers, the Graduki had advanced well beyond Home Dimension science. In other respects (such as lacking atomic power, though not atomic theory) they were well behind it. Nowhere did he see any signs of the mastery of electronics needed to make the wands, nor indeed much of anything that Home Dimension could not have produced within a few years. The science of the Graduki, however impressive to the Treduki, offered little or nothing that might be worth taking home. What was worse, it offered little or nothing that might stand effectively against the aliens.

If there were any aliens. In the peace of the resort, Blade sometimes found it hard to accept even his own deeply believed theory as other than totally fantastic. There were hundreds of acres of grounds,



some neatly kept lawn but mostly wooded, streams curling through to form little ponds, sudden patches of wildflowers blazing blue and red and yellow against the greenery, a continuous pulse of life in the sounds of the birds and insects and the sighing of the wind in the leaf-hung branches. He found that he thought best when wandering alone through these woods, although even the best thoughts that came to him there seemed unequal to the occasion.

It was during one of these wanderings, one morning earlier than usual, that Doctor Leyndt found him. In spite of the chill, Blade was barefoot and wearing only a pair of trousers. He was sitting on the damp grass, just about to rise because of the dew soaking through the seat of the trousers, when the bushes in front of him parted and Leyndt stepped out.

He had seldom seen her in anything except her medical tunic and trousers, and never in anything much less severe than these. Her grace and dignity and fine appearance were in spite of, rather than aided by, what she wore. Until today.

Today the woman who stepped toward him wore a flowing poncho-like garment, a single piece of material with a hole in the middle for her head and others for her arms. It could not have been simpler in design, but the material itself had an iridescent shimmer in which a hundred shades of cool colors—blue and green and purple and occasional flecks of silver-gray—swirled and chased each other like fish in a bowl as her movements caused the garment to swirl. It covered her from neck to ankles; the long-toed flexible feet peering out from under it were bare. Her loosened auburn hair now flowed halfway down her back in a cascade with its own kind of shimmer and movement, and the proud austere face was bare of the makeup she usually wore, it seemed, to heighten that austerity.

Blade rose as Leyndt approached. Her dress and manner were unusual and unexpected, but not in any way disturbing. In fact the sense he had always had before in her presence, that she was holding something back, had been much more disturbing. He moved toward her, and as he did so, she raised her hands, reached out, and took his.

They stood there in silence for a moment. Blade was not surprised or disturbed now, either. Her hands were muscular, the grip of the long fingers firm and without fumbling or shyness, as he would have expected a doctor's hands to be. But he was now closer to her than he had ever been before. He was very conscious of her scent—no perfume, just a woman fresh, clean, healthy. He was very conscious also that he had been a long time without a woman, except for that brief flurry of coupling with Rena outside the ruins of her village. And he was embarrassingly conscious that his mind was turning to wondering what she wore under that shimmering poncho, and the thought of her wearing nothing at all was arousing him. In his mind he firmly addressed that obstinate and self-willed rod of flesh, but as usual it remained deaf to the call of his allegedly higher faculties.

Leyndt's eyes roved downward with open approval, and Blade held his breath as they reached his swollen and upstanding manhood. This, he feared, might very easily strike a sour note and make the woman back off. Not only physically, but mentally.

Instead, her hands let go of his and followed the course of her eyes—gently combing his eyebrows, tracing a path down over nose and mouth and chin, on to his chest, across the chest with a gentle probing at each bulge of muscle, farther down across the flat, hard stomach, and farther down still until they stopped where the eyes had. First a gentle prod, then a firmer squeeze, then she jerked open the clasp of his trousers. They fell to his ankles, and before he could move to step out of them her fingers had returned to their work.

It was the first time he had ever felt such a caressing totally balanced, like the woman doing it, with the

delicacy and softness of a kitten and the sure strength and knowledge of a surgeon. Blade was not an iron statue, and knew very well that if he was expected to stand here like one much longer, Leyndt would find her expectations sorely disappointed. But on the other hand, neither would he make an abrupt move that might once again strike the wrong note.

Slowly he lifted his own hands and grasped her by the wrists, pulling her hands away from his now solid manhood. His hands moved up her arms to the holes in the poncho through which they emerged, and vanished into the holes. As he had imagined, she wore nothing under the poncho. The curves he felt all flowed smoothly into one another. His hands kept creeping around her body until they met at her back—petal-smooth skin over firm muscles and a spine straight as a sword blade. Then he gently drew her against him.

Now his lips dipped to meet hers, and her gasp at the pressure of body against body was instantly stifled. It remained stifled for a long time, but Blade's still-roving hands told him of the shivers and the quick breathing growing in her. His lips moved from her lips down to her throat, to nibble gently at the firm flesh of her neck. She moaned softly. He bent her head forward and licked an earlobe. She moaned louder.

His instincts told him she was now beyond hearing any "wrong notes" he might strike. He lifted the poncho, and without a word she raised her arms to let it slip freely over her head. He threw it aside and stared at her bare body gleaming in the morning sun.

Nothing of what he had seen, heard, or felt before had lied; her body was perfect to the limits of what he believed possible in a human woman. Slender, firm neck and arms, wide creamy shoulders faintly dusted with gold-brown freckles, full breasts forming perfect cones ending in large pink nipples, a flat belly, taut but full thighs flanking a triangle whose curling hair held more brown than the hair of her head, legs neither long nor short but flawlessly curved.

His fingers brushed the side of her neck, sprang lightly down past her shoulders to her breasts, played with the nipples. The pink circles seemed to warm to his touch; the centers thrust gently out, pushing at his roving hands. The hands dropped down farther, cupping the breasts and stroking the skin over her ribs; her mouth opened in an incoherent sound halfway between a moan and a choking. Her hands and arms stiffened as though an electric current had shot through them and seized his swollen manhood, pulling it hard against her groin. She moaned again, her knees relaxed, and she fell backward full length on the grass, pulling at his hands so hard that he nearly fell on top of her right there and then.

Then he did come down on top of her and drove into her, finding her already wet, open, welcoming him as he entered, writhing and gasping and raising her legs to clamp them behind his back and her hands to twine around his neck. She pulled him against her as though wanting to make him dissolve and be absorbed by her, then her first climax came and she screamed out loud. Blade continued his thrusts as her arms and legs relaxed for a moment, then again they went tight and she screamed again.

Four times she climaxed before the pressure in his own loins reached the bursting point. He poured himself into her with such force he was almost frightened; she screamed again, then went utterly limp beneath him.

As they lay there glued together by the sweat pouring over both of them and dripping onto the grass, Blade found himself a trifle bemused. He was, most of the time, a vigorous, even aggressive lover, always ready to take the initiative, giving his partner full pleasure but not backing off for one moment in pursuit of his own as well. But this time he had sensed a harmony that Leyndt seemed to radiate, a harmony almost as audible as a musical note, and he had been reluctant to disturb it. And he had been well rewarded for

this reluctance. The look in Leyndt's eyes was unique—he would not have believed it possible to look utterly satiated in such a detached manner.

Presently she rose, kissed him again in a rather sisterly manner, then pulled on her poncho and was off. There was a look of uncertainty as she did so, as if she feared that the detachment so long and so stubbornly maintained under such unlikely circumstances would fall apart if she spoke to Blade.

This was, fortunately, not their last encounter, nor were the second and subsequent ones quite as improbable as the first. They learned to laugh in the midst of their loving, particularly when Blade discovered that Leyndt, the perfectly balanced Leyndt, was ticklish, and that a few strokes at the backs of her knees could make her as helpless as a child. They learned to talk, and exchanged memories of their lives and of how they had each arrived at this particular place at this particular time. Leyndt found nothing strange in Blade's being from another dimension, as long as he was at least fully human. In fact, she accepted him so much without question that he wondered if she might be prepared to believe in the existence of the aliens—or at least listen to his theory of their existence without considering him mad.

After about two weeks, Blade was called to a conference with Leyndt and Stramod. They were the only two members of the directing bodies of the Union permanently in residence at the resort, and thus the only two there qualified to speak on matters of high policy. But Blade gathered from what they had said that the plans for him were in fact the result of much debate among all the Union leaders, with messages flowing back and forth. That made Blade a little uneasy. His long experience as a secret agent had taught him that sending too many messages risked discovery and destruction. And he had no wish to become the victim of the Union's destruction through becoming the occasion for too many messages.

Stramod was brisker and more cheerful than usual. The thought of being able even indirectly to strike a hard blow at the Ice Master could hardly do anything but improve his spirits. He was positively beaming as he explained the plan.

"The wisest thing for you would seem to be a return to Treduk territory, along with Nilando. The two of you as a team can travel among their villages, teaching them what you have learned about the Dragons, their Masters, and the ways to deal with them. Every dead Dragon or Dragon Master is a blow to the Ice Master's strength. We can whittle it away little by little, without risking exposing ourselves by giving the Treduki modern weapons. That would only lead the Conciliators to turn all the fliers and flier-troops against the Treduki at once. In addition, I cannot be altogether sure that some at least of the Treduki would not turn our own weapons against us. But this way, many Ice Dragons will die with the Conciliators being none the wiser. And however many supplies the Ice Master receives from his allies, he can make only so many Dragons and train so many slaves as Masters. In the end—" and Stramod made a neck-wringing gesture with his huge hands.

Blade nodded, somewhat wearily. The strain on him was considerable. He was having to continuously bite his tongue to keep it from throwing his theory about the aliens out into the open. And also in having to listen to long considerations of Graduk internal politics. Not that these people should not be concerned about them, but he had no need to be, and at the moment what he needed most of all was a chance to get back into action. Preferably fast, bloody action, destructive to the Ice Dragons, the Ice Master, and—? It was quite some time before Blade was able to turn the discussion to practical subjects, such as suitable weaponry for the Treduki to use against the Dragons.

He had considered teaching the Treduki to rifle their cannon to improve their accuracy, but that would involve months while he taught himself the technique, more months while he taught it to the Treduki, and many more months after that while the cannon were being cast and their gunners retrained. That was for the very long run.

But there were other possibilities. Various siege engines, similar to those of Home Dimension, not very accurate, but if the Ice Dragons could be induced to come through narrow passages—well, Blade doubted if either Master or Dragon could survive a quarter-ton boulder plummeting out of the skies.

And there were long poles with hooks or nooses on the end, lassos, bolas, and a host of other possible weapons for hauling Dragon Masters from their saddles, weapons that could be wielded or hurled from beyond the range of a Dragon's neck and snapping jaws or a Master's capture web. Together a Master and his Dragon were almost invulnerable and unstoppable; separated they were far easier to defeat.

Blade spent hours explaining proposed weaponry and tactics, with many sketches and much taking of notes on both sides. They debated materials, transportation, Treduk taboos (comparatively few among the leaders, as Blade had suspected from knowing Nilando, more numerous among the common people). In the end they agreed to give Blade a free hand to develop and try out in the field whatever he thought would work, and a blank check on the Union's resources in men and materials. They felt themselves under a great obligation to him—he was going back and all but thrusting himself into the Dragon's jaws—and this made them more willing to aid him.

It also made Leyndt more passionate than ever before, later in the afternoon at the secluded grove that had become their normal rendezvous. She demanded more and gave more in an endlessly spiraling cycle of raw, rutting passion that left them both spent and limp.

But she was in a talkative mood when she had recovered her strength. Bit by bit the conversation wandered around to the problems the Union faced in developing methods of fighting the Dragons and their Masters—and of course the supreme enemy, the Ice Master himself.

"What you have said about the more—primitive—weapons of your dimension makes me wonder. Have we Graduki perhaps grown as decadent as the Treduki, that we didn't think of these ourselves? I'm not a historian, but I'm sure that in our own history there must have been such weapons. And I wonder whether, if we can overlook something like this, we aren't perhaps overlooking other important things in our fight against the Ice Master. I think perhaps the greatest thing you're going to do for us is to be continuously making us see new ways of coping with the problem, even though you aren't a scientist."

"You may be right," he said without any particular emphasis—his voice as measured as hers usually was. But he was thinking furiously. Was this a good time to mention his theory? She might be as receptive in mind as she was in body, and of all the people in the Union she was certainly the one least likely to laugh at him or brand his judgment unsound. The bouts of love between them, in all their shades and variations, had given him more of a fink to her and her to him, although he doubted whether in the end he would turn out to have much of a hold on her. She did not seem to be that sort of woman.

"I think there's something you perhaps aren't considering," he began. "Do you really believe that the Ice Master gets his resources from the villages he raids and from secret allies among the Conciliators?"

"That seems to be a reasonable theory. He can hardly raise cattle or grow grain, or breed slaves in the glacierland."

It had occurred to Blade that the Ice Master might indeed be doing just that, back when he was reviewing the objections to his theory of aliens. But then he had rejected it. Large-scale agriculture on the ice cap would require far more power than could be generated without atomic energy, and he found it hard to believe that the Ice Master could have made all the engineering breakthroughs needed to go from atomic theory to a working atomic reactor—at least by himself. If the Ice Master was doing anything that

needed vast amounts of power, it was yet another argument in favor of the presence of a superior and alien technology.

"But have you ever found the Ice Master's allies, or had any clues as to who they might be?"

"Not yet. But we assume they're among the Conciliators. After all, what better way could they find of living up to their name than by aiding the Ice Master, even in secret? I expect that when we can infiltrate the Conciliators as thoroughly as we would like to, we'll find the answer. And then we can take action."

"That's all well and good. But I don't think the Conciliators are anywhere near the root of this problem." He took a deep breath to cover the pause while he searched for the exact formula of words. "I think—"

He broke off as he noticed she was staring over his shoulder, her eyes wide and her mouth just beginning to open to speak—or scream. He turned his head in the same direction and saw two men in familiar blue uniforms slip out of a patch of shrubbery, beamers at the ready, looking cautiously about them. Without a sound he gestured toward a clump of bushes five feet off to their left. Flattening himself on the grass he crawled into them and lay motionless, Leyndt beside him, staring out at the two men. Even if they had not been wearing uniforms, Blade would have recognized their hard, ruthless manner as that of Conciliator thugs.

"They've come in, on the ground," Leyndt began. "How—" but Blade cut her off with a hand over her mouth. He was furiously trying to work out a plan of action, worried but not entirely unhappy about the chance to settle a few more scores with the Conciliators' soldiery. After a moment he turned to Leyndt.

"Take off your poncho and step out in plain sight."

Her mouth opened in surprise.

"Yes. If they're planning to capture us, they won't do anything. If they're planning to burn us down, they may still get different ideas when you step out there. Either way, it will surprise them enough to make them off-guard."

She nodded and started struggling out of the poncho. Blade helped her. When she was nude, she grinned nervously at him, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and crawled out into the open. She stood up, hands at her sides, and stepped into view of the soldiers. Blade saw them stiffen, stare, then one stepped forward with his beamer held negligently in one hand, while the other covered him.

In the moment that the first soldier was blocking the other's line of fire, Blade moved. He came out of the bush in a single tigerish leap, head and shoulder slamming into the first soldier's ribcage. He heard the ribs smash and saw the man fly into the air like a mortar shell. Before he had hit the ground Blade had recovered his balance, dropped to the ground under a crackling blast from the second man's beamer, and pivoted around on his arms to smash his legs into the man's knees. He went down, and Blade chopped him across the throat with a flattened hand before he could rise. The first soldier was still writhing and gasping, but before Blade could do anything, Leyndt picked up one of the beamers and burned a hole in the man's skull. Then she dropped the beamer, sagged to the ground, and spent the next couple of minutes being very sick indeed.

When her stomach had heaved itself empty, she tottered to her feet and took Blade's arm. He smiled grimly at her. "Don't worry about that. The same thing happened to me the first time I had to kill somebody to get out of a tight spot. But I had to get used to it. I hope you won't have to."

She nodded feebly. "What do we do now?"

"Head back to the main buildings and find out how far this has gone. If they're infiltrating through the grounds, we may be able to pick off more as we hit them from the rear. That way we can warn the people in the main buildings and they can deal with the rest as they come in." That came very much under the heading of whistling in the dark, Blade thought. If the Conciliator goons had any sense, they would have hit the main buildings first and hardest, then started combing the grounds. He and Leyndt might be walking into a series of ready ambushes. But there was no point in being wildly pessimistic, particularly when all that could do was frighten Leyndt. She was going to have to go through this thing on her nerves as it was; Blade had seen too many amateurs like her suddenly pitchforked into a sticky situation.

They began their stalking approach to the main buildings. They had nearly half a mile to go, but even so Blade was surprised at the silence from ahead. No explosions, no shouting, not even the distance-muted crackle of a heatbeamer. Both of them held beamers ready, although Leyndt kept looking at hers as if she expected it to turn around and bite her. Blade, although he was less familiar with the beamers, held his with the same assurance as he would have a Home Dimension submachine gun. It was just another weapon. One learned how to use it and then used it.

They moved cautiously, slipping from one patch of cover to another. As they moved farther forward, they began to hear voices, soldiers calling to one another as though they were shouting across a noisy barroom. The Conciliator soldiery, it seemed, might not be as professional as they looked. Or perhaps they were just more nervous facing their own people, who might fight back, than when they were slaughtering Treduki with nothing better than arrows and muskets to fight with. Well, he was going to justify that nervousness.

As they rose from behind a line of flowering shrubs, Blade saw a soldier amble into the middle of the clearing they would have to cross to get to the next bit of cover. Leyndt raised her beamer, but Blade shook his head. They were getting close in, and the crackle of a beamer would alert the other soldiers certain to be within earshot. He watched the soldier closely, saw him wander over behind a tree, open the clasp of his trousers and pull down his fly.

Before the soldier could get any farther with his business, Blade covered the space between them in three strides, rammed his fist into the man's stomach, and finished him off as he toppled with the butt of the beamer across the back of the neck. A moment later Blade realized that he had made a nearly fatal mistake, for whether as a trap or merely as a precaution, another soldier on the far side of the clearing had been covering his victim.

He felt the air turn hot above his head and the beam-crackle tore at his ears. All that saved him was the other man's eagerness, which made him fire high. Blade felt his beamer buck in his hands as the other's second shot chopped it into two pieces like a butcher chopping sausage. Then Blade whipped both arms forward in quick throws, hurling the halves of his beamer at the soldier. They were clumsy missiles, but heavy enough, hard enough, and moving fast enough when they hit to do the job. The other man's beamer spun out of his disabled arm, and as he bent to retrieve it Blade's hurtling foot took him under the chin so hard it seemed to Blade the man's head would fly from his shoulders and soar through the air like a football.

Blade snatched up the weapon and motioned Leyndt forward into cover. She came at a run, and they both huddled flat on their stomachs under the bushes while shouts and running footsteps showed that the cordon around the main buildings had finally taken notice of the attack from their rear. Blade hoped they would be too excited to search thoroughly—or, if they did, that this would give him and Leyndt a chance to break through to the main buildings. The absence of explosions suggested that the main buildings could

still be holding out. Stramod had done a thorough job of modifying them for defense, and they had been robust and well built to begin with. Without explosives or gas, the soldiers would have a rather futile time trying to stamp out resistance quickly.

In a lull in the shouting Blade and Leyndt shifted their hiding place to another grove farther from the bodies of their latest victims and hit the ground again as the uproar redoubled. Apart from their lack of skill, Blade also doubted if the Conciliator soldiers were sufficiently numerous to conduct a bush-by-bush search of the rear while still maintaining their cordon.

But to his surprise he suddenly heard the soldiers' shouting pick up again, each man relaying a call on to his neighbor. Unmistakably, undeniably, the shouts traveled around a large circle. He and Leyndt were inside that circle. His military background was quite enough to fill in the details of what would happen next. With a defined area to search, the soldiers could look under every bush and up into every tree, burning anything suspicious. If the men in the circle were sufficiently far apart, he and Leyndt might have a reasonable chance of breaking through to safety. But no matter how tight the circle was, he knew their chances of breaking through it were bound to be better than their chances of survival inside it.

He and Leyndt began to move slowly toward the shouting. The shrubbery they were hidden in stretched some thirty feet in the right direction, providing good cover that far. But closely packed branches had to be wriggled around and through, with crackings, gruntings, and tearing of skin and clothing. Outside, the circle of shouting continued. Was it contracting? Blade heard the unmistakable and unwelcome crackle of a beamer, then saw ahead the daylight at the end of the shrubbery. He crawled forward the last yards and carefully peered out. Two soldiers stood on either side of a tree, so close it seemed they could look him in the eye if he raised his head a little more. Beyond the tree they flanked the woods thickened again. But between Blade and the men was twenty feet of completely open space. And as the shouts went around the circle again, Blade heard them respond to a call from close off to the right, and pass it on to be answered from close to their left.

He and Leyndt might use the distraction trick again. But even if they could take out the two soldiers facing them, as many as four more might have clear fields of fire. Unless he could get to such close quarters that the others might not be willing to risk hitting their own comrades by firing. Blade had seen the beamers in action enough to know that they were questionably accurate beyond about forty yards.

He turned and prodded Leyndt gently in the shoulder to get her attention and told her the situation and plan. Again she nodded, but this time her grin was almost impish. She was beginning to enjoy the adventure, its reduction of life to uncomplicated struggles for survival. Her fear was gone, or perhaps merely being contained now by exhilaration. Blade was glad she was no longer frightened but hoped she would not become overconfident and careless. He had seen two agents die that way.

There was no room for Leyndt to wriggle out of her poncho, but it was by now so badly torn by the bushes that she was able to simply rip it off. Then she licked her lips and pushed herself forward and out. Blade saw the soldiers gape as she appeared, without loosening their grip on their beamers. But for a moment their eyes were entirely on Leyndt, and in that moment Blade hurled himself forward.

The soldiers did not gape at him, however. The one closest to Leyndt grabbed her by the hair and jerked her down on the ground after him; she screamed and fell with a thud, sprawled across the soldier. The other one ducked behind the tree before Blade was halfway across the open space.

Then the air crackled over his head and beside his feet as the two flanking guard teams fired, missing him by so little that he felt the heated air sear his skin. He cut hard to the right to throw their aim off, ducked low to avoid the beam of the soldier behind the tree—then heard another scream from Leyndt.

The soldier holding her was now kneeling over her, both his knees slammed down hard on her arms, immobilizing them and grinding them painfully into the ground. On her bare shoulder was now a small charred patch—still smoking. The soldier glared with a combination of anger, hatred, fear, and lust in his eyes that revolted Blade, and snarled, "All right, you bastard! Next time I take off her ear. Time after that—" he gestured rather than speaking. Blade stopped and stood motionless as the soldier from behind the tree stepped into view and ordered him to raise his hands over his head, then called out to his companions.

They came running up from both flanks, four more of them, with four more beyond them crashing through the bushes behind the first two pairs. Again the shouts went around the circle, and Blade heard the cheers and the swelling sound of running feet as the whole circle broke up.

The soldiers stripped Blade, tied him to the tree, slapped him around enough to open a cut in his lower lip and make his face feel like a bad case of sunburn. They then turned to Leyndt, still pinned to the ground by the soldier. The look in their eyes showed what they were planning to do with her as clearly as if it had been inscribed in letters of fire in the air. And the trapped-animal expression in Leyndt's eyes showed what she thought of the idea; her expression, and the low moaning noise from her throat, broken by an occasional sob. Blade flexed arms and legs, trying to find some play in the ropes that bound him, or if he couldn't find some, make some. But the knots, crude as they were, seemed for the moment too tight. He had not much hope of survival, but he did hope for a chance to take a few more Conciliator soldiers with him.

There were nearly thirty of the soldiers gathered in the clearing around Leyndt and Blade now, and footsteps audible even over their undisciplined chatter told of more coming. Blade knew that if he could somehow get loose, there would be enough soldiers to get in each other's way, and if he could only get hold of a beamer, he would leave a sizable hole in the Conciliator force before they brought him down. And he could give Leyndt a quick, merciful death instead of watching her die by inches. But how to get loose!

Again he strained until the bindings cut into his flesh and the cords of his muscles stood out as though sculptured, using all his strength. And this time he felt the tautness of the bonds relax. A trifle, but enough to give him hope. The soldiers were still milling about, too intent on looking at Leyndt and contemplating what they were going to do to that lovely, helpless, bare body. They now had Leyndt spread-eagled in the traditional fashion, one man holding each limb. A fifth stepped forward, and even from the rear Blade could see the man was unfastening his trousers.

Then the man fell forward onto Leyndt, but with his pants still fastened and a blood-rimmed bone-dotted hole in the lower part of his back. He let out a gurgling scream and began kicking wildly. The four men holding Leyndt bounced to their feet, the anticipation and lust in their eyes changing in split seconds into fear. The other soldiers stared in all directions, waving their beamers.

Then three things happened at once. Three more soldiers toppled, two with holes in their chests and the third with half his skull blown away. Leyndt scrambled to her feet and sprinted for cover, the soldiers too surprised and distracted to grab her. And Blade surged forward, straining against his bonds until they creaked—and, snapped.

His arms were numb but his legs drove him forward, pumping like pistons. He crashed into the press of the soldiers before a single one of them could lift a beamer, moving so fast and hitting so hard that the sheer impact of his body sent half a dozen of them sprawling off their feet. He dropped onto the chest of one with both knees, crushing in his ribs, butted a second in the head. His arms were working again now;



he grabbed two more soldiers by the backs of their collars and smashed their heads together like a housewife cracking eggs, then threw them away. The others could perhaps have burned him down where he stood, but they were afraid of hitting their comrades, or perhaps just afraid. The invisible snipers were still picking off soldiers; Blade felt more than once the wheet of a bullet sailing past his ear. As the soldiers scattered, Blade picked up a beamer and sprinted for the same bushes that he had seen Leyndt dive into. A soldier heading for the same goal did not move fast enough, and Blade used the beamer to chop him squarely in half.

As he dove under cover, a bullet seared across his thigh, the pain making him grit his teeth, and he heard the crackle of beamers rise more loudly than ever before behind him, toward the main buildings, and sudden, chopped-off screams as the beamers tore men apart. The fighting there had suddenly flared up also; were the same people that were picking off the soldiers out here also at work there?

For a moment Blade was wild with frustration. Wounded or not, he wished he could do something useful in this battle besides keep his head down to avoid having it drilled by his own side, something that would account for another half-dozen Conciliator soldiers. But the snipers were shooting so furiously into the area that moving around would have been suicide.

Leyndt had finally fainted; Blade felt to make sure her heart was still beating. Since she was not seriously hurt he stopped worrying about her and concentrated on scanning the area visible to him, beamer ready to pick off any Conciliator troops that might drift into view.

One did; Blade dropped him with his second charge—for a moment he had forgotten that a beam weapon has no recoil, and overcompensated enough to throw his first shot off target. He thought of going out and retrieving the man's beamer as a spare for himself or a weapon for Leyndt, but too many wildly aimed bullets were still slapping through the branches and into tree trunks and whipping up clumps of turf. He didn't know who the attacking marksmen were, but he was certainly prepared to greet them as friends. He found it hard to believe they could be Union people, unless—

There was an explosion of half a dozen rifles going off all at once, making echoes bounce from tree to tree, and a silence following that broken only by a single groaning voice. Then a figure darted out into the clearing, a beamer in one oversized hand and a large conventional-looking rifle slung over his bowed back. Blade grinned as he saw the blue face, and he was already rising from his cover when Stramod shouted:

"Blade, the battle is over. Come out!"

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## Chapter 9

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Stramod had been as competent a commander as the now very dead Conciliator leader had been an inept one. He had made full use of one of his most-cherished projects, a long-secret series of tunnels dug from the subbasement of the central building out to the edges of the grounds. When the attack came in and it became obvious that a direct counter-attack on the surface would be suicidal, he had led the fourteen picked men of his action squad through the tunnels to take the Conciliators in the rear. Their hunting rifles could hit accurately at several times the effective range of the beamers, and their surprise had been almost complete. Blade and Leyndt had made an invaluable diversion by concentrating nearly a quarter of the enemy's total strength in one place, standing around in the open, "fat, dumb, and happy." After panic set in among the soldiers, a counter-attack from the main buildings finished off the battle.

Blade's thigh wound was only a shallow flesh wound, painful as it was. Leyndt, newly clothed and conscious, treated it with dressings and tissue-restoring salves, and assured Blade that it would heal within a few days if he could manage to stay off the leg. Stramod laughed harshly at that. Leyndt looked at him, somewhat puzzled.

"But surely; Stramod, now that they know our strength, they'll think twice before attacking again?"

"I doubt it. If they sent a whole company against us the first time, they must know or suspect this is a major base of our Union. And if they suspected it at first, they know it now. The only thing that gives us more than an hour or two of safety is that it should take them some time to assemble a larger attacking force. I doubt if they will try with a single company again. And by the time they arrive with a legion, we and everything we can carry on our backs must be well away from here."

Leyndt opened her mouth as if to protest, and Stramod frowned at her. "Doctor, you must know that in such a situation the Action Leader commands."

"I know," she said slowly. "But—after so many many months here, undisturbed, not running or watching, to move on again—"

"I understand," said Stramod more gently than Blade would have believed possible for him. "And that is not all. If this attack seems to be part of a general campaign against the Union, which it well may be, we must flee entirely outside Graduk lands. We must get Blade and Nilando with their knowledge of how to fight the Ice Dragons to a safe place. And the only such now will be among the Treduki. Even the most fanatical Conciliators will not urge a search of five hundred Treduk villages for our people. It would take the whole army twenty years, and half of it would die in the searching. We must flee."

Leyndt sighed and nodded. Blade felt much sympathy for her, and took her gently in his arms, in spite of Stramod's frown. She had barely been rescued from the nightmare of mass rape, to be told that she must now flee and take up at best the life of a guerrilla sheltering among primitive people many thousands of miles from all she was used to. Stramod pushed the evacuation forward as rapidly and as efficiently as he had pushed his men forward to the surprise attack. The Conciliator soldiers were dragged into the basement so that no air search would see them lying about and so sound the alarm, stripped of all usable gear and clothing, then piled into one of the tunnels and the demolition charges fired to bring down the roof of the tunnel on them. It would be long odds against the bodies ever being found; Stramod emphasized the terror value of this complete vanishing of a hundred-odd Conciliator soldiers. The men of the attacking force would be looking nervously over their shoulders, waiting for some secret weapon to leap out at them, tense, trigger-happy, quite likely to inflict many casualties on themselves. Blade and Nilando grinned appreciatively at the notion.

That was only the first step. Armed parties went out, to clear the grounds of possible surviving soldiers, lay ambushes for any new patrols, provide warning of new attacks, and hopefully hold open a corridor for retreat into the mountains. Working parties set demolition charges all over the clinic, destroyed any written material that could not be removed, packed up anything light enough to carry and valuable enough to be worth salvaging. Those not assigned to either the patrols or the working parties received personal weapons and packed their own gear.

Leyndt now seemed to have fully recovered from her shock, but Blade noticed that her hands sometimes shook for a moment as she bustled about, packing key records and a kit of medical supplies that would enable her to cope with emergencies on the march. Blade recalled that he had never had a chance to complete his explanation of his theory about the aliens, and if he and Leyndt wound up separated, he

might have a long search for another, equally reasonable person to talk to about it.

Stramod drove everybody as though Conciliator soldiers were already descending from the sky on them. The ones that had launched the first assault had come in by the back roads in five large trucks, which the patrols discovered as they went out. More than a few people suggested that they use the trucks when they moved out, but Stramod said no. In the trucks the refugees would be far more conspicuous than if they were on foot. Both Nilando and Blade supported Stramod, and the others gave in.

So it was on foot that sixty-odd men and women from the Union headquarters moved out some four hours after the last shot of the battle with the soldiers. Stramod and Blade would have liked to have moved out even sooner, but that would not have been humanly possible. They could only head into the hills and hope the Conciliators had not thrown an impenetrable cordon around the whole area. Stramod doubted it, but Blade was disagreeably aware of war's habit of taking the one thing you most doubted would happen and hitting you over the head with it.

As they passed over the crest of the first hill and started down the path into the wooded valley below, the rear guard still on the crest saw the smoke and flames rise into the sky over the treetops behind them. The demolition charges were going off, and now it mattered little when or whether a Conciliator legion descended on the resort itself, for there would be nothing for it to capture, interrogate, or carry away except blackened rubble.

Stramod turned to Blade as he saw the coiling smoke clouds and shrugged wearily. "That is one chapter in our history closed. But we got the people away safely, thank the High Spirits of the Hills. And with the people, we can go on. If they had all been burning in that smoke and flame..." He left the thought unfinished and turned away to scuttle down the hill and resume his place at the head of the line. After a moment's further looking, straining his eyes to see if he could catch a glimpse of low-passing fliers, Blade shouldered his beamer, readjusted the straps of his heavy pack, and moved on in his assigned place at the rear of the line.

They were well down in the valley and the day was drawing toward evening before they heard the whistle of fliers overhead. But those were not the danger, for they could not land on anything except flat, clear ground or water; Blade knew that the Graduki had never invented the helicopter. Pursuit on foot was another matter. Although Conciliator soldiers tended to be city-bred and therefore indifferent woodsmen, so were most of the Union people. It was at Nilando's suggestion that those few who had camping or hunting experience, or came from farms, were placed at the rear of the line to wipe away as much of the traces of their passage as possible. Otherwise, as Nilando put it, "a blind and half-witted girl-child could follow us." Apart from that, there was little to do but keep going, to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the abandoned resort, certain to be the first goal of the enemy.

The Union people kept going, in fact, until it was almost too dark to find a proper campsite. Many of the people were by now so exhausted that they simply staggered to a convenient patch of ground, unrolled their sleeping bags, and fell asleep without further movement. But Stramod posted sentries, and when he had made the rounds of the sentry posts, he called Blade, Nilando, and Leyndt aside for a private conference.

He repeated what he had said to Blade earlier: the need to find safety in flight to the Treduki. But how? Even assuming they could evade the searches for that length of time, it would take several months to reach Treduk territory on foot. Such a trek would be as far beyond the abilities of most of the people as would be swimming an ocean. Nor did a voyage by sea hold much more promise. To reach the coast they would have to travel for several days through the most heavily populated area of the Graduk lands

and then steal a ship without detection and travel north for more than a week without being overtaken by Conciliator ships or fliers. And even if they reached the coasts of the Treduk lands, they would have no few days' march overland before them still; Graduk raids from the sea had driven the Treduki well inland. (Nilando nodded grimly at this, and for the first time seemed to be feeling some resentment at having to cooperate so much with the sworn enemies of his people.)

But, among the pilots assigned to a flier base on a lake less than two days' march away, there were four who were Union members. Two or at most three of the fliers would be enough to carry every person in the group as far north as Tengran. There they could hide or if necessary destroy the fliers and vanish into the woods, at least if the Treduki would hide them. The base was of course well guarded, and entering it and finding both the pilots and fully fueled fliers would be a risky proposition. But unless the Union elsewhere was still by some miracle strong enough to provide them with a hiding place, they had no real alternative.

"And," went on Stramod wearily, "if we wait to find out for certain what has happened to the Union elsewhere, it may be too late for us. None of the messages sent out received any replies, which leads me to think the worst. Here we have the most important part of the Union, at least for the moment, and it must be saved."

Nilando nodded; Blade kept his peace. He knew he and Nilando would come more into their own when they had reached the Treduk lands. Meanwhile, he was prepared to leave the leadership to Stramod, who had all the self-confidence and gambler's temperament the situation demanded. But Leyndt had her own objections.

"Whatever we must do cannot be done with men and women so exhausted they can barely walk, let alone fight. They need rest. Trying to fight or march before they are rested will kill them all just as surely as waiting until the Conciliators track us down."

"I thought you had injections—"

"They will not create energy where none exists. When the time comes to take the base, well and good. But now they must restore themselves by natural means. That is my professional opinion as a doctor, as well as a leader of the Union. And I speak for the good of the Union."

Stramod's face clouded, but he nodded in recognition of both her facts and her position. Then he shrugged. "Very well. We will not stay in one place tomorrow, however, if I have to carry all the people on my back. Do you think they can march as far as the end of this valley?" He sketched out a route with a gesture across the unfolded map on his lap.

"I suppose so."

"Good. From there on to the base—" his hand moved to the northern end of a large lake "—is mostly open country. We will do well to cross as much of it as possible at night. And we will have to contact our people at the base and make plans for penetrating it and boarding the fliers. But that, I agree, can wait a day or two." He stretched, lifting his unnaturally long arms above his head until it seemed that they would brush against the branches high above, then yawned. "Perhaps we should all plan on getting some sleep now." He lay down on the bare ground and was asleep before the others could rise to their feet.

Nilando strode off to inspect the sentries, while Leyndt and Blade moved a little apart, as far from the others as the limits of the campsite permitted, and sat down close together. Leyndt was grimy, her auburn hair snarled like a thornbush, her eyes red with fatigue, and when she sat down it was as though her legs

had collapsed under her. But the long-fingered hands she held out to Blade, the hands whose fingers gently caressed and pressed his own aching muscles and changed the dressings on his thigh, were as strong and steady as they had ever been. And those red-rimmed eyes did not look away from him as she spoke.

"You had something to tell me just before the attack struck, didn't you? I could tell that it was there, and that it was something desperately important. Were you planning to tell me you thought that aliens might be aiding the Ice Master?"

Blade could not have said anything for a moment, even if there had been any need to speak. Then he recovered himself enough to grin at the two-minds-with-a-single thought coincidence.

"I was. When did you begin to support it?"

"As long as two years ago. I don't know all the facts, and perhaps I don't interpret the ones I do know well enough. But from what I know and from what I conclude from that, I feel very much that you are right. The Ice Master himself has masters—or at least allies."

"Did you say anything about this to anybody else?"

"Only Stramod. He knows the Ice Master well, of course, and would have perhaps been able to learn more to throw light on the idea. And he is a man with the courage to face such a fact, if he believes in it. The others, most of them, would despair and drift away. And of course the Treduki—"

She did not need to finish that. Blade could see how the Treduki, except for tough-minded specimens like Nilando and Rena, might be reduced to panic by the notion that some of their enemies were not even human. But their fears were a matter for later.

"What did Stramod say?"

"He laughed. Said I was underestimating the Ice Master, who could with only a little help do all that has been done."

"Including the glaciers?"

"He did not mention those."

Blade nodded. "So perhaps he is afraid to admit it after all?"

"Possibly. Or perhaps he thinks as I do. To let people come to believe in aliens might destroy the Union."

Blade's temper flared. "The aliens will destroy a damned lot more than the Union if they exist and if they go on the way we think they have! Even if we find a way to fight the Ice Dragons, if aliens are helping the Ice Master they will give him something else to use against the Treduki to rake in slaves and sow terror. They are the real enemy, not the Conciliators, not even the Ice Master!"

"If they exist."

Blade got his temper under control and looked grimly at her. His voice was deadly serious when he asked:

"Do you, deep inside, doubt they exist?"

"No."

He reached out and stroked her cheek. "Thank God for small favors. Now all we need is a way of convincing the others. And then a way to destroy the aliens." He chuckled, less grimly. "That's like saying that all we need is to find a way of turning all these trees—" he gestured upward and around "—into roast meat."

She laughed, and he was glad to hear her do so. Then she sobered again and asked, "How are we ever going to get the facts we need?"

Blade shook his head. "That I don't know at this point. But we both have to start thinking about ways."

Leyndt reached for the fastening of her tunic. "That is another thing we can put off for a day or two." She shrugged the tunic up over her head, and her bare shoulders and breasts gleamed faintly in the light that crept through the trees from the campfires. Blade reached out almost by instinct and cupped the breasts, feeling the nipples stiffen.

Leyndt gave a little moan. "Yes. Yes. We may not have much time left. We have to live all we can in that time. Live." The last word was a gasp, one that died as their lips met.

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## Chapter 10

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Except for Blade, Stramod, Nilando, Leyndt, and the men on guard, the whole camp slept well and undisturbed through the night. It was chilly in the small hours of the morning, but the returning sun swiftly warmed the air and roused the sleeping camp to movement.

Whether the Conciliators had abandoned the search for the refugees from the resort, or whether they were simply waiting like a cat at a mousehole for their quarry to make its own way out into easier terrain, was not clear. But there was no sign of pursuit on the ground all during the day's march, and only twice did fliers whistle overhead, both times so high that Blade found it hard to believe they could be searching for anything in a forest certain to be only a green blur from their height and speed.

Blade and Nilando led a scouting party from the camp that night, on to where the forest cover of the valley gave way to more open terrain, much of it farmland. Neither returned optimistic about getting sixty people, few of them with much training or experience, across two days' march worth of such territory, let alone penetrating the base after the march. Even Stramod had to admit that it would be risky.

"But what else can we do? We have still received no reliable Union messages. What can that mean except that the Union has collapsed under a massive assault by the Conciliators? Every day's delay by us gives them more time to track down the other groups and release forces for pursuing us. As it is, we may find the land between us and the base at least comparatively unpatrolled by anything our own weapons cannot defeat. If we wait too long, however, we could find entire legions barring our path."

Blade accepted this only because he had no wish to try to usurp the command of the group from the man to whom it properly belonged. But he was tense and strained the remainder of the evening. He

needed several hours of walking the rounds of the sentry posts and then another bout of love with Leyndt before he could sleep. His last thoughts before drifting off were of finding out from Leyndt the names of the Union people at the base, then making a cross-country trek on his own to get in touch with them in advance of the rest of his companions. Granted that he didn't know the country that well, it was vital to get some advance word to the people at the base . . .

. . . except that when he awoke in the morning, he discovered that one of the people from the base had arrived at exactly the same conclusion. Leyndt woke him and called him aside to join a conference with Stramod, Nilando, and a swarthy little man in a grass- and mud-stained blue uniform who was squatting in the middle of the circle formed by the others, wolfing down stew and ration bread.

Stramod rose as Blade and Leyndt approached. "Meet Captain Pnarr, of the Flier Service. He has plans for aiding us."

The captain nodded. "Right. The Union's pretty much smashed up all over the country, so my friends and I thought we'd make plans to get out ourselves. We were going to use some of the smaller fliers. But there won't be any big problem getting three of the big ones fueled and lined up on the ready moorings. How we're going to get you people aboard—another problem. A lot nastier."

"Could you taxi the fliers over to an uninhabited part of the lake shore?" Stramod asked.

"Not a chance," Pnarr grunted, and bit off another chunk of the flinty bread. "Only chance we'll have of getting away is to fire up and take off as soon as everybody's on board, before the shore-based beamers pick us off."

Stramod looked reluctant to give up his idea, but realized that the pilot knew more than he did about such things. Blade decided to put in his idea.

"What we've been worried about most is getting into the base and through it to wherever the planes are. You said they're anchored offshore?"

"Right."

"How far offshore?"

"Twelve valh." (The standard Graduk measurement, equal to about two hundred yards.)

"And the shore is patrolled?"

"Damned right it is. You'd be picked up and squashed like bugs, trying to get across the beach." Blade nodded. "I expected that. But are there any patrols offshore, on the lake side of the anchorage?"

"One boat, usually. Two or three men in it," said the pilot. His face lit up as he grasped what Blade was getting at. So did Stramod's.

"Exactly," said Blade. "We've got to get to the lake shore anyway. But once there, instead of marching clear around it and trying to get through the base, we can find boats and travel the rest of the way by water." He turned to Stramod. "Are there any Union people you know living along the lake shore?"

Pnarr broke in before Stramod could reply. "Don't worry about that. One of the base sympathizers—a ground type, not a pilot—has a big boat on the lake. Big enough for all of you, I'll bet. Work out a

rendezvous point and I'll have him be there. And it's a boat the patrol will let past into the anchorage because he uses it a lot to run out on service missions." Pnarr's face was positively gleeful.

His good spirits were infectious; half or more of their problems seemed to have been washed away. Leyndt squeezed Blade's hand and he smiled back at her. There was still the problem of getting across to the lake, even though now the distance they would have to march was so reduced that they could in a pinch do it in a single night. Blade had a nasty feeling that if they tried that, they would face the prospect of having to abandon stragglers. But they would have won most of their battle by the time they reached the lake. At least if Pnarr was trustworthy—and Blade could judge only by what Stramod and Leyndt were saying to him.

Blade would have liked a word with Pnarr, or several words, to try to influence him. A fully fueled flier with a competent pilot was an essential part of his plans for discovering the truth about the aliens. But he had not had time to fully judge how to approach the man. And Pnarr himself had to make his way back to where he had left his car. There was, unfortunately, no way to gather together enough vehicles to carry them all to the lake shore without being noticed, and being noticed was the most important thing to avoid now. Next to missing the rendezvous, that is.

Blade did not really believe that they were not going to miss the rendezvous until thirty-six hours later, when he stood behind a bush on the shore of the lake, watching a broad-beamed slab-sided powerboat glide up to the shore until its bows scraped the rocky bottom. A man dressed only in shorts scrambled up onto the bow and threw a line ashore; Blade caught it and tied it to a bush. Then he whistled into the darkness behind him, and watched the darkness come alive as the party filed out of cover and stepped into the water, holding their weapons and gear above their heads. Although the water rose above most of their waists, they were silent, swift, and as efficient as any company of soldiers might have been.

Well, perhaps that was what they were turning into. They had had to leave nine people behind them along the grueling night march to the lake, nine people who could not go another step no matter how hard they tried. Fortunately the weather was warm and clear, and there were farms within a few hours' walk. Seven more had simply dropped out, refusing to trust themselves to the Treduki or the pilots, preferring to take their chances of slinking away into anonymity among those same farms. There was nothing to be done about either group; neither the weak in body nor the weak in heart would have any place in the north.

Nilando's urgings had kept a fair number of people going even after they left blood at each step; they, by all that was sacred, weren't going to collapse and let a damned Treduk call them weak! But more people were beginning to develop a respect for the Treduk chieftain, a respect that Blade hoped would make cooperation once they reached Treduk territory easier than it might have been otherwise. They might get safely to Tengran, even safely into the woods, but the long-standing distrust between the two peoples might well sabotage all Stramod's plans. As it was, the mutant now treated Nilando as a second-in-command fully equal to Blade, and gave him special responsibility for the scouting parties.

Hobbling, gasping, limping, exhausted in body and mind, the survivors of the party had reached the lake shore just before the light became too strong to make traveling safe. An outbound flier screamed overhead at that exact moment, but they remembered their instructions and froze to the spot, not even looking up. Before the next one came over, they were under as much cover as a patch of forest could provide. They bathed their swollen feet, caught up on sleep, nibbled the last of their rations, and waited for darkness and the arrival of the boat.



The last two people in line were now passing Blade—Nilando and Rena, hand in hand, but with the other hand each holding a beamer high overhead. The water molded Rena's tunic against her lithe figure. Now Nilando was beckoning; Blade swung his own beamer up over his head and waded down into the water. He had barely scrambled over the side of the boat when its motor sprang to life and it began backing away from the shore and heading out into the lake.

Their craft was no speedboat, but the water was mirror-smooth and the wind as feeble as the puffs of air moving in a cave. It was as black as a cave, too, out on the water, with neither moon nor stars in the sky and the shores glowering in the distance without a light. Normally, Pnarr said, there would be a good many lights from the vacation homes and the like showing along the shore. But with all the uproar over the suppression of the Union, most people were too frightened to leave their homes in the comparatively well-patrolled cities and make their way to the lonely countryside. Sensible of them, Pnarr added, since if the Union really did want to launch a terror campaign the Conciliator soldiers couldn't do a damned thing about it! Bunch of stumble-footed incompetents, he concluded, with the normal lordly disdain of those who have their business in the high skies for those who plod along the ground.

It was two hours before the lights of the base showed clearly on the shore ahead, clearly enough to show the six big hydro-fliers anchored offshore and the complex of hangars and sheds that housed the others. To landward the base was well lit, with brilliant white lights pouring glare down on high chain-link fences. As they drew closer, Blade could see the shapes of sentries patrolling the fence. Getting in there from the shore would have been impossible. He went below and began to prepare for his assigned mission. In spite of his wounded thigh, he was still the best man for it.

When he returned to the deck, stripped to the skin and with his body blackened with camouflage cream, Stramod handed him a belt to tie around his waist, a belt from which hung six small but immensely powerful bombs and two fighting knives in sheaths. Beamers could not survive being submerged. Leyndt held out her hand to him and he grasped it briefly, but he was grinning as he slipped over the side into the cold water. Commando work had always been one of his favorite things.

One of the patrol boats was ambling slowly back and forth about two hundred yards away, the heads of three men visible inside it. He began to swim silently toward it, while the boat behind him continued on a course intended to draw the patrol toward him. Blade saw the patrol boat suddenly turn as its crew noticed the larger craft gliding across the water, heard a harsh challenge, saw one of the men in the patrol boat rise to his feet and flash a light toward the intruder. He gambled that they were now too preoccupied with the other boat to notice him, and quickened his stroke to a racing pace.

He shot up to the boat just as a man in it turned to look down and squalled a warning. He grasped the sides of the boat with both hands and heaved himself out of the water, then in a single fluid motion pivoted on his arms and swept his muscular legs across the boat like a scythe. One man went clear overboard with a splash and a cry, his beamer flying out of his hand as he did so; a second slammed up against the side, fumbling for his beamer. The third ducked below the swinging legs and grabbed for the communicator in the bottom of the boat; he was about to speak into it when Blade chopped him across the back of the neck and he collapsed. The second man now had his beamer coming up into firing position, but Blade's knife came out of its sheath before the man could complete the movement, and rammed into the man's chest before he could fire.

A movement behind him made Blade swing around. The first man was climbing back over the side of the boat, a knife in his hand, held in the point-up stance of the trained knife fighter. Blade did not rush in on this man; he was too dangerous. But he still had to kill him, and quickly, before somebody on shore noticed the commotion.

The man came at him, cat-footed and cat-quick, one arm held out as a blocking shield against Blade's knife while his own knife flickered in and out like a striking snake. Blade tried to use his longer reach to go in over the man's guard, but the other was too quick for that, and Blade nearly had his arm laid open. The other launched an attack; Blade had to parry a lightning slash at his jugular.

Then Blade stepped on the arm of the man fallen over the communicator. Like a fallen log the arm turned under him, and he went over backward. By a fraction of an inch he missed smashing his head against the control panel, but lay full-length on the deck. His opponent leaped forward, knife held out and reaching for the life of an apparently helpless victim.

As the man came within reach, Blade rolled his torso aside while both legs shot out and his ankles clamped tight around the other man's calves. Blade heaved, with every muscle in his body contributing in its own way to that heave. He heard the other man's leg bone crack, and heard him let out a scream that must have carried across the water to the base. The man crumpled onto one knee, the knife in his hand slashing down but only nicking Blade slightly under the left arm. Then Blade brought his own knife up before the man could recover and parry, and the man sank down onto his face, blood gushing from his throat.

Without worrying about whether the remaining man was dead, Blade stood up in the boat and gave the agreed-on signal with his arms outstretched. He heard the motor of the other boat speed up, then rolled himself over the side of the patrol craft into the water and headed for the farthest of the three fliers at the left end of the line. His six little bombs were for them. There would still be scores of fliers of all sorts and sizes that the Conciliators could use, but the Unionists could at least put out of action the three that could give pursuit most quickly.

He made no effort to swim silently now, but plunged through the water like a hunting shark. He saw lights in the cockpit windows of the fliers as he passed them, and lights moving around on shore in an aimless and frantic pattern. How thoroughly the base had become alerted during his fight was a nasty question. That knife fighter had delayed him beyond reason.

The little bombs were only the size of hand grenades, but each contained more than enough explosive to tear a flier apart. The first one was looming up now, with a figure silhouetted black against the light in one hatch. Blade estimated the distance to the hatch, dove under, and came up precisely below it. The man had no time to scream as a long arm snaked out of the water and plucked him over the side, then a razor-edged knife drove into his chest. Blade set the fuses of the two bombs and slapped them against the hull below the waterline. An adhesive plate would hold them against the hull. Then he turned and thrashed away toward the second flier.

This one had no one watching on the side he approached, and he was able to place his bombs unseen. To save time he then plunged under and swam beneath the flier, staying under until his breath seemed to pound red-hot in his throat and chest. He surfaced, took a deep breath, and plunged under again, passing beneath the third flier and coming up in the shadow of the tail. It concealed him from any watchers in the forward cabin, but gave him a clear view of the shore and what was happening around the other three fliers.

The big boat was moving among them, and people were throwing their beamers and bags into their open hatches, then slipping over the side and swimming across. Black figures stood silhouetted in the hatches, snagging gear out of the air and flinging it inside. He saw Nilando and Stramod standing atop the cabin of the boat, urging people to hurry, saw Leyndt drop over the side and scramble up into the nearest plane, followed by Pnarr. He slapped the two bombs onto the hull of the flier sheltering him and swam out into the open.

On shore now was a flurry and alarm visible even at this distance; running figures, lights swiveling around, shouts and alarm sirens wailing. A large boat with a beamer turret mounted amidship was putting out from shore, its deck crowded with armed soldiers. Blade heard the engines of the farthest flier crack and whine into life, then settle down to a swelling roar; he increased his pace. So did the approaching boat; the beamer turret was swinging around now, but the shore-based beamers were holding their fire to avoid hitting it.

Before the boat could do anything, however, Unionists in the turrets of two of the captured fliers discovered they had a clear field of fire. Two beams chopped into it in the same second; it flew apart in a tremendous blast that sent spray, smoke, flames, bits of debris, and mangled bodies hurtling into the air for a hundred yards in all directions. Then the flier-mounted beamers began picking off the shore mounts, and screams, crashes, and the flare of more explosions ashore told of their accuracy. Blade grinned. For the first time, it seemed that the heavy firepower was on the side of the "good guys."

In the middle of the uproar on shore, the bombs he had placed on the first flier went off, a double-barreled whump that sent a painful concussion battering through the water against Blade's body. The fuel aboard the flier went up in a sheet of green flame, and again pieces of metal splashed down all around Blade.

Now the second of the captured fliers was firing up its engines; the first was already well out on the lake, turning for its take-off run. As its engines went to full thrust the bombs attached to the second of Blade's victims went off, and flames once more spewed high. The second captured flier began taxiing out; then Blade's view of it was cut off by the loom of the third one as he thrashed up to its hatch. Hands—Leyndt's among them—reached down by the dozen. He seemed to fly out of the water and fall headfirst through the hatch, to sprawl with a thump on the metal floor at Stramod's feet. He barely had time to sit up and look forward to Pnarr seated at the controls, when the beamer turret above blazed out, and he heard another distant roar as something on shore collapsed or exploded.

Simultaneously came a much closer roar, as the third and final pair of bombs went off, and fragments pattered and clanged on the fuselage of the flier. Then Pnarr rammed the throttles forward and the engines built up to a roar as the flier came around, heeling over so hard that one wing skipped along the surface of the water. Then it straightened out, the engine roar swelled still further, the acceleration slid him back along the floor into the heap of people huddled dripping against the rear wall of the cabin, and he felt the flier lurch up on its ski. A moment later he felt it lift, and looking forward, saw nothing but sky showing through the windows beyond Pnarr's hunched head. And a moment after that the soupy blackness of the clouds swept past, and in the windows ahead the stars shone out bright and clean in the black sky as the flier banked around on to its new northbound course.

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## Chapter 11

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As soon as all three fliers were well clear of the lake area, Pnarr, the most experienced pilot, took the lead. He led the formation straight toward the coast, crossing it less than twenty minutes after take-off. Looking down, Blade could see the lights of houses and vehicles flash by underneath, then the faint glimmer of the surf as they headed out to sea. The idea was to confuse the radar that was undoubtedly tracking them. Also, over the sea there was less chance of being spotted and reported by ground-based observers.

They were well away before the floor tilted as Pnarr took the flier up to its most economical cruising altitude. There were no signs of pursuit, although Pnarr kept the beamer turret manned and ready all the way north.

Three and a half hours later Pnarr turned west again, heading toward the coast and dropping down as he approached. Through the windows Blade saw the mountains south of the lake marching over the horizon and plunging down into the sea in long rocky points. The white of breaking waves skirted their feet; the white of snowcaps crowned their peaks and crests, pink-tinged by the rising sun.

The fliers raced over the coast less than two thousand feet up and held that altitude, dipping and bobbing to avoid tree-crowned hilltops, until the lake sprawled blue and shimmering across their field of view ahead. Near its northern end, Tengran squatted on its island, as far as Blade could tell unchanged since the last time he had seen it, barely two crowded months ago.

On Blade's suggestion Pnarr led the formation well clear of the town on the final approach, to avoid alarming the people unnecessarily or picking up ground fire. Not that Blade had much hope of getting a friendly reception in the town, at least not without a good deal of fast and persuasive talking. He and Nilando had volunteered to go out and meet whoever came out from the town; hopefully the fact that Nilando was Treduk and he himself not Graduk would persuade the townsmen to not shoot first and ask questions afterward.

Pnarr put the flier down so that it glided to a stop only a few hundred yards from the piers of Tengran. Blade could see boats already putting off and men clustering around the guns of the forts as he peered through the cockpit window. He didn't entirely like being so close in, where even a well-aimed cannon ball from one of the shore guns could damage the flier. But putting themselves so much at the mercy of Tengran's guns was a useful gesture of good faith.

By the time he and Nilando climbed out of the hatch and inflated the life raft that would carry them to shore, the boats were a good deal closer, and Blade could see that they were packed with men and bristling with weapons. Two of the larger boats carried sizable guns both fore and aft, and in general the fleet gave a ready-for-anything impression. They were not concentrated either, but formed a long arc, encompassing all three fliers. Even with beamers, a really hostile force would have had a fight on its hands this time.

They launched the raft, climbed in, and began to row toward the boats. As they did so, the men in the boats crowded to the railings, lifting muskets and nocking arrows to their bows. The cannon slewed around until Blade could look straight down the black bore of one.

When they were within easy earshot, Nilando rose to his knees and spread out his empty hands.

"Hoy, people of Tengran! I am Nilando of Irdna. This is the warrior Blade, who slew a Dragon Master and his Dragon. We are returning from Graduk captivity."

There was a long silence in the arc of boats, then a voice called out:

"We have heard of both of you. But why return you in Graduk warfliers?"

"There are those among the Graduki who would aid us in fighting the Dragons. Have you not heard of these?"

"Tales. When was a Graduk ever a friend to us?"

"Many are. Or were. Those among the Graduki who hate you also are enemies to those who would aid you. They have defeated and slain most of them in a great battle. Some have fled in these fliers, and seek your aid."

"Why should we aid any Graduk?"

"These have much of the high Graduk learning. I know you have heard of it, and I know you have seen it, for I was taken prisoner in the battle where your town lost so many of its fighting men. Would you not like to see two-score or more Graduk aiding you to slaughter the Ice Dragons as their enemies and yours have slaughtered you?"

That brought the Tengrans in the boats up short; a great buzz of debate and argument arose, but the guns and bows did not waver. Nilando took the chance to mutter to Blade. "I think they will not kill us now. But trusting us—that is another thing." The debate and argument went on, until Blade began to wonder if the people of Tengran held a town meeting every time some critical question arose, even though it might be in the middle of a battle, or the middle of the lake.

Then the same voice that had spoken previously called out:

"We will send boats to you. Let your people come out one at a time, and give us their firethrowers as they do so. We will take them ashore and keep them safe until we decide what to do with them."

"We accept."

Blade was relieved at not being filled with arrows and musket balls, but far from satisfied. He needed an intact flier for his plans, and if the three fliers were left anchored in the open lake, they would be sitting ducks for the first Conciliator patrol flier that thought of checking out Tengran. And that patrol might arrive within a matter of hours.

The Tengrans landed them on the shore of the lake rather than in the town, then took Nilando and Stramod off to the island for further discussion. Having no idea of how long he would have to wait, and being more or less resigned to being unable to affect the proceedings while he was cooling his heels in the forest along with the other refugees, Blade decided to put the time to some use by speaking to Captain Pnarr about a flight north.

He chose to speak to Pnarr rather than one of the other pilots because, apart from knowing the captain better than any of the others, he was more impressed by his competence, his coolness, and his ability to take "fire, danger, and sudden death" more or less in his stride. The man was a professional. But that still did not make it much less of a gamble to speak to him in terms of aliens—though the alternative was winning Pnarr's support under false pretenses, and Blade was totally unwilling to do that.

As it worked out during the hours of sitting under the trees, the gamble paid off. Pnarr had not already concluded that aliens were lurking in the polar wastes, but he had concluded from the number of fliers that had vanished in the area that somebody or something was working to make it highly dangerous to enter. Aliens, if they existed, could hardly affect their chances of coming back safely that much—or so Pnarr said. Blade hoped the pilot wasn't whistling in the dark, and turned to a discussion of how best to approach the town elders for permission to make the flight. Stramod could permit them to go, but only the town elders' permission would make it possible to use the fliers.

In fact, the town elders approached them late in the afternoon, summoning them out to the island. When

they reached the town meeting hall, they found Nilando sitting among a dozen men and women, not all of them literally elderly, by any means, around a smoke-grimed table. He rose to greet Blade and Pnarr as their guards escorted them in.

The looks the "elders" threw at Blade and Pnarr were filled with curiosity now, rather than hostility or suspicion. Apparently Nilando, who sat among them as though it were his birthright to do so, had been doing much talking during the day, and to good purpose. One thing he had apparently done was to persuade the elders to dispense with the formalities Blade knew such bodies usually loved, and plunge directly into business. The head of the council, sparrowlike in appearance, was also sparrowlike in the briskness with which he opened the discussion.

"Your people," he said, "will be received among us, for Brother Nilando has convinced us that you are indeed friends. But they must at once withdraw into the forest and do their work there, that they may not be found in Tengran if the enemy's patrols come down on us."

One of the women interrupted. "That will not save the town if the patrols do come. They will burn it for the sheer joy of seeing the flames." She looked sullenly at Pnarr; Blade gathered she had been one of the last-ditch opposition to aiding the refugees.

"No, but it will save these people from perishing in those flames. And if they do indeed have ideas of how to fight the Ice Dragons and the weapons for such fighting, then we must save them."

"Well and good," said another man. "But what of their fliers? We cannot very well take them into the woods. And if they lie where they are much longer—"

Pnarr grinned and took up this perfect cue. "We're going to do something about that, Blade and I," he broke in, ignoring the glare at the interruption. "We think we ought to take one of the fliers north to find the Ice Dragons' home. There must be some place nearer than the glaciers themselves where they stay between raids. If we can find it, we can go there and kill many of the Dragons and Masters at once." That was the cover story they had worked out together. Mentioning the Ice Master would have been dangerous; mentioning aliens not only dangerous but futile.

Now the elders were turning to one another, discussing the idea, all except Nilando, who stared at Blade with a gaze that seemed to strip away the cover from the story and penetrate a long way toward the core of truth. Eventually the discussion petered out and the Sparrow looked at Blade and nodded.

"A wise idea. We have never had a flier before, but now that we do, it is well to get some use out of it before we must destroy it. What you need and what we can give, that you shall have."

That was all, except that Nilando drew Blade aside as he was leaving the chamber. The Treduk leader's wide-set gray eyes bored into Blade's as he said,

"There is more to this than you are telling the council, is there not?"

Blade nodded.

"You expect to find perhaps more than Ice Dragons during your search?"

Again, Blade had to nod.

"Then the High Spirits of the Hills be with you. I do not know whether I should hope that you find what

you seek, because I suspect that if you do, you will not be returning. And a man such as you, with the strange wisdom of a Graduk and the strength and courage of the Treduk, is someone we cannot spare without loss. Rena and I will both mourn you." They clasped hands, and then Nilando was striding away, head up and shoulders back.

Blade and Pnarr still had many hours' work before they could take off. The fliers had to be moved to an at least slightly less exposed position in the mouth of a creek; town boats towed them there. The fuel had to be transferred to the flier intended for the mission; Pnarr took care of that, scrambling all over the fliers like an energetic cockroach, sweating, swearing, reeking of fuel and his bare chest and black trousers turning sickly green with the fumes and droplets. Survival gear had to be loaded aboard—rafts, emergency rations, tents, winter clothing, weapons, and so on; Blade took care of that. By nightfall everything necessary had been done, and it was time for both Blade and Pnarr to lie down in soft beds in a forest-screened lakeside cottage and get a sound night's sleep.

Pnarr did indeed lie down and sleep soundly the night through, but Blade's sleep was troubled and tormented by nightmarish visions of the aliens. At times they were insects, man-sized and multi-legged, waving bristling antennas and clicking mandibles and claws in his face, hideous things in garish shades of blue and red and slimy purple. At other times they were enormous bear-like things, but lumbering about on eight legs instead of four, with hairless ears sprouting from far back on their heads and long tentacles waving from sockets in their massive shoulders. And at times they were not even living creatures, but giant silver-shimmering cubes, with a fringe of jointed crab-like limbs sprouting from their lower edges, on which they moved and with which they reached out toward him, beeping and whistling all the while like a radio set gone berserk. Now that the long preliminaries were over and the moment of what he hoped would be a decisive thrust at the heart of the problem had come, the long strain and worry had finally caught up with him. It was only toward morning that he was finally able to get to sleep. It seemed only an hour or so beyond that before Pnarr shook him awake and led him out to the boat waiting to take them to the flier.

The sun was just breaking the horizon in a blaze of orange and luminous pink when the boat bumped against the flier's fuselage. The two Union people who had spent a damp and chilly night mounting guard aboard it greeted Blade and Pnarr, then eagerly scrambled down into the boat and shoved off, no doubt dreaming of warm beds and hot drinks. Pnarr pulled the main hatch open, threw in their gear, waited while Blade climbed in, then pulled the hatch shut behind them and sealed it. The pilot then went forward to the cockpit, while Blade headed aft to make a quick inspection and stow the gear. He had just passed the beamer turret when Doctor Leyndt stepped through the door from the rear cabin.

For a moment Blade could not speak, then he reached up and clamped both hands hard on her shoulders. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"I'm planning to come with you," she said calmly, as though she were stating her plan to go into the kitchen for a cold drink. "I'm a doctor—remember—and that means I know more about the biological sciences than either you or Pnarr. I'm surprised you didn't think of that yourself. If there are aliens, you'll be able to find out much more about them with me along. And that's the whole purpose of the mission, isn't it?"

Blade nodded.

"If I weren't going to be useful I wouldn't have thought of coming along. If I had just come along because I wanted to be with you, you would have been right to send me back. Although," more quietly, "I do

want to be with you. Very much." For a moment there was a mistiness in her eyes, then she recovered. "I had thought of waiting in hiding until you had taken off. But I realized that might look dishonest, so I came out now."

Blade realized that he would probably find it easier to fight the aliens, with all their advanced knowledge and possible super-weapons, than this woman, with nothing but her straightforward honesty and logic. He couldn't at the moment quite bring himself to say in so many words, "Yes, you may come along," but he did say:

"Better get into one of the passenger seats. Did you bring any gear?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'd better go and tell Pnarr we have another person on board. He may need to revise his fuel calculations."

Pnarr did, but it was a minor matter, Leyndt's extra weight being almost negligible aboard the huge flier. Nonetheless, Pnarr grumbled and swore at women in general and Leyndt in particular for another two minutes, then unlocked the throttles and began preparations for take-off.

The sun that burned in through the cockpit windows as they raced across the calm lake was now well above the horizon, promising another flawlessly clear day. As the acceleration pushed him steadily back into his seat, Blade felt a great sensation of relief, of annoying complexities dropping away like dirty clothes at the end of a long day's work. The time was at hand to test his theory, and if it proved correct, to somehow grapple with beings from beyond this world. He had to admit to himself that he had no idea of how to meet them if they existed. But equally he had to admit also that he would be disappointed if they did not exist, if his theory vanished into the empty cold air over the glaciers. So great was his desire to come to grips with an enemy that he found it hard to regard even the Ice Master as a worthy opponent.

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## Chapter 12

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"Somebody's tracking us!" said Pnarr sharply.

Blade came out of his half-doze in an instant and looked at the control panel. The indicator light on the device that picked up radar waves aimed at the flier was flashing on and off like a demented firefly. He looked out the window. As it had been for the past half-hour, the shimmering, scarred surface of the glaciers was marching past below. There was nothing to show that any living creature might be down there. Nor, except for occasional black spurs of rock, was there anything to show that the whole world and indeed the whole universe had not turned to ice.

"Try to get a fix on it," he said to Pnarr.

"That will attract attention," said the pilot. "They'll know why we're up here."

"They'll know we're not on a joy-ride regardless of what we do," said Blade shortly, then regretted his irritation. Even Pnarr's iron nerves might reasonably be getting stretched by the strain of this endless flight into a northern nowhere, with no idea of when they might flush their quarry-or themselves become the



hunted.

But Pnarr ignored Blade's tone and obeyed his orders, swinging the flier around in a wide circle while recording the indicator's readings as he did so. At the end of the circle he turned to Blade and said, "About a thousand valh, bearing two sixty. Do you want to fly directly over it?"

Blade nodded. "I want to attract attention. We'll never find out who's up here if they stay in hiding."

"Or what," said Pnarr shortly, and turned back to the controls. The flier banked again as he turned it onto a course that would take it nearly over the source of the scanning. Then he throttled back the engines, while Blade and Leyndt took up positions at the windows, staring down through the sun glare of the ice for any trace of radar screens, buildings, or anything built by hands—or claws or tentacles, Blade reminded himself.

They made three passes over the area, while the scanning from the ground remained steady. Blade and Leyndt stared down until the glare made their eyes burn and run, without seeing anything. Blade was not sure whether he was disappointed or not. Pnarr sent the agreed-upon "first contact" message back to the refugee's station in the woods near the lake; Blade hoped somebody was also listening out there among the glaciers. The more seriously the Ice Master—or somebody—took this flight, the happier he would be. They flew on, with Blade hoping his sensation of having crossed somebody's trip wire was correct.

The hours rolled by, the glaciers rolled by; Pnarr put on the auto-pilot and came back into the cabin for a meal of assorted concentrates, each one more tasteless and less chewable than the preceding. Leyndt curled up on the floor in a pile of blankets and went to sleep. Watching her made Blade yawn and want to join her; instead he splashed water on his face and went through a series of exercises until the knots in his muscles untied themselves.

More time went by, and both Pnarr and the fuel gauges made it plain that they were finally approaching the northern limit of their range. Another half-hour, and they would have to turn back southward. Then it was another twenty minutes, another ten, another five. . . Pnarr went forward to disengage the auto-pilot and take over the controls for the turnabout; Blade went aft to wake up Leyndt and tell her the bad news. He was on edge with frustrated anticipation; his great blow had after all been delivered into the empty polar air. He would have to settle down to the fight against the Ice Dragons alone, without knowing whether they were only pawns expended by the real—

The emergency alarm screamed like a trapped animal. Pnarr sat bolt upright in his seat, staring at the detector screens. Blade dashed forward into the cockpit and stared over the pilot's shoulder. Swimming in the darkness of the screens like luminous fish in a dim aquarium were five blips. They were approaching from the left, at a speed three times that of the flier, a speed that should bring them within sight almost at once. Blade lunged toward the left-hand window, stared out—and seconds later felt a churning mixture of cold apprehension and exaltation.

The five needle-slim shapes pacing the flier, wingless, finless, exhaustless, more featureless than the glaciers themselves, were as far beyond the flier as it was beyond the boats and pony carts of the Treduki. Their formation was so perfect and so rigid that they might have been fastened together by invisible bars, then suddenly it split apart in a metallic shimmering of sunlight spraying off polished hulls, as the five machines scurried to take up positions around the flier—two dead ahead, one dead astern, one off either wing. They matched its course and speed with as little effort as two men walking side by side might have done. For a moment Blade toyed with the idea of asking Pnarr to test them further by trying to change course, then rejected it. He had no idea what orders these machines or their pilots—if they had pilots—might have, or what they might interpret as a hostile move. Nor at this point did he care about

minor details. They had alerted the hounds, and now the pack had found them and was leading them to the hunter.

For two hours more they flew north surrounded by the pack. Pnarr sat in the pilot's seat, hands rock-steady on the controls, face set like a rock also. In his pale face with the faint glaze of perspiration, Blade could however read no indication of fear.

Leyndt's face was also set and sweating, but her eyes were continually roving from the escorts to Blade and back again. She said very little, and that in a voice even more carefully controlled than usual. Once she said:

"Obviously a method of controlling gravity for both lateral and vertical motion. Also probably some form of repulsor field. They keep a constant distance from each other with remarkably few adjustments."

—and another time she said:

"No signs of weapons. But against our flier, perhaps they would attack by ramming. Anything capable of those accelerations and decelerations would be strong enough for that."

Apart from that she was mostly silent, but occasionally her hand would creep out and into Blade's, seeking the reassurance he could give her by squeezing it gently.

Blade's initial apprehension was gone, replaced by the every-sense-at-peak-efficiency reaction that usually came to him in the midst of a crisis, one that had saved his life more than a few times in both Home and X Dimensions. What had bothered him at first was not so much fear of losing his life, but of losing it before finding out anything about the aliens. Now that he could reasonably assume they were not simply going to destroy him on the spot, he could settle down to observing them as closely as possible. What chance he had of getting his observations out to the Union camp many thousands of miles to the south was another question entirely.

The endless flight over the endless ice attacked his sense of time to the point where he could not have told exactly how long it was before the five hounds began sliding downward, carefully matching their angle of descent to the flier's capabilities. They dropped steadily downward, toward a line of black fang-cragged peaks that jutted even above the miles-thick ice, slowing as they did so. They swept low above the peaks—and then Blade saw it.

A square of ice half a mile or more on a side had been planed flat as a table top and burnished to a dazzling blue-white sheen. In the center rose a low black rectangular structure, featureless at this height and distance; around the edges of the square rose alternating green and red cones. The whole square seemed to be covered with a fine grid of intersecting lines, like strings of beads laid across a mirror. The flier swept in toward the edge of the square, its guardians still holding formation around it, while Pnarr wondered out loud how in the name of all the seventy-nine spirits of the air he was supposed to land there.

As they passed over the edge of the square, the question was answered for them. It felt as though the flier had suddenly plunged nose first into a miles-deep bowl of oatmeal. It rocked and shuddered as whatever force was reaching up from the ice below dragged it to a dead stop, from five hundred miles an hour to zero in seconds. Blade gaped at the realization of what was involved in doing this, and doing it while acting equally on every molecule of matter caught within the field, so that the occupants of the flier did not hurl forward and pulp themselves against the cockpit windows. These beings could play games with gravity the way a child played with a chemistry set!

He was so caught up in marveling at the science represented by the field that for a moment he was not aware that it was now lowering the flier gently toward the ice. Blade looked out the window at the black building, found it as featureless close up as it had been from a distance, turned to look at the cones bordering the grid. The green ones, he noted, had four small yellow antennas sticking out of their points in an X-pattern, while the red ones ended in a translucent oval lens. He also noticed that at each corner of the grid a circular disc had flipped open, revealing a yawning black hole. Into these the five escorts were now dropping, each one flipping neatly up on end like a man making a precision dive and sliding vertically down out of sight. As the last one vanished, the flier itself touched down with a gentle bump, rocked for a moment as the field went off, then settled in place.

Blade found Leyndt holding onto both his arms. He could hardly blame her. He felt some need to hold onto a piece of reality himself, to fight off the massed fantasy that was pressing in on him from outside. After a moment, though, he gently disengaged her fingers and said, "Let's get on our clothes and go outside." He grinned. "These people seem to have been rather polite so far. I'm sure they won't forget to send up a reception committee to greet us at the door." She feebly imitated his own grin and turned away to the clothes locker.

Blade turned to Pnarr. The pilot was unbuckling himself and standing up, without taking his eyes off the scene outside. He looked tense but controlled and alert; he had never seemed to Blade the type to panic. Blade turned away and began pulling on the insulated trousers and parka that Leyndt handed him.

In a few minutes all three of them were suited up; each also carried a pack filled with emergency rations, ice-climbing gear, recording equipment, and spare charge packs for their beamers. Blade did not expect to need any of this, but was determined to be ready for exploration if the proprietors of their establishment allowed them the chance for any.

The cabin turned misty with condensation as the freezing air from outside poured in through the open hatch. Blade lowered himself down to the ice, tested his footing, then helped Leyndt down. Pnarr came last, locking the hatch behind him and giving the fuselage a furtive pat as he jumped down. They turned toward the black building, still as featureless as ever, but now sprawling squat and grim. Blade guessed it was at least five hundred feet by four hundred; its jet-black sides reflected not a glimmer of light. There seemed nothing better to do for the moment than to walk toward it.

They were only about a hundred feet from it when a door slid open at its base and the Ice Master stepped out to meet them.

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## Chapter 13

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Were the aliens humanoid? Blade asked himself for a moment. The figure stepping toward them as calmly as though it were a host greeting guests arriving at a party was nearly as tall as Blade, in its insulated clothing even wider, and carried—Blade had to look twice before he could believe it—a sword slung at its belt. The face that looked out of the parka hood seemed completely human as far as Blade could tell. A huge hooked nose jutted, wide-set brown eyes gleamed over a bushy pepper-and-salt beard.

Blade's staring at the man was interrupted by a cry of pain from Pnarr. He spun around to see the pilot fling his beamer away, smoke pouring from the charge housing. A moment later, Blade saw that his own

beamer was smoking also, and both he and Leyndt did the same. And a moment after that, all three beamers exploded with sharp cracks and sprays of sparks, leaving small blackened half-melted patches on the ice.

The Ice Master stood looking at the spectacle, his eyes seeming to show amusement, while behind him eight more men filed out onto the ice and took up positions on either side of him. They were wearing orange parkas trimmed with black fur, black boots and wide black belts. Each of them carried a seven-foot spear, with a sword slung on one side of his belt and a long heavy club like a policeman's truncheon on the other. They did not look very intelligent, but they carried themselves like men who at least knew what to do with the weapons they carried. Then the Ice Master took another step forward, spread out his hands in a gesture doubtless meant to be welcoming, and spoke.

"You are Blade and Leyndt, are you not? I have been hoping you would come." He turned to look at Pnarr. "Who is that?"

Blade did not like the man's tone, but answered him anyway. "The pilot of our flier, Captain Pn—"

"Never mind, he is not important," said the Ice Master. He waved a hand at two of the guards. "Take him below and confine him for conditioning. He looks like a good physical specimen." The two guards broke out of their formation and advanced on Pnarr, their spears held in one hand and truncheons in the other.

It happened so fast that Blade wasted crucial seconds in staring. But Pnarr, seeing the men coming at him, was faster. He sidestepped the first lunging truncheon blow at his head, reached into a boot top, whipped out a knife, and darted under the second lunge. The guard had barely time to spring back and away from the knife point as it swept up toward his heart and deflect it with a wild sweep of the truncheon. The guard took two steps backward, enough to bring him within reach of Blade, whose arms lunged out and clamped around the man's neck, jerking him backward off his feet so violently that Blade heard the neck snap. Pnarr turned to face the other guard, who had pulled out his sword. It was a single-handed weapon, with a slightly curved single-edged blade and a sharp point. Blade stepped forward, drawing his own knife from his belt, to give the guard two opponents, when a scream from Leyndt stopped him dead in his tracks.

Two of the other guards had leaped forward and grabbed her by the arms, dragging her to her knees. Another stood over her, sword drawn and its point at her throat. The Ice Master took another step forward and said quietly, "If this nonsense continues, she dies." Blade froze, the knife still raised in his hand, and opened his mouth to shout to Pnarr. But Pnarr had heard also; he stepped back and dropped his knife. As it tinkled on the ice, the first guard, too blind with battle lust to hear or see anything but his immediate opponent, stepped forward and swung his sword. There was a whush as it sliced through the air, a chunk as it sliced through Pnarr's neck, and a thump as the severed head sailed through the air and fell to the ice. The body remained erect for a split second, blood spouting from the neck, then crumpled.

The guard who had swung stood staring down at the body, his eyes still glazed, and in that moment the Ice Master gestured sharply at two of the other guards. Swords drawn, they rushed at him; he made no effort to defend himself as their blades whistled through the air and sank into his body. Still without speaking, still glassy-eyed, he sank to the ice, kicked, and was still.

The Ice Master turned to Blade. "You will come with me." It was an order, not a request. One of the guards plucked the knife out of Blade's hand; two others bound his arms behind his back and took up positions on either side of him. The remaining four guards picked up the two bodies and carried them in through the door. The Ice Master gestured sharply with a gloved thumb, and Blade's guards prodded him

into movement. The Ice Master himself brought up the rear, one hand firmly clutching Leyndt's arm.

As the door slid shut behind them with a boom and a thump, lights flashed on in a blue-white glare that almost dazzled Blade. Before his eyes had recovered, he felt the floor under him starting to sink downward. In a moment the walls of a square shaft twenty feet on a side were flowing upward past him.

The walls of the shaft and the slab of flooring that had suddenly become a downward-bound elevator seemed to be made of the same homogeneous dead-black material, so dead and so black and so without variation that looking at it was like looking into a bottomless, lightless well. There was no sound of machinery as they sank, no variation in the speed of the elevator, only a silent and steady downward progress for what Blade estimated to be about three hundred feet.

The elevator stopped sinking, and a moment after that vertical walls sank into slots in the floor on all four sides, and they were in the middle of a large circular chamber through whose ceiling they had dropped. The chamber was about a hundred feet in diameter, floored and walled in pastel reds and yellows, and unfurnished, though not uninhabited. Decidedly not uninhabited.

More guards, for one thing, some of them walking beats around the square platform on which the slab had landed, others standing guard at four large arches that led off into corridors, winding off into the distance at the four compass points. The guards wore only close-fitting silver shorts like swimming trunks, black boots, and the same three weapons as the guards accompanying Blade and Leyndt.

There were others who were obviously slaves. Some of them were male, dressed only in the silver trunks, with heavy brass-colored metal rings clamped around their left ankles. Their heads, unlike those of the guards, were shaved, and their skulls apparently varnished or waxed with something that glistened a sullen orange under the yellowish lights of the chamber.

Others of the slaves were female, also dressed only in trunks, bare-footed, their hair uniformly worn in a ponytail that sometimes reached down to the small of their backs. The male slaves, Blade noted, shuffled about as though drugged, with careful plodding steps and a listless air, while the women moved more naturally, yet not without apprehension in the glances they continuously threw about the chamber.

He had no time for speculation on the reasons for this difference or on anything else, because the Ice Master sprang down from the platform and barked an order. Instantly the little group broke up, the four guards carrying the two bodies disappearing down one corridor, the two with Blade leading him off to a second, and four more guards springing up onto the slab, lifting Leyndt off her feet, and departing down still a third passage at a run. Leyndt was silent, either too numbed by the events of the last half-hour to resist, or consciously deciding that it would be futile to do so.

Blade himself, after seeing what Pnarr's resistance had produced, was very much determined to stay calm, stay alive, and carry out his mission of finding out as much as possible about the Ice Master and his allies. He took it for granted now that the aliens existed; even if so much of what he had seen had not been from a technology far beyond that of the Graduki, the sheer size of the base would have been far beyond any local ability to establish here in the polar wastes.

So he let his guards lead him down the corridor, into a smaller one that branched off to the right, and to the far end of that one. A door showed in a recess in the wall; one of the guards slapped a white disc on the wall beside the door, and it slid open. The two guards cut Blade's bonds and pushed him forward. He staggered forward into the room, almost falling to his knees, as the door whispered shut behind him.

If the room was a cell, the Ice Master obviously believed in treating at least some of his prisoners well.

The room was nearly forty feet across and twice as high as Blade. Walls and ceiling were a checkerboard of pastel colors, blues and greens predominating, while underfoot spread a thick soft dark maroon rug. Rug? Blade reached down and felt the fibers curling around his toes. They felt more like the tendrils of some sort of plant. A living rug—more biological engineering? Possibly. He resumed his examination of the room.

One corner was fitted out as a living area—a platform for sleeping, covered with cushions and quilts, other cushions for sitting on, a row of shelves, a folding table. Another corner was fitted out as a bath, with a tall golden-mesh screen that presumably hid a toilet, a similarly gilded basin, and an enormous sunken tub not much smaller than a swimming pool. The rest of the room was empty. It would on the whole have made the most sybaritic London jetsetter run to his interior decorator, insisting that it be duplicated at all costs.

He went over to the wall and laid his hand against it. He felt a gentle warmth radiating from it, instead of the chill that he had unconsciously expected, since he knew he must be well down inside the ice or the chill rock below it, and more than the warmth—a gentle throbbing like the slow beating of an incredibly large and distant heart. He put his ear against the wall, trying to hear the sound more clearly and learn something about the nature of the source. He still had his ear against the wall when the door slid open and the Ice Master walked in.

He had taken off his surface clothing and wore a dark red coverall that was stretched tight over his broad chest and around his thick limbs. His feet and head were bare, and he wore on one side of his belt one of the curved swords and on the other side a small black box that looked like a pocket calculator or a radio. His head was almost entirely bald, except for a fringe of gray-flecked brown hair ending just above his ears, and all in all he looked almost more like the chief of a tribe of savages than Nilando did. Blade smiled at the thought.

The Ice Master returned the smile with a note of smugness that did nothing to put Blade at his ease. Then he took a few steps into the room and sat down on the floor. Blade noticed the Ice Master carefully kept between him and the door. Deciding that nothing was to be gained by remaining standing, he also sat down, but at a safe distance. He was not going to give the Ice Master the impression of any trust or friendliness—not now at any rate.

The Ice Master put both large hands on his knees and inclined his head in a ceremoniously slow nod. Then he spoke. His voice was higher-pitched than Blade would have naturally associated with such a large man, and his words came out slowly, calmly, and with the confidence of a man who knows he is in command of the situation and will remain that way.

"I was hoping you would make the flight north. You and Doctor Leyndt. The pilot was not so valuable, but it would have been interesting to see how he reacted to the conditioning. Although I have usually had to destroy violent ones like that in the past. I would not have destroyed the guard, except that he acted beyond his orders. That showed his conditioning was faulty. Even if I were willing to overlook it, the Menel would not be. They are very concerned about their own safety, the Menel are. But perhaps when one lives two thousand years, to be cut off at the age of, let us say, five hundred means a great loss. I do not know."

Blade recognized the ploy. The Ice Master was hoping to establish his dominance by talking of things about which Blade knew nothing, but which were certain to arouse his interest. Having aroused that interest, he could increase the domination by throwing Blade bits of explanation, like throwing bones to a yelping dog. It was a comparatively basic interrogation technique, and for a moment Blade felt almost disappointed. Was this the best the fabled Ice Master, ruler of the snowy wastes, creator (or at least

manager) of the Ice Dragons, and presumed ally of beings from beyond space (no doubt these were the Menel) could manage? Then he hastily reined in his complacency. The Ice Master was probably just exploring. It would be unwise to assume there was nothing more in his arsenal.

He was also going on. "—much impressed by the abilities you showed, both physical and mental. Of course I had no way of confirming the reports I received, but I hoped that if you were all they said you were, you would do what you have just done." After this cryptic remark, he paused briefly, looking at Blade with a stare that seemed to want to strip him not only of all his clothing but of all his psychological barriers and expose the nakedness of his soul as well as of his body. Blade again noted the clumsiness, but again resisted any impulse to dismiss the man completely. Clumsy interrogation was often one of the most subtle techniques of a highly skilled interrogator, to get a subject feeling complacent, certain he had the measure of the man quizzing him.

"I am glad Doctor Leyndt came along. I had planned to make her one of the Girls (the way he said the word emphasized the capital letter) but now I see you care for her. At least enough to wish not to see her killed. Or thrown to the male slaves when they are given Pleasure Days. Or converted, as your pilot and the dead guard will be, into nutrient cultures for the Menel. This can be done while the subject is still alive—at least for a few hours. It appears to be quite painful."

Blade made no attempt to control the disgust he was beginning to feel for this hulking, arrogant, and now sadistic brute. No, perhaps that was not quite right—there was nothing about the Ice Master yet revealed to suggest any sort of stupidity. In fact, there was too much heard and seen suggesting the reverse. Although he had yet to sort out what the Ice Master had done himself, what he had done with the help of the Menel, and what the Menel had done by themselves perhaps centuries before the Ice Master had even been born. He took a deep breath to calm himself and went on listening.

"Obviously I could condition you thoroughly enough to make someone of even your demonstrated strength and intelligence thoroughly docile. But that would destroy many of the same qualities that made me so—interested—in getting you into my hands." Blade noted the barely concealed hesitation over the choice of words, suggesting a barely averted slip. So he possessed qualities of special interest to the Ice Master. That was indeed "interesting," at least.

"You may have as many of the Girls as you wish, of course, and any extra furnishings you need can be brought in—" as the Ice Master gestured expansively around the apartment like a barkeeper welcoming a particularly good customer. "I would rather not have to even hurt Leyndt in order to influence you. She appears to be worth more than most women. You can easily see that the guards are numerous and well-armed, and you have already seen what the Pi-field that envelops my stronghold will do to more advanced weapons that might give one man a chance against superior numbers." Blade nodded in what he hoped would come across as a gesture of boredom rather than of agreement. The Ice Master was leading up to something, although Blade found it hard to believe that anything much short of announcing the Day of Judgment justified this long a build-up.

He decided to speak. Trying to balance his voice between boredom, contempt, and stubbornness, concealing the curiosity and the disgust, he said shortly, "Well and good. So you're going to treat me like a prize laboratory specimen. Is that what you have in mind for me?"

The Ice Master managed to look shocked or at least give a fairly good imitation of it. "You are certainly not a specimen. You are an ally. You are my ally against the Menel."

After rejecting the notion that he might not have heard the Ice Master correctly, Blade went through more calculations of risk and advantage in less time than ever before in all his career in either Home or X Dimensions. Although he maintained an outward appearance of no more than casual interest, within his mind was working furiously, breaking down the Ice Master's statement into logical chunks.

The Ice Master wanted—or needed—an ally. So he had weaknesses or inadequacies. A man strong enough to stand alone does not seek allies. Doing everything oneself is always safer, but seldom possible. So—what were the man's weaknesses?

And he needed an ally against the Menel. What was he planning to do to them? Or was he merely planning to defend himself against something they were planning to do to him? How far was he planning to go against them, if he was moving in that direction? How much was he prepared to offer Blade in return for his help—assuming that it turned out Blade could in fact give any help at all?

Blade found himself devoutly hoping that he could strike a bargain with the Ice Master. The man's fear, weakness, ambition—whatever—opened the possibility of studying the menace of the glaciers and the Ice Dragons, searching out weak points for future attack, with the active help of the man who was helping to create that menace. And beyond that, if there was some sort of conflict between the Ice Master and his mysterious allies, it might prove the chink into which a wedge could be driven, driven home with mighty blows, to split apart the whole menace and bring it to ruin and collapse.

All this marched—or rather, stampeded like mad elephants—through Blade's mind in a few seconds, while he stared blandly at the Ice Master. Then he frowned with studied care and said quietly and slowly, "That is a very interesting thing you need. It is not one I would have expected of you. The Menel have given you far more power than even your great genius could have won for you alone." That statement was a calculated risk. If he seemed too reluctant, the Ice Master might back off from his proposal, with consequences unknown but probably nasty. On the other hand, if he seemed too eager to join in a fight against the Menel, the Ice Master (except in the unlikely event that he were a complete fool) would hardly be able to avoid suspecting that he also was on Blade's list of Victims. Once again, everything depended on striking the right balance.

"They have," said the Ice Master even more slowly and quietly than Blade, as though he were afraid of being overheard. "But what they have given is less than I would have liked, and they can take it back any time they please. I save them much work and a little danger, and because they are a lazy and cowardly race they reward me greatly. But they could easily decide I am too expensive a luxury, that I could be done without. And then they will throw me away, as easily as their scout ships kept pace with your flier and their lift-field brought it down to the ice. I am like a stick in the hands of a child who uses it to scratch figures in the dirt. When he is tired of scratching or finds a better one he will break the stick over his knee and throw the pieces away. I will not be thrown away. I will find help. I will!" The Ice Master's voice had abandoned all its cautious quietness now, rising to a roar on the final "I will!"

The Ice Master was insane, thought Blade. Whether or not he had been so when he first allied himself with the Menel, he had become so during his alliance with them.

The isolation under the polar ice, the ambitions that the superior science all around him had aroused, had definitely pushed him over the edge. Blade recognized the fact, recognized that it would make any cooperation with the Ice Master for any purpose at all even more dangerous, then filed it away in his mind. Then he turned his attention back to the Ice Master, who had now somewhat calmed himself,



although his massive chest was still heaving violently. In the same tone of voice he had used before, he said, "I do not know whether I could help you, if the Menel are as strong as they appear to be. A people that can bring a dust cloud out of interstellar space to freeze a planet, then send it away when it has done its work, are not foolish or weak."

That broke through the Ice Master's defenses almost by accident. If he had ever had any suspicions of Blade's reasons in probing for information on the Menel, they vanished, first in a torrent of wild, mocking laughter that went on and on, echoing hideously around the chamber until Blade thought the Ice Master had finally lost all control and had to fight with the temptation to clasp his hands over his ears, then in an almost equally wild, spewed-out jumble of recollections, theories, guesses, observations, and experiences over the past twenty years, out of which Blade set himself to assemble a coherent picture of the Menel.

The Menel (which was as accurately as human tongues could pronounce their name for themselves) were indeed from a planet of another star. Driven across space by some unspecified catastrophe or threatened catastrophe too great for even their super-science to meet, their ships had reached the fringes of this world's system some eleven hundred years before. Of the planets in that system, all were either too cold or too warm. But for a species with great knowledge and a life expectancy of two thousand or more years, cooling off one of the warmer worlds through tipping its climate into a glacial era was a perfectly reasonable project.

So the Menel brought the dust cloud; it performed its job and was sent on its way. Then they settled down in the northern polar regions, dug several cave complexes out of the rock below the glaciers, and waited for the day when the planet would be chilled down enough for them to move about on the surface freely for more than short periods of time. They were still waiting (Blade could hear the melodramatic note in the other man's voice) when the Ice Master had come upon the scene.

He had done so through an accident. The Menel were omnivorous, but animal protein was a desired luxury, and occasionally they raided south into human-inhabited territories in search of victims. On one of these raids, a Menel flier had suffered an engine failure, and crashed near the Ice Master's laboratories. He had rescued the survivors, protected them from the excessive warmth that would have killed them after a few hours, and promised to find ways of communicating with their colony if they would teach him how to do so. He had already been thinking in terms of striking a bargain with the Menel.

The process of working out a system of mutual communication had taken over a year, because neither species had a vocal apparatus suitable for reproducing the other's language. During all that year, the Ice Master had successfully concealed his dealings with the Menel from his assistants and even from his servants, several of whom were previous successful experiments in genetic and biological engineering. But eventually a mutually intelligible code emerged, one developed enough to permit the exchange of scientific data, and he released the two Menel to return to their colony with the word that a human sought to aid them.

Unfortunately, before the Menel could decide how to respond to this news, one of his experimental creations, a youth named Stramod, led a revolt among the servants and escaped with many of his fellows. So great was the uproar caused by this revolt that the Ice Master knew he must flee at once, with as much of his learning and equipment as possible, to the only beings on the planet who might have any reason to shelter or aid them.

His gamble had proved correct; he had been able to strike a bargain with the Menel. They helped him create the Ice Dragons, with which he terrorized the Treduki and indirectly the Graduki, so keeping down any possible opposition from the human population. The Dragons also kidnapped large numbers of human beings, some to be made slaves, some to be made guards or Girls or Dragon Masters, some to

be simply fed into processing vats that broke them down into forms suitable for Menel food.

Some of the Ice Master's former friends and associates were now in Graduk ruling circles, supporting the Conciliators. A very few of them acted as his private intelligence network, through which he had been able to keep track of the doings of the Union for Cooperation comparatively well, and thus of Blade's arrival and of his history. He had immediately begun hoping that some circumstance would either destroy Blade or bring him north, and although the unanticipated Conciliator move against the Union had delayed this, so it had worked out.

The Menel had built him this massive base for his activities, as well as other facilities farther south where the Ice Dragons and the Dragon Masters lived. They did not keep a particularly close watch on what he was doing, although one of their settlements was nearby. However, he was certain that many of the guards were taken down into the settlement by the Menel for a day or two and given an extra layer of conditioning that made them act as spies on him. He didn't think the Menel had studied human psychology well enough to permit them to completely wipe out his own conditioning, which was advanced far beyond anything dreamed of in the outside world. That was the note of complacency on which he ended his long ramble through his own history and that of the Menel.

When he had finished and sat looking at Blade for some sort of reaction, Blade found himself once again having to do some very complex thinking in a very great hurry without any of it showing on his face. The Ice Master either had not told him or (incredible but not impossible) did not himself know a good many of the key facts about the Menel. So discreet exploring and inquiring on his own was going to be needed. This was equally true for information about the Ice Master's stronghold—he would be taking a great risk of warning the Ice Master about his real plans if he asked too many questions about that.

Set that question aside for a moment. What to say to the Ice Master now? Give him the impression of cooperation, somewhat willing but also dictated by fear for Leyndt's safety (if he thinks he doesn't need her as a hold, he will probably kill or condition her at once). Again, balance tone and choice of words perfectly—at a point when Blade would have given his right arm for the chance to give any one of his emotions—particularly the revulsion he felt for the Ice Master—full rein.

"I understand there is a sort of bargain involved here—my cooperation in return for Leyndt's safety."

"Of course. But much more than that can be yours after a while—as I said, all the Girls you want, anything this stronghold provides. And when we have destroyed the Menel, anything this world provides. I will rule it, and you will be my second-in-command." And do all the dirty work, thought Blade.

"All right. Have you thought of enlisting some of your prisoners in this project?" Two men tackling all the Menel seemed rather suicidal.

That almost pushed the Ice Master too far. "Nonsense! None of the male guards and slaves would be safe without a conditioning that makes them useless for anything more than fighting or menial work. That is why I hoped it would not be necessary to condition you—it would have been a total waste of all your higher qualities. And the Girls are like most women—they have no higher qualities to begin with. We can expect nothing from them. We can trust nobody but each other." He reached out a hand as if he expected it to be shaken, and Blade obliged him, fighting off the urge to fling the man head first into the wall, hopefully breaking all of his bones in the process. But killing the Ice Master would not strike a fatal blow at the Menel. In fact, it would do nothing but leave him and Leyndt (and he didn't even know where she was) alone in the Ice Master's stronghold, with no way to get out of it or if they got out of it return to the south—assuming they were not promptly killed by the guards. For the Menel he had some sympathy—a new home for their race was something any people might seek, and be driven to drastic

measures in doing so—but for the Ice Master he could have none.

The Ice Master rose to his full imposing height and raised his hand in farewell. Then he turned and strode toward the door. It opened to let him through, then closed behind him, and Blade was alone again.

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## Chapter 15

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He was alone for two days, as nearly as he could guess. There was no clock in his chamber and no dimming of the lights. But he could set himself to sleep for almost any amount of time with great precision, and then estimate the time between the two sleep cycles. This gave him a rough approximation of the amount of time passing.

He was determined to avoid any risk of disorientation; he was also determined to keep himself physically as close to the top line as possible. He had no idea when the Ice Master would call for him, or whether that call might pitch him straight into a situation where he could survive only by using every bit of strength and speed he possessed.

So he kept track of the time, did calisthenics, did unarmed-combat exercises, jogged (and in the process of the jogging estimated the size of the room and memorized his estimates). He bathed regularly in the huge sunken tub-pool (which had no adjustment for water flow or temperature; one slapped a projecting plate at the head end and the water flowed in until the tub was full, water always slightly too cool for Blade's preference). He ate the food which appeared in a recess in the wall regularly twice a day—a thick gray stew filled with blue lumps tasting like overaged and undercooked chicken and green glutinous lumps that both looked and tasted like a cross between half-baked bread and rice pudding. He drank the hot liquid that accompanied the food—a sweetish liquid the color of weak coffee and the most palatable part of the meal. He decided after the first two meals that the Ice Master's intention to treat him well did not extend to providing good food. He only hoped that none of the lumps in the stew were protein processed from human victims brought in by the Ice Dragons.

He was taking his bath on the "morning" of the third day when, without any warning, the door opened with its characteristic low swisssh and an unseen hand shoved one of the Girls into the chamber, so violently that she fell to her knees. Blade was instantly alert, springing out of the bath without bothering to dry or dress himself. The girl's eyes widened as she ran them over his body, standing naked and dripping in front of her. He examined her in his turn, and found the examination a pleasant enough task.

His initial notion that she might have been sent to him as a subtle way of killing him rapidly shrank away to nothing. He found it hard to believe that the short trunks that were her only garment could conceal anything lethal, and he found the notion of poisoned finger- or toe-nails ludicrous. Her skin was pale, but with a healthy tinge of pink, and a light dusting of freckles over her shoulders and down on to the small, firm breasts. There was firm-toned muscle under the curves of waist and hips and legs, and the toes and fingers of the small feet and hands were long and sure of their movements. The ponytail that flowed down her back was shorter than usual—it reached only just below her shoulder blades—and its color perhaps the least attractive feature about her—a sort of dirty blonde. The face was small, square-chinned, with high cheekbones and a delicately chiseled snub nose. The eyes were wide, deep blue, with lashes that half the women Blade knew could match only by going out and buying them. And those eyes struck the jarring note in the whole agreeable picture, because they were wide, staring, and filled with a stark terror that Blade could almost feel crackling in the air like static electricity.

He stepped over to the girl and reached down, putting his hands under her chin to lift her head. It came up stiffly, as though she were setting her neck muscles against it, and the terror in her eyes flashed stronger yet.

"What is your name?" he asked in a voice as low as he could make it and still hope that it would reach her ears.

"I am—I am a Girl," she said in a voice with a faint tremble in it.

"I know that," Blade said. "I can tell the difference between boys and girls." The attempted note of lightness fell away into nothing, like a stone hurled into a canyon. She shivered as though the winds from the glaciers far above were sweeping through the room. His hands tightened briefly on her shoulders, trying to reassure her, but the shivering faded only slightly.

"Well, I cannot go on calling you simply Girl," he said. "You must have a name. I think—"

She jumped up with a gasp. "No, no, no! I have no name. I am a Girl. I cannot have a name. It is forbidden. I—" He put his arms around her and pulled her gently against him, until her face was buried against his chest. She stopped speaking but went on trembling. "Who forbids it that you have a name?"

"T-t-the Master. He says—"

"—that you are Girls, not people, and only people have names? Is that it?" She did not speak, but nodded slowly and looked up at him with surprise now mixed with the fear in her eyes. His arms tightened again, and went on tightening until her gasp warned him that he was squeezing her as if he had the Ice Master here in his hands. If it had been the Ice Master, he would have gone on squeezing until the man slipped to the floor a boneless pulp. He was beginning to see what the Ice Master had done to the Girls.

"I do not tell the Ice Master everything I do or say," he said sharply. (Provided, he added to himself, that this room isn't so thoroughly bugged that the bastard can pick up a cockroach's footsteps!) "So if you do not tell him everything, then I can give you a name and he will never know that we do forbidden things. Do you understand me?" She nodded, with the surprise now beginning to overcome the terror. He was something new in her life—not surprisingly, all things considered. "Then I think I will call you Lora. Say it after me. Lora."

"Lora."

"That's right. Now, Lora, why are you here?"

"For your p-p-Pleasure," she said. The stammer would have told him, even without looking into her eyes, that the fear was back again, swamping everything. He felt her stiffen against him until it was as though he held a store-window dummy in his arms.

"Yes. But what kind of pleasure?" She gaped at him as though he had suddenly grown a second head, then stared down at his genitals.

"But you-you seem to be a Whole One. Have you n-n-never taken Pleasure before?"

Blade could not help flushing. She was implying he was either a eunuch or incredibly ignorant. But he felt himself also on the track of something too important to let himself be put aside by a little embarrassment.

"I have not taken pleasure here," he said with emphasis on the last word. "You must show me how, lest I do something else forbidden that cannot be hidden from the Ice Master." She swallowed several times hard, then stared at him for a moment, unclasped her trunks, and slipped them off. Nude, she lay down on the hard tile surrounding the bath and spread her legs apart. Her arms were stiff at her side, fists clenched until the knuckles were sheet-white. And the trapped-animal look was back in her eyes, stronger than ever before.

Blade stepped back a pace as the realization hit him, and for a minute could do nothing except swear, out loud and eloquently, by every Home Dimensional and X Dimensional spirit or deity he could remember. The wretched girl on the floor was expecting to be raped! No wonder the Ice Master was able to keep the Girls in line! He wiped out their memories of any previous existence, told them that they were merely Girls—indistinguishable as individuals. Then he conditioned the ungelded males among the slaves and guards—the Whole Ones—to be as brutal and ferocious in sex—in Pleasure—as possible. The Girls were kept in line by threats of being turned over to the Whole Ones for Unlimited Pleasure—no doubt a particularly unpleasant and no doubt usually fatal form of mass rape. Even without considering the possibility of Leyndt being subjected to that treatment, the whole notion made him almost physically ill.

He looked back to the girl. At the moment, he could no more have made love to her than he could have made love to a suit of armor. But if he could demonstrate to Lora that there were other ways of Pleasure than the one she was used to—and if she then passed this earthshaking news on to the other Girls—? Here was very definitely another chink in the Ice Master's armor, where a wedge might be driven in at the appropriate time. Meanwhile...

"Lora," he said. Her eyes flickered in his direction. "Don't lie like that. Sit up and look at me." For a moment he thought she was too paralyzed by fear to respond, then slowly she sat up and curled her legs under her. Her hands lay in her lap, and gradually he saw the fists unclench themselves. He sat down in the same position in front of her, and patted her hands gently. "That's much better. I see how the Whole Ones take Pleasure. But I cannot take Pleasure that way. I have not been taught how to do it that way."

"But that is the Master's way!"

"Do not always tell me what is the Master's way! There are many other ways of doing things besides the Master's way! For example—have you ever during Pleasure taken this—" he pointed toward his groin—"in your mouth?" He traced a line across her pink lips with his fingers. "It is also a way of giving Pleasure to a Whole One, and does not hurt you. The Whole Ones of the Master like to hurt, don't they?" She nodded. "Then let us find out all the ways of Pleasure that do not hurt. What can the Master do or say about it, if he never finds out?" Again she nodded, and this time she bent forward on hands and knees and began inexpertly to work.

She was so inexpert and simultaneously so enthusiastic that Blade at one or two moments wondered if he was going to come out of this a Whole One. But she was so entirely at sea in this new realm of Pleasure without pain that he could guide her more or less as he chose, and was able to alternately warn her off and urge her on until he was fully aroused. Then he turned to arousing her.

He could not have handled her body more delicately if she had been one of the priceless pieces of carved-jade in his father's collection, or a butterfly whose gaudy wings would crumble to dust at a hair's too much pressure. Lips caressed cheeks, tongue licked out at earlobes and nipples, fingers ran up and down thigh muscles and probed gently around the dark mat of curly hair between her legs. He saw the fear fade from her eyes, surprise replace it, and then—and his own arousal increased at the

sight—readiness and even eagerness. But it was not until he saw her lips begin to move in soundless pleading and heard her breath coming in short puffs that he gently eased her legs apart and himself into her.

Even then he lay quietly until the momentary spasm of uncertainty had passed from her face. Then he began a sure, slow, relaxed (but not too relaxed, he reminded himself!) stroking, feeling tremors go through her muscles as he did so. He fought back any urge to quicken his stroke, listening for every breath she gave out, every sound she made, as clues to her state of mind and body. When he heard her begin to urge him on, it was then that he quickened his stroke, feeling her approaching climax as fast as he was, then reach it at almost the same moment as he did. They lay intertwined for a long gentle moment afterward, then he rolled off her and lay down beside her, looking into her eyes. Her mouth sagged slackly open and her breath was coming in gasps that made it impossible for her to speak, but the look in her eyes said all he needed for the moment. He had revealed to her a whole new world, and as the man who had done so would have her allegiance to the death.

Which it might very well come to, he said to himself after she had risen, bathed with him in the tub, and gone out again. He had not asked her to do anything beyond telling the other Girls (in strict confidence, and warning them to keep silent in turn) about her experience, and hoping that the Girls would start to consider him a friend. Possibly some of them would actively seek to be sent to his chamber for Pleasure, and he could acquire a more direct hold over them in the same way he had done with Lora. That would be desirable. But it might also be risky. If the Ice Master noticed that his Girls were positively clamoring for Pleasure with Blade, his suspicions might well go into high gear. If he had not already bugged the chamber, he might do so now, or even worse, interrogate some of the Girls. If the interrogation revealed anything out of line, two or three of the Girls would no doubt be subjected to Unlimited Pleasure "to encourage the others" and whatever hold he might have or hope to develop over the rest would be smashed on the spot.

The same problem of risk to the Girls applied even more strongly to anything more than simple Pleasure sessions. He did not even know if they were familiar enough with the layout of the stronghold to tell him very much about it; he would have laid two years' salary that their movements were too restricted: And no doubt any Girl found outside a restricted area was appropriately punished, so he could not with a clear conscience encourage them to do any spying.

But he was forgetting some rather basic points in his concern for the Girls! If he could lead the conversation around to their Pleasure sessions with the Whole Ones—particularly the guards—he might find out where the guards were quartered, get some idea of how many there were, what routes they used to come and go, and so forth. Similarly, if any of them had ever been taken to the Ice Master's quarters for giving him Pleasure (and Blade doubted that the Ice Master was so self-controlled as to keep the Girls entirely for the slaves and guards), they might well remember where those quarters were, how well guarded, and so on. He might build up quite a body of useful information without asking the Girls to take any risks, if he went about it right.

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## Chapter 16

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The next morning, and for three more mornings after that, he was awakened by the arrival of a Girl sent to bring him Pleasure. And with each one he followed the same pattern he had used with Lora, although with none of them did he have as much trouble establishing trust and confidence. Lora had been spreading the word. He hoped once more that she had not been spreading it too widely.

Before retiring that first night, he had made as thorough a search of the chamber as possible for any sort of bugging, and found nothing visible, let alone obvious. He was not yet particularly confident that the room was safe, of course, because any number of disguises were possible. He could not be sure of penetrating all of them, and could only penetrate a reasonable number by means of a search so thorough and obvious that it would tell the Ice Master exactly what he was looking for. He did not want to give the Ice Master the impression of too much distrust—just enough so that he would continue to keep Leyndt alive as a hoped-for hold over Blade.

And she was a hold over Blade. He was certainly unwilling to make any move that might endanger her—unless, he added as a mental reservation, the move stood a good chance of taking out the Ice Master and the Menel together. Even then, he knew that he might very easily balk at the thought of her being pounded to death beneath the lunging bodies of the guards or dissolved inch by inch by the solvents used in preparing the protein compounds for the Menel. He did not want her harmed, and had no objection to letting the Ice Master know it.

In fact, his concern for Leyndt brought him an unexpected dividend. In the course of entirely sincere inquiries about where she was and how she was, he was able to find out a tremendous amount about the workings of the Ice Master's stronghold. None of them had seen Leyndt, it turned out, but in the process of telling Blade so they told him so much else that was useful that he was almost consoled for the lack of information about the doctor.

The black building in the center of the ice grid was the top of the stronghold, which was about eight hundred feet from top to bottom and had a cross section, as he guessed, about five hundred by four hundred. His own chamber was on the same level as the Ice Master's, a little less than two-thirds of the way up. The Ice Master's chambers covered about half of the whole level, and were divided into at least seven large rooms, all luxuriously furnished. In front there was another large room where the guards who protected the Ice Master slept.

There were many other guards, of course—to guard the slaves, to guard the Girls (the ones who guarded the Girls were Cut-Off Ones—eunuchs), to guard the rooms where the Ice Master worked (his laboratories, no doubt). And to guard the Heart. The Heart? What was that?

The Girls all shuddered at the mention of it, but Blade was able to bring all of them around eventually, and build up a vague but tantalizing picture. Girls called it the Heart because it made a steady throbbing noise like a huge heart (and Blade nodded, with a flash of memory back to his first day in the chamber). They didn't know what it looked like, but they knew that it must be just above the level of the slave quarters, because the sound was loudest there. No Girl had dared to approach it since two who tried were caught by the guards—Blade had the impression that these guards were a particularly nasty lot even by the standards of the Ice Master—and forced to give Unlimited Pleasure until they died. It was a very terrible thing, and must be dangerous, because there were always many, many guards around it.

At this point Blade realized he had pulled something vitally important out of his questioning of the Girls. He would have laid long odds on the Heart being the main power source for the Ice Master's stronghold, or something equally important. To sabotage that... But he had no equipment. And besides, to destroy the Ice Master's stronghold alone would be valueless if he could do nothing against the Menel in their underground settlements. No, he would have to defer action at least until he had found out where the Menel were, where Leyndt was, and also how to return to the surface and escape to the south—unless the situation turned out to absolutely demand a suicide mission.

So he waited, asked the Girls questions, and on the fifth day was rescued by the Ice Master himself. At

least that was the way Blade put it to himself. No doubt the Ice Master felt that he was merely giving his new ally necessary information and teaching him necessary skills to make him as useful as possible in the coming campaign against the Menel. Over the next ten days this teaching kept Blade very busy indeed.

The Ice Master took him from top to bottom of the stronghold, telling Blade in exhaustive detail about some things, hinting at others, and giving Blade important clues by leaving some things entirely unexplained or even unshown. Among the last was the Heart. They passed it on the way down to the slave quarters, and it was as the Girls said—a deep continuous throbbing coming from somewhere close beyond a chamber filled with the worst thugs Blade had seen in the whole stronghold. Stairs led from it down to a chamber at the level of the slave quarters.

The slave quarters were as sterile as an operating room, as silent as a morgue, and all the more terrifying for lacking the smells and sounds that would at least have suggested that the hundreds of vague-eyed figures that lay on pallets, stood in lines, or wandered about under the eyes of the guards were alive and human. And in one corner of the chamber into which the stairs from the Heart led, a corner which Blade explored for a few minutes while the Ice Master was off supervising some business of the slaves, was another item the Ice Master very carefully passed by.

It was a circular shaft, about thirty feet in diameter, plunging straight down and brightly lit all the way, until it vanished into what seemed like the bowels of the planet. Blade knew, however, that this must be the passage down to the underground dwellings of the Menel. He shoved a small piece of debris over the edge of the shaft and watched it float down as though it were a piece of dandelion fluff. Gravity in the shaft was controlled; if any enemy entered the shaft, no doubt those at the bottom simply cut off the gravity control and let the enemy plunge headlong down to the bottom, to smash himself to a pulp. Blade noticed as he turned back to rejoin the Ice Master a faint moldy odor clinging to the edge of the shaft, and scratch marks on some of the stones around the mouth many feet long.

That was as much as he was able to see and file away in his mind before the Ice Master called him back and they returned to the upper levels of the stronghold. The Ice Master showed him those with the same selective thoroughness as before, going on until by the time the tour was over Blade was almost too tired to appreciate and question the Girl who came to his chamber that night.

But there was even more to come, and Blade absorbed it all, keeping his eagerness veiled behind a mask of disinterest, watching the Ice Master working industriously to bring the day of his own destruction rapidly closer. The Ice Master explained the conditioning he used on the guards and slaves, the memory-erasure of the Girls, the training of the Dragon Masters (who were not allowed in the stronghold). He showed Blade the enormous culture vats where the Ice Dragons were cloned, the workshops where the Dragon Masters' suits and control wands and catcher-webs were made. He did not show Blade where any of the key systems of the stronghold—power, light, water, air circulation—were controlled, but Blade had not expected that, and in the course of the tours saw enough to permit him to draw his own conclusions. And also to be staggered by the technological treasure-trove here. If he had not been limited in what he could bring back to Home Dimension to what he could carry in his hands (or happened to be carrying in his hands) when the computer snatched him back, he could have brought back enough advanced knowledge to push England a century forward at a single leap.

But that was an opportunity unlikely to arise. He could at least bring back the knowledge that gravity control and the like were possible, which might encourage Home Dimension research enough to cut decades off the time of developing it. And the monumental knowledge that somewhere in some universe there existed another intelligent race! Meanwhile, he had plenty of problems to face here as he sought ways and means of dealing with the Ice Master and the Menel.



The Ice Master himself provided Blade with what might be a satisfactory solution to a problem that had been occupying a good part of Blade's attention ever since he began thinking out ways of destroying the stronghold. What was he to do about the slaves and Girls? They were innocent bystanders, at least five hundred strong, and to destroy or cripple the stronghold meant dooming them to a death perhaps swift, perhaps slow, but in any case certain. Blade knew he would not hold back even if the deaths of these people were the price for freeing this world of the Ice Master and meeting the threat of the Menel, but he did not like the prospect. But from the day the Ice Master took him up to the surface and showed him the huge fliers used to carry the Ice Dragons to their bases in the south and the prisoners north, Blade knew that these might be a solution to his problem. The machines were enormous, larger than any Home Dimension transport plane he had ever seen, easily capable of carrying five hundred or more people. He never came closer to letting his elation show as when the Ice Master showed him how to operate the huge machines. He found out that day that they could rise ten miles into the air and race along with a full load at twice or three times the speed of a Graduk Flier. One of them could easily carry away all the slaves and Girls—or bring in the force Blade knew he would need to take the stronghold.

That was the key to the problem now. As long as the Pi-field was on, the guards dominated the situation. There were nearly three hundred of them at Blade's most conservative estimate, too many for him to cope with single-handed. Even if he penetrated to the Heart, he had nothing available with which to damage it. So he had to bring in a fighting force, preferably with some of those small bombs he had used on the fliers. With surprise on their side, reasonable luck, very fast action, and his guidance as to the vital spots of the stronghold, he guessed that a hundred or so good fighting men could clean the place out. That would chop off the Ice Master's threat at the roots; without the support from the stronghold the Dragon lair would wither on the vine.

Obviously this would not take care of the Menel entirely, but certainly it would create enough of an uproar that they would notice something was going on. Some of them would undoubtedly come up that shaft from their nearest settlement to find out what. From the Ice Master's vague descriptions they apparently were not so physically formidable that it was impossible to kill or capture them—preferably capture. And then? It was going to be difficult to communicate with them without the Ice Master, but on the other hand it was going to be next to impossible to destroy all their settlements, even if that were the right thing to do. Certainly the immediate threat to the Treduki would be gone when the Ice Master was defeated; possibly after that some way could be found for human and Menel to share this world.

Meanwhile, how to bring in the fighting force to deal with the Ice Master? Granted, the man was so eager for an ally against the Menel that he was giving Blade an amount of help and freedom that would have been preposterous under other circumstances. But he was still holding Leyndt somewhere in the stronghold, and would certainly kill or torture her if Blade simply went up to the surface and dashed off in one of the fliers. Scratch that idea. And Blade could hardly imagine the Ice Master letting him take one of the fliers and head south. That would be the act of a fool, and the Ice Master, mad, egotistical, and cruel though he was, showed no signs of being that kind of fool.

Very well. The Ice Master would not let Blade go unless the situation was desperate. So—how to create a desperate situation for the Ice Master? His strength and his prospects depended on the good will of the Menel. The thing he would most fear would be losing the support of the Menel, and having them turn against him would be several times worse.

So—how to turn the Menel against the Ice Master? Many of the guards definitely received additional conditioning at the hands of the Menel themselves. The Menel were not such fools as to put so much of their knowledge and power into the hands of a human without taking some care to watch, control, and limit him. (One way in which they had limited him was prohibiting him from cloning human guards in the same way he cloned the Ice Dragons. Such guards would have been entirely under the Ice Master's

control and entirely immune from that of the Menel. Obviously this was intolerable—and just as obviously the prohibition was one of the Ice Master's main grievances against the Menel.)

But all the guards would not be so conditioned. Suppose some of them turned against the Menel—or seemed to be turning against the Menel, which would be just as effective? The Menel would unleash their conditioned guards against the other ones, and the Ice Master's forces would be divided. The stronghold would be a shambles of fighting men, clambering up and down its scores of levels and slaughtering one another. The Ice Master would be tearing his beard out by the bloody roots!

And then, if Blade came to him in the middle of the shambles and promised that if allowed to fly to the south he would bring back a hundred or more fighting men, loyal to him, that could be thrown into the battle against the Menel's guards? At that point Blade would become not merely a useful ally but an indispensable one for survival, and he could head south with reasonable certainty that Leyndt would be safe. Unless she was killed in the fighting, of course, but he could reasonably expect the Ice Master to see to her safety.

And after he returned? Simply getting a hundred fighters would not solve the problem. For one thing, most of them would have to be Treduki, for the Graduki were largely untrained in handling the primitive weapons that would be needed. But the Treduki themselves were also primitive, and faced with the wonders of the stronghold, would they be too terrified to fight? Not many of them could be expected to be as level-headed as Nilando. Stramod might be able to help there.

And he would certainly be able to help with training the men. To take the stronghold from its own people, the attackers would have to commit to memory every scrap of information Blade had learned about it. How long would that take? Would it take so long that the Ice Master would become suspicious? However long it would take, it would have to be done. Otherwise Blade knew he would be leading a hundred or more men who trusted him like sheep to the slaughterhouse.

But those were problems to be considered later. Now he had to find a way to sow distrust between the Menel and their human ally. The Menel, it appeared, came up from their settlement from time to time. Did they have a regular route and schedule? The Girls would hardly know that, since they did not even know of the existence of the Menel, but here as elsewhere they might know things from which he could deduce much. After that—how to give the appearance of an attack on the Menel by the regular guards?

That brought him to a dead stop for an unpleasant moment. What did the Menel look like? He had only the vaguest clues about this, apart from the Ice Master's hints that they were small enough to fit inside an ordinary human dwelling without too much trouble. So—an upper limit on their size. But otherwise? Blade remembered the scratches—clawmarks?—and the moldy odor at the head of the shaft, and grimaced. Then he put the matter aside and moved on to the next question.

He was still moving from question to question when fatigue finally drove him to the sleeping platform. But he had answered a good many of the questions, and he could see the rest falling into place before much longer. He was on the move again—now with his mind, in a few more days with his body.

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## Chapter 17

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Blade waited until his mental clock told him enough time had passed for the Girl he had just been with to have returned safely to her quarters. He didn't want her or any of the eight other Girls he had taken

Pleasure with, talked to, and given names to, involved in what was about to happen. The ordinary guards were kill-happy enough; what the Menel-conditioned guards might be like, their minds worked over by non-humans with probably a very imperfect knowledge of human psychology, he didn't know. He didn't want to find out at the expense of any of the Girls, either.

When he was reasonably certain the Girl was safe, he rose from the platform, went over to the door, and began hammering on it, calling loudly and incoherently at the same time. He kept on until he heard the booted feet of guards in the corridor outside, and a harsh voice demanding, "What's the trouble?"

"I-I'm sick. I—" and he gave what he hoped would be a convincing imitation of a man being violently sick to his stomach, then fell to the floor and began thrashing about and groaning audibly. The guards were normally under strict orders not to enter his chamber, but he was wagering that in such an emergency situation their fear of the Ice Master's wrath at losing Blade would make them willing to risk a small violation of the rules.

He was right. He heard the slap of a hand against the door switch and the faint whine of the door motor starting up. At the swish of the door opening he was already flattened against the wall a few feet to the right of the arch, hands ready to chop, knees slightly bent for a spring. As the door opened wide enough for the two guards to dash through, swords drawn, he moved.

He took one guard out with a kick from the rear that sent him flying halfway across the chamber before he hit the floor and slid the rest of the way into the empty tub with a thump and a clatter of weapons. The other guard had time to turn around and raise his sword, but he made the mistake of raising it for a slash and not relying on a quicker thrust. Blade's flattened hand chopped him across the throat before the sword started down; he choked, started to crumble, then Blade kicked him in the stomach and he shot backward and joined his late comrade in the tub.

Guard number two had dropped his sword as he fell; Blade picked it up and wedged it in the door track to keep any casual passerby from closing the door and locking him in the room. Then he went over to the tub and began stripping the two guards of their clothing and weapons. Neither was quite as large as he was, but he found the larger one's trunks and boots fit him without too much discomfort or restriction on his movement. Fortunately the guards wore no distinctive hair styles, tattoos, or other recognition marks; this made his job of disguising himself as one (at least well enough to fool the Menel) comparatively easy.

Now came the second risky part—disposing of the bodies. They had to disappear without a trace, both to demoralize their comrades more effectively and to prevent their being found where they might cast suspicion on Blade. The nearest disposal chute large enough to take the bodies was some fifty feet down the corridor. He slung the first body over his shoulder, stuck his head out to see if the corridor was clear, then hurried down to the chute opening and pitched the body in.

If anybody came by now, he would have to kill them and send their bodies after the guards. Down at the bottom of the chute lay the waste disposal chambers where the organic and non-organic wastes were separated, to be recycled respectively for algae cultures and building material. He hoped nobody would appear. Apart from the possibility of somebody getting away to give the alarm, too many killings too soon might weaken the regular guards enough to give the Menel-conditioned ones a fatally large edge.

Nobody came. He disposed of the second body, went back to his chamber, picked up the sword, and hung it on his belt. He checked the chamber to make sure it looked normal, then went out and closed the door behind him. Now it was time to prowl! He headed down the corridor toward the elevator that would take him down to the slave level. His first goal had to be the head of the shaft to the Menel colony and then—well, he would see.

He met two guards escorting four slaves as he approached the elevator entrance; a late working party being led back to their quarters, no doubt. He hoped his disguise would hold. The slaves would hardly help the guards, but they might very well panic, scatter, and unintentionally give the alarm that something unusual was afoot.

The guards came stamping along, passed abreast of him, turned to look at him, then turned away again and back to their charges. Blade's breath whistled out in relief so loudly that for a moment he thought the guards must have heard it. Not for the first time, he thanked the Ice Master for conditioning curiosity out of his guards along with so many other "individual" qualities.

He fell in behind the little group and kept pace with them, matching his stride and manner to the guards', all the way to the elevator. They all got in and the door closed behind them, then the lift sank silently into the depths. In the two minutes it took the elevator to drop down to the slave level, neither the guards nor the slaves took any further notice of Blade. As long as he possessed enough of the outward signs of being a guard not to trigger any of their conditioned warnings, he was apparently going to be safe—at least until he went into action. And then the rapidly spreading chaos should hopefully leave the slow, conditioned wits of the guards laboring along far in the rear.

The elevator stopped and the door whispered open. The four slaves trotted dutifully out, the guards now flanking them, Blade following behind. They turned left, toward the slave quarters; Blade turned right, toward the head of the shaft.

He was not entirely certain what he could do to get the Menel to notice him and come up into the stronghold. Dropping in on them—literally—by going down the shaft would be nothing but a swift way of committing suicide, he suspected. They almost certainly would have warning systems or sentries at the bottom, and if anything unexpected came down it, they would probably cut the gravity control off and let it drop. No doubt there were also barriers against bombs, gas, etc.—so if the problem had involved physically attacking them it would have been almost insoluble, apart from the fact that he wanted to inflict as little damage as possible in the process of calling himself to their attention.

However, annoying them, like a mosquito whining around a man's head until he tries to swat it, might prove simpler. From his pouch Blade pulled out one of the Ice Master's ultrasonic grenades, microminiaturized generators used in herding the Ice Dragons. Then he pulled out a timing device, also lifted from the laboratory storage shelves. Hooked to the grenade, it would delay the firing for as much as twenty minutes, long enough for the grenade to sink well down the shaft before giving off a two hundred-decibel blast of ultrasonic sound. That, Blade was fairly certain, would register on any detectors or warning systems likely to be down there, possibly wreck them, and certainly alert or alarm any Menel sentries. Since the sound grenade was a device the Menel themselves had given the Ice Master, they would be more than likely to demand an accounting for such an unorthodox, not to say hostile, use of it.

He wired the timer to the firing mechanism of the grenade and strode over to the head of the shaft, hefting the grenade in his hand. It was no larger than a small pear, but weighed more than four pounds. He reached the edge of the shaft—and halted in mid-stride.

Unmistakably there was a current of air rising up the shaft—he could see dust particles soaring upward, glinting in the light—and unmistakably that rising current also bore with ever-increasing strength the damp, moldy odor Blade had noticed previously clinging to the rim of the pit. For a moment he froze in place, nearly paralyzed with surprise—and not quite able to suppress a little fear—then sprang backward, looking for a place of concealment.

As he did so the lights began to blink on and off in a well-defined pattern—three long blinks, three short blinks, two long blinks, two short blinks, then start the cycle over again. A high-pitched whine that wavered uncertainly for a moment, then settled down to a regular undulation, started hammering at his ears.

Two guards came out of the corridor that led to the slave quarters. Blade started, spun ready to strike, then stared as he saw them slow, stop, and finally stand motionless as statues, their arms at their sides and their eyes staring vacantly into space. Of course! The Ice Master wanted to keep the existence of the Menel a secret from his servants and slaves, so part of the conditioning was designed to put them into a trance whenever the lights and sirens that signaled the approach of the Menel went into action. And Blade was certain that the updraft and odor from the shaft could mean nothing else but the approach of the Menel. He found himself sweating as he contemplated being the first human being to face a non-human intelligence. It was nearly tragic that this contact was bound to be somewhat hostile—but what choice did he have for the moment, other than abandoning the human population of this planet?

He started again as running feet sounded behind him, and he spun around to see no less than six guards storming down the flight of stairs that led to the level of the Heart. These guards did not have the entranced, sleepwalkers' air of the other two; on the contrary, they seemed twice as alert and lively as usual. They moved purposefully toward the head of the shaft and formed a ring around it, their spears forming a protective circle of steel points. These were the Menel-conditioned guards, no doubt, their duty being to guard the Menel during their visits to the stronghold—with or without the Ice Master's knowledge and consent. And if these were guards from the Heart squads, did this mean that preserving the Heart was important to the Menel as well as to the Ice Master? Would the damage or destruction of the Heart damage the Menel as well as destroying the Ice Master? His mind was racing so busily over this possibility that for a moment he forgot what was coming up the shaft. He had barely time to duck behind a projecting cabinet before the two Menel reached the top of the shaft and wobbled their way out onto the floor.

The initial impression on Blade was that of two giant stalks of asparagus with four lobster claws apiece. It was a moment before he could begin sorting out details into a more detailed picture. As far as he could see, the two Menel were identical in size, coloring, and form, with no visible sense or sex organs and no clothing except a broad mesh belt around their—well, call them "necks"—with a silver disc set in the front of it. Both were just over nine feet tall and a foot and a half in diameter, the "stalks" tapering toward the "tip" end to a point only a couple of inches thick. They maneuvered themselves across the floor by a snail-like pulsing of a broad suction disk at their base, to the accompaniment of a stomach-turning sucking noise, and balanced themselves with two of the four arms. The other two were kept tightly folded against their bodies.

All four arms were double-jointed, nearly eight feet long at full extension, with spiky nobs at the joints. They ended in foot-long lobster-like claws with sharp edges and even sharper points. Just above the claws on each arm was a pair of two-foot tentacles, now tightly curled, but presumably the Menels' equivalent of fingers. If the claws were as formidable as they looked, Blade could understand why the Menel carried no weapons when visiting humans who carried nothing more than swords or spears. They did not appear particularly fast-moving, but with those long arms, did they need to be?

The Menel were making their stately if noisy way toward the stairs, and Blade realized that they were heading up to the Heart level, where they would have even more of their conditioned guards to protect them. He would have to make his move now. He waited until the Menel were almost at the foot of the stairs, with three guards already ahead of them on the first flight, then he darted across the open space to where the two regular guards still stood motionless. He ducked behind one of them, snatched his spear from his hand, and without stepping into view threw it full force at the center one of the three guards

escorting the Menel from the rear.

His throw was accurate; the spear drove straight through the surprised guard's chest and came out through his back so far that its point almost nicked one of the Menel. The guard clutched at the shaft, eyes widening, then toppled as his two companions brought their spears up to the ready and looked wildly about for the attacker. In the few seconds it took them to focus on the two motionless guards, Blade dropped to the floor and rolled away into a corner, watching for the next move. He had just risen to a watchful crouch when the Menels' guards saw that one of the two no longer carried his spear, drew the hoped-for conclusion, and threw theirs. The spears thudded into the guard, toppling him off his feet and stabbing deeply not only into his body but into his conditioning. He let out a nightmare scream that echoed through the dim corridors, and that scream somehow galvanized his companion into life.

Blade saw the man stir, raise his spear, then look about him and see the Menel. And then he also screamed, drawing his sword and hurling himself forward at the two remaining Menel guards so fast they barely had a chance to draw their swords before he was on them, slashing with his sword, stabbing with his spear, and shrieking like a madman. The Menel lurched around, unfolding all four arms to full extension. One of the guards from up on the stairs tried to get past them and join in the fight, tripped over one of the outstretched arms, and crashed down on to the floor at the feet of the attacking guard, who chopped down with his sword and took the man's head off with a single stroke. A split-second later one of the two Menel guards got home to the attacker's thigh; he staggered and began to go down. And then the rear Menel reached down with two arms, their claws opened to the widest, and closed both pincers on the man's chest. The air went out of him in a horrible bubbling scream, and Blade heard bones crunching as the pincers met.

So far Blade had done more in less time and with less risk to the Menel themselves than he had dreamed possible. But he knew he couldn't stop yet; the situation would have to be pushed to a pitched battle and the Menel themselves more seriously endangered than they had been so far. Crouching low, he moved out onto the floor to the body of the first guard killed, picked up the man's truncheon, then sprang forward, covering the space to the foot of the stairs in a single tiger-like bound.

The Menel saw him first; whatever they used in place of eyes could apparently see better in this dim light than the guards could. Two arms snaked toward him past the two rear guards; he raised the truncheon and smashed it down hard on the left pincer, then ducked back as the two guards whirled around and sent their swords whistling toward his head. There was not room enough for both of them to make a full swing; the two blades crashed into each other with an ear-splitting clang and one flew clear out of its owner's hand. Blade thrust the disarmed man through the chest before he could recover, parried a cut from the other, and slashed him in the leg. The Menel now lunged out with three arms together, emitting a staccato banging noise from the disk at its throat that sounded like somebody pounding on an iron pipe, and tried to move down a step for a better reach. It hit a blood-covered patch of stone, lost suction, lost its balance, and fell head toward Blade with a squashy thump. For a moment it was completely at Blade's mercy, half-stunned, two of its arms caught beneath its body, its comrade unable to reach across it to get at Blade and the other guards blocked by the other Menel.

Blade let that moment pass. As he saw the Menel approach, as he saw it totter and overbalance, he reached a fixed and final decision. Insofar as possible, he would never kill one of the Menel, and he would certainly not kill this one. He would not even injure it if he could avoid it.

And he could avoid it. Flourishing the sword back and forth in an air-tearing blur, he lashed out with it at one of the claws, felt the blade rasp across a bony substance as hard as steel and no more vulnerable. With his left hand he brought the truncheon up over his head, whipped it down straight at the creature's "neck"—just above the silver disk—with all the strength in his body—and then with muscle-wrenching

precision brought it to a dead stop in mid-air an inch from the Menel's skin.

That "I could have killed you but I won't" gesture nearly cost Blade his own life during the extra seconds it required. The other Menel lunged at Blade, nearly losing its own balance but almost closing one pincer on his left arm. He sprang back from the fallen Menel, slipping as he did so on the blood-smeared stones and landing full-length on his back. The other Menel could not reach him, but the remaining guards could; he saw spears raised and rolled desperately to one side as two of them smacked into the stone where he had been lying and went skittering off into a corner. Two of the guards charged down, swords swinging, but by now he was up on his knees and parried one slash with the truncheon, then jabbed the man in the stomach with the tip, while at the same time his sword whistled out and chopped the second man's left leg off at the knee. He screamed and went down, while Blade sprang up in time to meet the remaining guard in a clanging flurry of blows.

This man was much the best swordsman Blade had met all night, a maddening thing to encounter just when delay might be particularly fatal. He found himself taking risks he would never have thought of at other times, and once had the other's point whistle past his throat by a hairsbreadth, so close he could feel the whuff of disturbed air on his skin. The second Menel made no effort to intervene, concentrating instead on helping its comrade up. The two seemed to be conversing earnestly, the conversation sounding like a whole conclave of plumbers hard at work.

If the other man had not been functioning under a conditioning that slowed him just a fraction, he might have fatally delayed Blade. As it was, Blade got in a slash that beat the other's guard down and sank deep into his neck just as an uproar of shouting and pounding feet from above drowned out the pipe-banging sound of the Menel as a dozen more guards from the Heart detachment swarmed down the stairs.

Blade was sprinting down the corridor before his latest victim had hit the floor. A dozen guards, even a dozen slowed by their Menel conditioning, would be disastrously too many to fight. It was time to get away from the shaft head and try adding to the chaos by action somewhere else.

He did not stop running until he had gone well out of sight and almost out of sound of the guards. He was heading for the secondary elevator, to take it up to the floor of the Girls. There was a separate room there, where the regular guards took the Girls for Pleasure. If there were any guards there now, he could kill them and expect that it would be blamed on the Heart guards, the only ones not conditioned to go into a trance during the passage of the Menel. The Girls would not be in any danger, since they would also be in a trance and would not recognize him.

He reached the elevator shaft, punched the call button, waited for the indicator light to gleam on. It did so, the door opened—and two guards and a Girl tumbled out, falling rigidly to the floor and lying there motionless. Blade pulled the Girl gently aside before neatly slicing the throats of the two frozen men. Killing helpless victims was a stomach-turning business for him, but he found the guards sufficiently revolting for it to be just possible now.

The elevator shot upward and let him out on the floor of the Girls. He sprinted through the halls, heading for the Pleasure room, slapped its door-opener, and darted inside.

The room was as depressing as the rest of the living quarters of the Ice Master's underlings, with the stone-hard floor on which the Guards were conditioned to take their pleasure. There were two Girls on the floor, one of them Lora herself, and four Guards, three standing (one frozen in the act of unbuckling his trunks) and one lying flat on the floor, where the conditioning had dropped him just as he rolled off Lora. Blade stepped into the room, hauled the two Girls out into the corridor by their feet (no time to be

chivalrous or elegant now), then went back into the room, sword ready. As he did so, the lights began flashing in the same pattern that had frozen the guards down below and the same undulating whine filled the air. Blade pulled himself to a stop, spun around, and plunged out the door, just as the main elevator opened its door to disgorge four of the Heart guards, with swords drawn.

The Girls were already staggering to their feet and tottering away down the corridor. Blade yelled at the top of his lungs, "In there!" and the Heart guards stopped in their tracks, looked at him, then at one another and followed his pointing finger—straight into the Pleasure room. They charged the four newly un-frozen guards and hacked one of them to the floor before he could raise his weapons. Two others jumped back into a corner and drew sword and truncheon, while the one on the floor rolled aside from under the stamping feet of the newcomers, caught one of them by the belt, and slammed him down on the floor. The man was struggling to rise when Blade sprang back into the room and drove his sword point-first through both men at once. They jerked wildly, gurgled, and lay still.

Simultaneously one of the men in the corner and one of the attackers got blows home on each other, toppled to the floor, and reached out for each other with clawing hands. Blade stepped over them as they rolled in their blood on the floor, struggling to get a grip on each other's throat, thrashing and growling like animals. He reached the two surviving attackers just as one of them went down from a belly-slash by the remaining man in the corner, then thrust the remaining attacker through from behind. The corner survivor had just enough time to raise a bloodsmearred face to stare at Blade with the beginning of gratitude in his eyes when Blade's sword whistled down and sheared off his head.

Then Blade was on the move again, as fast as his now flagging muscles would push him along. He dashed to the secondary elevator, leaped in, pushed the button for his home level, and sagged to the floor to savor a moment's rest and relief. Now he had to get back to his chamber undetected, and wash the blood and sweat off himself before the Ice Master thought to check the chamber. If the Ice Master found it empty, he would find it hard not to draw the right conclusion. And if he drew that conclusion, Blade had no illusions that his value as an ally would make the Ice Master spare him. In fact, it would become absolutely vital for the Ice Master to get rid of Blade, to prove to the Menel his continued good faith and innocence.

The door opened and Blade slipped out into the corridor, flattening himself against the wall at every sound. He had more than a hundred feet to go, the longest hundred feet he had ever traveled in his life. He had spent less time and effort on more than one occasion crossing a frontier strip sown with mines and guarded by barbed wire, searchlights, and machine gun nests. Halfway along he found a small waste chute, and took the chance to strip off the bloodsmearred trunks and boots and send them on their way down to destruction. But he held on to the sword—held on to it so tightly that his knuckles were paste-white by the time he finally slipped unseen and unmolested into his room. The sword went down the chute there in an instant, and in another instant he was squatting in the tub, not minding the coolness of the water this time as it flowed over him, washing away the blood, the sweat, and at least some of the strain.

He had done the first of the necessary things. He had given the Menel cause to distrust the Ice Master; he had given the guards occasion to distrust each other. Now he would have to wait and see if that distrust he had sown would lead the Ice Master to give him the opportunity to move to the next step.

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## Chapter 18



The Ice Master came to Blade the next morning in such a state of nerves that before he said a word Blade knew that his plans were working. The other man could not sit, could not stand, could not do anything for more than a minute at a time except talk, and not always coherently. He presented the spectacle of a man watching twenty years' cherished dreams fall apart around him, as well as being in danger of his own life, a spectacle that in this case Blade was entirely happy to see.

The Ice Master's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and the lines of his face seemed to have been chiseled inches deeper into the flesh. His hair was unkempt; he kept plucking at his beard; Blade would not in fact have sworn that both beard and hair didn't show a good deal more white and gray than the last time he had seen the man. And all the confidence and arrogance was gone from his voice. In its place was an almost pleading note, so strong that Blade would have felt qualms about his plans if they had been laid against a person less unpleasant and dangerous than the Ice Master.

The broken sentences tumbled out of the Ice Master's mouth for better than an hour, and Blade picked them up one by one, made ideas out of them, assembled the ideas into a picture of the situation—and could barely keep from grinning broadly. The Menel-conditioned guards were firmly convinced that somewhere among the regular guards was a conspiracy dedicated to killing them—or even the Menel. The regular guards were equally convinced that the Menel-conditioned guards had all at once gone off their nut and decided to kill them. The two factions had been fighting in the corridors of the stronghold all night. Blade gathered that at least twenty more bodies had joined the fifteen or so he had seen before returning to his chamber. At this rate the guards might well kill off half of their own number before he could return with his own force!

The Girls and slaves cowered panic-stricken in their quarters; no Pleasure was given, no food was prepared, the bodies and the debris of battle lay about the stronghold with none to pick them up. And the Menel!

For the first time in twenty years the Menel were taking an active and direct interest in the inner workings of the stronghold that they had so casually created and presented to their human ally. It was this more than anything else that was paralyzing the Ice Master with fear. He was trying to persuade them to stay out of the stronghold, because if they came up, the lights and sirens would freeze the regular guards and leave them to the mercy of the Menel-conditioned ones, who would slaughter them without mercy and leave the Ice Master without a single guard who would not in a crisis dance to the Menel's tune. The reply of the Menel to this was that obviously the regular guards were no longer trustworthy; their conditioning had been faulty—perhaps deliberately so? (The Ice Master broke into a cold sweat in recalling the moment of the Menel's veiled accusation of treachery.) Therefore why should they care what happened to the Ice Master's own guards? If these unreliable guards were to seize the Main Core (which Blade recognized as the place called the Heart by the Girls), a dangerous situation would be created for all concerned. The Ice Master could hardly blame the Menel if under the circumstances they took concern for their own survival before his convenience, could he?

Mentally, Blade noted the confirmation of his previous guess that the Heart (or Main Core) was something important and even potentially dangerous to both Ice Master and Menel. Aloud, he went to great lengths to assure the Ice Master that he was being ill-treated by his ungrateful patrons. He spared no effort to build up the Ice Master's self-righteousness and thus increase his stubborn resistance to the Menel. The Ice Master nodded at each phrase Blade threw him, like an eager dog begging for a bone—a dog that Blade, after a little while, would cheerfully have kicked across the room. But finally he felt the Ice Master was primed and ready, and launched his own proposal.

"I know where I can get at least a hundred fighting men loyal to me personally, who could stand against the Menel's guards all by themselves."

The Ice Master's head jerked up as though somebody had tightened a noose around his neck, and stared at Blade with hope dawning in his greedy, panic-stricken eyes. "Where?" he croaked.

"In the south," said Blade. "They would certainly fight against the Menel if I told them to. Many of them are Treduki, trained in weaponscraft from their childhood and better fighters than any of these hot-house plants you call guards. Others are Graduki, and among them are most of the leaders of the resistance to the Conciliators." He saw a light begin to dawn on the Ice Master's strained face, nodded, and before the man could say anything, filled in for what he guessed must be the man's thoughts.

"Exactly. Once they've killed off the Menel-conditioned guards and given you the whip hand, you can have them killed, or conditioned, or turned into slaves and Girls, or anything else you want. And you'll be wiping out the last bit of resistance to the Conciliators. There won't be anybody left to teach the Treduki how to fight the Ice Dragons, and you can accumulate even more slaves without any problem." At that point the Ice Master's face became so wrought-up that Blade for a moment was afraid he had overplayed his hand. Then he realized that the Ice Master was simply stunned at the unexpected prospect of having still more of his enemies delivered into his hand, and was struggling to grasp the idea. It took him a while, like a child confronted with an unlimited stack of Christmas presents. Finally his astonishment faded enough for him to smile and nod slowly.

"Yes. They will make good slaves. And their women will make good Girls for Pleasure."

"Except Leyndt."

"You wish her for yourself?"

"Yes. Not as a Girl. As she is—or as close to it as you think safe."

"Well," said the Ice Master slowly, "if you do this thing for me that you promise, I will certainly give you Leyndt. You will be responsible for seeing that she does not endanger us, and I will not condition her at all. But I will keep her close by me until you return from the south with your fighters."

"Of course. Will you be sure to keep her safe from the guards, if they go on fighting?"

"I will do my best. I will keep her in my own quarters, with a room to herself. All the guards are conditioned to stay out of my private chambers, Menel and regular alike."

"Good." It was even better than he dared let the Ice Master know. For the first time he had a reasonably good notion of where to find Leyndt. And find her he would! One of the first things to do when he returned was to get Leyndt beyond the reach of Menel, Ice Master, or guards. He did not imagine that Stramod or Nilando would argue that point.

He debated for a moment whether he should ask for a map of the stronghold to help in training his raiding force. It might seem like asking too much, so much that the Ice Master's suspicions would be aroused. On the other hand, the Ice Master would certainly want the raiders to be ready to go into action the moment they arrived. Blade decided to risk it.

"It might save time if my men knew their way around your stronghold when they arrived. Otherwise the guards would have an advantage in any fighting. And we don't know that my men won't have to go straight into action when they arrive." Blade knew perfectly well they would.

The Ice Master frowned. "I hope I can make some sort of arrangement with the Menel to calm things somewhat before then. But you may be right. Very well. I will give you a map before you leave. How soon will you be ready to leave?"

"As soon as you want me to be."

The Ice Master rose and clasped both of Blade's hands. For a moment Blade was closer than he had ever been to feeling sorry for the Ice Master, but the moment passed quickly. Blade knew this man's motives, saw them for what they were, and could despise them and him. He could not do the same with the Menel, and so he had spared one and would spare the rest if there were any way to do this without betraying the human population of this world.

With that in his mind, he followed the Ice Master out into the corridor and down it to the Ice Master's own chambers. There the Ice Master gave him the clothing and survival gear he would need on the surface, the charts and navigational instructions for the flier, the diagram of the stronghold, and finally one of the electronic master keys that unlocked the controls of the great fliers. Those keys, like the Dragon wands, were prodigies of electronic science. Then they rode up on the secondary elevator to the hangar, and Blade went to his flier.

The Ice Master would not step inside with him—no doubt, Blade thought, afraid of my betraying him by taking off with him and turning him over to the Graduki. The man's trust did have its limits. Blade closed and sealed the door behind him and walked forward through the vast echoing cargo hold that stretched two hundred feet fore and aft and rose thirty feet above his head, to the control room in the nose.

As he went through the five simple steps that brought the huge flier from a slumbering mass of inert metal to a machine ready to hurl itself into the skies, he again felt frustrated to the point of almost physical pain at the impossibility of bringing one of these machines back to Home Dimension. With its electronics, its power plant, and above all the array of tubes and circuits that somehow neutralized and manipulated gravity, it would hurl England and the whole human race two centuries into the future at once. Or perhaps such a leap might be more than human wisdom could handle? It had taken nearly the whole of Blade's adult life to hammer out some sort of precarious control over the atomic and hydrogen bombs.

Perhaps the larger pieces of the Menel's wisdom were best left here?

A moment later he saw the huge hangar's darkness broken by light pouring down from above, as the Ice Master opened the great sliding doors to the surface. He twisted the power dial and simultaneously pulled back on the main control lever. There was a mighty lurch that sent vibrations and metallic clangings surging through the whole structure of the flier as it came up off the floor, wobbling in the air currents now flowing through the hangar. He eased it forward, waiting until the open door above showed a broad rectangle of blue sky and searing golden sun, with wisps of snow darting past to suggest a strong wind. He twisted the power dial further and pulled back yet farther on the main control. The flier reared up on its broad-finned tail, pushing Blade deep into the cushions of the control chair, then leaped into the sky.

Blade rather doubted that the Menel would be likely to try to stop his flight. But he preferred to be on the safe side, so kept the flier as low as possible, so low that radar would find it hard to pick him up and even seeing the flier, silver-gray against the blaze of the snow-covered ice cap, would be chancy. This meant flying slowly, because neither the automatic pilot nor his own skills were up to hedgehopping the flier at its normal cruising speed of twice the speed of sound. The fact that he had been able to learn to handle the big flier at all was more a tribute to its simplicity and foolproof design than to his own piloting abilities.

So he crept along at barely half the speed of a Home Dimension jet airliner for better than two hours. He skimmed less than a hundred feet above fangs of intricately sculptured ice, watching streamers of snow blow out like the plumes of a cavalry helmet from blue-green shimmering ice domes, feeling the updrafts as the wind struck vertical cliffs of chiseled whiteness and hurled itself upward, to strike the flier and toss it about. The sky was a flawless blue that might have been enameled and then polished to a glowing sheen tinged with gold and silver, and neither storm nor whiteout threatened him.

At the end of the two hours, neither his own eyes nor the far-reaching radars of the flier showed any signs of pursuit. He checked the charts again for the precise course south to Tengran, then set the auto-pilot and lifted the flier up to cruising speed and altitude. At more than twice the speed of sound he raced south, the flier locked on course, the ice now ten miles below and reduced to a featureless plain of blazing white, only the faintest blue lines etched across it to mark where crevices plunged down into cold blue darkness.

Less than two hours at cruising speed took the flier clear of the glacier land and out over the narrow belt of tundra, green now at the height of summer. The river whose banks he had reached the first night in this dimension began there, a silver thread creeping south across the tundra, losing itself for a while in the tumbled gray masses of the mountains down which he had climbed, and then appearing again in flashes of light under the trees of the forest that spread to the horizon on either side. Blade dropped the flier down to treetop height again to avoid giving premature alarm to the Tengrans.

He flashed over the ruins of Irdna low enough to see figures squatting around a campfire in the now weed-green town square. They jumped up, pointed, and scattered, running frantically for cover. He wished the flier had an outside speaker system, so that he could explain himself before climbing out and exposing himself to the arrows and musket balls of people who might be too frightened to ask questions before they fired. Then he stopped himself. Time spent wishing for what you didn't have and weren't going to get was usually a gift to an enemy who acted at once with what he had.

Three days' travel along the river by boat was less than half an hour at the speed of the flier, even at low altitude. Blade saw the mountains that marched across the southern end of the lake jutting up on the horizon, their snowcaps sadly shrunken under the summer sun. Then the gap in the trees far ahead showed where the river flowed into the lake, and a minute later Blade raced out over the lake and saw Tengran on its island dead ahead. As he sailed over the town he saw the smoke of the alarm fires starting to puff up. It struck him that it was going to be a delicate process landing the huge flier on the island without flattening half a dozen buildings and possibly the people in them. That would damn well get him shot the minute he stepped out the door!

He came around in a wide circle, losing speed as he did so, searching the island for a space long enough and wide enough to accommodate the huge flier. The town itself was largely inside or near the walls, but for reasons good or bad odd buildings sprouted like mushrooms almost everywhere he looked, and where there weren't buildings there were trees and ditches.

He had to circle the island three times before he found what he hoped would be a large enough space. He lined the flier up, sighting on a low unpainted wooden building visible through the lower nose port, dropped slowly until the indicator spurs dug in and their lights flashed green on the master control board, then cut all power. The flier dropped with a solid jar and then a series of lighter ones as the whole huge structure wobbled and wiggled itself to a secure rest, with the hull belling and clanging as the stresses and strains shot through the metal. Blade braced his feet under the panel and stayed in his seat until the dance was through, then unbuckled himself and dropped through the floor hatch to the emergency hatch in the very nose of the flier.

Flattening himself against the floor in case somebody outside was ready to fire into the nose the minute the hatch opened, he pressed the switch and the hatch clanged open. Blade cautiously raised his head and looked out.

There was nobody in sight except three or four pigs rooting around the plank building, so Blade swung himself over the edge of the hatch and dropped to the ground. He landed with a squashy thump and went waist-deep in something soft and damp, and as he did so a gangling youth ran around the edge of the building. Blade raised his hands, then looked down-and sight and smell together made him realize that he was standing up to his middle in a manure pile.

"Damn!" was the first thing he said, in a roar that made the boy jump and drop his crossbow, then:

"Hello. I am Blade, a friend of the Treduki. Your town elders have heard of me. Could you send word to them, please?" Then with a mighty lurch he pulled one leg free enough of the mess to take a stride forward, and staggered out into the open, heading for the lake. The boy picked up his crossbow and clutched it tightly. Blade didn't care. He was damned if he was going to try to explain himself to the elders of Tengran while he was half-covered with manure.

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## Chapter 19

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Four days later, Blade lifted the flier from a concealed site in the woods around the lake and headed north. Behind him in the control room sat Stramod and Nilando; behind them in the cargo compartment rode a hundred twenty fighting men and women. Most of them were Treduki, to be sure, but there were some of Stramod's action-squad people from the Union among them.

He could have taken five times as many fighters if he had been willing to take everybody who wanted to go and strike the blow to the heart of the Ice Master's power. But there had been no time to give even the most basic training to more than the hundred twenty who rode with him. Besides, there were other jobs for fighters now.

While he had been a captive and a guest simultaneously in the Ice Master's stronghold, nearly five hundred other Treduki and Graduki had been trained in all the techniques of fighting the Dragons and their Masters that he had discussed with Nilando and Stramod during the weeks at the Union base. Now that the location of the Dragon base was known, these were on their way to surprise it and destroy it and its inhabitants. Blade expected that many of these fighting men would not come back, but they had now lost their fear of the Dragons, and that alone would make it likely they would deal a heavy blow at the Dragon base. Such a blow to the Ice Dragons would much reduce the Ice Master's capacity for evil, regardless of what happened in his stronghold. The Ice Dragons and their Masters would be lying dead in scores, and Blade had his doubts whether the Menel would ever again trust the Ice Master enough to help him create and train more.

But that was assuming total failure of the assault on the stronghold, and at the very least the hundred twenty should wipe out most of the Ice Master's guards and smash everything smashable in the stronghold. Blade's raiders were picked for their condition; they had body armor (leather cuirasses and helmets) which the Ice Master's guards seemed to lack; they had half a dozen crossbows; they had twenty of the little bombs that Blade had used on the fliers. The crossbows could outrange anything the guards carried (and that was perhaps why they had been absent from the Ice Master's stronghold; too dangerous to the Menel, able to strike from beyond the range of those long arms with their terrible

pincers). And while Stramod suspected that the Pi-field would probably prevent the bombs from going off, a way might be found to turn off the Pi-field, and in any case the bombs didn't weigh very much.

If they took the stronghold, what about the Menel? The Menel, who were destroying this world as a home for humans—but to make it a home for their own race. They were intelligent beings; not to be wiped out as the guards would be. Blade wished he had an answer beyond that. As far as the fighting was concerned, he had given his orders: the green monsters (so he told the Treduki) or the Ice Master's new creations (he told the Graduki) were to be avoided if possible, fought only if necessary, and never killed.

But after the fighting, then what? He would have to try to improvise some sort of communication system, at least one that might convey to the Menel that their ally the Ice Master was dead and they would have to deal with a new group of humans now. Perhaps if the Menel realized that there were many intelligent human beings, instead of merely the Ice Master... ? But speculation beforehand was pointless.

He turned back to watch the land roll away below, reversing the sequence it had followed on the way south—forest, mountain, tundra, then the endless glacier. He was glad the hold had no windows; the Treduki at least might be badly shaken by learning how far into the forbidden glacier lands they were going.

He came into the stronghold flying high, wide, and open, gambling that the more he looked like a regular run coming in from the Dragon lair, the less the Menel would be likely to pay attention to him and perhaps shoot him down. The gamble paid off. He settled the flier down on the ice within a few convenient yards of the main door, ordered the rest of the raiders to stay put for the time being, and climbed down on to the ice through the same emergency hatch that had landed him in a manure heap the first time he used it. He smiled at the memory, then quickly erased the smile from his face as the door opened and four guards stepped out.

He tensed as they approached, for here was another moment of test. If these were Menel-conditioned guards, his asking for the Ice Master might be fatal, depending on how far the Ice Master and the Menel had fallen out by now. He was carrying a sword, however, and two crossbows were covering him from the hatch. If the guards had orders to kill him, they would pay for those orders on the spot and the rest of the raiders would tumble out posthaste and go in shooting. And he could rely on Stramod and Nilando to be as careful about saving Leyndt and the slaves and Girls and not killing the Menel if possible as he would be himself. But—

"Welcome, Blade," said the lead guard. "The Master has been waiting for you. You and your guards shall come to his quarters at once. It is the safest place." Blade noticed that the guards' spears and swords were well-battered, which they had not been the first time he passed this way, and that one of them had a white bandage stuck to where his right ear should have been. Blade spent a few seconds assessing the guard's tone for possible deception, then nodded and gave the signal for disembarkation.

Nilando must have had the whole raiding force champing at the bit, because almost at once there was a solid bang of an opening hatch and many smaller bangings as many pairs of booted feet carried their owners out of the flier and onto the ice. Except for ten men left behind to guard the flier, everybody was going. As they came around the nose of the flier Blade saw some of them slipping and sliding on the ice as they tried to match Nilando's pace, but military dignity was the last thing to worry about now! In fact, the raiders' looking a bit sloppy might put the Ice Master just a little more off guard.

Blade formed the men up and the chief of the guard detail led the way into the stronghold. As they filed in, Blade heard behind him murmurs and awed gasps, and some pained yelps as the lights of the entrance

chamber flared on, shattering the darkness. The guards led the way over to the patch of floor that Blade knew was the elevator platform, and stopped. So did Blade.

This was another danger point. The elevator would not take more than half his force at a time, and that only with crowding; his force would be divided and vulnerable if attacked. He would have liked to have stayed behind with the rear guard, but neither Stramod nor Nilando could handle the bargaining with the Ice Master that might be needed down below, and they could certainly handle the fighting that might flare suddenly up here. He nodded to the first company, and forty men peeled off and assembled in the square formed by the guards. The elevator field came on, and the platform dropped into the darkness.

They sank twice as fast as they had the first time Blade traveled this route, and as the elevator floated to a stop in the underground crossroads chamber the four guards at once sprang off the platform, landing in their fighting stances and glaring down all four corridors. The murmuring among the raiders took on a note of uneasiness, and Blade found himself swallowing, his mouth dry. The corridors stretched away under the light, untenanted now but he knew even better than the guards what might come striding—or lumbering squishily—along them.

The platform soared up again through the ceiling and vanished into the darkness to bring the second company down; Blade walked around his men, keeping a firm grip on his sword hilt and noticing that many of the men were doing the same. The crossbows were still in their canvas bags; he had given strict orders on that. The fewer surprises for the Ice Master the better—at least before they were ready to spring the big surprise!

Down came the platform; forty more men with Nilando at their head filed off it and joined the square around the platform. The sides of the square lengthened; Blade and Nilando stationed themselves inside it and kept watch down the corridors over the helmeted heads and through the spear points. A whisper of disturbed air, and the elevator shot up again. One more trip, and the raiders would be united again, and—

A sound of approaching footsteps brought Blade hard around, to stare down a corridor where a squat shadow now appeared on the ceiling, moving toward him at the same pace as the footsteps. A figure appeared, approached, took shape—Blade gave a small sigh of relief at recognizing the Ice Master—then swallowed again. The moment of action was nearing. As soon as the last load had arrived and taken its place in the square...

The Ice Master's face showed that the strain on him had not diminished during the last four days. Quite the reverse, in fact. The hand he extended to Blade shook as Blade grasped it, and he plucked at Blade's cuirass in order to lead him aside from the men.

"Blade," he gasped, "thank all the spirits of space you are here. You brought—"

"A hundred ten fighting men, fully equipped."

"Bless you. You will rule beside me when the day comes when I rule without the Menel. They want me to turn off the Pi-field, so they can enter here with modern weapons and kill all my guards. What's to stop them from killing us all if they do that? What, I ask you?"

Blade tried to calm the half-hysterical man with his level tone of voice. "Where are the Pi-field controls?"

"In the Main Control, beside the Main Core chamber. The Menel will send their guards there and then come up themselves and be able to kill us all, all, all!" There was almost a screech in the last "all."

The elevator sailed down to the platform and Stramod led the last three squads off and into the square. Blade looked at the mutant, saw the loathing in his blue face as he stared at the Ice Master, looked back to the Ice Master, saw the man's eyes bugging hysterically out of his red face, made his decision. But there was one more question.

"Where is Leyndt?"

"Leyndt—oh, Leyndt. She—she is in my chambers. She—" and the sentence died as did the Ice Master, as Blade's sword whipped out of its scabbard and came down in the same motion. The Ice Master's eyes continued staring as he backed away from Blade, blood pouring down his tunic, the look in them changing from hysteria to amazement, then terror. Before they could change any further, the Ice Master sat down on the floor, then crumpled forward until his body was bent nearly double. All expression went out of his eyes and a trickle of blood flowed out of the corner of his mouth and dropped down into his beard.

As the Ice Master crumpled, the four guards seemed to snap from their rigid sentry positions and whirled, swords drawn, to run at Blade. None of them got within reach of their swords—or of his. A crossbow went spung and one guard staggered and went down with blood spouting around a quarrel rammed through his throat; Stramod's long arms flashed out and a throwing knife suddenly blossomed in the chest of a second; the other two were met by Treduki breaking ranks. One Treduk went down but so did both guards, and suddenly the chamber was empty except for the raiders and silent except for their heavy breathing.

The silence held for long seconds, while everybody listened for any sign that the brief scuffle had been overheard. Then it broke up in a volley of sharp commands and the pound of feet as the raiders broke up into their previously arranged elements. Five fell in behind Blade and followed him down the corridor toward the Ice Master's chambers at a pace that steadily increased to a dead run as Blade's eagerness to get in and get Leyndt safely out increased. Most of the others scattered in half a dozen different directions, some to hold the heads of both elevator shafts to the lower levels, others to descend the stairs set in the walls of the stronghold.

Those stairs were the key to Blade's plan. Down them would go nearly two-thirds of the raiders, to liberate the slaves and Girls and to demolish if at all possible the Main Control and the Main Core and the entrance to the Menel settlements. Up them would come the slaves and Girls, with the raiders urging them on and forming a rear guard, or if possible blocking the stairs with the bombs, With the lifts held by Blade's men, victory would go to him who held the stairs and could move up or down at will. Blade intended to see to it that his raiders held the stairs as well.

Now they were coming up to the entrance to the Ice Master's chambers. Blade brought his section to a halt; there were bound to be guards in the chambers. The door was closed, but Blade noticed with a faint chill that both it and the floor in front of it showed the marks of Menel claws. So they had been all the way up here. When would they come again?

He shut off that line of thinking as the door slid open, to reveal a guard's face peering suspiciously out over a spear point. Blade smiled disarmingly, then his arms rose and came down like sledgehammers, right fist smashing into the guard's jaw and left hand snaking past the spear point to grab the hand holding the spear. He jerked the guard forward, wedging him in the door, then snatched a spear from one of the men behind him and began to pry the door the rest of the way open. In a moment there was a crackling sound and a cloud of foul blue smoke as something burned out, and the door slid easily open.



Instantly Blade and his section dove to the scarred floor, as three guards hefted spears and hurled them. One of the men behind Blade was not quite fast enough; a spear caught him through the chest on the way down. But the others were up again in the same instant as Blade and barely a step behind him as he charged through the door at the three guards, his sword drawn.

He chopped down one guard and sent him reeling back against a second, who leaped aside but in so doing got off balance long enough for one of Blade's companions to engage him. Steel clanged, sparks sprayed in all directions as the two went at it in a blind frenzy. The third guard backed away from the struggle, then turned with a grim look in his eyes and dashed for the door into the inner chambers. Blade did not need to see the man draw the long knife from his belt to know that killing Leyndt was in his mind. He lunged past the two duelists and after the fleeing guard, but the man had a head start and a good pair of legs. By the time Blade entered the next chamber, it was empty, and he could not tell which of the three closed doors in its walls might take him to Leyndt.

A second later he knew. Behind the door to the right sounded a scream—not a scream of terror, but a scream intended to sow terror, to make an attacker draw back in fear at its raw frenzy, and to alert help if help was near. Blade dashed to the door, slapped the opening plate, saw nothing happen, looked frantically around the chamber for something heavy as the scream sounded again. There was a squat black table in a corner; Blade hefted it, feeling his muscles strain and creak under its nearly two hundred pounds, then lifted it over his head and sent it crashing against the door. The door split apart and Blade leaped over the smashed door panels and the pieces of the table into the room.

Leyndt, naked except for a Girl's short trunks, was backed into a corner, holding a large thick cushion in front of her to block or absorb the thrusts and slashes of her attacker's knife. Some of them had still gone home, though—blood was oozing across cheek, shoulder above her right breast, and thigh just above the left knee. As Blade burst into the room the guard whirled around, kicking out suddenly with a foot that sailed in under the pillow and drove into Leyndt's stomach. The breath went out of her with an explosive gasp and she collapsed as the guard turned to face Blade.

Blade knew already this guard was a quicker thinker than usual; now he had a nasty surprise in the man's speed. The guard was at him and on him before he could bring up his sword for either a slash or a thrust, darted past the half-raised point, and struck with the knife at Blade's wide-open throat. Blade felt the knife whisper past the side of his neck as a lightning twisting of his whole body moved him clear just in time, then raised the sword with the point still aimed at the ceiling and brought the heavy metal guard down on his opponent's shoulder. The man gasped and his left arm—not his knife arm, unfortunately—sagged limply; Blade lowered the sword and thrust at his opponent's stomach, only to have the tip scrape along the man's metal-mesh belt and nick him only slightly. The guard sprang back out of Blade's immediate reach in a single bound, whirled, and took two steps toward Leyndt, knife raised. The knife was just coming down, and so was one raised foot, when Blade caught up with the man and rammed the sword through his back before he could turn. The point burst through his chest, and he toppled face down on top of Leyndt, his blood pouring over her.

Blade spent only enough time examining Leyndt to make sure that she was breathing and that none of her knife wounds were serious. When he had done this, he hoisted her limp body over his shoulder and rejoined his companions at the entrance. There were only three of them now; the two duelists had killed each other. Blade led the others back toward the elevator chamber.

As they approached it, the sound of a fight—shouts, screams, the clang of weapons—came battering down the corridor at them. Blade slowed his pace and motioned the others to a halt while he put Leyndt down and stalked forward, pressing as close as possible to the wall, until he could see clearly into the chamber.

The ten men left in the chamber were standing off a furious attack by at least three times that many guards. Two of the defenders were already down, others showed blood, but at least seven guards lay writhing or still on the floor, and as Blade watched he heard the crossbow among the squad twang, with the usual result of a guard clutching wildly at his chest and collapsing. But the crossbowmen could not fire quickly and the attackers were already pressing the defending raiders into a back-to-back formation for a last stand.

Blade looked behind him, nodded to the others. Three right arms hefted spears then snapped forward at the same instant, three spears flew down the corridor and into the massed ranks of the guards. The scream from one of them as he died paralyzed both sides for a moment, and in that moment Blade rushed out and charged the guards, sword in one hand, knife in the other, the three others with him running hard behind him and fanning out to come in on either side of him.

Blade's sword whistled out and down, slashing through a spear shaft and throwing the wielder enough off balance for Blade to thrust him through with the knife. Another man came at Blade with a sword in each hand; he gave back a step, sliced off the man's left arm with one slash, then sent the other sword flying in a savage metallic clash of weapons. The man reached out for Blade with his good arm, trying a desperate body-to-body grapple, but crumpled, thrust through by Blade's knife from in front and a raider's spear from behind.

Now two guards came at Blade together, so intent on him that they forgot the man protecting Blade's left, whose sword swished out and around in a flat arc like a scythe, passing through one man's neck as though it had been a cornstalk. Blade brought both sword and knife up to guard against the survivor's downswing, locked the other's plunging sword in the V formed by his own two weapons, twisted the sword out of the man's grasp, and as it flew through the air slashed the man in the body. A crossbow quarrel went into a nearby body with a meaty thunk, and the man facing Blade's right-hanker folded forward and went down on to a floor that was becoming slippery underfoot with the smeared pools of blood from the rapidly increasing number of bodies.

Then Blade stopped taking note of individual opponents, and was lost in a continuous frenzy of slash, thrust, parry, guard, give back, step forward, chop like a butcher, thrust like a matador, smell the sweat, smell the blood (none of it his own—yet)—until suddenly there were no more attackers staying to fight, and only a handful of them sprinting or staggering away down the corridor. Some left blood trails as they went. Blade saw the Bowman pick off a final victim. Then again there was silence in the chamber, except for the heaving and rasping breath of Blade, his two companions, and the six survivors of the defending squad.

There was nothing more for Blade to do here except leave his three companions to reinforce the elevator guard, then head for the stairway as fast as he could go. Leyndt would be safer here with nine men around her than anywhere else for the time being, and he would be unencumbered.

Two raiders lifted their swords in greeting as Blade ran up to the stairway door and plunged in and down. His pounding feet raised echoes that boomed up and down the metal-walled tube as he raced downward, weapons at the ready, ears listening for signs of activity behind or ahead. He passed doors with the locks thrown from the stair side; it would take the guards and a battering ram to get through those doors and into the stairway now. At two of those doors Blade saw blood trickling from under the door's edge, and at one of them two bodies—one a raider, one a guard—had been dragged to one side and piled on top of each other.

From the elevator chamber to the bottom of the stronghold was some five hundred vertical feet, but

down the endlessly spiraling staircase it seemed far longer. Blade's legs began to feel rubbery as he approached the bottom, and the sweat was sluicing off him like water off a melting glacier. He estimated he was less than fifty feet from the bottom when he heard the sound of footsteps below him on the stairs—many sets of feet, climbing fast but irregularly. He tightened his grip on both sword and knife, wished briefly for a spear, then flattened himself against the wall, waiting for the climbers to heave into view around the bend.

The footsteps rose to a tumult, with little whimpering cries and sobbing gasps mixed in, then Lora and another of the Girls trotted around the bend, each one carrying a guard's spear in her right hand and a guard's truncheon in her left. Behind them came a long straggling line of slaves and Girls, singly or in twos and threes, panting and struggling upward, urged on by the two Girls leading them. As Lora caught sight of Blade, her face split apart in a broad grin, but she was in too much of a hurry or perhaps too short of breath to say anything. The procession flowed on up past Blade; he counted seventy or more of them before the last Girl (another of the ones to whom he had given Pleasure, also armed) was out of sight. He continued downward, feeling better in the knowledge that at least a few of those whom the Ice Master had condemned to a living death in the stronghold might win freedom.

Now sounds made their way up the staircase—people running, voices shouting, and occasionally short bursts of combat. Footsteps climbing upward sounded again below him, and again he plastered himself against the wall as another procession of slaves and Girls flowed upward and out of sight, this one escorted by three or four wounded raiders and moving faster than the first. Blade resumed his course downward, bounded down the last three steps at one leap, and stalked out onto the slave floor.

He had barely time to notice the four raiders standing guard in a broad arc around the stairway door and the dozen or more bodies—one of them a Girl with a spear in her hand and another through her body—when he became aware of the odor that was drifting down the corridor that led to the central chamber of the floor. The central chamber—where the shaft that led down to the Menel began. And the odor was the musky, sour-bitter reek of the Menel themselves. He pushed his legs on, faster and faster, racing down the corridor to meet what he knew was coming. More than the odor now came down the corridor—uneasy mutterings, half-stifled cries of fear, inarticulate growls that he guessed might be from the Menel's guards. He stepped up his pace again, saw the chamber's lights glowing ahead at the end of the corridor, and reached his goal just as the first of the Menel rose out of the shaft and spread its four limbs over the heads of the guards surrounding the shaft.

A wild cry burst from the throats of all the people in the huge chamber—triumph from the Menel-conditioned guards, amazement and some fear from the raiders hovering around the fringes of the cordon of guards, stark raw terror from the slaves and Girls lined up ready to be led off to the stairs. This time the Menel had come up without even triggering the conditioning; this time they were desperate, and would be twice as dangerous as before.

No, even worse than that, said Blade to himself as he noticed that each Menel was carrying in one arm a long blue tube with a red lens at one end and several smaller black tubes on a mesh belt around their "waists." This was obviously a weapon, probably one that made even the Graduk beamers look like a child's rubber knife, and the only good thing about it was that it suggested where the Menel might be going. They would most likely be on their way up to the Main Control, to shut off the Pi-field and then turn their advanced weapons loose, to make a clean sweep of everything within the stronghold that opposed them.

The Menel guards paid no attention to him as he dashed across the chamber; neither did the Menel. Both no doubt were too confident that they had victory almost within their grasp to worry about fighting the raiders now, with the crude weapons necessary as long as the Pi-field was active. Blade ran up to

Stramod, who was busily sending off another mass of slaves and Girls. He reached out for the sack of bombs on Stramod's back.

"Quick! I need those."

Stramod nodded and handed the bag to Blade. As Blade had expected, the mutant's cool head had not deserted him even in the uproar of battle and the shock of encountering the Menel. Blade quickly ran through his plan; Stramod nodded and grinned wolfishly.

"I'll throw in some men as a diversion while you make your move. Will you need anybody with you?"

Blade shook his head. "I can move faster alone."

"Good." The mutant's huge hand came out and clasped Blade's, then Blade turned around and began edging in toward the guards, the bulging bomb sack over his shoulder. Behind him Stramod was talking to Nilando, and Nilando was massing twenty men, to draw their swords and level their spears at the Menel guards. Then Nilando shouted, the twenty charged forward, and a second later so did Blade.

There were better than a dozen Menel visible now, the lead ones already approaching the foot of the stairs, the cordon of guards altering shape now to make a protected passage from the shaft to the stairs. Blade ran in toward the end of the stairway, keeping outside the range of the Menel's terrible crane-like arms, saw the end of the cordon near the stairway thinning out as the guards ran toward the shaft to meet Nilando's charge, and lunged straight at the widening gap between the last two men.

These at least did not ignore the huge and terrifyingly blood-spattered figure bearing down on them as harmless; their swords flashed up into a guard position—and then one fell from limp fingers as Blade kicked one man in the stomach and the other flew through the air and clanged off the wall as Blade smashed it out of the other man's hand. He didn't bother finishing off either man; he had to get up those stairs. He thrust the knife in his belt and drew the truncheon, for use against the Menel.

The first of these was just within reach of the foot of the stairs as Blade leaped past the two fallen guards. Two arms darted out, the pincers snapping with a sound like chains clanking together. Blade struck savagely at the nearest pincer with his truncheon, hitting it so hard the blow jarred his arm half to numbness, then plunged up the stairs two at a time. As he reached the top, he heard the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs as the guards came after him, and the slopping sucking sound of climbing Menel.

The Main Control was an awesome array of consoles studded with switches and dials and readouts, a computerized technological paradise that would have made Lord Leighton turn pea-soup-green with envy. But Blade had no time to appreciate or analyze what he had come to destroy.

First, turn off the Pi-field. The panel with the master switches was squarely in the center of the complex, with a hard plastic chair in front of it for those rare occasions when the Ice Master had actually needed to sit down and look at the key to his stronghold. Blade strode over to it, stared for a moment at the winking lights. Then he reached out and systematically began flipping every switch and pressing every button. The lights began to die, and then from one second to the next there was a subtle change in the air, a change that seemed to trickle down on to Blade's skin like a thin liquid and make every hair on his body cling more closely. He knew that something important had gone—he would have to gamble that it was the Pi-field. And the second after that, half a dozen things happened at once.

A clutch of Menel guards burst into the room and dashed at him. He avoided their rush by a four-foot

vertical leap to the top of one of the consoles, and batted the first two swords to reach for him away with his truncheon. With his right hand he reached behind him and began pulling bombs out of the pouch and setting the fuses with thumb and forefinger, then pitching them in long arcs through the open door with the sign Main Core above it. Exactly what was in there Blade had no real idea, but he found it hard to believe that anything would survive completely unscathed ten of those little bombs exploding in a confined space.

Now the bag was empty and he threw it in a guard's face and leaped down after it, smashing the man to the ground with his truncheon. The guards drew back to form another cordon around the head of the stairs as the first of the Menel appeared, with others beyond it, but Blade saw the Menel stop, turn, and retreat a few feet, almost to the edge of the top step. It had no time to go farther before the first of the bombs went off.

In the confined space the explosion was terrific and the noise beyond belief. Blade was never sure afterward how he or anybody else in the chamber escaped being pulped into jam by the concussion. That the bombs went off separately rather than all together perhaps was their only salvation. Flying fragments screamed into the room like demented banshees and chopped down guards right and left. Blade dove behind a console at the first blast, huddled there while the debris from the remaining nine slammed into the metal with harsh clangs, then vaulted over the console and beaded for the stairs. From within the Main Core room he could hear satisfactory sizzling and hissing noises like a gigantic fireworks display.

Those guards not too badly wounded seemed too stunned to resist as Blade brushed past them: Then he reached the first of the Menel. The creature's companions had escaped the worst of the blast. In fact, as Blade looked down the stairs he could see them and their guards retreating downward as fast as their respective gaits could take them. But this Menel had been fully exposed to the blast. It lay on its side, motionless, one limb half-severed and oozing a sticky sap-like green fluid. Blade was about to leap over it as he would have leaped over a fallen tree, then remembered.

This was an intelligent being. It might be dead. But it might not be, and if it wasn't, it needed help. He turned back to the chamber and began ripping the shorts off the bodies of the guards and tearing the tough plastic-like material into strips. These he bound around the half-severed limb until the flow of fluid stopped, then used a broken spear as a splint tied on with several more strips to hold the limb rigid. Then with exquisite care he picked the creature up. It weighed too much for him to carry alone—nearly three hundred pounds—so he snapped an order at one of the guards. The man's conditioning to serve the Menel was holding; he dutifully came over and picked up the "foot" end of the creature. Holding it between them like a misshapen log of wood, they descended the stairs.

Reaching the bottom, Blade saw that Menel and Menel guards alike had vanished; the chamber was empty except for dead bodies and a rearguard of raiders under Stramod's command. His eyes widened as he saw Blade appear with his burden, but he said nothing. Blade and the guard carried the Menel over to the shaft and slid it over the edge. It plunged out of sight like a rock; Blade hoped it would be detected and slowed before it hit bottom. But he could only hope. He had done all he could do for it; now it was time to get himself and his own people out of here.

Stramod came up to him as he fell in with the rearguard and said in a half-grunt:

"Why?"

"You know."

"I suppose I do. I hope it affects the way they see us. Even if it does not—thank you. Our consciences

will—"

"Never mind your consciences for now," said Blade briskly. "I think we'd better move fast and save our necks. I started something in that—" and from above in the Main Core an enormous sizzling explosion, like fifty thousand pieces of bacon dropped at once into a giant frying pan, saved him the need for further explanation. Stramod nodded and the rearguard moved out at a brisk trot to the stairway, then turned in and began the long climb.

They were halfway to the lift chamber when the first real explosion came—a tremendous thudding jar that rumbled through the very fabric of the stronghold and seemed to make Blade's bones bounce and vibrate within his body. The forces let loose in the Main Core were on the march now; it was anyone's guess whether they would devour the stronghold before the flier and its load could get clear. Though his breath was coming searing hot, as though he were breathing in hot pepper, Blade quickened his pace and urged the others on faster still.

They came up to the elevator level almost at a dead run, sprinted across the chamber to where the guarding party there was herding the last handful of slaves on to the platform, and Blade ordered them off. So far whatever force powered the elevator was still working, but Blade would not want to risk its dying while they were halfway up the shaft, leaving them to fall hundreds of feet to certain death. Instead he led both parties back toward the stairs, setting a pace that made his breath burn hotter still, his leg muscles feel like rotted rubber bands stretched tight, and some of the weaker slaves falling out entirely. He would have liked to bring them all out, but now things were at the point where they couldn't delay even seconds for stragglers.

They reached the stairs and started up, Blade's legs now pumping like machines, the slaves holding their own as the prospect of freedom seemed to give them a second wind. Up, up, up—halfway up there was another explosion, the lights dying, but Stramod switched on a handlamp that gave enough light to keep people from missing their footing. On and on upward, the rasping breath of fifty men and women now sounding loud enough to raise echoes above and beyond their pounding footsteps.

The surface at last—light searing through the door, reflected off ice and off the great silver bulk of the flier visible beyond, with its hatches standing open and the last few people of the previous load disappearing into the black interior. The searing light and searing cold brought the slaves and Girls to a stop for a moment, but Stramod was urging them on, waving his arms and his truncheon and blistering the air with curses. The cold struck at Blade's toiling lungs, bringing him to a stop for a moment as he leaned against the wall for support. By the time he recovered only Stramod was left inside the stronghold; together they ran out across the ice and up the folding stairway into the flier.

One of the four men Blade had trained as emergency pilots must have already been at the controls, because even before the hatch was completely shut the big flier lurched off the ice and zoomed upward, wobbling and lurching still, throwing people about in the hold with screams and yells and crashes. Blade lurched to his feet, every muscle in his body from his innermost viscera out to the tips of his fingers and toes clamoring for rest, denied their clamor, and made his way forward. The emergency pilot handed him the master key; Blade stuck it in his pocket and collapsed into the pilot's seat.

Under his relatively more experienced hand, the flier's gyrations straightened out, the panicky uproar behind him faded, and the flier arrowed out on a course south. Blade stayed high and fast, figuring the Menel now had far too much to worry about to bother pursuing him. And perhaps they wouldn't want to. He had won almost all the victory he had planned and dreamed of, but he would not mind staying in this dimension long enough to know what the future relations might be between human and Menel.

Stramod came forward into the control room, his long face haggard and his longer arms sagging at his side in a way even more ape-like than usual. But there was contentment in his voice as he said, "I have done a count of the people we evacuated. Nearly four hundred slaves and Girls. And we lost only thirty-one men doing it. We have quite a few wounded, of course, but—"

"No doubt," said Blade. He hoped weariness didn't make him sound too callous. "How is Doctor Leyndt?"

"Leyndt? She will be all right with a little care and much rest. I hope you and she will—"

Whatever Stramod might have hoped for Blade and Leyndt was lost, as the sun rose behind the flier. A searing light gushed across the landscape, turning the glaciers even whiter than nature could make them, then faded through purples, reds, and oranges. As the glow died, Blade turned the flier around in a wide circle so that he could look to the north, to see what he had known he must see.

A creamy cloud was beginning to bulge above the horizon, like a blob of whipped marshmallow, with thin writhing tendrils creeping out in all directions, vivid against the blue sky. It took on no mushroom shape, but rather swelled continuously into a broad dome. Here and there in it flecks of gold, green, and silver sparkled as the sun was reflected off debris thrown up into what must already be well into the stratosphere if the cloud was visible from so far away.

Blade turned the flier away and increased the speed. There was no point in not outrunning the shock wave, not when they could move at twice its speed. And there was little point in watching for anything more in the north—at least not now. The Ice Master's stronghold was gone as if it had never existed; nothing could be back there now except a steaming hole chewed down through the glacier deep into bedrock, miles in diameter and buzzing with lethal radioactive particles.

Stramod turned to him now and muttered, "I wonder what happened to the Menel in that blast? If their settlements were sufficiently far from the stronghold and sufficiently well-built, they may have survived. In which case—"

Blade was not listening to him, however, because it suddenly seemed that a smaller version of the explosion in the north had flared in his own skull. Again the world turned white, then faded through purple, red, and orange. And his mind screamed out as though its voice could be hurled across the dimensions to where the computer was reaching for him:

"No! Not now! It's not finished yet! I can't leave until—"

—but the pains continued to tear at his head. He lurched up out of the chair, thumb of his right hand stabbing for the button that would engage the automatic pilot while the other hand reached up to cradle a head that seemed on the verge of splitting apart. If the automatic pilot was on, the flier would hold its course south to Tengran and one of the emergency pilots could land it safely.

He felt the button click in, then the computer's grasp on his mind tightened and the button turned to mush and his hand sank into the control panel. His arm followed it, and as a fading Stramod gaped at him he slowly seeped through the control consoles and out through the skin of the flier on to its nose.

He rode the nose like the figurehead of a sailing ship, oddly aware that no cold or wind seared at him. Then he became aware that, preposterously, the sky ahead seemed to be getting closer. It was getting closer. There was a pattern on it becoming visible, a pattern of lines etched as if on glass. They were going to hit!

They did hit it. The sky fell apart along the etched lines and one huge fragment swept down and sliced him clear of the flier. He clung to it, finding it cold but in spite of its total smoothness easy to cling to, as it spiraled downward, twisting and sliding like a falling leaf, down, down, down, until he suddenly fell off and kept on going down by himself into a blackness that yawned below, down into a blackness that now rose up about him like a fog. Sensation faded. Sensation vanished.

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## Chapter 20

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The four men sitting around a table in the study of the Prime Minister's shooting lodge were all feeling rather short-tempered. For three of them it was an inconvenient place to be at an inconvenient time—but the P.M. was notably disinclined to interrupt a good grouse season for anything short of the Last Judgment. So Lord Leighton, J, and Richard Blade had trundled out to meet him. For two of them there was an additional strain in that Lord Leighton was being even more maddeningly stubborn than usual when he had started some particularly fascinating bare, and both J and the Prime Minister were doing their best to grab the scientist by the coattails and keep him from disappearing over the horizon with the whole Dimension X Project. And for Richard Blade, there were some personal pains, which Lord Leighton had touched on but for once had the tact not to pursue. Had he done his best to preserve the Menel?

At this moment, however, the Prime Minister was holding the floor, holding it so stubbornly that not even Lord Leighton's willingness to interrupt anybody for any reason was stopping him from getting his thoughts out. "Now damn it all, Leighton, this time you're asking for the moon. Not just the moon, but the moon in a bloody gift-wrap as well! You've got to sit down and look at it from the point of view of keeping the Project going over the long term."

"Yes," put in J, "and from the point of view of keeping Richard alive and sane, which is also a trifle important for the project in the long run. It's simply preposterous to talk about canceling the search for other candidates in favor of this new whatever-you-call-it."

"A Replication Module," said Leighton shortly. "Obviously—"

"Obviously we have to consider all sides of the problem," said the P.M., accomplishing simultaneously the considerable feat of getting his irritation under control and the positively prodigious one of successfully interrupting Lord Leighton. "Let's go through Leighton's request from the beginning.

"What you want, if I understand it correctly, is that the main effort of the project now be turned in the direction of first, determining the exact relationship between X Dimension and Home Dimension, and then modifying both the programming and the hardware of the computer so that we can send Blade to any given X Dimension in a controlled fashion, rather than simply firing him off into the blue the way we've been doing. Is that right so far?"

Leighton nodded but said nothing, apparently not recovered from the shock of being successfully interrupted. Oh well, thought Blade, there's a first time for everything, and a politician like the P.M. has had enough practice interrupting nonstop talkers to be able to cope with almost anybody if he wants to.

"Particularly, you want to send Blade back to the world he just came back from, to find out whether the—the Menel, I think you called them?—survived the destruction of the Ice Master's stronghold, and if



they did, to help with the efforts of the local people to make contact with them. And then what?"

"That depends entirely on the attitude of the Menel," said Leighton rather shortly. "Obviously there's no need to approach them hat in hand. But they are our superiors in technology by any number of centuries, and I can't imagine that either the Ice Master or Blade's attack left them with a terribly good impression of the human race in any dimension."

Lord Leighton had once again put his finger squarely on the problem that had been churning in Blade's mind in the weeks since his return from the dimension of the Ice Dragons. Had he given the Menel the notion that human beings were dangerous, in spite of all his efforts to limit damage to them? In particular, had the destruction of the stronghold also involved the destruction of the Menel settlements? All of them, some of them, one of them? And if the destruction had been less than total, what would be the Menel's reaction? Would they consider the human race a menace, and resort to more direct means of clearing off the world they wanted to make their home—in short, had he signed the death warrant of both Graduki and Treduki by his destruction of the Ice Master, rather than saving them? Or possibly would they realize that this world was inhabited by other intelligent beings in great numbers, and that it would be both more civilized and more expedient to negotiate with these beings? He was so absorbed in questioning himself that he missed a good part of the Prime Minister's continuing explanation.

"—and on top of canceling all the other supporting projects such as the search for new candidates, you still say that the Replicator Project will require another million pounds for new personnel, new research, and new hardware. It may even require relocating the whole damned computer complex, and my estimate of that is another three million, plus the security risk. And on top of all this, you say the Replicator will take at least two years to develop if it can be developed at all, which you're not sure of yet!" The P.M. shook his head. "My answer has to be no."

"But—" began Lord Leighton.

The P.M. held up a hand. "Definitely no. The Special Fund will barely come up with the extra million, and for anything beyond that I'll have to go for an addition to the research budget. And Parliament isn't terribly likely to sit still for three million pounds without asking some pointed questions—and the Official Secrets Act is like a red rag to a bull with some of the back-benchers. They'll demand to be shown at least privately what the money is going to do. And what can we show them?"

"We can hardly show them the Menel," Leighton said calmly. "That would risk a global panic if the word got out."

"Precisely," said the P.M., beaming. "And what else can we show them that's as earth-shaking—or even really important? We're still trying to duplicate most of the things Blade has brought back—things like the teksin from Tharn and that electronic key he brought back from this one. We could step up the appropriations for that research effort—but again, more money! Apart from the things we can't show or which haven't produced any results yet, what else is there from the project? Blade deserves the Victoria Cross for each and every mission, and no doubt Parliament would petition the Sovereign to award it if they knew what he'd done—but I much doubt they'll be willing to underwrite the project further if Blade's V.C. is all it looks like producing.

"Besides," he went on, "some damned fool would be bound to blab in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there's the project's security gone for aBurton ! At the very least, we'd have the Americans demanding an arm and a leg and three toes off the remaining foot for sharing in the project. And we'd very probably have half the espionage people in the world camping on what they think is our doorstep. Including some from countries we'd like to stay on good terms with."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think I can say yes to what you're asking. Not all of it. But I agree the discovery of the Menel is important enough that we should—" and he was off into outlining a compromise solution. Blade listened long enough to get the general outlines of it, and watch Lord Leighton's downcast expression—something prodigiously rare in itself—start to change to a more cheerful one, then excused himself and stepped out into the courtyard. The room was stiflingly hot from the fire, and he needed the damp chill air of the night to clear his head and lungs.

Lord Leighton had met a man who was more stubborn—or at least as stubborn—as he was, and a professional bargainer to boot. However, the scientist was going to salvage something from the collision—another million pounds from the Special Fund, with a portion of it earmarked for preliminary feasibility studies of the Replicator. If it turned out there was a real possibility of being able to control the computer sufficiently to permit Blade (or his successor) to pick an X Dimension the way a traveler at Paddington Station picks where he'll get off the train, then the P.M. would be open to a request for the full amount necessary. In return, Lord Leighton would keep everything else connected with the project going at at least its current level, and step up the pace in the search for new candidates.

Blade felt disappointed, but as his head cleared enough for him to think the matter over dispassionately, he had to confess that much of his wish for Lord Leighton to win out came from his own desire to get back and find out the answer to all the questions about the Menel that were tormenting him. It was a very personal desire, having nothing to do with the higher goals of the project, arising simply from his own doubts about whether or not he had bungled the job! It was also a completely unrealistic desire, considering that even Lord Leighton's most optimistic estimate for a working Replicator—assuming one could be built—was two years.

No, he would not be going back to the dimension of the Menel soon, and if he did not go back soon, it did not matter very much whether he went back at all, except to satisfy his curiosity. If the Menel survived (and his own guess was that their settlements, at least some of them, could have survived the blast), they would have established the pattern for their future relations with the humans on the world the two races shared long before Blade could return. Extermination? Possibly—if Blade were to return he might find nothing but the Menel and the ruins of the human cities and towns.

But suppose there were peace? Blade realized he had in a way been underestimating the abilities of his friends in that dimension. People like Stramod and Leyndt—yes, and Treduki like Nilando and Rena and the head of the Tengran council of elders—had all the intelligence, learning, and humanity needed to arrive at a peaceful settlement with the Menel, if one were possible. Anything that could be done, they would do. They wouldn't need him. He recalled what he himself had thought at the moment when the Ice Master had asked him to be his ally against the Menel—a man should do everything himself if possible. And the other side of that was that if it isn't possible, he should get the best help available. That he had done.

He reined his mind in sharply, with a rueful grin in the darkness. If he kept on woolgathering this way, he was going to develop a taste for philosophy. And while he knew he was a first-class adventurer, he also knew he would never make more than a fifteenth-rate philosopher.

He scraped the mud off his shoes with a stick and went back into the lodge.