
Blade 12: King of Zunga

by Jeffrey Lord

CHAPTER ONE

"Blast," said J, and dropped the sheaf of papers down on the desk in front of him. It took an effort for him not to throw them, down, or even throw them across the room.

From behind the broad, polished desk, Lord Leighton stared at J. The scientist was bent forward in the pose that made his hunchback and his polio-twisted frame most comfortable for him. His gnarled, knob-jointed hands were splayed out on the varnished desk top. It seemed to J that for a moment there was a fleeting look of sympathy on Lord Leighton's gnomelike face. But it vanished quickly, and was replaced by the man's usual professional detachment.

The scientist shrugged his humped shoulders and said quietly, "It's not my fault, old chap. Really it isn't."

J sighed: "I know, damn it!" His dignified civil servant's face broke into a wry grin. "I suppose the one we could blame is Richard himself, if we wanted to." That made even Lord Leighton smile, at the incongruity of the idea.

J leaned back in his chair and considered. Here in this office two hundred feet below the Tower of London sat two of the key men in Project Dimension X, the most important and most secret research project in England. Sometimes J wondered if they needed all the secrecy. Would the average man or even the average member of Parliament really believe in the project if he heard of it, let alone understand it? J wondered. He was a well-educated man and had been in secret intelligence work since World War I. He had often dealt in his work with things too fantastic to believe. But never with anything like Project Dimension X. Every so often, when his mind confronted some new part of the project, it more or less tried to go on strike. What would the man in the street say?

Project Dimension X involved, very simply, putting a man into alternate dimensions. Eleven different ones so far, but the number was doubtless nearly infinite. With Lord Leighton's computer linked to the man's brain, he would vanish from beneath the Tower-from Home Dimension. He would awaken-somewhere else-in Dimension X, always naked, usually with a splitting headache; and more often than not with a great need to both think and act fast to stay alive. The dimensions varied widely, and most of them sounded like a madman's ravings when put down on paper. But they all seemed to have one thing in common-they were all filled with deadly dangers.

The project revolved around four key men. Lord Leighton had developed the computer-a monster two or three generations beyond anything else believed possible in the rest of the world. The Prime Minister provided the money that the project gobbled up by the hundreds of thousands of pounds, and fought off indiscreet questions from curious M.P.s. J acted as liaison and field man for both the scientist and the politician, since he had more freedom of movement than either. And as head of the secret intelligence agency MI6, he had provided the fourth key man.

Richard Blade. Recruited by MI6 while still at Oxford, he had fulfilled his early promise ten times over. He had been MI6's best agent for the better part of twenty years, expert in both the thinking and the rough-and-tumble ends of the business. He had been the secret of many of the agency's most successful operations. He had, in fact, become virtually indispensable. J would have esteemed him highly even if

Richard had not been so much like the son he had wanted.

But those same exceptional qualities of mind and body that had made Richard Blade a superlative field agent had also made him the perfect man to travel into Dimension X. Or perhaps not perfect, but so far the only man in the Free World able to travel into Dimension X and return alive and sane. He was able to explore those Dimensions and bring back their science and technology to aid England. And more often than not, he managed to help the people in each Dimension cope with problems of their own. Richard was a natural leader. Set him down in the middle of a wilderness full of howling savages, and in a few months his wits and his muscles would have enabled him to rise to power. That had happened more than once out in Dimension X.

But Richard was not superhuman, and he was not invulnerable. There was always the risk of the pitcher going to the well once too often. Apart from the personal feelings he had for Blade, J knew that the whole Dimension X program would come to a standstill if Richard were ever killed, disabled, or lost. One other Englishman had made the trip into Dimension X, and even returned alive. But he now sat in a padded cell in an obscure corner of the North Counties, insane for life. Even without being killed, Blade might come to that. Not even Lord Leighton could do more than guess what the repeated jolts to Blade's brain from the computer might do in the way of permanent effects. Blade had already suffered problems with drinking and sex as a result of brain trauma. One of J's outstanding and continuing nightmares was that Blade would one day come back from Dimension X with that athlete's body of his intact. But there would be only the ruins of a mind behind those piercing blue eyes. J shuddered at the thought, hardened as he was to seeing his agents take risks.

So there was a search on for other candidates for Dimension X trips. The Prime Minister was searching England's pool of likely candidates, while J busied himself checking with the Americans. The search had been underway now for the better part of two years, both men doing their best. And that frustrating sheaf of papers that J had dropped on Leighton's desk was the only result.

J looked at Lord Leighton, half hoping that the scientist would say something to offer a way out of this dead end. "Do the graphs mean what I think they do?"

Leighton nodded. "We took Blade's qualities and set up a series of indicators. A hundred of them, each with a scale of zero to one. Then we graded all of the other possible candidates that you and the Prime Minister together had presented, using the same indicators. You've seen the results."

J sighed wearily. "I know. Blade works out to 92.7 out of a possible 100. The next highest, an American Special Forces man assigned to the CIA, works out to 64.3."

"And the doctors and psychiatrists have interpreted that to mean that he has virtually no chance of making a trip into Dimension X and coming back alive and sane," said Leighton. "We did a rough application of these indicators to that poor fellow who did come back insane, and he worked out to 77.1. The guess right now is that nobody with much below an 85 is even worth trying out. It would be sheer murder to send them through the computer."

J felt like using the kind of language he hadn't used in forty years. He had to take several deep breaths until the urge passed. Then he asked, "Are you sure that we've got a comparable amount of information on all the other men? After all, Richard's been examined more thoroughly than any other ten men in the world today, and by the best doctors and psychiatrists."

"I thought of that," replied Leighton. "But it doesn't matter. The difference between Blade and the others is too big for any lack of information to account for it. No, we just have to face the fact that Blade is the

most nearly perfect human being known today."

"Perhaps you should tell him that someday."

Lord Leighton's white eyebrows went up. "How do you think he'd take it?"

J fixed the scientist with a cold stare. "Having known Richard for longer than you have, I would say he'd take it like a gentleman."

While Leighton and J sat and argued in the office far underground, the "most nearly perfect human being" was sitting in a taxi on his way to the Tower of London. He was cold, because the early autumn evening was unseasonably chilly. And he was impatient, because a proper London fog was moving in on the city and the poor visibility had slowed the taxi to a crawl. If the driver couldn't speed things up a bit, Blade was half inclined to get out and walk the rest of the way to the Tower.

He was tanned and in better condition than usual, if that were possible. This was the result of a month spent diving for Greek vases off Smyrna, varied with nights ashore in Turkish bars, sipping good raki and watching the belly dancers. And before that there had been a month at his Cornish cottage. That month had been just as pleasant but not quite as relaxing. A lovely and charming young German exchange student had kept him agreeably busy for a good part of that month. Two pleasant months, and now it was time to earn his next spell of leave.

He wondered where he would end up this time. The variety had already been so incredible that he wondered if Dimension X had anything left that could really surprise him. Of course landing in a polar ocean, or in the crater of an active volcano would be surprising. Very surprising. But he wouldn't live long enough in either case to appreciate the surprise. Or he might land in a dimension with no human inhabitants. That hadn't happened yet either. But that would not be terribly interesting. In fact his main survival problem in that case would be not dying of boredom before the computer brought him home.

He shrugged. He was trying to predict the unpredictable and measure the infinite. He would be dead or retired long before Dimension X ran out of surprises. In fact a thousand men could make regular trips into Dimension X for a century without exhausting its possibilities, or so Lord Leighton said. And that was something Blade rather liked. He knew he liked to be always on the move in search of something new. So here he was, involved in a project that handed him on a silver platter as much adventure and as much novelty as any human being could very well cope with. He was content. Not complacent or self-satisfied, but content. He knew he had out of life nearly everything he could reasonably ask.

The traffic began to break up just before Blade was going to climb out and walk, so he eventually climbed out of the taxi at the Tower of London as he had intended. He gave the driver an extra tip for fighting his way through the traffic and poor visibility and watched the taxi's lights shrink away and wink out in the fog. It was rolling in thicker and thicker now. Blade was frankly glad that he wasn't going to have to face a trip back in it tonight.

The Special Branch men assigned to the project handed him on with even more dour faces than usual. The fog and darkness seemed to be weighing heavily on them. Blade was glad when the door of the elevator closed, shutting out the dank chill of the evening and the silent watchdogs.

The elevator dropped the two hundred feet to the level of the computer complex in the usual few seconds, and the heavy bronze door slid open as noiselessly as ever. J was standing in the corridor to greet him. The old man's face lit up as Blade stepped forward, and they shook hands.

"You're looking remarkably fit, Richard."

Blade briefly told of his last months' doings as they walked down the brightly lit corridor toward the computer room. At each door there was a slight delay as they stood still, to be scanned by electronic sentries that had their characteristics memorized down almost to the fingernail. Each time, the image they presented matched the sentry's memories of people permitted to come this way. Each time the door ahead swished open.

"Where's Lord Leighton?" asked Blade.

"Already down with the computer. You know how he is about that blasted machine. Always fussing over it like a cat with one kitten. He hardly lets the technicians even dust the consoles."

Blade grinned. "Frankly, I don't mind that if it helps get me into Dimension X and back safely." J nodded. That was an unanswerable argument.

Lord Leighton's sanctum lay deep inside the computer facilities, beyond several rooms filled with the auxiliary equipment needed for the project and the technicians and operators needed for that equipment. More and more incomprehensible pieces of electronic wizardry seemed to have been installed each time Blade passed through the rooms. Lord Leighton's fertile mind had generated all sorts of new ideas for increasing the computer's powers. Each of those ideas had in turn generated its own family of new gadgets. Blade wondered what was going to happen when there was no more room in the existing net of underground rooms. Excavate some more? How the Prime Minister would love getting the bill for that!

Then they stepped through the door into the main computer room. All around and above them the massive computer consoles loomed. Their gray crackled finish seemed to absorb light and make the cramped room even gloomier than it would have been otherwise. In the middle sat the glass-walled booth and on the rubber floor of the booth stood the chair where Blade would be sitting in a few minutes. He had never liked the look of that chair. With the booth, it looked more like a place for executing criminals than for carrying out major scientific experiments.

Lord Leighton was at the main control board when they entered, too engrossed in examining the dials and readouts to do more than give a brisk nod to Blade. A glance at the board told Blade that the main sequence was already underway. He had been around Lord Leighton's computers long enough to pick up some vague glimmerings of how they worked.

It was time to get ready. He went into the tiny dressing room and took off his clothes. The loincloth and the pot of black grease to prevent electrical burns were laid out waiting for him. When he was naked, he dipped both hands into the grease and smeared it over every inch of skin, from hairline to toenails. It neither smelled nor felt any better than usual. Admittedly he couldn't expect it to be perfumed, but did it have to smell like a cheap insecticide? Fortunately the grease never stayed on his body through a the transition into Dimension X. Unfortunately, neither did the loincloth. One of these days he was going to land in a public place, among a people who frowned on nudity, and spend his first few days in the new dimension in the local jail on a charge of indecent exposure.

Blade strode into the room and sat down in the chair. The seat and back of the chair were chilly against his bare skin. Lord Leighton abandoned the control panel to its own devices for a moment and came over to wire Blade into the computer, briskly attaching the forty-odd electrodes and their connecting wires. The electrodes had the form of polished metal cobra's heads. Blade looked as though he were being attacked by a monstrous swarm of tiny snakes.

Finally Leighton was finished and stepped back to the controls. J had already perched himself on the chair that Leighton had put out for him. From the expression on the older man's face, Blade realized that J was probably more nervous than he was. He grinned and raised a hand in salute as far as the wires would permit.

Then Leighton turned. Blade saw that the scientist's eyes were filled with very nearly the only excitement he ever permitted himself to show. "Are you ready, Richard?"

"Ready and eager, sir." That was very nearly true. He felt fit and rested and hardly nervous at all. If anything, he was looking forward to the challenge that a new dimension would throw at him.

Leighton nodded, and pulled down on the red master switch.

Instantly smoke began to pour out of the consoles in great swirling yellow-brown clouds. For a moment Blade thought that the computer had finally blown up. Then as the smoke swirled around him and he took a sniff, he realized that the computer had him in its grip after all. He was sliding out of Home Dimension. Leighton and J and the computer consoles and then even the walls of the booth slowly vanished into the smoke. It seemed to be pouring up from below now, eddying and flowing as though unfelt puffs of wind were disturbing it.

Blade tried to raise his arms, found them unencumbered by wires. He now realized that the chair was gone, that he was sitting on a flat metallic surface.

He rose to his feet. As he did so, the smoke around him swirled away on all sides until he stood in the middle of a patch of clean air. Beneath his feet the surface showed pale blue with gold threads running through it.

He stepped forward, and the edges of the clear space in the smoke writhed and jerked as it tried to keep up with him. He moved slowly at first, one step at a time. Then bit by bit he increased his speed, as though there were a siren voice calling him somewhere ahead in the smoke. He had no will to do anything but keep moving steadily forward, now at a walk, now at a jog, now at a run. The clear space around him kept pace.

Then he felt the surface under his feet begin to change. First it stopped being smooth, as though there were a thin layer of mud on it. Then it was not quite so hard anymore-the mud seemed to be getting deeper. And then it unmistakably began to slope downward. At first it was a gentle slope, then it became steeper. Blade tried to slow down, to hold back, but found that he couldn't. He felt the surface under him turn liquid, then the angle of the slope increased still further, until it was almost vertical. He was falling, falling down in a waterfall of liquid, falling endlessly. The smoke stopped trying to stay clear of him and moved in on him again. As it touched his skin, he felt sensation leave him. As it swallowed him up entirely, it was like being swallowed up in a great black pit, without light or sound or sensation.

CHAPTER TWO

Blade awoke lying on his back in tall grass. His head was throbbing with the usual splitting headache that followed being hurled into Dimension X. But that was now more or less a welcome sign. It indicated that he was back in the real world, instead of being stuck in some limbo halfway between dimensions like a kitten up a tree.

Directly above him, the branches of a tall tree spread across his field of vision. From the branches drooped pale green leaves nearly three feet long stirring slightly in a faint, hot breeze. A glaring yellow sun

burned down with tropical fury through the leaves, making Blade wince and turn his head aside. The glare did not help his headache. Around him in the grass he could hear the buzz and hum of insects, and once a flock of birds flew squawking across a patch of blue sky visible through the leaves.

A tremendous bellowing roar suddenly sounded nearby, a single blast at first but echoed at once by half a dozen more. It sounded like a chorus of foghorns. Then the sequence came again, definitely louder. A heavy, irregular vibration came to Blade through the ground. When the bellowing sounded for a third time, he did not wait any longer. Ignoring the stabbing pains in his head; he scrambled to his feet and climbed the tree as fast as he could. He preferred to watch whatever was approaching from a safe and high perch, where he would be in no danger of being trampled underfoot.

High above the ground he perched himself in the fork of two stout branches. On three sides the land stretched away as far as Blade could see, level as a table and covered with the long grass, occasional low trees, and extensive patches of shrubbery. On the fourth side the trees and shrubs slowly thickened, until a few hundred feet away they became a solid mass of greenery. The bellowing sounded for the fourth time. A tremendous crashing and splintering followed as bushes and small trees went over or came up by the roots. Then a line of huge gray beasts came lumbering out of the forest.

They were at least a hundred yards away, but Blade was quite happy that he was already up in a tree. They were easily the size of full-grown African elephants, and very nearly the same ashy, dirty gray. But these beasts were built lower to the ground, with four thick legs splayed out to the side and ending in massive blunt-clawed feet. The head was almost square, with small ears now standing erect and a blunt piglike snout instead of a trunk. But what drew Blade's eye most was the tusks.

From the cheeks of each beast, two enormous, dirty, yellow-white tusks jutted forward. The shortest pair was easily six feet long. Blade noticed that they were slightly flattened at the ends as well, like the blades of gigantic shovels. The beasts kept streaming out of the forest and lumbering onto the open plain, all except for one. That one was the largest, with tusks that must have stretched a good nine feet. It stationed itself at the edge of the forest, and every few seconds it threw its head back and gave the bellow Blade had first heard. When the last of the beasts was clear of the forest, their leader turned, gave a final bellow, and then set off at a fast rolling trot to catch up with its followers. Only when the whole herd of two dozen or more of the beasts was well out on the plain did Blade consider climbing down.

Now his problem was getting something between his bare skin and the sun. It was glaring down on him with a fury that was already bringing the sweat out on his skin. It was fortunate that he had tanned himself to a turn in the Mediterranean. Otherwise he would have faced the prospect of spending the next few days recovering from a bad sunburn.

A quick experimental tug showed that the three-foot leaves of the tree came loose easily enough. Blade climbed out on the heavier of the two branches until he felt it begin to sag under him, snapping the huge leaves off short and dropping them to the ground. By the time he scrambled down the tree, scraping his skin on the rough bark, a couple of bushels of leaves lay on the grass.

As a trained survival expert, it was no great matter for him to take the grass and leaves and weave himself a hat and a sort of apron or loincloth. These would be enough at least to keep the sun off his head and the thorns out of his genitals.

Now for a weapon. Not for use against the big, tusked animals-short of carrying a big-game rifle, the best thing to do about them was to climb trees. But there were bound to be other less unmanageable but perhaps no less dangerous animals. He had seen no sign of human beings; perhaps this was finally the uninhabited dimension. But he wasn't going to assume he had the forest and plain all to himself, not yet at

any rate. Finding out the hard way was too dangerous in Dimension X.

He set off toward the forest. After a hundred feet his path met the trail beaten through the grass and shrubbery by the herd of tuskers, and the going became easier. As the forest rose to meet him and rose around him, Blade became more and more alert. He found himself trying to watch the trees for things jumping down on him, the ground ahead for snakes and thorns, and all around him for whatever other dangerous life this forest might hold.

He had covered about a hundred yards in from the edge of the forest when he came to a cluster of saplings lying scattered in all directions. The tuskers had been at work here, obviously, using their tusks to uproot the saplings and then leisurely stripping them of their leaves. Most of the saplings were bare sticks now. Blade bent down and searched the wreckage until he found a sapling broken off into about a six-foot length. He picked it up, swung it first with one hand, then with the other, then with both. It balanced well enough for green wood, and it was certainly better than bare hands. Much better than bare hands for Richard Blade, who knew a great deal about the use of the quarterstaff and more than a little kendo.

He was not more confident or less wary as he moved on along the trail. Only a very foolish or untrained man thinks that he can be careless just because he has a weapon in his hands. Blade had never been foolish, and he hadn't been untrained since before he came to Oxford. He had been a fencer and a boxer at his public school. He had no more intention now of getting into trouble than he had before picking up his staff. But he at least hoped that if trouble came to him, he would have a better chance of getting out of it.

The next thing to find was water. Here in a tropical country he was going to have to be much more careful than usual about water. He decided that his best bet was to keep right on going, following the herd's trail. Not too far, though. Until he had a better weapon than the staff, he didn't want to spend a night in the forest. He would be better off out on the plain, preferably up in a tree, where nothing could come at him without his noticing it.

As he moved on deeper into the forest, he heard and saw unmistakable signs of abundant wild life. He heard no more of the trumpeting and bellowing of the tuskers. But several times he heard full-throated roars that sounded far too much like a lion's for comfort. Once he heard a sharp grunting noise close by. It broke off in a shrill scream and a violent crashing sound, as though a violent fight were going on. Blade stopped dead and held his staff ready until the crashing died away. It was replaced by a series of contented grumblings and the sound of powerful jaws crunching bones. Whatever had just killed its prey out there in the forest either had not caught his scent or was too busy dismembering its first kill to be interested in another. Very definitely he would be better off out on the plain after darkness fell!

He took more care to tread softly after this, feeling with his staff for a solid footing at each step forward. But still, thorn-covered branches raked his bare calves, exposed roots caught his toes and made him stagger, branches snapped under his weight with cracks that sounded in his ears as loud as gunshots.

He must have scrambled and stumbled a good two miles into the forest by now. When a gap in the forest cover showed him the sky, the sun was still high overhead, but definitely beginning to slide lower. Darkness came quickly in the tropics. He would have to ration his time, to give himself enough for the trek back out of the forest.

Still onward. The heat had been brutal enough out in the open plain, under the sun. Here in the forest there was shade, but there was not a breath of air moving. Sweat poured off Blade; he was as wet as if he had been swimming. Insects attracted by the smell of sweat swarmed around him, forming a whining

cloud in front of his eyes and around his head, darting in, nipping and biting. Some of the bites drew blood, and other insects, attracted in turn by the blood, came droning in to add themselves to the swarm. Blade snapped off a branch from a fallen tree and waved it in front of his face with his free hand. That at least kept them out of his eyes, but all the rest of his body still lay open to their attack. His throat was dry and sour with thirst, but right at the moment he would have traded ten gallons of water for a can of insect repellent.

Then suddenly the trail broadened. Blade stopped. Not more than a hundred feet ahead, the trail seemed to come to an end in a wide open space with trees growing close around it. He moved forward even more cautiously than before, taking one step at a time and listening between each step. Nothing for a long time, except the buzz and shrill whine of the insects. Then, coming from the clearing ahead, he heard the sound of something large splashing through water.

If he could have stopped breathing, Blade would have done so. He waited until the sound died away, and then moved forward again. Now he caught the scent of water in the faint breeze that blew down the trail. He took the last few steps, and found himself on the edge of a broad pond.

The pond was circular, roughly a hundred feet in diameter. On three sides trees grew closely around it and overhung it, drooping branches downward until the leaves dangled in the water. On the fourth side, where Blade stood, a broad rim of bare black earth showed the footprints of hundreds of animals. Most of the prints were the circular four-clawed marks of the tuskers, sunk a foot or more into the soft ground.

The water looked clear and clean. Only a few patches of fallen leaves and one or two floating branches dotted its shimmering blue-green surface. On Blade's left, a misshapen tree trunk lay half submerged, sagging downward into the water. Blade shifted his grip on the staff so that he could strike out with one hand, and stepped out onto the open bank.

As he did so, the tree trunk came alive. It writhed backward, bent into a bow, and lifted a head as large as a horse's up from the surface of the pond. The head rose slowly, bobbing and weaving at the end of a neck thicker than Blade's own body, occasionally opening a mouth rimmed with foot-long dagger-pointed teeth.

At the first movement of the snake Blade froze, at the second he began inching back into the cover of the trees. The head swiveled back and forth ten feet above the ground. Green-hued eyes the size of dinner plates scanned the edges of the pond. Then the snake lowered itself down to the ground, and began slowly and steadily to pull itself out of the forest onto the bank.

Blade swore mentally. Against that monster his staff would be about as useful as a Boy Scout knife. As long as it was camped on the edge of the pond, it would be a risky business to try getting water. He could only hope the snake wasn't settling down; for its afternoon nap.

More and more of the mottled black-brown body flowed out of the forest, until there must have been sixty feet of yard-thick snake stretched along the bare earth. The breeze carried its faint musk to Blade. He swallowed, his mouth and throat suddenly drier than even his thirst had made them.

Then from off to his right, near the far end of the earth bank, came the unmistakable sound of a wooden drum. It came in a rapid, staccato rhythm-boom boom boom boom-and then a long rolling brrrrmmmm. Blade stiffened. So did the snake. Its scales grated on the earth as it heaved its head upright again, once more searching all around it. The drum sound came again. The snake's head swayed, then dropped to the earth, and it began to move. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, it slithered along the bank, past the motionless and silent Blade, and then on to the trail left by the tuskers. In a minute the last few feet of its

tail had vanished from sight. Blade heard the scrapings and cracklings it made as it writhed its way through the tangle of smashed undergrowth along the trail, then those too faded away. Silence returned to the pond.

Blade heaved a sigh of relief, but only a small sigh. Somebody lurking in the forest nearby had beaten that drum. He might be as dangerous as the snake. Blade licked dry lips, then decided to take a chance. He was not going to get water or find out anything about his invisible neighbors by clinging to this tree.

Lifting his staff, he stepped slowly out onto the bare earth of the bank. He took two more steps, taking him well clear of the trees. Then he lifted his staff high over his head, and rammed it hard into the soft ground so that it stood upright, quivering slightly. He turned away from it, toward the place where the drums had sounded. Then slowly he raised his arms and spread his hands, palms outward, in a gesture of peace.

A nerve-wracking moment of silence followed. Then there was a faint swish and crackle in the bushes, and six men sprang out of the shadows onto the bank.

CHAPTER THREE

Blade was not particularly surprised. Neither, it seemed, were the six men. They spread out as they reached the bank, forming a curved line that stretched from the water on one side to the edge of the forest on the other. All six were tall, thin, and deep reddish brown in color. They wore wide swatches of dyed animal hide around their waists and fur anklets. All six carried spears as tall as they were, with broad leaf-shaped iron blades nearly two feet long. Blade did not like the look of those spears, nor did he like the way the men were looking at him. He backed away one step, then two, until the staff was in front of him where he could grab it in a hurry.

The apparent leader, marked by a tuft of blue feathers tied around his spear, stepped out in front of the line and looked Blade over from head to foot. Blade kept his arms raised and his palms out, even though he was itching to snatch the staff out of the ground. Then the man frowned.

"He makes the Peace Hand."

There were growls from some of the other men. One of them said, "But he is of Kanda. Maybe even of Rulam. Look at his skin."

"You look at his hands."

"I do. He makes the Peace Hand because he does not want to die."

"Who does?"

"You do not, I see, Nayung. He is only one man and has only a stick. Well, then, I will kill him."

The speaker leaped forward, spear raised high in both hands and stabbing downward. Blade leaped out from under the down-plunging point with split seconds to spare and jerked the staff out of the ground. Another spear stab, another leap backward, and Blade had time to bring the staff up into a guard position. Then the spear lunged downward again, and Blade had to jump back a third time.

"You are a coward," snarled his opponent. "I will not eat your heart when you are dead. I will feed it to the pigs with the rest of your insides.. I, Chamba, say this."

"Your pigs will go hungry," said Blade, smiling. Chamba seemed to know only one way of using his spear. He stood there glaring at Blade, spear raised, and as wide open as a child for a thrust with the butt of Blade's staff. Blade shifted his grip again, sliding both hands down toward one end of the staff.

Chamba laughed harshly. "What are you going to do with that little stick, coward? It is green wood. It would not even make good burning in your Death Fire if I gave you one.

Again Blade smiled. "And I have a question for you, Chamba. Your pigs eat cowards. What do you have here that eats fools?" Chamba stiffened, his arm muscles knotted, and he let out an ear-splitting scream of rage. Then he seemed to be hurtling through the air toward Blade, once again lunging down with his spear point.

This time Blade did not move backward. Nor did he close in. Instead he snapped his staff forward, straight at Chamba's unguarded stomach, pulling his blow at the last possible instant. The end of the staff, solid wood with Blade's massive arm muscles behind it, took Chamba in the stomach. He gasped and the reckless grin vanished from his face.

Before he could recover, Blade took the offensive. The staff lunged forward again. First it smashed into Chamba's wrist. A quick shifting of hands, and the staff swung up, over, and came down like a club on Chamba's shoulder. One arm and one hand disabled, he dropped his spear and stood shaking his head in bewilderment. He was still shaking it when Blade swung the staff around in a level sweep to his temple. For the fourth time Blade pulled the blow—he did not want to kill the man—but Chamba dropped as though he had been hit with an axe.

The leader Nayung was staring at Blade with curiosity now. Then he smiled. "Man of Kanda, I think we will eat your heart. I promise this as a D'bor of Zunga." His chest swelled out as he took in breath. Then all that breath rushed out in a scream. At the leader's signal all five of the Zungans charged at Blade simultaneously.

Two of the warriors had to leap over Chamba's fallen body as they came at Blade. One of them landed slightly off balance. In the seconds while the man was straightening up, Blade drove the staff in under his spear and hard into his kneecap. Blade felt bone smash under the impact. The man screamed and fell on his face in the dirt, clutching at his knee.

But the other four fighters were all around Blade now, circling him cautiously, trying to get at least two behind him before they rushed him. Again Blade shifted his grip, watching Nayung's eyes for a signal. The D'bor's eyes narrowed, and Blade saw a tightening of his chest muscles as he got ready to give his war cry again.

Then Blade's staff moved. Backward it went this time, straight into the groin of the warrior angling in toward Blade's right rear. Before the man had hit the ground, Blade had pulled the staff back in and swung it horizontally again, jerking the tip up at the last moment. The staff came up under the arm of the man on his right, smashing it into the air, sending the man's spear flying. He stepped back, his arm dangling, staring at Blade. Four down or out.

Nayung was no longer smiling. His mouth was drawn tight, and his voice came out as a growl as he spoke to his sole remaining companion. "Guard me," he said. Then he tossed his spear up into the air, and caught it as it came down. Now he held it with both hands near the butt. But instead of moving in, he stood where he was, spreading his legs apart for better balance.

Blade guessed what was coming just in time. As the sharp spear point swept in a horizontal arc like a scythe, he sprang clear. The razor-sharp black edge whistled by inches from his stomach. He took a step forward, then hastily backed away as the other warrior advanced, spear held for the conventional downward thrust. Blade lifted his staff to thrust at the second man, and then had to back off again as Nayung's spear whistled toward him again.

Four, five, six times in succession this happened. Now it was Blade's turn to stop smiling. By luck or skill Nayung and his companion had worked out a stronger system of complementary fighting styles. Blade realized he would have to change his own approach. And he would have to do it soon. Before long Nayung would go over to the attack. Blade knew he would have to gamble. As the deadly ballet of stab and swing went on, a plan began to form in his mind.

Nayung's spear was swinging out, far to the right, ready to come around for another slash. The companion hovered, ready to drive Blade back if he tried to close. Nayung's spear whipped forward. Blade guessed its height above the ground, and dropped into a squatting position, head pulled down into his shoulders like a turtle. The spear blade whistled over his head. As it did so, Blade snapped his staff forward, into Nayung's stomach. He had to move too fast to pull that blow. The staff folded Nayung practically double and sent him tottering backward, to fall to the ground a few feet away.

If the last warrior was frightened at facing Blade alone, he gave no sign of it. Before Nayung hit the ground he rushed in, spear stabbing downward. Blade closed barely enough to avoid being spitted. The spear slashed down past his back, the sharp edge slicing through the leaves of his loincloth. As the spear came down, his own staff came up, one end smashing vertically into the warrior's jaw. Blade was able to pull this blow, otherwise it would have gone right on up into the man's brain. Instead, the warrior went limp all over and fell face down on the ground. Blade checked to see that he was still breathing, and then stood up.

Carefully he went around to each of the six men; picking up each one's spear and giving it back to him. He saved Nayung for last.

As Blade handed the leader his spear, the man's eyes followed him with utter amazement written all over the mahogany face. Nayung was obviously seeing something he could not understand. Finally he got up enough nerve to speak.

"Warrior of Kanda, are you not going to slay us?"

Blade shook his head angrily. "Why should I? And do not call me a warrior of Kanda! I am not from there. I have never been there in my life." He was about to add that nothing in the world would ever make him go there, then decided against embroidering his story too much. As long as they believed he was not from Kanda, they would be less likely to stick spears into him first and ask questions later. There would be other and better times for telling the story of where he really came from.

Nayung shook his head slowly, as if shaking it hard might make it fall off, and rubbed his stomach. Then he said, "No, you must be right. No slavehunter of Kanda would ever spare six warriors of Zunga if he had them where you have us now." He could not quite bring himself to say at your mercy. "And there are few of the slavehunters who could defeat six Zungan warriors." He struggled to a sitting position. "If you are not of Kanda, are you of Rulam?"

Blade shook his head. "I am not of Rulam either. And while I am not going to kill or hurt any of you, I do think I am going to ask the questions for a little while. Then you may ask me who I am, and I will tell the truth if you do." He lifted the staff to emphasize his words. "First, tell me what is Zunga?"

Nayung looked at him as blankly as if he had been a man in London and Blade had just asked him what was England. Obviously he did not want to believe that Blade was mad, but he was having a hard time believing anything else.

Finally he found his voice. "It is the land of the People."

Blade nodded. That was enough to go on for now, at least about Zunga. "And what is Kanda?"

Nayung's face darkened. "The city of the Priests of the Ivory Tower. The city of the killers of the Ivory People and the ivory thieves. A city of slave raiders. They come and take us away, to Kanda or even to Rulam. We die there in Rulam. We die in the firestone mines, we die in the arenas, we die in the slave barracks."

Blade asked another question. "Is Rulam another city?"

"Yes." Nayung grimaced. "Without the soldiers of Rulam, we would not fear Kanda and the Priests of the Ivory Tower. We could march up to its walls and climb over them, kill all the Priests and take our ivory back from the tower. But Rulam sends soldiers. They have swords and hats and coats of iron. We cannot fight them with our spears." Nayung suddenly seemed to realize how much he was telling this stranger, and clamped his jaw shut.

Blade ignored the gesture. He could fill in the details later, without asking any more questions now. He stood up and said, "As I told you, I am not from Kanda, and I am not from Rulam. My name is Richard Blade."

"You have two names?"

"Nayung," said Blade gently but with an edge in his voice, "I said I would ask the questions for now. Yes, I have two names. I come from the land of the English. I am a warrior there. I have coarse to Zunga-" and there he had to break off suddenly. What was a safe reason to give for his coming to Zunga? Curiosity, they would not believe. And they might very easily think an explorer was another kind of slave raider or ivory poacher.

"I was exiled from England by my king," he began. "Now I must wander from country to country, living as well as I can by my skills as a warrior. I have become a better warrior during my wanderings, though. I have learned many things about fighting." He did not go on to offer to teach the Zungans some of what he knew. This was not the time yet. He wanted to look around him a little more first.

Nayung laughed. "You are not telling us anything we do not know already when you say that you are a great warrior. There has never been a warrior who could defeat six Zungans single-handed without taking a single wound. Chamba boasted that he could, but never tried to do it. It is too bad that he did not try. He would have been killed or disgraced, and we would have been spared having to listen to him for many months." Again Nayung's face clouded as he realized he had been speaking too freely, and he was silent for a while.

Then he painfully dragged himself to his feet and spread out both hands toward Blade. "I make the Peace Hand to you, Richard Blade of the English. And I tell you that you do not need to travel on beyond the land of Zunga. You will have my voice for you among our people as long as I live."

Blade grinned and returned Nayung's gesture. "That is good. Then I will go with you and your warriors

to your camp tonight. Is it far?"

Nayung shook his head. "Our camp is only an hour from here. That way." He pointed across the pond. "We are hunters who came to the forest to hunt one of the Ivory People and bring his ivory back. The Ivory People were drinking at this water when we came upon them. But they scented us, and ran off before we could spear one according to the laws and customs. We waited, hoping they might come back, but saw only the Lomban." He made a sinuous motion with his hands that told Blade he meant the big snake. "Then we beat our drums to drive the Lomban away. After that, we saw you step out on the bank and make the Peace Hand. We came out to find out who you were. We learned."

Blade laughed. "You did indeed. And I learned who you are. Good men, brave warriors." He pointed to the other five men sitting or lying on the ground. "I came to this water to drink, and I have not done so. Why don't you get your men on their feet while I drink?"

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time Blade had drunk enough to quench his thirst and had filled the hollow gourd that Nayung had given him to use as a water bottle, the Zungan warrior had gone around to all of his men. Those who had been unconscious he had revived, gently or roughly as the case required-Chamba very roughly indeed.

The man with the smashed kneecap, however, could not walk. Even to try standing made him scream again in agony and, collapse, writhing on the ground. Nayung looked down at him, his face set hard.

"He cannot walk. The spirits of his feet are gone. If we had an Ulunga with us we might try to bring the spirits back to his feet. But none of us, is an Ulunga. He cannot walk, and we cannot carry him. It is our custom then for the D'bor to give him a quick death with the spear, so that all the other spirits of his body may go together. If we leave him here... "

Blade nodded and raised a hand. "I understand. But if your camp is only an hour away, I think I can carry him myself. If I cannot do so by myself, I know a way in which two can carry him."

Nayung was looking at Blade with interest when Chamba strode forward, waving his spear in his left hand. "Nayung, do you call this man a warrior when he is so soft he will not see that the customs must be followed? If neither of you has the courage to follow them, then I will." The spear in Chamba's hand stabbed downward into the chest of the man on the ground before anybody could move. The man gasped, clutched at the spear shaft for a moment, then relaxed all over and lay still.

Nayung glared at Chamba. "Chamba, you have a very thick head. But if you ever do this again, I will break that head into so many pieces that its spirits will spend the next thousand years finding them." His grip on his spear shaft tightened. "The warrior Richard Blade of the English is second to me now. Do you understand?" The spear came up and the point was leveled at Chamba's stomach.

Chamba looked down at the spear, then up to Nayung's grim face, and nodded slowly.

"Good," said Nayung. He turned to Blade. "If that fool Chamba makes any more trouble, kill him." Blade nodded reluctantly. He didn't like Chamba any better than Nayung did, but he wasn't sure if it was a good idea to humiliate such a proud and dangerous man in front of a stranger. Chamba would be thinking of revenge now that was certain.

The six men moved out. They walked through the forest in single file, with Nayung leading and Blade bringing up the rear. That was just as well. He did not want Chamba behind him for now.

The Zungans stepped along at a pace that Blade could only match with effort. They plowed straight along through the forest, stopping every fifteen minutes or so to take their bearings. Blade asked Nayung about this during one of the halts.

"The men of Kanda and Rulam do not come into the forests," said the Zungan. "They are afraid. That was why I thought you might not be a Kandamor a Rulami, since you have gone where they never go."

"What of the animals in the forest?"

"The animals do not bother us. Only sworn warriors go into the forest, to hunt the Ivory People, and the animals know that such warriors are dangerous to attack. So they avoid us."

Blade nodded. "But if the Kandans and the Rulami do not go into the forest, why don't all the Zungans move into the forest and be safe from the raiders?"

Nayung looked at Blade as though he had just accused the Zungan of murdering his own grandmother. "Only sworn warriors blessed by the Ulungas may enter the forests. The women and children and men past the age of being warriors are forbidden. The spirits of their bodies would depart if they did so."

It was on the tip of Blade's tongue to ask whether any woman or child had ever tested this theory by going into the forest. But he decided against it. He would not earn Nayung's trust by expressing heretical opinions about the Zungans' beliefs. He merely nodded and said nothing.

They reached the camp while the sun was still sending a golden glow down through the thinner patches of leaves. It was a neat little compound, obviously permanent. Its floor was of beaten earth, and Nayung immediately sent two of the warriors back into the forest to pick up fresh leaves to cover the floor. Its walls were of branches and saplings, interlaced with thorny twigs to present a prickly face to the world. More saplings were laid across the tops of the walls, and yet more of the three-foot leaves laid across the saplings to make a roof. There were clay pots filled with dried meat, fruit, and water.

Blade praised the shelter to Nayung, and saw that the man was pleased. "You English must be a wise and understanding people. The Kandans think we are evil because we do not obey the Priests of the Ivory Tower and keep our women as slaves. The Rulami think we are savages because we are brown-skinned and live in towns on the plains, instead of in a great crowded, noisy city the way they do. Our people could never live the way the Rulami do. The spirits of their bodies would go away. You English must teach your warriors not to look down on other peoples, but to take each for what they are worth. That is a very wise thing. When you are too old to be a warrior, you will be an adviser to the king because of your wisdom."

Blade saw no point in explaining that he would be returning to the land of the English long before enough years had passed to force him to retire as a Zungan warrior. Or if not returning to England, at least moving on to another land than Zunga. Nayung obviously liked and trusted him, wanted to treat him as a friend, and wanted to see him stay and be accepted by the Zungans. Blade suspected that Nayung also had in mind his value as an ally for some plans of his own.

There was plenty of food and water for all six men, and Blade dug in vigorously, not trying to hide the appetite he had worked up since his arrival in this dimension. Chamba jeered at him for that.

"Blade," he said, "a Zungan warrior can march for two days and then fight a great battle on half of what you have eaten and drunk at one sitting."

"I don't doubt it," said Blade. "But if he cannot reach his goal before the enemy does, or win the battle when he meets the enemy, what good does that do? And if he has not eaten and drunk enough simply to prove how strong he is, then he has simply proved that he has the brains of a little cheeping bird as well as the appetite of one."

If Nayung had not fixed him with a glare, Chamba would have jumped up and hurled himself on Blade then and there. It occurred to Blade that he might wisely be a little less sharp-tongued with Chamba. On the other hand, the man was obviously Nayung's enemy as well as his own. For Blade's own safety, he decided to deal with Chamba fairly soon. Baiting him was the best way to push him into the necessary fight. But it would definitely be better to wait until they had reached the home territory of the Zungans, and Blade had gained some status among them. This would keep people from asking too many nasty questions of either him or Nayung when Chamba did not come back from the hunting trip.

In spite of his words to Blade, Chamba ate like a starving man, then lay down and promptly fell asleep. Nayung looked down at him with a sour smile on his face. "He is quite certain that he is too good to be asked to wear himself out mounting guard." Nayung shrugged. "It seems to be up to me, then. I..."

Blade shook his head. "You have been hunting all day. I have not traveled far, and I am less tired than you are. I will keep the first watch tonight."

Nayung tried to argue, more out of his pride as a warrior than because he disagreed with Blade or resented his offer. But eventually he gave in and lay down on the carpet of leaves. He was asleep within a few moments. The other warriors soon joined him.

Blade picked up one of the spears and hefted it experimentally. The spearhead was actually more like a short sword. It was about two feet long from socket to point, about five inches across at its widest point, and nearly half an inch thick in the middle. It was made of poor-quality wrought iron. Both the point and the edge were surprisingly sharp, considering the quality of the iron. In fact, the workmanship of the whole spear was considerably better than the materials. The Zungans obviously were proud of their weapons and spent much time and thought in making them.

Then Blade examined the spear shaft. It was four feet of tough, limber, and exceedingly hard wood. He tried to pull the spearhead off, to test the balance of the shaft without the head, but the socket was too tight. So he stood up and went through a series of quarterstaff and kendo movements with the complete spear. Then he grinned again. With some more weight at the butt end, the spear would be perfectly balanced for use as quarterstaff. The wood was excellent. In fact, the spear would probably be a more effective weapon without the head, if all the head was used for was that overhead downstroke or the windmill slash that Blade had seen in the fight.

Suddenly Blade felt light-headed and almost buoyant. Less than twelve hours after arriving in this dimension, his training with weapons had already put one key to solving the Zungan's problems into his hand. Then he shut off that line of thought and took a more sober look at the situation.

The Zungans were obviously much given to being hostile to strangers. He could not blame them, but here it was. His own prospects for a peaceful reception still depended on Nayung. And he had no idea what Nayung's reaction would be to turning the entire Zungan fighting style head over heels with this new method. Blade knew he had better find out before he started shooting off his mouth. Such a proud people as the Zungans might balk at learning from even a friendly stranger.

He knew at least which side he should be on in this dimension. Nayung had described the Kandans and

the Rulami as raiding the Zungans for slaves—mine slaves, domestic slaves, and gladiators. That didn't necessarily make them completely evil. But Blade had a perspective on slavery that few modern men had. He had been a slave several times, and what it did to a man's spirit was not something written in the pages of a book. He might not aid the Zungans if he found them unwilling or unable to accept his aid. But it would take some very extraordinary virtues among the Kandans or the Rulami to make him willing to help either one of them.

That settled that point in his mind for the time being. He stood up, and began a slow walk around the wall of the little compound, peering out into the darkness.

CHAPTER FIVE

They spent four more nights in the forest, each in one of the little compounds. Twice Nayung and Chamba had to go out with their spears and clay pots and bring back fruit and small animals. They ate the animals raw—fire was taboo in the forest. Once Blade went to refill the water jugs. Chamba promptly jeered at him for this.

"The English warriors have no sense of shame, I see. They will do women's work without complaint. They will even ask to do it. Can you have babies also, Blade?"

At that remark Nayung was probably closer than Blade to putting a spear through Chamba on the spot. It was Blade who, held the two men apart. If Nayung killed Chamba, well and good. But if Chamba killed Nayung, Blade would at once have to kill Chamba. And they might also kill or disable each other. In either of the last two cases Blade knew he would be left with the job of leading the remaining warriors out of a vast forest that he did not know, back to their homes among a people he knew even less well. And he would be pitchforked straight among those people with no one to sponsor him or teach him the ropes. No, this was not the time or place for a finish fight between Chamba and either himself or Nayung.

Once the rage had gone out of Nayung's face, Blade turned to Chamba and said, "Your tongue is waving again, Chamba, like a dry leaf in the wind. I go to bring the water because this is not a forest of the land of the English. I do not know how to hunt its animals, I do not know what fruits are good to eat. If I went out to gather fruit, I might bring back something poisonous. And then you would stuff your swollen guts full of it, and that would be the end of you. Do you want to risk that, Chamba?"

Chamba didn't. Nayung burst out laughing at the expression on the other warrior's face, and said, "Blade, is the art of using one's tongue as a weapon practiced among all the English warriors? Or are you the only one who has learned this? The spirit of your head must be very wise indeed if you are. You stick your words into that man like one of the Ivory People digging up the ground with his tusks."

"When we are at home, I will fight Blade, and I will cut that tongue out of his mouth with a dull knife," snarled Chamba. He could barely keep himself from grinding his teeth in rage. "Then I will throw it on a fire, and we will see if it is a very good weapon when I roast it and eat it!"

"I do not know how good a weapon it would be either," said Blade. "It would not be ruled then by the spirit of my head. But at least it is ruled as long as it is in my head. Yours flaps and waves by itself even now." He picked up the water pots and strode off toward the spring before Chamba could move or speak again.

So they marched across the forest; with Blade and Chamba swapping verbal thrusts every mile or so. On the afternoon of the fifth day Blade noticed that the greenery overhead was beginning to thin out noticeably. Soon they began passing open spaces, where the sun glared down onto patches of grass

cropped short by any number of animals and marred with their droppings and footprints.

Blade noticed that the Zungans were beginning to move more cautiously. Their eyes roved about ceaselessly, and their hands were tighter on their spears than before. Blade hardly needed Nayang's warning that they were coming to the edge of the northern plains. There the slave raiders might be met, although Nayung admitted it was rare for them to travel all the way to the edge of the forest. Rare, but not unheard of. So from here to the town of Brona there was danger that there had not been before.

There was no permanent camp for them that night. On the edge of the forest one would have simply been bait to the slave raiders. Instead the party found a patch where the trees still grew thick, laid down a heavy carpet of leaves, and made camp there. They had dried meat with them, and with the water from their gourds they half filled their stomachs before going to sleep. Here two men mounted guard during the night instead of one. And the other four slept with their spears close beside them.

Early the next morning they were on the move, striking out across the open plains toward Brona. North of the forest the land was drier, the ground harder, the grass shorter. In the south it had reached almost to Blade's knees. Here it only brushed his ankles. But as in the south, the plain was still dotted with gnarled trees and patches of low-slung shrubbery.

With Nayung in the lead and Blade at the rear, the band headed north at the mile-eating jog that put even Blade's muscular legs and good wind to the test. The hard ground with its wavering of coarse brown-green grass offered good footing. One stride flowed easily into another, in what seemed like an endless pattern.

On and on they went. Although Blade had renewed his hat of leaves on the edge of the forest, he felt the sun beating down on the leaves and through them. It wilted them until they offered no more protection, then began working on his head. He knew, logically, that his brains couldn't be getting boiled in his skull like a potato in its jacket. But it certainly began to feel that way as the day wore on. Once again he blessed his Mediterranean tan. Without it, he would have been rapidly turning the color of a boiled lobster. How he would have felt was better left to the imagination.

None of the Zungans seemed to be showing any sign of fatigue, strain, thirst, or even heat-sickness. Blade was a bit surprised. He knew that this was their land, their climate. But they were made of flesh and blood, not iron.

The hours and the miles rolled by. Once Blade looked through the sweat that poured down over his eyes and saw a series of moving gray masses far off toward the horizon. A herd of the Ivory People. But the beasts ignored the men, and soon were left behind.

That was not the only wildlife on the plain. More than once Blade saw antelopelike beasts bounding away, in ones and twos, half-dozens, and entire herds. Once they came on a decaying carcass, large but beyond recognition now. Broad-winged birds with rust-colored backs and black bellies soared away from the carrion, and olive-brown dogs scampered away in all directions. The dogs made no effort to close with the moving men. Perhaps they ate only carrion, perhaps a group of six armed men was something they knew to be a tough proposition. Soon they were out of both sight and earshot, lost in the vastness of the plain.

Still the Zungans did not slow, although Blade noticed that they were sweating heavily. The man just ahead of Blade had his eyes half-closed and his face screwed up into a sort of grimace. It was good to know that at least one of these supermen was beginning to feel the strain!

Nayung now began looking back toward Blade every few minutes. So did Chamba. There was open disdain on Chamba's face, but there was something more like curiosity on Nayung's. Blade was a bit confused. Had his face turned green, or had something else equally unusual happened to him-

Then the light dawned. Nayung was watching him to see if he could keep up the pace, or if he showed signs of slowing down and even collapsing. The D'bor wanted to find out if this Richard Blade of the English could keep up with Zungan warriors in the field. Blade was almost willing to bet that Nayung was deliberately forcing the pace to the maximum his own warriors could take, to test Blade's speed and endurance. And Chamba, of course, was looking back at him, positive that this Englishman would fall on his pale face sooner or later and have to be left for the carrion birds and the scavenger dogs.

If he had felt like wasting the breath, Blade would have sworn, half in indignation, half in amusement. Very well. Nayung wanted to see if this new warrior was worthy of being accepted among the Zungans. Blade was an expert judge of his own endurance, and he knew that he had ample reserves left if Brona wasn't too much farther. He checked the position of the sun. It was well down in the sky already. Darkness would be falling soon. It would be safe enough to throw away a little of those reserves of his to drive his point home to Nayung.

Blade started lengthening his stride, and gradually he closed the gap between him and the next man, and soon he was walking beside him. The Zungan shot Blade a bewildered look. Then Blade was out in front of the man and angling back into the line ahead of him. As Nayung looked back this time, Blade would have sworn he almost started in surprise-and then grinned faintly.

Nayung did not step up the pace, however. A few minutes later Blade moved up another place. This time Nayung's grin was unmistakable. When Blade moved up a third place, to move in just behind Chamba, Nayung showed all of his teeth and raised both clenched fists over his head in salute.

Chamba, however, was obviously unwilling to be overtaken as easily as the first two men. Blade saw the Zungan warrior's long, sinewy legs increase their stride, and pushed his own pace up a little. Neck and neck, he and Chamba swung out and moved up past the next man in the line. Then they swung in together just behind Nayung.

Nayung's face was now showing signs of strain. Was physical exhaustion beginning to set in, or was he again concerned about the rivalry between Blade and Chamba? Nayung still made no effort to increase the pace, and Chamba found from somewhere the breath to taunt him for this.

"What is it, Nayung? Can even this woman of an Englishman join me in catching up with you?" And he put on a spurt that drew him level with Nayung.

The D'bor wasted no breath in replying to the taunts. He merely looked back over his shoulder, then the pumping of his long arms increased. This seemed to pour new breath into his body and new life into his legs. In seconds the gap between Nayung and the two men behind him was opening rapidly.

That push by Nayung worried Blade. Did the D'bor have the reserves of strength to keep up this new pace all the way to Brona? Or would he soon fall back and perhaps be shamed before Chamba? If that happened, it was all the more important for Blade to keep going, and above all to reach Brona before Chamba.

Blade increased his own pace a little more, and found that he was pulling ahead of Chamba. Also the gap between him and Nayung had stopped widening. For a moment he risked looking back. The other three warriors were moving along together at a steady lope, but they were definitely falling behind. And

why shouldn't they? They had no stake in this mad race across the plain, nothing worth breaking their hearts and bursting their lungs to accomplish.

Gradually the movement of Blade's legs and feet slipped out of the reach of his conscious mind. They settled down to a steady pattern of their own, endlessly repeated, carrying him forward across the plain. He was no longer aware of the movement of air in and out of his lungs, of the expansions and contractions of his chest. He might have been a robot, for all that his body made itself known to his mind.

Before too much longer he realized that Nayung was definitely weakening. The Mor's arms now moved more rapidly, almost flailing the air. He no longer lifted his long-toed feet as high at each stride. In fact, he seemed to be running almost flat-footed. Sometimes his feet came down so hard that puffs of dust spurted up from the ground under them.

Chamba was still running beside Blade, and the Zungan showed no signs of strain. Or did he? Blade noticed cracked lips opening and closing, a sweat-greased chest heaving more than before. Would he be feeling the strain himself if he let his body tell him about it? Perhaps. But for now he felt as though he could keep on running for hours. And he knew it would be up to him to beat Chamba.

Suddenly Nayung threw up his head and gave a long gasping cry that must have taken every spare ounce of breath in his body. For a moment Blade thought the man was going to stumble and fall. But he kept on his feet, only slowing until Blade and Chamba were level with him. Then they were past him, and he was falling back still farther, to take a place ahead of the other three warriors. One of them grinned at Nayung and reached out to slap him on the back. That man at least did not think the D'bor shamed and weak.

But Chamba would, and there would be many who would support Chamba. Blade would have to run that arrogant warrior into the ground, or endanger not only Nayung but himself. He looked sideways at Chamba. The man showed no signs of speeding up, but his face wore an exultant grin.

Then suddenly he did step up the pace, so quickly that he seemed to leap ahead into the lead in seconds. Blade clenched his teeth, feeling the gritty dust between them, and followed.

The two men moved out across the plain now a good fifty feet ahead of the others, and the gap kept widening foot by foot. For the time being Blade was willing to let Chamba set the pace, and only match him. The time for his own move into the lead would come, if he lasted long enough. He was not sure he was going to. The breath rasping in his throat, and the stabbing pains in his chest, the throbbing ache in his thighs and calves, all were coming through clearly now.

A minute later Blade realized that Chamba was no longer increasing his speed. His pounding feet had settled down to a constant pace. It was time for Blade to make his move. He tried to breathe even more deeply than before, found it impossible, and decided to gamble.

As fast as he had been running before, it seemed to him now that he was almost flying. He barely felt his feet touch the ground, barely heard the breath wheezing in and out as his lungs clawed at the air. He saw Chamba stare at him, then he had to turn his head to watch the Zungan warrior.

There was agony, agony of the body and agony of the mind, written all over the man's face. His arms began to flail and his mouth opened wide, trying to gulp down as much air as possible. His eyes were no longer focused on Blade, or on anything else. They stared blindly ahead, into the fading sky, toward the flat horizon of the endless plain.

Suddenly he stumbled. He did not go down, but the steady pattern of his steps was broken. In the moments it took Chamba to recover, Blade gained ten feet. He could no longer look back at the Zungan without risking stumbling and falling, himself. He put his opponent out of his mind and concentrated on ignoring the shooting pains in his legs. He knew they and his lungs were both very close to letting him down. It was going to be a matter of minutes or seconds.

Then there was a thudding sound behind him. He risked turning his head back to where Chamba should have been, and saw nothing. He turned farther-and he saw the Zungan warrior writhing on the ground, kicking his legs and clawing at his chest, rolling over and over. Nayung and the others had stopped and were standing over Chamba, looking down at him.

Blade had to force his legs to stop moving, they had been going so long and so steadily. He stood still for a moment, then turned and walked slowly back to the others. He could not entirely keep his feet from dragging, or his chest from heaving like a bellows. But neither could he keep a broad grin off his sweating face as he looked down at Chamba. He did not feel particularly angry with the man, only a bit irritated with him for having forced this whole running match so far beyond the point of reason.

Then Nayung started, and said in an unexpectedly loud voice, "Blade, look!" He pointed at something to the north, behind Blade.

Blade turned and saw three columns of dark gray smoke curling up into the sky from below the horizon. "What is that, Nayung? Brona?"

"Yes. But those are Death Fires."

"Death Fires?"

"Yes. And for a royal death. I hope it is not Prince Makuluno. He was most worthy." Nayung's face seemed to have gone pale under the sweat. Without another word, he waved his arm toward the smoke columns and started moving. One by one the others followed. This time, Chamba brought up the rear. Blade did not worry about that; the Zungan was too exhausted and ashamed to try anything for the moment. He was more worried about what lay beneath those three smoke columns. A royal death? The hour of a royal death was seldom a good time to arrive among a new people, and often a dangerous one.

CHAPTER SIX

Nayung would have liked to run the rest of the way to Brona, but Chamba at least could not move faster than a brisk walk. And Nayung and Blade admitted privately to each other that they really couldn't either. So they moved toward the smoke on the horizon at what seemed to Blade a snail's pace after the day's swift run.

It was more than five miles across the plains to Brona, so it was completely dark long before they sighted the gates. But there were plenty of signs of human presence long before that.

Herds of cattle, for one thing-enormous herds of large plodding beasts that looked like a cross between cows and short-haired goats. Their enormous yellow horns hooked forward; their hides ranged from dusty yellow to black. All of the herds were ambling in the direction of Brona, each under the charge of half a dozen women and small boys armed with pointed sticks. They seemed quite fearless, darting in and out among beasts ten times their size, like sheepdogs among sheep.

There were also warriors out on the plain. Most of them were in groups of six, led by warriors with tufts

of red feathers around their spears. There were two groups of thirty-six, led by warriors with green-feathered spears. And there was one group of two hundred or more-two hundred and sixteen, Blade suspected-led by a D'bor with a blue-feathered spear like Nayung's.

When he saw the D'bor, Nayung's face grew sober, and he hailed the man.

"Why so many warriors out to bring the herds home, Durungu?"

"Have you not heard, Nayung? No, you would not. You have been hunting the Ivory People since before Prince Makuluno was killed."

Nayung stiffened. In the twilight Blade saw the man's hands tighten on his spear until the knuckles paled. His voice grated as he asked, "Killed? Who killed him?"

Durungu shook his head. "No, it was not murder. There is no need to worry about that. He was killed in a fight with slave raiders and Priests only a day's march north of Brona. They have brought his body and the bodies of the slave raiders back here for the death rites."

For the first time Durungu appeared to notice Blade, and his spear jerked up almost by reflex as he prepared to lunge forward. "Is that a man of Kanda or Rulam that you bring, to add to the sacrifices at the rites? That will be welcome to King Afuno."

Nayung shook his head and made Peace Hands. "Put that spear away, Durungu. This is a warrior and a wise man called Richard Blade, of the English people."

"I never heard of such."

"They live far away. He was exiled from his land and came upon us in the forest at a water place." Nayung gave a brief account of his band's adventures since meeting Blade. When he told of Blade's using a strange new fighting style and defeating all six of the Zungan warriors without getting a scratch, Durungu looked from Nayung to Blade and then back to Nayung.

"I do not think you can lie, Nayung. But it is hard to believe that this is the truth."

Nayung shrugged. "Ask Blade and he will show you. But tomorrow, please." He went on to tell of the all-day run and the test that Blade had passed so well. When he told of what happened to Chamba, Durungu laughed out loud.

"I have been waiting for something like that to happen to Chamba. I wish I could have been there to see it. It is good to hear about that thick-headed fool meeting his match." Then Durungu's face sobered. "Be sure that you tell everybody about this Blade. He looks so like a slave raider that there may be some who will feel like putting a spear through him on sight." He turned and barked out an order to his company. They moved off into the gathering darkness at a steady trot.

Nayung started off again, with Blade walking beside him. "You have your warriors organized, I see. The sixes, the thirty-sixes, and the two hundred and sixteens. Why by sixes?"

"The Sky Father decreed that we should have only five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot. To divide up our warriors by fives would be imitating the Sky Father's work. The Ulungas have forbidden it."

Blade nodded. "The Ulungas forbid many things, it seems." Blade left it at that, but Nayung's voice had an edge as he replied.

"You ask about many things of the Zungans, Richard Blade. Perhaps you want to make yourself more wise. But now it will not be a good thing for a man who looks like a slave raider to go around asking questions about the customs of the Zungans. We have lived as we live for a thousand years, in the sight of the Sky Father and with the advice of the Ulungas. Do not question our life, and ten times over do not question the wisdom of the Ulungas." He lowered his voice so that only Blade could hear. "At least not except when you are alone with me. Do you wish to give Chamba a perfect reason to destroy you?"

Blade nodded in understanding and sympathy. Nayung seemed to be chafing more than a little under the rule of what seemed to be a well-established and rather stuffy class of priests. And he had to agree that the days after the death of a royal prince were not a good time to make oneself unpopular.

They walked on through the darkness, past more homeward-bound herds and more outward-bound soldiers, until finally Blade saw fires glowing in the darkness ahead. Their yellow light revealed a high wall hundreds of feet long, with a gate in its center. They headed toward this gate, picking their way through the cattle that were streaming in through it ahead of them. In a few minutes they were at the wall, and by the light of fires burning inside Blade could see the wall clearly for the first time.

It appeared to be made of slabs of turf, piled one on the other and packed down until they formed a solid mass ten feet high and ten feet thick. On top of the wall stood sentries, the firelight gleaming on the heads of their spears. The top of the wall was studded with dry, thorny branches to discourage climbers.

They passed through the gate. Both on the wall and on the ground sentries stiffened and raised spears as they caught sight of Blade. But Nayung called out to each one, and Blade saw them nod and lower their spears. It seemed that Nayung was indeed a man to listen to.

Inside the gate, men and cattle went their separate ways. Small boys and women wearing only the same leather loincloths as the men drove the cattle into a series of enormous pens, amid clouds of dust and a tremendous chorus of bawling and shouting.

Nayung led Blade and the others over an enormous field of beaten earth, easily a quarter of a mile across. In fact, Blade could see the opposite wall of the town only a little beyond the end of the field. In the center of the field three fires were burning, sending up their greasy columns of smoke into the night sky. Blade saw tall poles standing in a circle around the fires. Something was hanging from each pole.

Nayung led his companions toward the fires at a trot. Something in the sight of them seemed to be giving strength to his legs. As they approached the fires and the poles, Blade saw what hung from them.

From each of the twenty-odd poles a human body hung head down, naked, bloody, and so thoroughly disemboweled that from throat to waist they were only a huge gaping cavity. Blade could not be sure of the color of their skins, but it seemed to be lighter than that of the Zungans, and each man wore a full beard. At the foot of each pole, metal reflected the firelight—a sword stuck point down in the earth, a conical hemlet with temple pieces, and a back and breast plate.

"It was a good kill for the prince before he died," said Nayung, his white teeth bared in a savage grin. "I wonder if they died well." He sniffed the wisps of smoke drifting across from the fire. "Yes, they died well. The pigs will go hungry tonight." Blade sniffed also, and caught the unmistakable odor of burning flesh in the smoke.

"You burn their-

"If they die well, we cut their insides out and burn them as an offering to the Sky Father, that he may eat of their courage. If they die badly, we feed their guts to the pigs!" He fixed Blade with a stare rather less than friendly. "Take a good look at those bodies, and remember what I said about keeping quiet. But do not worry," Nayung added. "I will see to it that you are treated as one who died bravely, no matter what. It will be better for you, and more worthy of a warrior."

"It will be best of all for me to stay alive and serve as a warrior of the Zungans," said Blade with a thin smile. "I will do my best to make that happen."

"Good."

Nayung led Blade and the others the rest of the way across the field. Beyond the field stood row on row of mud and sod huts, roofed with interlaced branches. A good many warriors were standing about with sober faces, drinking from clay or wooden bowls, but there were no women or children visible.

Once again faces hardened and spears snapped up as Nayung led Blade past, and once again Nayung's explanations got the spears lowered. Blade did not entirely like some of the looks that followed him, however. He was becoming even more aware than he had been before that among the Zungans he would be very much on probation for the time being.

They plunged into the narrow, foul-smelling lanes that wriggled and wandered their way among the huts. Chamba and the other three warriors left them at the door of a compound within a compound, filled with long buildings that appeared to serve as barracks for the younger warriors. Nayung gave Chamba a final warning in parting. "Remember-no women or beer until you have seen the Ulungas."

Chamba grunted. "With the prince dead, the Ulungas will be so busy with the death rites it will be a week before they have time for a hunter returning from the Ivory People. I am a man, Nayung. How long am I supposed to wait? Until my balls dry up and wither away like a stalk of grass?" He turned his back contemptuously and stamped away into the barracks compound.

Nayung shook his head, then shrugged. "He is usually much more reverent toward the Ulungas. Well, if he goes on like this, the Ulungas will hear of it, and then his past reverence for them will not save him. And we will be rid of him."

"I think that it would be wise for you also to take no women or beer until the Ulungas have seen you and I have explained to them what and who you are. You are not bound by a hunter's oath as we are, but for a man returning from the lands of the Ivory People it would look well to obey our customs."

"Nayung," said Blade with a weary grin, "right now I don't want either beer or women. I want food, water, and many hours of sleep."

Nayung smiled. "I think I can provide that. If you will follow me to my house..."

CHAPTER SEVEN

In Nayung's house, Blade ate and drank, then slept peacefully for many hours. He was awakened by Nayung gently prodding him in the ribs with a toe.

"Wake up, Richard Blade," said the Zungan. "We must go before the Ulungas as soon as possible, in

case King Afuno arrives today. Without the blessing of the Ulungas, a warrior cannot go before the king."

Blade nearly suggested that the Ulungas could go to the devil and take anybody who bowed to them along, but controlled himself in time. When in Rome, he thought, even if ignoring local customs hadn't been so dangerous. He recalled those gutted bodies swinging from poles. And this would be as good a chance as any to size up the Ulungas, who seemed to have this whole nation of warriors more or less under their thumbs. Always know your enemy-and he was almost certain the Ulungas were going to turn out to be an enemy. If the Ulungas were not, Chamba in any case certainly was, and it would be well to get the Ulungas' blessing before he locked horns with Chamba.

Custom required that one go before the Ulungas without either food or drink, so it was with dry throats and empty stomachs that Blade and Nayung left the house. Blade wore one of the leather loincloths, sandals, and an improvised turban to protect his head from the sun.

The House of the Ulungas was the most imposing building in all of Brona, with a second story built of wood rising above the usual first floor of mud and turf. The second floor was adorned with high gables and ornately carved balconies as well. It represented a fantastic amount of effort, considering that nearly all of the wood must have been hauled many miles across the plains from the nearest stand of large timber.

The entrance to the house was framed in particularly intricate carvings, some unmistakably gilded, others set with semi-precious stones, uncut but dazzling. Outside the entrance stood twelve warriors in two lines as rigid and perfect as the formation of the guards at Buckingham Palace. All of them had black feathers decorating their spears, and delicate figures of clouds and birds painted on the spearheads.

They raised their spears into the air and slammed the butts down on the hard earth as Nayung approached. He strode forward, made the Peace Hand, and said, "I bring the warrior Richard Blade of the English before the Ulungas." The twelve nodded, raised their spears again, and formed an arch with them. Nayung motioned Blade forward.

They had just stepped into the smoky gloom inside the entrance when the inner door opened and Chamba came out, followed by a second warrior of the hunting party. Nayung and Blade could not keep from shooting sharp looks at Chamba. He made the Peace Hand to them, but there was an unmistakably triumphant grin on his face and on that of his companion. Without speaking, they passed on out into the sunlight.

As the outer door closed behind Chamba, Blade turned to Nayung, his face sober. Before he could speak, a dim yellow light broke the darkness of the chamber. A moment later a thundering voice also came down at them from the ceiling.

"Who are you?"

"I am Nayung of Brona, D'bor and sworn hunter. I come before the Ulungas."

"Who is the man with you?"

Blade spoke up. "I am Richard Blade, a warrior of the English. I encountered the D'bor Nayung and his fellow hunters in the forest during their hunt for the Ivory People, and-"

"This is known," broke in the voice. There was a long silence. Blade fancied his ears caught the sound of distant whispers and the stamping of feet, as the Speakers for the Ulungas frantically tried to remember

their next lines.

"This is known," the voice repeated. "Nayung, you come before the Ulungas to be relieved of your hunter's oath. And you bring this man Richard Blade of the English with you, that he may be seen by the Ulungas. You wish that he may be judged fit to go before the king."

There was another silence, in which the voice appeared to be waiting for an answer. Finally Nayung gave it. "That is all true."

Apparently that was a cue for the speakers. "You may not come before the Ulungas, Richard Blade. It is not good that one who does not understand the laws of the Zungans as the Sky Father has given them be made fit to come before the king. This shall not be.

"Nayung, you shall not come before the Ulungas for one half-moon of time. You are bidden not to leave Brona. You shall spend four hours of each day in meditating on your evil in bringing before the Ulungas such a man as Blade."

Blade could see that Nayung's face was twisted with surprise and the beginnings of anger. But an outburst of anger now would do nothing except make matters worse. Blade clamped a hand down hard on Nayung's shoulder. He himself bowed his head submissively, in case anybody was looking at them through a peephole. Then he spoke.

"We submit to the decision of the Ulungas speaking as the voice of the Sky Father. But they have not said what I, Richard Blade, am to do if I cannot come before the king. Am I to go forth into the plains like once of the beasts of your herds, to live or die there as the Sky Father wills it?"

Blade's tone and words must have come as a surprise to the listening spokesmen, because there was another silence, even longer than the first one. Then the voice came again, more quietly than before. "Richard Blade, you shall live in Brona for the time of six full moons. You shall do only women's work during that time, as it seems to please you so much. You may not raise your hand to any warrior of Zunga, nor speak to him without being spoken to first. At the beginning of the seventh moon, if you show that you understand the laws of the Zungans as the Sky Father has given them, you shall then come before the Ulungas."

"It shall be so. I submit to the judgment of the Ulungas," said Blade. Quickly he turned and headed for the outer door, practically dragging Nayung after him. He did not breathe freely until they were out in the sun again, and he did not speak until they were well outside the Ulungas' compound and hopefully out of earshot of anyone connected with it. Then he turned to Nayung.

"What do we do now, my friend?"

Nayung's face was still working with astonishment, frustration, and rage. It was a minute or so before he managed to answer. Finally he clenched his fists and said quietly, "The Ulungas have become involved in a game Chamba is playing. I did not think that they could stoop so low."

Blade refrained from putting in his own opinion. In his experience political priesthoods could indeed stoop that low, or even lower. Instead he only shrugged and said, "I think you are right. They-or Chamba-do not want us to go before King Afuno for a very long time. Why does Chamba want to do this? Surely he cannot wish that the Zungans remain ignorant of the fighting arts that I could teach them?" He did not add that he suspected the Ulungas themselves did not want that. The notion that the official priests of his people would endanger that people to preserve "the laws as given by the Sky Father" would

be too much for Nayung to accept.

Nayung appeared to be having trouble deciding whether or not to speak. Finally he said, "Blade, I think you must be told some things even I would rather you did not know."

Blade hastily raised a hand. "Do not endanger yourself by telling me these things, please. It would not be worth it for you."

Nayung shook his head angrily. "Blade, if I do not tell you, the whole people of Zunga will be in danger! You are a wise man as well as a warrior. Perhaps you can help me if you know what the dangers are. But what I am going to tell you is about divisions among the Zungans, so you must swear that you will never use it to endanger our people: If you swear, and then break your oath, I will kill you myself, and I will feed your guts to the pigs."

Blade nodded. "Nayung, by the Sky Father, lawgiver to the Zungans, and by the god of the English, I swear that what you tell me now will never pass my lips to the harm of the Zungans. If I break my oath, may the spirits of my body depart at once, and may my whole, entire body be fed to the pigs of the people I have betrayed."

Nayung heaved a sigh. "That is good. Although still, I trust you in part because I have no choice. However..." He shook himself all over like a dog shaking itself after a bath: Some of the strain and anger left his face. Then he drew Blade aside into a niche in the wall of a dark, narrow alley between two huts, and told him in brief the situation of the Zungans.

There were two factions among them. The more conservative wished to keep everything-laws, rites, beliefs, even methods of slaughtering cattle or fighting-as it had always been. This side had the support of the Ulungas, which gave them a great advantage. Anybody who disagreed with them was likely to find that he could not go before the Ulungas and was thus an outcast for the time being. Those who balked and protested at this frequently wound up dead. Punished by the Sky Father, the Ulungas would say. But Nayung was certain that most of these deaths were the work of agents of the Ulungas--such as Chamba.

So much for the narrow-minded Zungans. The more open-minded ones believed that the customs of the Zungans should be changed if it were necessary to keep the people alive. They were particularly interested in new ways of fighting, to make it possible to defeat the slave raiders of Kanda and Rulam. They even thought that perhaps the Ulungas could not properly speak for the Sky Father any more. If he was the guardian of the Zungans, would he permit them or require them to continue along the old ways to their doom? But very few were bold enough to say this last out loud. Those who did usually died sooner or later from the "wrath of the Sky Father," as the Ulungas put it.

What kept the two factions from coming to open civil warfare was the influence of the king. King Afuno had reigned forty years with the respect and often the love of all the Zungans. He had been a mighty warrior in his youth and was now a wise statesman and judge in his old age. Except for the Ulungas, there were few Zungans who would go against his wishes.

But even Afuno could not go against the Ulungas. Too many of the ordinary warriors and the women took every claim of the Ulungas seriously, and would fight to preserve the priests' authority. For King Afuno to go openly against the Ulungas would also mean civil war in Zunga.

But now that Prince Makuluno was dead, King Afuno had a new problem. Makuluno had been his last surviving son, and Afuno was perhaps too old to beget another. He was certainly too old to live until his son was of a warrior's age. In such a case it was in the Zungan custom to pick the best and wisest

warrior among the Zungans and marry him to the eldest daughter of the king. They would rule jointly during their lifetimes, and afterward their eldest son would rule as sole king. Thus did the royal house keep its line alive and its hand upon the Zungans.

Over the course of time Chamba had come to be a candidate of the conservatives for the hand of Princess Aumara, Afuno's eldest daughter. Though he was only a M'nor, a leader of thirty-six, he was an immensely strong and fast fighter. Wisdom he obviously lacked, but ambition filled him. That made him a ready tool for the Ulungas and the others who would rather see the Zungans die as a people than see their customs change.

The more progressive faction had no single candidate, unfortunately. There were too many able and ambitious warriors among it. All of them saw not only the beauty of Princess Aumara and a chance to sit on the throne of Zunga, but also saw a chance to settle many years' accumulated scores with the Ulungas. So they fought each other almost as bitterly as they fought the Ulungas.

Nayung was one of the strongest of the candidates. He was a D'bor and likely to become a Great D'bor (a commander over a force of 1296 men) very soon. He was as skilled in single combat as he was wise as a commander against the slave raiders. He was young enough that he would probably live until at least one of his sons was grown. And he was known to hold the Ulungas in sufficient respect so that the conservatives might not make a great uproar if he became king and consort.

But now Nayung by order of the Ulungas could not approach Afuno. If he tried, he would be going against the will of the Sky Father. His whole reputation for moderation would go up in smoke in an instant. His life would follow shortly, if, past events were any clue. And if the Ulungas were sufficiently determined to have a king of their faction, they might find ways of keeping all the other progressive candidates from approaching Afuno. They might end up leaving the field open to Chamba or some other man they supported. The Ulungas saw their power threatened, and they would do anything to hold onto it.

Blade considered Nayung's words in silence for a minute, and then for another minute. Nayung leaned against the wall and seemed to be calm. Only the twitching of a nerve above his left eye betrayed the strain. Finally Blade sighed and said, "Well, we cannot let the Ulungas play with the succession this way. That would be a betrayal of Zunga. So we must go before King Afuno whether the Ulungas approve it or not."

CHAPTER EIGHT

If Blade had suddenly sprouted a second head with long, flowing purple hair, Nayung could not have looked at him with more shock and surprise. The Zungan's mouth opened and shut several times like that of a dying fish before he said:

"That is sacrilege."

Blade shook his head. "Nayung, consider. Who respects the Ulungas most? A man who bribes them to give judgments to advance his political plans? Or one who respects them in all things until they put the whole people of Zunga in danger? In fact, can the Ulungas even be respecting themselves if they play with the future of the Zungans in this way? If the Zungans are the protected and beloved of the Sky Father, is it not the greatest sacrilege of all to endanger their future? Nayung, perhaps going before Afuno without the permission of the Ulungas is sacrilege. But it is not the greatest sacrilege, nor is it the first. Sacrilege already swarms around the Zungans like carrion birds around a dead animal."

Nayung's face had remained frozen in its first astonishment while Blade talked. When Blade fell silent, Nayung still showed no change of expression for a moment. Then with an almost imperceptible jerk of his head, he said, "Yes, I suppose you are right. The Sky Father must understand what we do, if he protects the Zungans as the Ulungas themselves say he does. But how are we to do this thing without being instantly killed? The Ulungas will not wait for the Sky Father to take vengeance for this. Their guards will attack us at once, the moment we step toward the king."

Blade slammed a clenched fist down into his palm.. "That is exactly what I want! Do the guards ever throw their spears?"

Again Nayung looked shocked. "To throw a spear is contrary to the laws given by the Sky Father. Except for the king," he added.

"No doubt," said Blade. "And I suppose the Ulungas' guards have to be particularly careful to obey the laws. Besides, those spears are not very good for throwing as they are now. In a few days I could show you how to make something so much better!"

"Blade," said Nayung. "We were talking of approaching the king. Why do you want the guards to attack us?"

"I should have said, attack me. Remember, I took six of you without a scratch there in the forest. And I wasn't using a spear."

"Just that stick."

"Just that stick," said Blade, nodding. "With a spear, I think I can hold off just about any number of the Ulungas' guards until the king notices me."

Nayung laughed. "Blade, if you start a fight in the royal circle or anywhere near it, King Afuno will notice it about one breath after it begins. He may even climb down from the throne platform and take a hand in the fight if his daughters will let him."

"Do his daughters have that much influence over him?" asked Blade.

Nayung's smile broadened. "Ah, Blade, I see where that thought is taking you. I do not blame you. If they were not royal, all five of Afuno's daughters would have been wed years ago. Even the youngest is beautiful, and Aumara is the most beautiful of the five. Half the warriors in Zunga would take such a woman with no bride price at all. But Afuno will never consider giving Aumara to a warrior not of the Zungans, even if he does not commit 'sacrilege' before the king's very eyes. Think of some other women of the Zungans."

"You think of your plan," said Blade rather testily. "Even if I were interested in being King of Zunga I would still have to survive our little demonstration for Afuno." He hoped Nayung was convinced by this. If Nayung got to suspecting that Blade was aiming at the Zungan throne, he would be much less willing to cooperate in Blade's plans. And Blade needed the Zungan's cooperation for quite a while to come.

As if he had read the last part of Blade's thoughts, Nayung asked, "Blade, while you are fighting the guards and risking your life, what am I doing? Do I simply stand about like a carved wooden image of the Sky Father in the House of the Ulungas? It will not be to my honor to let a friend risk his life for me when I am doing nothing."

"Don't worry," said Blade. "When I start fighting with the guards, you step forward until you can easily be seen and heard by Afuno. Then you explain to him who I am, what I am doing, and what I can do for the Zungans. Choose the most convincing words, and shout them out loud and clear so everybody can hear you."

Nayung nodded. "I understand, Blade. It is a good idea. But why do you insist on doing this fighting with the Ulungas' guards? Why do you not just let me call out to Afuno, and hear his answer before you act?"

"You do not quite understand, Nayung. If you go up to the royal circle and shout at Afuno, the spokesmen for the Ulungas will simply point out that you are a man forbidden to approach the king. The guards may kill you on the spot for that. They will certainly seize you and rush you away before you can speak. Almost nobody will remember the incident. Those who do will be told by the Ulungas that it is against the laws of the Zungans to talk about a case of sacrilege. Afuno will never get a chance to see what I can do, nor will anybody else.

"But if I fight with the guards, I will show Afuno and his daughters and many hundreds of Zungans what I can do. What the English fighting arts can do. The Ulungas will not be able to tell that many people to ignore or forget what they have seen. If the Ulungas even try, they will show that they have more regard for the ancient laws and their own power than they do for the future of the Zungans. I think your people are not the kind to take that very well."

Nayung shook his head.

"Besides," Blade concluded, "there is honor among the warriors of the English also. It is much like that of the Zungans. I cannot let a friend go into danger to help me while I stand in safety outside the fight, any more than you can." He stuck out his hand to Nayung, and after a moment's hesitation the warrior took it.

They now decided to return to Nayung's house, break their fast, and finish working out the details of their plan. They were just turning into the lane that led to the compound of the D'bors when the roar of at least a dozen iron gongs being savagely beaten came booming over the roofs and walls. Nayung started and stopped dead.

"The assembly call to the people!"

"What does it mean?"

"Mean?" Nayung looked at Blade in astonishment, and also in more than a little fear. "It means that all the people of Brona are to assemble in the great open field. King Afuno is arriving right now!"

Blade threw up his hands in mock despair and said, "The Sky Father seems to want to play jokes on us today. Well, we know most of what we need to do: Tell me, quickly, about these assemblies."

Nayung's words raced off his tongue. "The king, the princesses, and certain advisers stand or sit inside the royal circle. Outside that circle is a ring of the Royal Guards. Outside the Royal Guards is another circle, the Ulungas' circle, where the Speakers for the Ulungas stand. Outside the speakers are the Ulungas' guards."

"Is there room to fight in the Ulungas' circle?"

Nayung nodded.

"All right, then. I'll only plan on getting through the Ulungas' guards. Then I'll do my fighting in the Ulungas' circle. You get in close enough to the Ulungas' guards so that you can be sure the king will hear you when you shout. But don't get too close. The Ulungas' guards will probably know what the Ulungas have said to you. One more thing-will the Royal Guards join in the fight?"

"Not unless you look dangerous to the king."

"You should be able to convince King Afuno that I'm not a danger to him, only to the enemies of the Zungans. If not-well, we must leave the Sky Father with something to do, and not plan everything ourselves."

"Blade, I think sometimes that you are mad, to talk as you do of the Sky Father and the Ulungas. Or else you are a spirit of the Sky Father given the form of a man and sent down to help the Zungans. I wish I knew which."

Blade slapped Nayung on the shoulder. "Neither, my friend. Only a warrior who has traveled farther and seen more than most Zungans. But this is no time for talking. Let's go."

Blade's feet kept itching to break into a run as they headed down the lane toward the assembly field. But he knew nothing would be more certain to attract attention. Besides, the crowd of people heading for the field would have made running almost impossible in any case. Warriors, women and children, even household slaves-everybody was on the move.

Many hundreds of people had already crowded toward the circle by the time Blade and Nayung reached it. But the two men were able to slip to within a few yards of the Ulungas' guards. There were about a hundred of these, stationed in pairs at six-foot intervals around the outside of their circle. Of each pair, one stood facing outward toward the crowd, one inward toward the Ulungas' circle.

The sun was now well up in the sky and beating savagely down on the open field. Blade was glad he was wearing his turban, in spite of the curious and sometimes hostile looks it drew. But the turban could not keep out the smell that was rising from hundreds of unwashed bodies as the sun worked on them. For the moment Blade's empty stomach was holding its peace, but he wondered if that would last as the crowd grew.

As more and more people came, a tremendous din of voices added itself to the smells. Women's and children's voices almost entirely, though. The warriors stood in the blazing sun like so many mahogany statues, the only words coming from their sections of the crowd were the barks of orders.

Suddenly, the iron gongs sounded again. This time in a definite four-beat pattern. As the heavy metallic sounds rolled out across the field, the warriors took up the rhythm, stamping their feet, shaking their spears in the air, and shouting, "Hi! Ho! Ya! Ha!" in time to the gongs. The noise swelled to a deafening roar that tore at Blade's ears and made him seriously consider putting his hands over them. Beside him, Nayung was chanting and stamping with the best of them, and Blade finally decided he should join in.

He had just done so when a new noise cut through the uproar-the deep bray of a horn. In a second the gongs stopped and the chanting died away. In the next second someone in the section of warriors to Blade's right shouted an order. Every one of the hundreds of warriors in the section did a perfect simultaneous about-face. Then another order sounded, and they stepped forward, again moving as one man. In perfect order and formation the whole section marched out of the crowd into the open field, dressing its lines and keeping step as it did so with no apparent effort.

Now a solid wall of warriors three ranks deep came marching across the field toward the crowd, led by half a dozen men blowing the long horns Blade had heard. Behind the warriors appeared six large, carved wooden chairs, each apparently floating along in midair several feet above the ground. As the whole group approached, Blade saw that each chair was mounted on a platform borne by four of the Zungan cattle. In five of the chairs sat young women—one in fact was only a girl—but in the lead chair sat a man. Blade hardly needed Nayung's whispers to know this was King Afuno. Nor did he wait to go down on his knees when everyone around him started doing so. Fortunately there seemed to be no taboo about looking at the king. Blade examined the man carefully as his chair passed down the corridor left by the withdrawal of the section of warriors.

He might have been anywhere from fifty to seventy, but obviously he was still in magnificent physical condition. He was nearly as tall as Blade's six-feet plus, and every bit as muscular. He wore a loincloth of solid blue, worked with bright red figures, and held a spear in each hand. One spear had a red shaft, one a black, and both had gilded heads. That was all Blade could see before the king passed into the royal circle and for the moment out of Blade's field of vision.

Behind the king came the five chairs with the princesses. As the first one moved past, Nayung nudged Blade and whispered, "Aumara." But Blade would have known the princess without Nayung's prompting. She sat straight and proud in the chair, head slightly raised by the massive golden collar around her neck. That collar and a red loincloth were her only garments. Even seen in profile, the straight-back, the high, full breasts, and the flawlessly curved legs were unmistakable—and exciting. As the other four princesses were carried past, Blade could not deny that Aumara was first in beauty as well as in place.

The last of the princesses vanished into the circle. Three barked orders sounded in the silence. There was a stamping of feet and a clattering of spears as the Royal Guards took up their positions around the royal family, then silence again. The king had arrived.

Again Nayung nudged Blade, and whispered in his ear.

"Are you ready, Blade?"

"Ready? Now? Why?"

"You said we wanted to get much attention. We will get the most attention now, before the king speaks. And we should move before the warriors come back into that space," he said, pointing off to the right.

Blade nodded. The Zungan was right on all points. Was there any reason besides his own nerves to delay? He could think of none. He took one, two, three slow steps to the right, until there was only one row of people separating him from the open space. Several of the people turned to look at him and Nayung, with open hostility on their faces. Then in a single motion he pushed through the row and dashed down the open lane toward the Ulungas' guards.

CHAPTER NINE

Blade was gambling that surprise and speed would bring him in among the guards before they could react. So he made no sound, and rushed straight down the open lane as fast as his feet could carry him across the hard ground. His spear rode on one shoulder, out of the way for now but firmly gripped in his right hand and ready to be swung down and into action in a second.

The Ulungas' guards did not wait long to react to this huge pale-skinned warrior rushing at them. But even that little delay was too long. Their spears were only just coming up into fighting position when

Blade reached them.

His own spear whistled down off his shoulder and then whirled up again, gripped in both hands. It came up under the shaft of the first guard's spear with a sharp bang. The other's spear flew straight up into the air. Blade slammed the spear butt down onto the man's shoulder before he could do anything else to respond.

Blade was trying to pull his blows and avoid killing any of his opponents, which put him at a disadvantage. A pulled punch or blow had to go in more slowly, possibly too slowly, but he had to take the risk. A wholesale slaughter of the Ulungas' guards would make it impossible for King Afuno to give him a hearing. The defeat of a dozen or more without killing, on the other hand...

But the second man of the first pair was now coming at him, spear held with the point too far down for Blade to get in under it. So Blade quickly reversed his spear and stabbed at the man's thigh. Spearheads met with a clang. Then Blade's spear butt crashed down on the man's head. He dropped in his tracks. Blade leaped high over the fallen body, deliberately making the leap as spectacular as possible. He went a good five feet into the air and came down well inside the Ulungas' circle, with four guards rushing him.

The first pair seemed to be tyros. They came in both together, spears held in a strictly conventional position. Blade's own shaft whirled like a windmill, and both spears went flying. The two men backed away as Blade threatened them with his point, then turned to meet the other pair. He decided it was time to show off a low-line thrust with the spear, and did so. A lightning jab, and the spear point grated on one man's thighbone. Then Blade whipped the heavy point up at top speed. Already red with blood, the point sank into the second man's upper arm.

Two more guards came at him, with a new variation in their stance. Their spears were held extra high, almost level. Blade decided to make that improvised variation look as ridiculous as it actually was. As they came at him, he did a forward roll, going completely over in a split second and coming up with his spear held crossways. With all the power of his arms and the speed and weight of his body behind it, his spear slammed across the stomachs of the two men. They doubled up as though they had been kicked, all their breath going out in a whooosh. As they toppled face down, Blade sprang up between them, waving his spear over his head in both hands, yelling and shouting joyfully. What he said made no sense. It wasn't supposed to make sense. It was all for effect for effect, and to call Nayung.

Instead of Nayung, he saw yet another pair of guards coming at him. No, it was the second pair he had disarmed. They had retrieved their spears and were coming at him in the attack Nayung and his last companion had used in the forest.

But they lacked Nayung's skill. The man covering his partner moved in so close he got in the way of the other's swing. The first man had to check his swing, and while the two were sorting themselves out, Blade moved in. In a deliberate display of sheer strength, he swung his spear one-handed like a club, smashing down across the first man's lowered spear. Blade's spearhead rose up the other man's spearshaft and slashed a bloody furrow across his stomach. Before the first victim could even step back, Blade swung his spear up again, shifted hands, and thrust single-handed at him. He was deliberately aiming high, and his thrust went straight to its target. The man gasped as Blade's spearhead tore open his left ear, and jumped back. From first to last the whole sequence had taken perhaps ten seconds.

It certainly made an impression, not only on the crowd but on the other guards. Gasps of amazement and awe rose all around Blade. The next two pairs of guards that had been rushing forward to the attack stopped where they were and fanned out into a circle around Blade. He whirled, reversing his spear as he turned, and drove the butt hard at the man behind him. For once, the intended target jumped back in

time to escape being hit. All four of the men in the circle took a few more steps backward, holding their spears ready to guard against any more surprises.

Before Blade or his opponents could make another move, there was a flurry in the crowd. Voices rose in angry protest, spearheads clanged together, and then Nayung burst out into the open. He dashed toward the guards that had closed the Ulungas' circle behind Blade, but stopped just outside spear range. Then he raised his spear high over head in salute to King Afuno, threw back his head, and roared out his message.

"Oh, King, see the great warrior of the English and how he makes the best warriors of the Zungans fall over themselves like children playing in the dust. He has sworn before the Sky Father that he can teach each Zungan to fight as he does. The iron swords and the iron clothing of the slave raiders will no longer protect them. They will all hang from posts around our victory fires. Our wives and children will not be their slaves, but theirs will be ours. Let this warrior Blade speak to you, oh, King!"

While Nayung was shouting his message, Blade was doing his best to watch the four guards circling around him and King Afuno on his chair. Afuno held on to both of his spears, but lowered the one he had raised into throwing position. Otherwise he neither moved nor spoke during Nayung's entire speech. Once it seemed to Blade that the massive head jerked in surprise, but that might have only been his imagination.

Blade braced himself as Nayung came to the end of his speech. Had Afuno, understood their message? And even if he had, would he dare to encourage two men who were under the ban of the Ulungas? If the answer was no to either question, Blade knew that he and Nayung had only minutes at most to live. Perhaps less, if Afuno took it into his head to use his royal privileges and hurl those spears.

The minutes dragged on. The sun seemed hotter than ever, or was it just the strain? Blade knew that sweat was pouring off him as though he were melting away. Cautiously he reached up a hand to loosen a fold of the turban and wipe his streaming forehead with it. Then he turned back toward Afuno.

The king still stood motionless on his platform. Then Blade saw Princess Aumara get to her feet and spring lightly down from her platform. A moment later she was climbing up beside her father and talking urgently into his ear. Blade would have given a good deal to hear what she was saying.

Then Afuno turned back toward Blade and Nayung. He fixed the two men with a stare that even fifty feet away made Blade swallow and brace himself for action. Then in a clear, high-pitched voice he hailed them.

"D'bor Nayung, Richard Blade of the English, come into the king's circle."

Blade's own whistling sigh of relief was lost in the gasps and murmurs of astonishment from the thousands of onlookers. For a moment he could not have said a word if he had had to. He could only turn to Nayung and see his own grin mirrored on the other's face. Nayung stretched out his hand toward Blade, Blade took it, and both turned toward the king's circle.

Before, they could take a single step, a voice roared out from the other side of the circles:

"Wait, oh, King!"

The voice was shrill with rage, but it was unmistakably Chamba's. Blade's grip on his spear tightened. Chamba went on. "Oh, great Afuno, shall you defy the Sky Father? These men were forbidden by the

Ulungas to approach your person. The Ulungas have spoken!"

Again Blade tensed, waiting for Afuno's answer. If the king said, "Then, so be it," or some other words of submission, Blade and Nayung would once again be facing a quick death.

Afuno's voice was calm at first. "Blade has shown himself a warrior who indeed may teach us much. If there is a wrongness in letting them approach me against the will of the Ulungas, let the wrath of the Sky Father fall on my head. Do not attempt to teach me how to be a king, Chamba." Then Afuno's voice rose to an angry roar. "And by what right do you speak for the Ulungas, Chamba? Are their speakers all mute, that I do not hear their voices? Or are you lying? Oh, Speakers of the Ulungas, I am waiting for your answer." There was no mistaking the sarcasm in Afuno's voice.

Nor was there any mistaking the silence that followed Afuno's question. Blade did not know which of the unarmed men in the Ulungas' circle might be speakers, but he did know that none of them were saying anything. The silence went on and on, and a triumphant grin spread across Nayung's face. He motioned Blade forward.

They had taken only one step when Chamba's voice rose again from the other side of the circles. Now it was shrill with half-hysterical rage, in spite of its words. "Oh, Sky Father, bless me in slaying these blasphemers, and when they are dead turn your curse away from the Zungans!" Even in his rage, Chamba did not quite dare call down a curse on King Afuno. Blade and Nayung looked at each other, then nodded and moved a few steps apart. As they raised their spears, Chamba burst through the guards into the Ulungas' circle and sprinted around it toward the waiting men. A few steps behind him ran a second warrior.

Whether the Ulungas' guards would have intervened or not, they had no time to do so. Chamba and his companion came down at Blade and Nayung at a dead run, spears raised but dancing and darting back and forth. Blade made a movement to jump backward, but Nayung shook his head sharply.

"It is against a warrior's honor to retreat."

Blade opened his mouth to reply, then shut it again. This was no time to argue. Besides, if he wanted to impress the Zungans, he would have to win according to their rules, regardless of what his training and instincts told him. This wasn't the first time he had played this sort of game. So he nodded to Nayung, and both moved forward to meet their opponents.

Crude technique or not, Chamba at full speed was a deadly opponent. And he was strong. His first downthrust nearly drove all the way into Blade's chest. It took all the strength of Blade's arms to hold Chamba off. And as the man pulled his spear back, he hooked the head over the shaft of Blade's spear and nearly jerked it out of his hands. Blade lurched forward, for a moment nearly off balance. He had to jump desperately sideways to avoid another thrust at his stomach, and twist his head to avoid a third at his face. Then he was able to bring his own spear back up and whip the point around into a lunge at Chamba's thigh. The warrior sprang sideways also, but not far enough or fast enough. The point scraped his skin just below the loincloth, leaving a thin oozing red line.

The slight wound made no difference to Chamba's speed or determination. He came in again, and Blade had to move fast to slam his own spear down against the shaft of Chamba's spear and force the incoming point down. The point almost went into the ground, and Blade quickly whipped his spear butt up and over at Chamba's head. Again a sideways leap took Chamba clear almost unscathed-the spear butt just grazed his cheek.

So it went on, an endless sequence of thrusts, parries, and ripostes. Each fighter was using every possible and impossible variation of his fighting style. Each was using every bit of his speed, strength, and skill. Blade soon knew that Chamba, fighting all out, was as fast as he was. Blade knew he had more endurance, and was probably stronger. But in a fight where one lucky stroke could end it, would he last long enough for these to make a difference? And how was Nayung doing? He dared not take his attention off Chamba even for a split-second glance at his companion's duel with Chamba's second.

If Chamba had been willing to retreat occasionally, he could have kept the fight going until he or Blade or both of them dropped flat on the ground from exhaustion. As it was, his honor would not permit him to give back a single step. He always stayed within range of Blade. Because he was always within range, Blade's superior strength and endurance finally began to tell.

Blade was focusing so completely on the next sequence of blows that it was a little while before he realized this. He saw one of his thrusts go home a few inches below the now-clotted blood from the first wound, just above Chamba's right knee. A thrust with the butt at Chamba's jaw missed, but glanced along the man's temple. Blade felt the jar along the spear shaft. Chamba shook his head, and stood still for a moment before coming in again. Since the fight began, this was the first pause in Chamba's steady, machinelike offensive.

But it was not the last. The pauses began to come more and more frequently. Each time Chamba kept his spear up, and each time Blade attacked, he defended solidly. But it seemed to Blade that each parry or guard came a little more slowly than the one before. If anybody got home a lucky stroke now, it would be Blade, not Chamba. He told himself not to let hope make him careless about a man who was still dangerous, and moved in again.

The world had shrunk now to Chamba, the bare hard earth between them, and his own blood pounding in his ears. Suddenly something new broke in on his mind—a gasping scream, and the solid sound of metal striking bone. Chamba whirled to stare, and so did Blade.

Nayung's opponent was standing motionless, his spear raised and just about to descend. Nayung appeared to be crouching motionless, a sitting target for his opponent's downstrokes. Then Blade saw that Nayung's spear angled up toward his opponent's chest. The head of the spear was buried almost out of sight between the man's ribs, and a thin rim of blood showed around it. After what seemed an incredibly long time, the dying man dropped his spear. Both hands went down to the spear driven into his body, as if he wanted to wrench it out of him. Then he gasped again and fell forward, so that Nayung's spear drove deep into him, then came out through his back.

Before Nayung could make a single move to jerk his spear free, Chamba struck. He leaped sideways from in front of Blade and came down in a crouch within easy reach of his companion's fallen spear. He snatched it up and raised it to the attack position. Nayung began sidling around to the right, motioning Blade to do the same in the opposite direction. Blade nodded, but kept his eyes fixed on Chamba. The man's eyes were wide, staring, and bloodshot; his breath came in bellows-like wheezes. He seemed to be nerving himself for something.

Then his spear rose, sun flashing from the head, and his right arm snapped forward. The spear hurled free through the air. Before Blade could realize what Chamba had done, the thrown spear plunged deep into Nayung's thigh.

Blade did not need the howl of rage and horror that rose up deafeningly all around him to tell him that Chamba had made a fatal error. He saw King Afuno stiffen as though he himself had been struck, then raise one of his own spears, ready to hurl it into Chamba.

Somehow Blade managed to raise his voice enough so that Afuno realized he was trying to say something. The king's bull-like roar beat through the shouting of the crowd. As the yells and curses subsided, Blade raised his spear and shouted at the top of his voice.

"The Sky Father has spoken. He who would seek to deny my teachings to the Zungans has revealed himself a mad blasphemer. He was thrown a spear and wounded my comrade, the D'bor Nayung. Oh, King, let me teach the Zungans first of all how I honor their laws. Let me slay thus blasphemer with my own hands!"

Even King Afuno could not make himself heard over the roar that went up at these words. Cheers now mingled with the curses, and Blade heard his name from a thousand throats. He looked to where Nayung lay. Four of the Royal Guards were already standing around him, examining his wound, preparing to pull the spear out. Nayung was as well off as he could be for now. It was time to settle with Chamba.

The man was desperate, and Blade knew that a desperate man was the most dangerous opponent possible. But Chamba had lost too much speed and strength. No matter how furiously he attacked, Blade's defenses held. For a few minutes Blade stayed firmly on the defensive, judging Chamba's speed to the split second.

Then he moved in for the kill. The golden sunlight danced in a dazzling pattern as his spearhead bobbed and weaved, up and down, in and out. Bloody slashes and punctures appeared on Chamba's arms, legs, stomach, cheeks. Blood from a cut in his scalp ran down toward one eye. Blade stepped back and let Chamba wipe it off without stopping his spear's movements. Then he moved in again.

A feint with the point at Chamba's throat. The man's spear swung sideways to block it. Blade quickly reversed his spear, bringing the butt down across Chamba's right hand. He felt bone crack, saw the hand open limply and Chamba's spear dip. He swung his own spear down and then sideways like a club. Chamba's spear flew out of his left hand and landed twenty feet away.

Before Chamba could recover from the shock, Blade rammed his own spear point down into the ground. Then he leaped forward, one leg snapping out in a flying kick. The foot drove into Chamba's stomach. He rose completely clear of the ground, folding up in midair like a snapped twig. He was still doubled up when he hit the ground. Blade was on top of Chamba in a second. Three rapid chops with the edge of his hand-to the throat, to the temple, to the back of the neck-and Chamba lay still.

Again deafening cheering pounded at Blade's ears as he lurched to his feet and retrieved his spear. He turned toward King Afuno and raised it in salute, but made no effort to speak. The explosion of a bomb would have been lost in the uproar.

He waited until the crowd ran out of either enthusiasm or breath, then shouted across to Afuno. "Hail, oh, King. I have done as I had promised. With my own hands I have slain the blasphemer. This is my first lesson to the Zungans and my first offering to the Sky Father."

More cheering, but not so loud or so prolonged this time. The crowd was obviously running down. Considering how long they had been standing in the hot sun, this was hardly surprising. Blade knew that his own head was beginning to swim from the heat and the fight. If he had to stand out here much longer, he was going to give the crowd another bit of entertainment by fading flat on his face.

He managed to raise his voice again. "Oh, King, my companion and friend Nayung is badly wounded. May I see him taken safely to his house and then return to approach you?"

Afuno nodded. "It is my wish that you go with Nayung, and my own doctor shall come to care for both of you. It is my wish also that you remain in the house of Nayung until I myself come. That will be after the death rites of my son. Then we shall speak of your fighting arts and of what you may teach the Zungans." The king's face was expressionless. But even at this distance, there was no mistaking the interest and curiosity on Princess Aumara's face.

CHAPTER TEN

Afuno came to Nayung's house that night, heralded by another blare of horns. This did not wake Nayung, who was sleeping peacefully. To Blade's relief, the doctor had pronounced Nayung in no danger. He would merely have to stay off his leg for a few weeks in order to ensure that it healed properly.

Once out of the public eye, Afuno seemed to have a great dislike for royal pomp and ceremony. He squatted down on the floor, drank thirstily from the water jug, and fixed Blade with an unpleasantly searching stare.

"Well, Richard Blade of the English. Was Nayung telling the truth about you when he broke up my assembly?"

Blade nodded.

"The whole truth?"

Blade had to shake his head. Afuno grinned, showing a full set of white teeth. "I did not think so. But I do not blame either of you. You had to get my attention and speak fast. If all the people who come before me with petitions and requests were to follow that rule, it would be easier to be a king. But now we are alone. Say all that you need to say, and leave nothing out."

As far as he could, Blade did so. Afuno had the gift of listening well, rare anywhere and still rarer in men of power. When he asked a question, it was either to keep Blade moving, or to clarify some point he did not understand. And he did not mind admitting that he did not understand. By the time Blade had finished, he found it exceedingly easy to understand how King Afuno had ruled the proud, martial Zungans for forty years without dispute.

When Blade had finished, Afuno again fixed him with a painfully searching stare. Then he nodded slowly and said, "It is well that you showed what you could do. Otherwise I might find it hard to believe. But you were knocking down the Ulungas' guards as though they were children. That was good to see, and I know many Zungans will feel the same. And what you did to Chamba!" The king laughed fiercely. "That man had the kind of hot head that can only be cooled down by cutting it off."

Then Afuno's face sobered. "Do not think that I am grateful to you for forcing me to go against the will of the Ulungas. I know Chamba was telling the truth, but fortunately few others did, and they kept their mouths shut. That was well for them. But if the speakers had supported Chamba, it would have been difficult for me to recognize you and Nayung. And then it would have gone hard for you.

"However, the Ulungas may see that it would be wise to go on keeping their mouths shut. If that is the case, our problems will be smaller."

Afuno rose. "In any case, Ulungas or not, I am going to take you and Nayung to Dorkalu with me

tomorrow. There you will meet with the Great Mors and the On'ror who commands all the warriors of Zunga under me. The On'ror will pick good warriors to learn this new way of fighting from you. Then each of the ones you have taught will teach more, and so on. You are a gift from the Sky Father, and I will not slap his face by wearing you out asking you to do all the teaching yourself."

Blade smiled. "Your Majesty understands very well the way to train warriors in a new way of fighting. It is what we do among the English also. But must Nayung come now? He will not be able to walk."

"He can travel by litter. And you will need his advice about the laws and customs of the Zungans. Listen to him, for he is a wise man as well as an excellent warrior."

"That is the way I see him also."

"Then, so be it. We leave tomorrow at dawn." Afuno raised a massive hand in a gesture that was part wave, part blessing, and strode out. Blade turned to Nayung and saw the Zungan warrior was awake and grinning broadly.

"We are off to a good start, Blade. But it is no more than that so far. And we have also been very lucky."

"That we have."

Warriors of the Royal Guard routed them out of their sleep while it was still dark the next morning, bringing food and beer and a litter for Nayung. They were on the move before the sun had cleared the walls of Brona, and the sky was still pink and gold as they crossed the field. The bodies of the slave raiders still swung gently from their poles, but three new poles had been added. The bodies swinging from these were Zungans. One body was headless.

Afuno saw the curiosity on Blade's face and grinned. "The one with no head is Chamba. I would have fed his head to the pigs, but they would get little food from it. There was not much in that skull of his. The other two are the warriors who ran from you when you disarmed them. That was the act of a coward, and there will be no cowards among the Zungans while I rule."

Blade nodded, his face expressionless. He did not object to any of the punishments. But they were a sharp reminder of the harsh, bloody world in which he had begun to make his way.

Outside the gates of Brona the royal caravan formed up. Four hundred warriors, a hundred slaves, assorted free members of the royal household, and the royal family itself. More than five hundred men and women in all, and more than a hundred cattle. Some of these bore the platforms and litter, others carried supplies and equipment, others were simply driven along to provide fresh meat. The pace of the caravan was limited to the leisurely amble of the cattle. Tired as he was, Blade found that frustratingly slow.

Though the caravan moved slowly, it started early and kept on all day, with only one short break for water and food. The water came around in skin bags. It was warm and tasted foul, but after hours of marching in the sun, Blade was too thirsty to care. As he drank, he sensed somebody's eyes on him. Spinning around, he saw Princess Aumara quickly turn her graceful head away and go back to staring straight ahead. In the momentary glimpse he had of her eyes, he saw they were wide, brown, and once again filled with an unmistakable curiosity. But it was hard to believe this curiosity could lead to anything here and now, out on the plain in the middle of the entire royal caravan.

The sun was dipping below the horizon before they reached the waterhole that was their goal and campsite. By the light of torches the household slaves pitched hide tents, laid out food, refilled the water bags, and lit fires. The warriors refilled their water bottle's, gnawed pieces of dried meat, then moved out into the darkness to form a wide protective circle around the camp.

There were eight tents-one for the king, one for each of his daughters, one for Blade and Nayung, and one for the royal advisers. Everybody else would sleep on the ground, under the stars. And soon everybody was asleep, except for the warriors on guard and the slaves tending the fires.

Blade found that he could not sleep. Things were moving too fast for his mind to adjust to them. He was rising among the Zungans-in fact, he was shooting up like a skyrocket. And there was nothing to support his position except the favor of Afuno, his own skills, and a great deal of luck. So far the luck had been running his way. He hoped that it would continue.

Although he had been walking all day, he decided that perhaps a short walk around the camp would relax him as much as anything could. Nayung was asleep, and Blade did not disturb him as he slipped out of the tent and stepped out into the flickering orange glow of the firelight.

He kept walking, feeling the breeze blow over his skin, blowing away some of the tension. Out here the fire was reduced to an orange blotch on the dark plain, dimly showing up the hunched forms of the tents around it. From over nearer to the waterhole, the cattle stirred restlessly, and occasionally one bawled loud and harsh. A half moon rode high in a sky filled with more stars than Blade had ever seen before.

How long he sat there he didn't know. In time he realized that the temperature was dropping, and he thought of drifting back toward the warmth of the fire. He started to rise. As he did so, he realized that someone was standing in front of him, looking down at him.

He stood up, and found himself looking down at the figure. The face tilted upward, and in the faint moonlight Blade saw two wide eyes shining up into his. His jaw set hard. It was Princess Aumara.

The silence went on and on, those two eyes still gleaming upward. Finally Blade heard a soft laugh, and Aumara spoke. "What is it, Richard Blade of the English? Do you find my company unpleasant?"

"No, Princess. Only surprising. Why are you wandering about outside your tent?"

"Do the English keep their women locked up, like the Kandans?"

Blade was startled, and it showed in his voice. "No. Why do you ask?"

"If they do not, why are you surprised that I do not sit and stifle in my tent? The air is so good and clean out here on the plain."

"It is. But aren't you afraid of being-bothered?" Blade could not think of a more tactful word at the moment.

"Who would bother me?" asked Aumara. Not arrogantly, but simply asking a question about a matter that she regarded as self-evident. "I am the First Princess of Zunga. It is death to show disrespect to me. And it would not even be necessary to wait for my father's guards and judgment to bring that death." She reached up for the thong that held her robe together at the waist, undid it, and did a little whirling step. The robe lifted, showing a belt around her waist with two gleaming knives in it. It also showed that she wore nothing else under her robe. Blade had a fleeting glimpse of a trim waist and full round thighs

converging in a curly dark mass of hair in the center.

Blade jumped as if he had been stung. He had not exactly been afraid of this, but he could see a hideous host of complications following in its wake. Aumara noticed his reaction, and her eyes blazed into his again.

"Is there a problem, Richard Blade? Do you perhaps find me not desirable? No, I see that is not the case, whatever you may say." She pointed down at Blade's groin. He was entirely too aware that his manhood had risen. As usual it obeyed no will but its own.

"My tongue will not lie to you, Princess. Why should it? You are a beautiful woman. My mind and my manhood agree on that. But you are also a princess of the Zungans. Suppose I took you, and did not please you? Dawn might find me lying here stiff with one of your knives stuck in me. And suppose I pleased you, but my pleasing you did not please your father? Then the dawn might find me hanging downward from a pole, with the smoke of my burning guts rising up around me. And there are important things I have to do in Zunga." He very nearly added, "More important than servicing a randy princess," but realized that would be suicidally untactful. Instead he substituted, "Things that will not be done if I die."

"I like that, Blade," said Aumara. "I am not so vain that I rejoice in having a man fling away all his plans and duties to take me. But I can assure you there is no danger. I believe you will do your best, and no man can do any more. If your best is not good enough for me, there simply will be no other time. But if it is..." She left the sentence snidely unfinished. "And my father will say nothing, even if he learns of what we have done. He does not see fit to keep me in a cage, now that I am a grown woman. Even less will he try to hold me back now that my last brother is dead and I will be joint ruler of Zunga with a husband someday."

She reached up to undo the thongs at the neck of her robe, then shrugged the robe to the ground. Nude except for the belt, she stood before him. Her skin was very smooth and its mahogany color had a slight sheen in the moonlight. Blade stared. In spite of his surprise, he felt his erection rise and stiffen still further.

"Here and now, Princess?"

"None will be looking or listening for us, Blade. If we are married, our first bedding will be before a royal assembly with ten thousand Zungan warriors looking on and giving you advice. Why not here and now?"

Aumara's mention of their being married nearly made Blade's erection collapse on the spot. Aumara noticed this. "Ah, Blade, I surprised you, did I not? But come, I think I see a little life still down there." One long-fingered hand drifted down, then up under Blade's loincloth. Her fingers played busily and in a few moments she smiled. "As I thought, there is life. It is time, Blade. It is time."

She unbuckled her belt and let it fall to the ground. Blade undid his loincloth and tossed it down on top of her robe. Then he stepped forward and put his arms around her, drawing her close to him, until her face lay against his shoulder. His hands went from the back of her neck down the straight back with its smooth, velvety skin, stroking, caressing, cupping the firm, perfectly rounded buttocks. Looking down, he saw her eyes close and her lips curl up in a smile. A smile of contentment so far, like a baby being held or a cat being petted. No passion in it yet.

He raised a hand and tilted her chin up until their lips could meet. Her mouth was rigid and stiff for a moment, for she seemed unfamiliar with kissing. Then it flowed open, and her small delicate tongue

leaped out to meet his, moving like a living thing. Her arms rose from her sides and locked around his body. Her hands met in the small of his back and began a gentle pressure there.

He pulled away for a moment's breath and looked at Aumara's face again. Yes, there was passion showing now, no mistaking it. Suddenly she sank to her knees, hands still clasped at the small of Blade's back. Her mouth opened, then warm, wet lips closed down on Blade's swollen member.

If Blade had felt aroused before, her expert fellatio brought him higher, and then higher still. He had to clamp down all his self-control to keep from a fierce and savage coming. His body was bowed backward as he fought for restraint. Aumara's hands pulled him forward bit by bit, as her lips worked their way up his organ. It seemed that she wanted to take the whole massive swollen rod in her mouth.

Suddenly she withdrew, with final twisting motions of her lips as they passed over the end that nearly put an end to Blade. He let out something between a groan and a sigh of relief as the steadily rising pressure faded away to something more tolerable.

Now he wanted to be in her, desperately wanted to feel her wet canal tightening around him. He knelt down on the ground, grasping her firmly by the upper arms. Then he lay back, and as he did so, he pulled her slowly but firmly down on him, penetrating her just as slowly and firmly.

She was aroused and dripping and no virgin—that he felt the moment he entered. Her head went back at such an angle that for a moment Blade wondered how her neck could manage it, and her eyes rolled up in her head. She was no virgin indeed! She was expert and hungry and demanding. Her hips began to move in a slow circular rolling motion that alternately tightened and loosened the pressure on him. Again he had to fight for self-control.

Up and down, around and around she churned. Her breath came now in great whooping gasps, so loud that Blade half expected a dozen guards to wander over to find out what the noise was. Next to his losing control, the last thing he wanted was a mob of spectators.

It went on and on, and fortunately so did Blade. There was more than one time when he knew absolutely that another half second of Aumara's stimulation would bring him over the top. But she always sensed those moments, and always slowed her movements by just the little bit needed to save the situation. In spite of the coolness, they were both sweating now. Aumara's sweat dripped down off her writhing body onto Blade and mixed with his.

Blade's hands had been holding onto her arms all this time. Now they seemed to develop a will of their own, moving inward and down. Her nipples jutted forward from her full, perfectly curved breasts, hard little points. His hands kept moving, down over the curves of her breasts, down over the nipples.

As his hands cupped her breasts, she exploded. The scream rising in her throat died in a hiss, but her body arched like a bow in a series of wild convulsions. Then so did Blade's, as he bent himself upward, driving still deeper as he gushed and spurted into her. He fell back on the ground, Aumara sagged down on top of him and lay with her head on his shoulder, his relaxing organ still inside her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blade was never quite sure how he and Aumara got back to their tents afterward. And he had only vague memories of rolling himself up in his hide cloak after crawling back into the tent. But he had very vivid memories of the encounter the next morning, when the bawling of the cattle as they were watered and the clatter of the pots as the slaves prepared breakfast roused him out before dawn.

Vivid memories, and pleasant ones. Aumara was beautiful, and she had obviously been well satisfied. Her interest in him was another piece of luck. Whether it was good or bad he couldn't say right now. As long as he could satisfy with both his wits, and his virility his luck should remain good. But the affairs of princesses could develop nasty complications at a moment's notice. So could affairs with princesses. He would have to do his best, and rely on the ruthless but apparently just King Afuno to take up any slack.

They were on the move again, before all the dawn colors had faded from the sky, ambling along at the same tedious pace as the day before. The plain stretched out before them, as bare and flat and empty as before. It was not until nearly sundown that the smoke and the herds of Dorkalu, the Zungan capital, came in sight.

"We are almost home," said Aumara. The grin she gave Blade made it obvious what home meant to her, at least for the moment. It meant more privacy and comfort for them and their lovemaking. Blade decided not to try explaining to her how much time he would have to spend training the warriors, assuming that the Great D'bors and the On'ror let him.

The homeward-bound herds thickened, until the warriors had to form a ring around the caravan to keep its cattle and those of the herds separate. A few minutes later Blade made out a long, dark line on the horizon. "The walls of Dorkalu," Aumara said.

The sun dipped below the horizon and the tropical darkness swallowed up the land. A little after that, torches sparked in the darkness ahead as warriors came out from the city to escort the caravan the final miles to it. And eventually more torches sparked in the darkness ahead, held by men standing on top of the walls themselves. These stretched out of sight into the darkness on either side, and rose more than twenty feet above the plain. Dead ahead lay a massive gate, wide enough for a dozen men to march through.

The cattle turned aside instead of going through the gate. In Dorkalu, the herds had their own separate compounds outside the walls, each with its own fortifications and guards. But the royal caravan kept straight on.

The gate squealed and groaned open, and the caravan marched through without breaking formation or step. On the other side of the massive walls an inner gate led out onto another of the enormous open fields. Blade could not even see its edges in the darkness. What he could see would have swallowed Brona twice over. In the center of the field rose what could only be King Afuno's palace, looming behind its own wall, its roof and balconies outlined by still more flickering torches.

Now the caravan broke up in a flurry of barked orders and slaves and warriors hustling about on a dozen different errands. Afuno leaped down from his platform as lightly as any young warrior and came over to Blade. Four warriors nearly as large as he was stood on each side of him.

"Blade," he said, "we must move quickly before the Ulungas try to make people forget Chamba's sacrilege and remember only that I went against their word. They will not have an easy time of it, for Chamba's sacrilege was great and public. But they may do it, and if they do, we will be back where we started. I will not give you up to the Ulungas. But in such a case I would not be able to give you a chance to train my warriors in your English fighting arts."

He sighed. "If I had one son left-just one-I could throw myself against the Ulungas, sacrifice myself to bring them down. And then my son could rule a kingdom in which the Ulungas had no more power. But there are only daughters left. It is always a delicate thing to set up the joint rule of a princess and her

consort. It is too delicate a thing to survive what might happen if I fought the Ulungas openly."

Blade was worried. This gloomy note was something new for Afuno. "Surely at least the War Council will not listen to the Ulungas?"

"The Great Mors are supposed to be like you-wise men, not just warriors with strong arms and thick heads. Not all of them are. And the On'ror is only partly a war leader. He also speaks for the Ulungas in questions of war. He will speak this time, and he will speak loudly. I only hope nobody listens to him. At least, not until you have done your work for the Zungans."

In spite of these disturbing words, Blade managed to get a good night's sleep. It turned out he needed it, because the next morning a summons to appear before the War Council came.

Like most Zungan public business, attending the War Council had to be done on an empty stomach. Blade supposed this was certainly one way of discouraging long speeches. But he would rather have sat through any number of speeches with something in his stomach than face the War Council and present his case with his empty stomach growling like a starving dog.

By now he was used to explaining himself, his fighting arts, and the English people to the Zungans, while putting his best foot forward. He tried to avoid claiming too much for his fighting skills, pointing out that he had never seen slave raiders in action. But if they were as he had heard them described, he could certainly teach the Zungans how to do much better against them. They would not win every fight, but they would win many more. And they would do this without any sacrilegious violations of the Sky Father's laws, such as throwing their spears as Chamba had done. Blade saw Afuno smile at the mention of Chamba.

When Blade finished, he had no idea whether he had won or lost his case. The men of the War Council had listened to his entire presentation with totally expressionless faces, except for Afuno. And the faces had not changed when Blade went out to await their decision.

There was beer and bread waiting for him in the corridor, and he fell to. He had just polished off the last of both when he saw a slave woman come down the hall and stop before the commander of the council's guards. They whispered together for a moment, then the commander turned to Blade and said, "This woman is Princess Aumara's. The princess wants you. You must go."

"Now?" asked Blade.

"Yes."

"But the council-"

"Richard Blade of the English," said the guard commander with a grin. "Do not fear the War Council. Fear the princess if she becomes angry. I know. Soon you will too." There was no trace of a leer in the man's grin. If he knew anything, he was keeping it to himself. Blade nodded and followed the woman.

He did not have to follow her very far. Aumara was standing in the corner of a small room off the next corridor to the left. As the door of the room closed behind him, Aumara slipped into his arms. She seemed to want to be held, and as he held her, he felt her trembling.

"What is it, Princess? Do you...?" He was trying to think of a tactful way to ask a warrior princess what had frightened her when she saved him the trouble.

"The On'ror has asked for my hand."

It took Blade a moment to realize what she had said. It took him another moment to realize what it meant. When he did, he swore softly, invoking both the Sky Father and a variety of other deities picked up on his adventures. Then he shook his head in impotent fury.

"I see you understand," said Aumara.

"Yes. The man who can determine whether I become a great hero of the Zungans is now my rival for you. If he gives me the chance to train the Zungans, I may end up with fame above his, second only to King Afuno. If he does not give me the chance, he himself will be the strongest candidate for your hand, no matter what your father thinks of him."

"Yes," said Aumara bitterly. "And the On'ror and I will rule for a few short years over the Zungans while the slave raiders continue to bleed them. Then we will die with our people when the Rulami and the Kandans march together."

Blade felt like swearing again, but realized it would be a waste of breath. All the optimism he had built up over the past couple of hours had drained out of him. He sat down and stared off into the darkness of the room, his mind working furiously.

"Can you delay accepting any consort for a while?"

"How long, Blade?"

Blade frowned. "It depends on how much of a chance to train the warriors I get. Whatever you do, hold off choosing until I have some sort of a victory to show off. That will give me the status I need to make an offer for you.

"Whatever you and I think, your father won't dare accept me until I have enough status among the warriors so that he won't face a rebellion by choosing me."

Aumara nodded sadly. "There are very many times when I was growing up that I wished I was not a princess. This is the first time I have wished that since I became a woman." She sighed and seemed to put the thought away, then returned to the issue. "How long will it take you to win that victory?"

"That I won't even be able to guess at until the War Council decides what I am to do."

After that there was nothing more to say, and they sat in the dark stifling little room holding each other. Blade did not know how long they sat before the woman knocked gently on the door and whispered, "The council is calling for Blade."

Unwinding himself from Aumara's arms, he rose and followed the woman back to the council chamber. The guard led him inside and then vanished. Standing before the fifteen seated figures, he scanned the dark faces for some sign of what their decision had been.

Fourteen of the faces were as unreadable as ever. The fifteenth was the On'ror's. Blade looked the man over more closely than before, noticing the thickening jowls, the high forehead, the missing finger and the half-missing ear, the scars on his chest and arms. This man was an enemy. One he could take almost easily in a straight fight, he suspected. But would it ever come to, that? Blade doubted it.

"Richard Blade of the English," said the On'ror in a voice now as gross and ugly as his body. "The council has heard you. It has talked of you. It has decided." The man paused. He stretched the pause until it was obvious to Blade that this was a deliberate effort to make him sweat and fidget. He stared back at the On'ror with a level, expressionless gaze. He was damned if the man was going to win their very first confrontation.

Finally the On'ror got the message that Blade wasn't going to yield. He lifted his head until he appeared to be staring off into space-or perhaps up into the heavens? Once again he prolonged the display of reverence in an effort to make Blade nervous.

Blade remained unmoved, but the strain was too much for King Afuno. "Well, get on with it, damn you!" the King snapped. "The Sky Father isn't going to appear on the ceiling and give you a scroll with the words you want written on it in gold."

The king's voice jolted the On'ror into action. He rose to his feet and the rest of the council followed. "Richard Blade of the English, your methods of fighting may not be pleasing to the Sky Father. But we shall not utterly cast out them or you: You shall train ten men in your arts for three moons. Then you shall wait three full moons more, and each of those men shall train ten more. After that all shall wait one full year, that the Sky Father may show us whether or not your arts are pleasing to him. Neither you nor any of the men you have trained shall instruct any other warriors during that year. Further we shall not say until all the time has passed." He sat down again, his massive rump hitting the chair with a solid thump. The grin on his face was almost a smirk.

Forty objections and as many curses died on Blade's lips at a sharp look from Afuno. With an effort he controlled himself, took a deep breath, and without waiting for the guards, turned around and left the chamber. Outside he headed for the stairs to the second floor. He had to get out of this stifling gloom, onto a balcony and into the sun and the fresh air.

Aumara met him halfway up the stairs. "I thought you would be coming up here, Blade. What was the decision? No, I can see it in your face. Bad?"

Blade was calm now and his ability to plan was back. He nodded, but slowly. "It could have been worse." He told her. She shook her head.

"I cannot hold out for six months, and never for a whole year after that. Even my father would cast me down as First Princess if I tried it. You must do something sooner."

Blade had to laugh at this, but it was a bitter laugh.

"Very well, Princess. I will see if I can defeat the slave raiders with ten men."

CHAPTER TWELVE

It did not come to that. Nayung, King Afuno, and several of the Great Mors who were thoroughly out of sympathy with the On'ror's plans pitched in and kept Blade's job from being completely impossible. It was merely fantastically difficult.

Blade chose his ten trainees carefully, with the advice of King Afuno. Among them were two Great Mors, five Mors, and three other fighters of known wisdom as well as skill. They were of the anti-Ulunga faction. Blade was able to be entirely frank with them the first time he gathered them together for a

training session.

"The On'ror and some of the War Council want to play the game of the Ulungas. I don't know what that game is, but I have seen things like it in my travels. It is a game dangerous to the Zungans. The only people who will gain from it are the Ulungas themselves and perhaps the slave raiders of Rulam and Kanda. But you do not want to let the Ulungas lead you by the hand like little children. That is good. You are wise men as well as great warriors. And by your wisdom as well as by your war skills you may save the people of Zunga." That was a prospect he deliberately and carefully held out to them—that they would be the saviors of Zunga. He thought it wiser not to push himself too far forward, regardless of what plans Princess Aumara had for him.

After that there was no difficulty in whipping up his students' enthusiasm. They were all grown men, trained warriors, in top physical and mental condition, and more than willing to learn. Training them was a pleasure, even if an exhausting one. Blade soon learned that they were insatiable in their curiosity about the ways of the English, not only in fighting but in all other things. He had to keep mentally very much on his toes to answer their questions. And he had to keep even more on his toes physically. Not only were they willing to train from dawn to dark and even at night, but they learned fast. Within ten days half of them were already dangerous opponents.

Almost as great a pleasure to Blade were the various tricks he and King Afuno were playing on the Ulungas and the On'ror. The matter of the new balanced spears, for example. King Afuno's household included a large contingent of smiths. He had them make up the twenty practice spears for Blade's students.

After they had made these, the smiths waited for a few days while Blade tested the spears. Then he sent back the five best, and the smiths went right back to work making more. Soon they were turning out fifty to a hundred of the new spears a week. In obscure corners of the cellars of King Afuno's palace, piles of long hide-wrapped bundles began to grow. Each bundle contained ten of the new spears.

"And the Ulungas can say nothing about it," said Afuno with a triumphant grin. "They said only that you could not train more than a certain number of fighters. They said nothing about not making the weapons for any number."

There were even ways devised for getting around the training restrictions. All the training sessions were held in the open field, where anybody who wanted to stop and watch could do so. Many warriors did. Afterward, some of them went off and tried out privately what they had seen in the sessions. They soon discovered that the standard Zungan spear was not nearly as good as the new balanced ones for the new, fighting style. They came to Blade, asking for new spears. He sent them to Nayung, who asked each one a few questions, intended to reveal if the warrior was a sympathizer with the Ulungas or not. If Nayung approved of him, the warrior was then taken down into the cellars of the palace and given two of the new spears.

By the time Nayung was back on his feet, Blade had trained his hard core of ten about as much as he could without their going stale or getting bored. At least fifty more warriors had watched and practiced enough so that they also were now giving lessons. About five hundred warriors in all were now learning the new fighting techniques, and more than a thousand of the new spears were in circulation.

King Afuno was openly delighted at this neat outflanking of the Ulungas. So was Blade. He had heard J tell many tales of the years when intelligence service budgets had been slashed to the bone. The younger men, the field agents in particular, had performed miracles of improvisation and judicious deception. In some of those stories there had been a note of mild scorn for the postwar intelligence operatives, who

had never known a real starvation budget, or learned how to outwit Whitehall. Well, when he got back from this trip, Blade knew he could tell J at least one good story of making do and outwitting higher authorities.

But as well as things were going, and as much fun as he was having, Blade knew the horizon was still far from clear. Neither he nor Afuno nor Nayung believed that the Ulungas would overlook the tricks and evasions of their decision indefinitely. Even if the Ulungas were not sufficiently familiar with things military to recognize what was happening, the On'ror certainly was and would pass the word to his masters. And then the fat would be, in the fire-Blade's fat, Afuno's, and Nayung's.

Meanwhile, the On'ror was also pushing his suit for Aumara. The princess would neither encourage nor discourage him. As long as he kept coming around on visits and talking to her, she would be able to learn at least some of what he was thinking and planning. And what she learned, she passed on to Blade each time she slipped into his room at night.

For many weeks there was nothing in the On'ror's words to cause Blade much alarm. In fact, Aumara's mocking recitals of the man's constant boasting became something he looked forward to almost as much as to their lovemaking. Aumara had a savage gift for mimicry. But he listened closely to those recitals while laughing at them. A boastful man who may drop hints of his plans while boasting is an easier enemy.

Finally the day came when he gathered his ten students together and told them that tomorrow they would go north to hunt slave raiders. If he had just offered each of them a ton of gold or half a dozen beautiful women, they could not have been happier. When the cheering died, he reminded them to bring three spears and two water bottles each. He warned them not to expect that the slave raiders would lie down and die when the new spears were waved in their faces. He made it clear that this was very much a trial run, and they were not going to fight a pitched battle if the Sky Father made it possible. And he was quite sure that they had not heard half a word of all his warnings and advice. Hoping that the Zungans' luck would hold until they got their overconfidence out of their systems, he went off to his chamber.

Aumara came to him that night. As she slipped into his bed and flowed up against him, he felt her trembling. Not with desire this time, but with fear. He held her gently and murmured in her ear as though he were comforting a child, but the trembling went on. Finally he pulled her tight against him and whispered in her ear, "What is it, my princess?"

She swallowed. "The On'ror knows that you are taking your men out tomorrow."

"So? That's not a secret. Why should it be? The slave raiders aren't going to find out about it. And what good would it do if they did?"

"Are you sure, Blade? Are you sure the slave raiders don't know?"

It was Blade's turn to stiffen. "What have you heard? Has the On'ror been saying something?"

"Yes. He came to my chamber this evening and drank more beer than usual. He seemed happier than I had ever seen him. I gave him more beer, and... " she paused, "I even let him make love to me. You are not angry?"

"Of course not," said Blade. "Go on."

"When we were in bed together, he kept muttering something about 'The English warrior's time is coming. He has had his run. Now he thinks he will go out and get so famous he can have you. He won't.

He won't even come back alive.' And then he laughed. He laughed for a long time, then he fell asleep."

Blade let his breath out in a long whistling sigh. Did these boasts mean that the On'ror was prepared to betray his own people to the slave raiders? That was an ugly thought. And it put Blade in an awkward position, to say the least. If he canceled the mission to the north, how could he convince his warriors that he hadn't simply lost his nerve? But if he took them north and the On'ror had passed the word on to the slave raiders to lay a trap, what then? Would it look as if he had led his ten picked men into a trap? Not to mention what losing many of the trained instructors in their first battle would do to the Zungans' morale.

Unfortunately there was no way back. He would simply have to march out tomorrow and be particularly careful. The plains and forests to the north were vast, his patrol small, the number of slave raiders limited. He and the enemy would have plenty of room to miss each other. He didn't like relying on luck, but for the moment it looked as if he would have to. With that giving him a little peace of mind, he fell asleep.

With Zungans, there was no problem in having the patrol headed north out of the city before dawn. It took them an hour to get clear of Dorkalu's herds going out to pasture, then they were alone.

They were alone for two whole days, in fact. Over the land to the north of Dorkalu the hand of the slavers had fallen heavily. Huts and whole towns lay abandoned and ruined, fields that had once been rich with grain now grew masses of weeds, the rangy survivors of the cattle herds had gone wild and lumbered away at the approach of Blade's men.

The second night out, they camped in a patch of forest on the northernmost edge of Zungan territory with extra sentries posted on all sides. The morning of the third day dawned overcast, less rare now that they were farther north. To Blade this was nothing, but to the Zungans clouds concealed the face of the Sky Father, who would not be able to see them going into battle and judge their new fighting skills. Blade did not try to argue them out of their nervousness. He was far from calm himself, here in enemy territory and with Aumara's warning hanging over his head like the gray sky itself. He hoped their nervousness would vanish with the first successful combat.

They no longer marched boldly across country, but stalked like hunting animals from one patch of cover to another. The Zungans had nothing to learn from Blade about the use of cover. In fact, he hoped he would have time to learn from them. A Zungan could stretch along the branch of a tree and remain so motionless that he seemed to merge with the branch. To a man not looking for him, he would be totally invisible.

The first sight of their enemies came toward midafternoon, sooner than Blade had expected. One of the Zungan scouts suddenly flattened himself against a tree, then cautiously waved Blade forward. Slipping forward and flattening himself against the other side of the tree, Blade followed the Zungan's pointing hand. Fourteen soldiers in two files of seven were tramping along the edge of a small ravine. They wore Rulami-style iron helmets and cuirasses, and carried the Rulami broadswords. But on each helmet and breastplate was a vertical white line.

"Kandans," said the Zungan warrior. "That white line is the sign of the Ivory Tower. This will be easy. They are not as good soldiers as the Rulami."

"Do not count the bodies until they are dead," said Blade. He turned back toward the woods where the other nine Zungans were. He waited for a count of five, until the soldiers reached a stretch of ravine where there were no bushes to give them cover. Then he raised his hand and swung it across his own throat in a chopping gesture.

The Zungans swept forward from their cover so silently that they were halfway to the ravine before the soldiers looked up and saw them coming. If the Zungans could have thrown their spears, most of the soldiers would have been dead within thirty seconds. As it was, they had time to blunder into a sort of defensive formation and raise their swords and shields before the Zungans were on them.

Blade jabbed over the top of a soldier's shield and saw the soldier flinch and drop his guard. Blade's partner beat the sword down the rest of the way with a smashing blow, then swept the weighted butt of his spear sideways. The top, of the shield guided it straight to the soldier's jaw. Blade heard bone smash and saw the soldier reel and collapse. His fall left a gap in the enemy's ragged line. Blade led his partner through it.

As he passed in through the gap, he thrust at a knee exposed by a shield raised to defend against a Zungan downstroke. The knee crunched, the shield toppled, and the downstroke plunged into the man's throat all in the same split second. A gurgling scream, and he too went down.

Now Blade was behind the enemy, but four of them were turning to face him. Then there were only three, as a Zungan caught one man turning, striking low with the spear butt into the man's unprotected groin. The man went down onto his hands and knees, and the victor reversed his spear and drove the head down through the man's spine. Then Blade's partner feinted low, pulling down the shield of the man facing Blade. Blade himself thrust straight, seeing the spearhead drive into the bearded face, seeing the face split apart and disintegrate.

"They are as helpless as children," a Zungan shouted behind Blade, and clubbed an enemy's sword out of his hand with his spear butt. The man dove after his weapon, but died before he reached it as the spear butt slammed down again across the back of his neck. Then Blade no longer had time to pick out individual details of fights, his own or anybody else's, as he and his partner concentrated on putting their opponents down.

These two were definitely not helpless as children. Blade leaped high to avoid a sword thrust and fell down over the edge of the ravine. He landed on all fours, and a soldier rushed at him, sword raised to chop down into Blade's skull. But in his enthusiasm the man raised his shield also. Blade's spear drove upward in a single-handed thrust and into the soldier's groin. Before the man could fall, Blade was on his feet and blocking downcuts from two more soldiers. His spear whirled, one sword flew down, the other flew up, and both men backed away. Blade would have taken their surrender, but his partner would not. He leaped forward and thrust both men through the throat in a quick double stroke.

Eventually the fight ended, with one Zungan and twelve of the soldiers lying dead on the ground. Another Zungan was wounded. Two of the soldiers had abandoned weapons, armor, and comrades and vanished into the forest. The Zungans would have gone after them, but Blade called them back. Wait until the next time slave raiders enter Zungan land, he told them. Then you can have all the fun you want hunting them down one by one. In their land, we stay together.

The Zungans did not mind his lecture. In fact, they were so overjoyed at their victory that they probably would not have minded very much if he had proclaimed himself King of Zunga. They might not have believed him, but they would not have been angry. Twelve of the enemy down, and only one Zungan! There had been no battle like that in a hundred years or even more, ever since the raiders began wearing armor. The iron of the enemy would no longer protect them. They would have to learn to fight like real warriors now, and that they would never do. The Zungans would kill them all.

Blade finally called a halt to the rejoicing. The twelve dead soldiers were stripped of their swords and personal gear and thrown into the ravine. Blade would have liked to take their armor also, but realized

that this far from home the added weight would be a hindrance. Another thing to keep in mind for the next time the raiders entered Zungan land-pick up all the armor. Don't waste it in trophies. If it can't be worn, melt it down for spearheads.

They laid the dead Zungan on the ground and stood around him while four of his comrades chanted the Warrior's Death. Then they placed the ritual bunch of grass on his chest and marched on. Darkness finally came down on them a good ten miles beyond the battle-site. They munched cold dried meat and grubbed edible mushrooms from around the roots of trees. Then the sentries were posted, and sleep came.

Blade took the first watch because he was still too keyed-up to sleep. A victory. A small one, but even he had to be encouraged by the way the new fighting technique had showed up against the soldiers. Would a thousand Zungans properly trained be able to do as well against a thousand soldiers, also properly trained?

Perhaps. Assuming, that is, that the On'ror allowed him to train those thousand Zungans. Or, preferably, ten thousand. What was the On'ror's game? Knowing that the answer would most likely be found back in Dorkalu, not out here, Blade put the matter from his mind.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There were neither sights nor sounds of pursuit all night, and still none when dawn broke over the camp. The Zungans were ready to stop worrying about pursuit. They were cheerfully confident that they would outmarch or outrun as well as outfight any soldiers coming after them. Once more Blade did not try to argue with them, he merely gave his orders. In spite of their high spirits the Zungans obeyed him as well as ever.

Blade leaned against a tree and conjured up his mental map of the area. The best course for them seemed to be heading east. There lay the roads south from Kanda to its satellite towns. Along these roads passed slave raiders heading south, slave coffles heading north, and merchant caravans headed in both directions. The Kandans would not be expecting Zungan raiders to strike there. With surprise on their side, the Zungans might cause uproar, confusion, and destruction out of all proportion to their numbers.

Blade switched off his mental map and faced the warriors. "We go east," he said. They spread out into their scouting line and followed him toward the faint glow behind the overcast that told of the rising sun.

With the sun almost invisible, it was hard to tell time. Blade guessed it was about noon when the most advanced scout suddenly halted and pointed at the ground in a clearing just ahead. Blade joined the man and frowned as he looked down. The ground was too hard to show good footprints, but there was no mistaking the swath of crushed and flattened grass. It had not begun to lose color, either. The soldiers had passed this way only hours before.

Suddenly the gray day seemed gloomier than before, and the thin forest somehow denser and more menacing. Blade shook his head. They would have to go back. It would be stupid to plunge on toward the eastern roads if the Kandans were patrolling this far west. The roads still lay a day's march ahead, and now they would have the enemy at their backs for every foot of that march.

Blade gathered the Zungans around him and explained the situation. His own partner protested the loudest.

"But Blade, there is no honor for us in running away from soldiers who passed by hours ago."

"Where they passed once, they will pass again. And when they pass again, they will be behind you."

"They will never pick up our trail."

"Perhaps not. But they might. And then they would call up other soldiers and surround us. We cannot fight hundreds of enemy soldiers, not with only ten men. The east roads will have to wait until the next time we come back. Then we will come with a hundred warriors, and the Kandans will remember our visit for a long time."

The Zungans still seemed unhappy. So Blade decided that now was perhaps a good time for a lecture he had been planning to give them later. "Remember, each of you will soon be needed to train many more warriors in the new ways of fighting. And soon after that you will be leading them into battle. Consider them as your children and think about your duty to them. Who will teach them or lead them in killing the raiders if you throw away your lives now? It is sometimes a warrior's honor to go away and live, instead of fighting and dying." If any were still unconvinced, they said nothing as he led them back toward the west.

Blade was no happier than the Zungans about abandoning the raid on the eastern roads. A victory there would have made him a man of mark, and proved the new fighting techniques beyond any doubt. It would have driven home a sharp thrust at the Ulungas and the On'ror. Now all of this would have to wait until the next raid north. And when that would be, not even the Sky Father knew. Blade did not like finding Kandan patrols this far west. It suggested special patrols, laid on to find or catch-what? Him and his men? He liked that idea even less.

They retraced their steps for more than an hour, with no more signs that they did not have the whole countryside to themselves. He drove the Zungans along at a mile-eating pace-not that any Zungan warrior ever needed to be driven to cover ground fast. By mid-afternoon the overcast was beginning to break up and the sun began to blaze down on the marching men. The improved weather lifted Blade's spirits. He began to relax and enjoy the steady rhythm of his feet on the hard ground.

Then a flash of light from the north struck his eyes. He stopped, turned, stared in that direction. Another flash came, then a series of them. With a chorus of squawks and a flurry of wings, a flock of large pink birds shot up into the air, also from the north.

Blade snapped to full alertness. The signs pointed unmistakably to a force of soldiers off to the north. His jaw set. There was only one way to find out. He motioned the Zungans to gather around him. Pointing to the north, he said, "I think there are more soldiers there. I am going to go and find out if there are too many to attack or not." He pointed to his partner. "You come with me, but keep well behind me. If there are only a few soldiers, we will call the others forward and fight them. If there are many, we will run back and warn the others, and we will all run." The Zungans' faces fell. Blade glared at them. "Remember what I said about warriors who must sometimes choose to go away and live for another day?"

"Yes," several muttered. "But to run away from an enemy in plain sight?"

"If it is the only way to stay alive, you will do it. Or do you want the Ulungas to rule in Zunga forever?" He thought of adding his suspicions of the On'ror. But this was not the time or place for that. The warriors reluctantly fell into silence and drew back under cover. Blade nodded to his partner and led the way.

Blade guessed that the line of trees where he had seen the flashes was about a hundred yards north. The ground between was open and flat, with no cover large enough to hide a rabbit. Blade felt painfully exposed as he stepped out from behind the trees, even though he knew that neither the Kandans nor the Rulami used the bow.

Step by step he moved forward, with his partner keeping parallel to him about twenty feet behind. Every second he expected the bushes to crackle and crash and spew out armed men. Now he had covered half the distance. There was definitely something behind the trees; he could see more metallic glintings. He could hear nothing, nor see any movement. This suggested that the men ahead must be trained soldiers, the men of Rulam. He was close to simply turning about and retreating. The men of Rulam would not be as easy a proposition as the Kandans had been.

Then something finally moved in the woods. Not a mass of armed men pouring out into the open, but a long heavy rope with a weighted loop at the end. It soared high into the air, uncoiling as it flew, high over Blade's head, straight down onto the Zungan behind him and around the man's neck. As the noose descended, the rope went tight, and the Zungan was yanked off his feet.

Blade drew his sword and leaped at the rope. The sword flashed up, came down, rebounded from tough fibers without cutting through. He raised the sword again. As he did so, a second loop arched out of the bushes and thudded into place around his own neck. And then the bushes did spew out armed men, dozens of them, the sunlight gleaming on their polished armor. Their shields bore red circles -the badge of Rulam.

In their haste to spring the trap, the Rulami forgot to jerk Blade's rope tight. Dropping sword and spear to leave both hands free, he clawed it from around his neck, then snatched up his weapons before the soldiers could reach him. Sunlight flashed off spearhead and sword blade as he flourished them overhead, roaring out, "Warriors! Remember your honor! Flee and fight again! I will delay those-!" He did not know if the Zungans heard him or not, but he knew that if they got a good headstart, they would be safe. No armored soldier in any army in any dimension could run down a Zungan warrior moving at full speed. Then he was suddenly too busy with his own fight to pay any more attention to his scattering followers.

As the Rulami formed a circle around him, Blade discarded his sword. Then he yelled, "Come on, you cowards. There's only one of me, there's forty of you. Or is one man of the English equal to forty of Rulam? I've heard a lot of bad things about your city, but nothing that bad. You wear iron on your heads to keep your brains from falling out. Do you wear it on your stomachs to keep your guts from falling out? Maybe you need some iron inside your guts, not outside? Well, I'll give it to you!" And without pausing for breath, he charged.

The two men in front of him jerked up their shields to meet a straight thrust. Blade's spear whirled up and over. The weighted butt crashed down on one polished helmet, then snapped sideways into an exposed cheek. The two men flew in opposite directions, but instantly the gap in the Rulami line was closed by two more.

These did not wait for Blade to come at them. He had to back away into the center of the circle as their swords flickered and jabbed at him, waiting for an opening. It came. His spearhead darted in under one shield, laying open a thigh. He heaved upward on the shaft, sending the man sprawling backward, then swung the spear sharply to the right. It rode up across the second man's shield, caught his helmet, flipped it high into the air. The spear whirled end for end in another lightning stroke, and this time the butt end came down on an unhelmeted head.

Blade did not wait for the man with the smashed skull to hit the ground. He shifted rapidly left, then right

as two men charged him from opposite sides. The spear shot out level as he spun about. Like a runaway revolving door the shaft caught both men and knocked them sprawling. One's helmet came off as he fell. Blade stamped down on the exposed neck and felt bone give way. At the same moment he drove his spear down into the other man's face, smashing it between the teeth into the brain.

He realized a moment later that he should not have taken the time to do that. An entire section of the circle charged in against him at once, half a dozen men at least. He should not waste time killing men who were down. His reason told him that, but his blood fury told him something else. Now that he had these slavers within killing range, he wanted to kill as many of them as possible before they killed him.

He retreated hastily before the advancing section. As he did so, he realized that there were just enough of them to get in each other's way. Blade knew he was a master of exploiting the advantage one man always has over a group in such a situation.

They were trying to back him against another section of the circle. No chance, friends, he said to himself. He stepped forward, the spearhead went down into the ground, and like a pole vaulter he soared clear over the heads of the advancing soldiers. A sword flashed up, waving helplessly at him as he sailed past. Then he was behind the line, spinning around, spear up and thrusting.

He drove the spearhead into two men below the cuirasses before they could even begin to turn. He opened the side of a third man's face with the spear's edge. A quick sideways flick of his powerful wrists, and the heavy wood shaft caught a fourth man on the neck. The two survivors of the advancing section suddenly decided to stop advancing. That didn't save them. Blade feinted at one man's head, then jabbed the butt into his comrade's knee. As the second man reeled and opened the first one's flank, Blade moved in before he could get his shield around. The spear jabbed up into the man's armpit so hard it nearly jammed there.

But in the moment before he could get back into the open, three more men rushed at Blade. One of them stumbled over a fallen body and staggered forward. He cannoned into Blade, throwing him off balance. Fighting to keep his feet, Blade let go of the spear with one hand and rammed his fist into the side of the man's neck. The man jerked and started to slide to the ground. Before Blade could get both hands back on the spear, a second man chopped down wildly with his sword. The sword struck the head of Blade's spear with a tremendous clang, and the jar broke Blade's grip on the shaft. The spear slammed down hard on the ground. Blade lunged for it, and suddenly found two sword points waving within inches of his throat. He froze, looking up at the soldiers. Under the helmets, their eyes were wide and staring, and the knuckles of their sword hands stood out white. These men would kill him if he moved an inch.

Then behind the soldiers he saw another figure loom up. He could not see it clearly, but it seemed to be dressed in flowing silvery robes, with something off-white dangling on its chest. He could not make out the face. But the voice was that of a man in authority.

"Do not kill him," said the voice.

Blade tensed. If these soldiers had to try to take him alive... He took a deep breath, ready to plunge forward the minute one of the swords shifted as much as an inch.

But the sound came from behind him, feet approaching at a run. The two swords held steady, keeping him facing rigidly forward. He froze as the footsteps came to a stop behind him. Then something heavy slammed down on top of his head, on the side, on the back. He hardly felt the third blow as he sagged forward, his face coming down on the hard ground by the foot of one of the soldiers. The last thing he

saw was the figure in silver stepping between the two soldiers and stopping above him. The man's sandals shone with the unmistakable blood-hued glint of rubies. Then Blade stopped seeing or feeling anything.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Blade drifted back to consciousness, there were aches and pains shooting through every part of his head. There was also the same silver-robed figure looming over him, looking down at him. Blade looked up at the man and met his gaze. The man was gray-bearded and fair-skinned, but except for that and his silver robes, he resembled the On'ror so much they might have been brothers or at least cousins. Both were broad and fleshy in face and figure, and both had the look of men long accustomed to power. Not only long accustomed to power, but totally lacking in scruples when it came to keeping it. Blade did not like thinking that his path and that of the Zungans ran through two such men.

The man crossed both arms in front of his chest and smiled down at Blade. It was the sort of gloating, triumphant smile Blade might have expected from such a man, and it didn't make him feel any better. But he was determined not to give the man any advantage, so he kept his mouth shut. The ache in his head made that fairly easy.

"Well, Richard Blade of the English," said the man. Blade just managed to keep from stiffening in surprise at hearing his name. The man shot a hard look at Blade, searching for some signs of surprise, then smiled again, as unpleasantly as before.

"Well, Richard Blade of the English," he said again.

Blade found the strength to return the smile. "Are you a man or just a talking animal? You don't seem to be able to say very much."

The smile on the man's face slipped for a moment. Blade felt that he had scored. "I do not need to say very much, Blade. But if I wanted to hear you talk, it would be easy. Oh, it would be so easy." The man licked his lips. It was obvious what he had in mind as a "so easy" way of making Blade talk.

"But I am not free to do what the ghosts of my soldiers would like me to do. No, I am not free. The men of Rulam want to see you in the arenas. They greatly want to see you in the arenas. They have given me many firestones and many lesser slaves for you. Oh, they have paid me well. The Ivory Tower will be richer because of you. That is not something you enjoy hearing, is it? I know you have been teaching the Zungans how to fight a new way. It is a good way, too. When you are dying, you can think that it is a good way. Oh, yes, I am a generous man. Even my enemies can have their last thoughts."

The man rambled on like this for quite some time. Before too much longer Blade was sure that he was dealing with a madman. Or, more accurately, that he was being dealt with by one. But he still paid close attention to every one of the man's words, searching them for any clues as to where he was and who the man might be. While he listened, he also looked around him.

He was lying on his back on a wooden bedframe covered with a thin straw mattress. His wrists and ankles were tied with heavy iron chain to staples set in the bed. The chain would be too heavy to break, but could the staples be pulled out?

He could move his head enough to see that the walls and ceiling of the room were of heavy timber, darkened with age and smoke. Possibly he was in a peasant's cottage, but it looked too well built for that. The door was low, no more than five feet high, and as massive as the walls. The floor seemed to be

bare earth covered with straw-straw that had not been changed for a long time, his nose told him.

There was only one light in the room, a guttering rush light dangling from the ceiling. By its feeble glow Blade again examined the man standing over him from head to toe. He appeared to be unarmed, although a large black leather purse dangled from a black silk sash around his ample midriff. But now Blade could make out more closely what was dangling on the man's chest. It was a model of a cylindrical tower, with the windows and doors clearly shown. It was a beautiful and delicate piece of carving, with the yellow-white sheen of old ivory.

Blade remembered what he had heard of the ruling Priests of the Ivory Tower in Kanda. Was this man one of them? It seemed likely. And it was obvious he resented turning a man who had killed Kandan soldiers over to the Rulami as a gladiator. Was there anything more to this resentment? Could something more perhaps be made of this resentment, until Kanda and Rulam were at least mildly at-odds over Blade's disposal? Blade realized that he was grasping at straws, but also realized that for the moment there was nothing much better that he could do.

How long the silver-robed man continued his half-incoherent monologue Blade had no way of guessing. The longer it continued, the more Blade was certain that the man was someone high up among the Priests of the Ivory Tower. He spoke with authority, if not arrogance, and his comments on the Rulami were seldom charitable.

Eventually the man ran out of things to say or perhaps out of breath. He raised his arms in what might have been a parting blessing-or perhaps only a stretching of cramped muscles. Then he said, "Farewell, Blade. I do not think I will be seeing you again, for you will never see Kanda, and I seldom leave it. Certainly I will never go to Rulam and walk among the barefaced women of that city. But you-you will find favor in their eyes, I think." He turned and went out. A moment later Blade heard the clank as a chain was attached to the outside of the door, and the click of a key turning in a lock. He was truly a prisoner.

The light was still burning, so Blade examined his chains more closely. The staples were heavier than he had thought at first. He tried a few tentative pulls, but soon realized that there was little hope of getting enough power from the strength of only one arm. And there was even less hope of bringing two arms to bear on one staple. The chains were too short.

Then he tried the iron wrist and ankle bands to which the chains were attached. Perhaps he could find a flaw in one of them? But the iron was solid, and all his jerking only made his wrists and ankles raw and red.

Very well, he was not going to escape from this particular prison. As long as his captors were not going to kill him here and now, he didn't really need to escape. Not for the first time his fighting qualities seemed to have destined him for a career as a gladiator. He would wait until he reached Rulam, and then look for ways of escape. At least as a gladiator he would be certain to have easy access to weapons. After deciding that, he was able to drift off to sleep. He would need to conserve his strength.

A metallic clink from the door woke him with a start. The light still burned, dimmer now but showing the chamber still empty. Somebody was outside, working at the chain and lock. Somebody sent to kill him? The Ivory Tower priest had not sounded very happy about sending him up to Rulam. Perhaps he was going to cheat the Rulami by having Blade "killed while attempting to escape."

The clinking came again the sound of a key turning in the lock. Then the rattle of the chain being pulled through its fastenings. And finally to creak of seldom-oiled hinges as the door swung open.

The figure that slipped into the room on noiseless feet was dressed in the same silver robes and black sash as the Ivory Tower priest. But its head was completely concealed by a red hood drawn tight over the face so that only the eyes showed. It came across the room and stood over Blade, staring down at him. Blade tried to read the expression in the eyes, but could not. Yet he felt this one's examination was of quite a different kind from that of the other priest. It was less hostile, more openly curious.

Then the figure raised its arms, and the silver sleeves fell back, revealing slim hands in red gloves. The hands went up to the hood and jerked it suddenly back. Blade's eyes opened in amazement. He would have sat up and stared if the chains had let him. From out of the red hood, the face of a young woman stared at him.

Young, and also beautiful. Long ash-blond hair framed a finely chiseled face, with wide blue eyes and an impudently up-tilted nose. The eyes were roaming over Blade's naked body, lingering here and there with unmistakable interest. Blade could not help grinning as he almost read the woman's mind. This seemed to be a trip for meeting women who wanted to make love in strange places.

In a single graceful motion she knelt down beside Blade and brought her mouth close to his right ear. "Blade, listen to me," she whispered. "I am Sarnila, daughter to the High Priest of Kanda."

Blade looked a question at her. She nodded. "Yes, the man in the silver robes who was talking to you earlier. He does not want to turn you over to the Rulami. He wants to have you killed and make it look like an attempt to escape. I have come to help you really escape before my father's killers arrive."

Blade frowned. In a whisper as low as hers, he said, "Why should I trust you? You are the High Priest's daughter. Why should you want me to escape?"

Something like a shudder of revulsion passed over Sarnila's delicate features. "And I am also his mistress." She looked at Blade. "Yes, I see you think of this as a Rulang or a Zungan would. But it is nothing unusual in Kanda, at least not for the upper priests. They can have families when they are younger, but when they are older they are supposed to be celibate." Sarnila looked as if she wanted to spit on the floor. "But they are still men. And their daughters can be relied on not to talk. So they make their daughters their mistresses and keep them almost as slaves. There are a hundred or more young women in Kanda who have never known any man but their fathers. Their old, fat, half-impotent fathers!" This time she did spit on the floor.

She took one glove off now and ran her hand over Blade's body. "You are a warrior. Your body feels like that of a warrior. Do you know how many warriors there are in Kanda? Real warriors, not just slave catchers and slave guards and slave beaters? Only a handful. And yet every fat priest and merchant thinks that by keeping his women behind veils and behind lock and bars, he is being a man. Even the Zungans are wiser than that!"

The hand kept moving as she talked, and suddenly closed around Blade's genitals. It did not take him long to respond to the pressure. Sarnila's mouth widened in a smile as she watched Blade's arousal make itself clear.

"Do you know how long it takes the High Priest to get stiff that way?" she asked. It was a question obviously intended to go unanswered.

Blade had a more practical question of his own. "Aren't you going to get me unchained if we're going to make love?"

Sarnila laughed. "No, Blade. I don't trust you that much. You might just run off into the darkness if I let you go now. Then I would never know what the love of a man and a warrior is like. Never." She patted the purse that hung from her belt. "I have a file in here. I could get the keys to your chains, but it is a good, hard file. It will have you free when I am ready for you to be free." Her voice held some of her father's arrogance as she said this.

Blade sighed, more in frustration than in passion. He did not look forward to being used as the object of Sarnila's lust and vengeance. He was more than slightly angry at her distrust. But he had to admit she was right. If he were free now, no power and no woman could keep him from heading out of that door and south toward Zungan territory as fast as his legs would carry him. That brought another question to his mind.

"Did the Zungans who were with me escape from the Rulami soldiers?"

"I will tell you that also afterward," she said sharply. But he noticed that her own breathing was beginning to come a little faster. He could see one of the blue veins under the pale skin of her temples pulsing and jumping.

He was fully aroused now, but her hands still kept moving. Her skill was remarkable. He knew that in another minute he would be fighting for control. And a minute after that he would lose the fight. Sarnila would not like that. Odds were, she would abandon any plan to help his escape. Blade realized his freedom depended on his self-control.

The first minute passed, and Blade found himself clenching his teeth and his fists. Then suddenly Sarnila's hands stopped their maddeningly skilled and delicate work. She undid her sash. A quick jerk, and the robe flew through the air and landed on the floor. Under it she was wearing only a semitransparent shift. A quick wriggle, and she was entirely bare.

Naked, Blade saw that Sarnila was younger than he had thought. Her breasts were perfect but shallow cones, with small pink nipples. Her stomach was flat and hard, with only a faint crease above the sparse growth of darker hair that furred her pubic triangle. She stood before him posing and posturing for a few moments. The play of her supple young muscles under the light would have been beautiful under other circumstances. Now Blade's mind was screaming only, "Stop playing around and get on with it!" Now that the stroking hands were gone, the strain of waiting, of listening for the fatal knock on the door, was getting to him. He wondered if he would fall short of her demands through failure instead of haste, with the same disastrous results.

Finally the slow dance came to an end. In a single swift and graceful motion she swung herself astride Blade, then lowered herself onto him. As her wetness and tightness took him in, Blade knew he could stop worrying about failure. The slow steady friction as she rose up and down on him was bringing him back to peak, regardless of the tensions preying on his mind.

Then he forgot all about the tensions and was aware only of Sarnila, her endless motions, the little jerk at the end of each cycle, the little gasps from her half-parted lips. Those veins were almost dancing now. Her hands played a steady tattoo on the muscles of his chest, plucking at the hairs. Her own hair tossed about wildly, whipping about the white shoulders, vagrant strands falling down over the neat little nose.

Now her movements were speeding up of their own accord, as her body slipped out of control. Her head was thrown back until her hair hung almost vertically down her back, the ends brushing her neat buttocks. Her mouth was wide open, the moans coming louder now. Blade hoped the walls and door of

this room were thick enough to muffle the sound. Her skin was beginning to feel flushed and damp.

Then the first spasm took her, throat muscles and pelvic muscles contracting and jerking and her wetness suddenly flowing harder. A second spasm, and a third; with Blade still firm as she jerked up and down on him. He was biting his lip to keep from groaning with the strain of fighting for self-control. He felt himself losing the fight, abandoned it, spurted into her with a gasp. She jerked and writhed for a fourth time, then collapsed on Blade's chest, fingers still moving idly through the hair on it.

Blade had never before worried about his own willingness to relax and even sleep in such moments after release. But now he knew he had to force his body and his mind into action, fast action, and soon. He reached up a hand to the limit of the chain and chucked Sarnila under the chin.

"Have I given you what you wanted?"

He thought he heard her murmur, "Yes," and was almost certain he heard an equally faint "More."

Blade shook his head. "No, Sarnila. No more. I must escape. Now. When I have escaped, perhaps I can come back and take you away to where there are many warriors. But first I must get out of here!" He pointed at her purse. "You said you had a file. Give it to me." He made his voice as firm and harsh as he could without risking being overheard outside the chamber.

He had to repeat his words several times. But eventually they got through the erotic fog that still enveloped Sarnila. Slowly she rolled off him, knelt down on the floor, and rummaged the file out of her purse. It was a massive object, as tough as she had said, and long and heavy enough to make a good improvised weapon. That was somewhat encouraging, but Blade knew that he would have little chance of getting clean away except by stealth. But at least he could take a few more of the slavers with him if it came to a fight. He took the file from Sarnila-almost snatched it, in fact-and went to work on the staples.

The iron was tough, but the file ground and chewed its way through the staples with encouraging speed. And also with a discouraging amount of noise. Half a dozen times Blade stopped, listening, certain that the uproar he was making must be waking up everybody within a half mile and bringing them at the run to investigate. The staple holding the chain to his right wrist gave way. He turned over and went to work on the one for the left wrist.

While Blade was filing away, Sarnila was kneeling on the floor. She had not bothered to put her clothes back on, and Blade could see goose flesh on her bare skin. She still seemed half in a trance. He hoped she would get her head clear before the time came for him to escape. He did not like the thought of leaving her in this condition.

As he finished the left-hand staple and started freeing his feet, she rose slowly and began pulling her robes on. Alertness began creeping back into her eyes. In the middle of his filing and scraping, Blade turned to her and said, "Remember, I asked you about the other Zungans with me. Did they escape or not?"

She was pulling her robe over her head at that moment, and her voice came out half-muffled. "Seven of them did. One was killed outright, one died later. The others all ran away. I thought Zungan warriors never ran away-"

"Zungan warriors are learning many new things," said Blade. "They will be much more dangerous because of this. The warriors who ran away will be back someday soon, with many companions. And then it will be the Rulami-" he nearly added "-and the Kandans," but stopped himself in time "-who run

away or die."

Sarnila's head popped out of the neck of her robe. "That is good. I do not like the Rulami."

Blade looked at her. "I thought the Rulami treated their women well. Why do you not like them?"

"They treat their women well. The women of the Rulami have great power, from Queen Roxala on down. But they do not treat other people or other people's women at all well. There was a time when they even made slaves of the women of Kanda, the way they do now with the Zungans. The Rulami are very proud and haughty, and in their eyes all should go down in the dust and kiss their feet."

Blade was taking mental notes at a furious clip. He would not need to spend any time deepening the animosity between Kanda and Rulam, if she was telling the truth. It already ran deep enough, as deep as he could hope for. His job would be to find some way of exploiting it. A job that he could do, he reminded himself, only if he escaped. He resolutely shut his ears to the noise he was making, and kept working with the file.

Soon the staple holding his right foot was gone, and the one on the left was cut half through. He was beginning to think of clothing, and how to get some. He was just about to ask Sarnila about this, when he heard footsteps and voices outside the door.

Sarnila froze, and her mouth opened in a soundless scream of terror. Blade did not and could not pay any attention to her. His reflexes and training took over. With a tremendous flesh-gouging lunge he jerked the remaining chain. The half-filed staple snapped. Blade sprang off the bed, clutching the file in his hand. Then he darted across the room and flattened himself against the wall, behind where the opening door would swing. If the people outside opened it just far enough... Now he jerked a beckoning thumb at Sarnila, but she was too paralyzed with terror to move a step. He was calculating if he would have the time to step over and grab her, when the door squealed and groaned open.

Half a dozen Kandan soldiers with the High Priest at their head stamped into the room in a crash of booted feet and a clank of armor and weapons. They took two steps, then stopped at the sight of the empty bed and Sarnila standing numb with fright beside it. For a moment they were as paralyzed as she was. In that moment, Blade moved.

He came out from behind the door in two silent steps and sprang at the High Priest, stabbing with the file toward the exposed back of the man's thick neck. But a soldier standing just behind the High Priest started to turn as Blade struck. Blade could not halt his stroke; the file clanged off the man's helmet. The soldier staggered and fell against the High Priest, who spun around with surprising agility for a man his size and weight.

"You!" he gasped as he saw Blade. Then he hoisted up his robes and dashed for the door. The soldiers flung themselves out of his way, then re-formed behind him to block Blade's path. They were smiling. After all, there were a half dozen of them with swords, and only one of him, with nothing but a file.

Not for long. A soldier lunged at Blade, and he brought the file down on the man's arm so hard the sword dropped from his hand. Blade dove for it, straight-arming the man in the groin as he also sought to retrieve his weapon. He snatched up the sword and returned it to its previous owner-in the thigh, just below his armor. Then he flipped the sword sideways at a sword arm rising for a stroke, and another sword clattered on the floor, held in a severed hand. The four intact soldiers backed off, staring with dawning fear at the giant naked figure of Blade.

He plunged into their ranks again, beating down two thrusts but not killing or wounding this time. He snatched the statue-like Sarnila off her feet and tucked her under one arm. She was light enough so that he could carry her that way with no trouble. He turned and faced the soldiers.

"Just stay there for a while, friends. I've got the High Priest's daughter." He did not plan on holding her a hostage, but the soldiers couldn't know that. They backed obediently against the walls and lowered their swords. Blade turned again and ran out of the chamber.

Outside he found himself in a long, narrow lane between two rows of stoutly timbered wooden huts. "Where are we?" he asked Sarnila. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. He shook her gently. "Where are we? I am going to take you to Zunga with me, and I want to know how to get there."

Her face collapsed and she began to cry. Blade wondered about the wisdom of the promise he had just made to encourage her. He was far from sure that Sarnila would be able to handle herself in a long flight. The courage she had shown in coming to his but seemed to have entirely gone.

A moment later the question became irrelevant. Pounding down the lane in a glare of torches came a mob of Kandan soldiers, the High Priest again visible among them-well in the rear, Blade noticed. Blade whirled about. Beyond the huts on both sides rose high walls with spiked tops. And down the lane from the other direction a dozen men with Rulami shields were approaching. Blade took all of one second to decide, then dashed straight at the Rulami. Escape was no longer possible, but with the Rulami he and Sarnila might live a little longer and find other chances.

If Blade had wanted to fight the Rulami, he could have taken out half a dozen of them at least. His charge out of the darkness took them by surprise and all their training did not keep them from flinching. But he did not want to fight them. He held his sword point down and shouted, "Save me from the treachery of the Kandans. They mean to kill me and cheat you of your money!" He was gambling that the High Priest's description of the deal over him was correct.

In a moment he saw that it was. The Rulami drew their swords and glared, not at him, but at the Kandans coming up behind him. The Rulami officer growled contemptuously at Blade, "get behind us, boy. We'll take care of those priests' pimps." Blade led Sarnila through the soldiers as they swung into a formation six-men wide and two deep across the lane.

The High Priest was in the lead now as the Kandans charged up. But he stopped abruptly as the Rulami presented a dozen drawn swords. The officer stepped forward and barked, "Halt, Priest. We don't like your kind of dealing. If you take one more step after this man-

"If you draw a single drop of blood from me I'll-!"

"You'll what?" sneered the officer. "What can Kanda do to us or for us that we couldn't do as well on our own? You think you've got a real city, don't you?" The officer spat on the path. "All you've got is the Ivory Tower and a huddle of houses. And those boys and old men you call soldiers." He spat again.

Blade wondered if the Rulami officer wasn't going too far, deliberately trying to bring on a battle. That was fine with him, of course. The more the Rulami and Kandans were at each other's throats, the better. And a fight now might even give him and Sarnila a chance to escape.

Apparently the High Priest's thick skull contained enough brains to make him realize this. He took a deep breath, and in his turn spat on the path. "All right, you no-balls Rulami men, you can have him! You paid for him. Get him out of my sight, get him out of Kanda, get yourselves out of Kanda! But give me

that woman."

"Your daughter?" The officer's voice held a sneer of total contempt. "Daughter" might have been the foulest word in the whole language, the way he said it.

The High Priest said nothing. He merely shoved his way forward through the Rulami soldiers and grabbed Sarnila by the arm. The girl cringed and whimpered and tried to pull away. Blade took a step forward, and found three Rulami swords aimed at his chest. "None of that, boy," said the officer. "We don't want any more fighting over what isn't our business."

The High Priest kicked Sarnila's feet out from under her and dragged her by the hair out into the open. He let go of her hair, and she dropped to the ground with a thud. He kicked her in the stomach, and she doubled up and rolled back and forth moaning.

The High Priest's face was purple with fury and hatred; he was past caring who heard what. He looked down at Sarnila and snarled, "You little bitch! You whore! You man-woman!" That last seemed to be the ultimate insult. Although his mouth kept opening and shutting, he couldn't find anything more to say.

Instead he bent and with powerful hands ripped the robes from Sarnila's body. She made a futile effort to roll over on her stomach as her body was bared, then an equally futile effort to cover herself with her hands. As she lifted her right hand, the High Priest stamped down on it with one booted foot. Blade heard the crunch of bone, and Sarnila's scream. If a half dozen soldiers hadn't had a firm grip on him, he would have dashed forward and strangled the High Priest with his bare hands. As it was, he could only heave and jerk and swear that he would have the High Priest's blood for this.

"You wanted to take her away with you, did you, Blade? Is that why you're so angry? Well, well. You may indeed have my blood someday. High Priests can die or be killed like men. Oh, yes, we can. But first I will have her blood." The High Priest leaped into the air, with more agility than Blade would have thought possible in such a man. He came down squarely on Sarnila's chest, both feet smashing down on her ribs with a terrible crunching noise. Sarnila heaved once, then lay still, blood oozing from her mouth and nose.

Blade took one look at the mess the High Priest's weight had made of his daughter's body, then had to turn away and be very sick. It did not last long. There was not that much in his stomach. Finally the Rulami officer swatted him across the shoulders with the flat of his sword and said roughly, "Come on, boy, and stop puking. You'll see worse in the arena." Blade allowed himself to be led away. For the moment he felt too drained to resist.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The High Priest was correct in his prediction. Blade never saw Kanda or the Ivory Tower. After his taste of Kandan habits, he didn't feel that he was missing anything. If he ever saw Kanda, he hoped it would be at the head of a Zungan army. And if he was snatched back to Home Dimension before he could lead a march on Kanda, he hoped the Zungans would take care of the matter themselves.

Where Blade had been confined turned out to be a sort of trading post. There the Rulami exchanged the rubies from their mines and the ivory their hunters had collected for slaves taken by the Kandan raiders. The slaves were chained into coffles and marched north.

Blade was not put into a coffle. Apparently he was considered too high-quality merchandise to be forced to tramp along the road to Rulam with chains at his neck and ankles. He was chained, to be sure,

with chains even heavier than the ones in the hut. But instead of being put into the coffle, he was loaded feet first into a canvas bag. Then they tied heavy ropes around the bag. Finally, they slung Blade, bag and all, onto the back of one of the Ivory People, like a saddlebag on a horse.

Blade rode trussed this way in the bag for six full days, as the caravan tramped north. There were about a dozen of the tame Ivory People, nearly two hundred slaves, a guard of fifty-odd soldiers, and an assortment of wagons. The trip would have taken less than half the time if the Ivory People had been traveling alone; Blade knew from the Zungans that the strange beasts could cover sixty to seventy miles a day without strain. Clumsy as they looked, they were surprisingly fast, and their endurance was enormous. Each night they stopped in clearings by the side of the road. Blade was always taken out of the sack and given water, food, and exercise. He did not need to be forced to take any of these. He was as determined as any of the Rulami that he would be in top condition when he reached the city. Once they even offered him a slave girl from the coffle and a tent in which to enjoy her in privacy. Blade turned down that offer. The brief episode with Samila and her fate afterward had left an ugly taste in his mouth.

On the morning of the seventh day the sun was only just clearing the treetops when shouts went up from the head of the caravan. Rulam was in sight, and within an hour even Blade in his sack could see its towers and walls crowning the ridge a few miles ahead. The road was becoming more crowded now. Farmers' carts and occasional patrols of soldiers rumbled and tramped along in the dust, giving way as the caravan ploughed through. The bridges over the occasional streams were no longer rickety collections of old timber, but solid works of dressed and mortared stone, as wide as the road.

The officer leaned down from his saddle far enough to be able to talk to Blade without shouting. The officer's name was Horan, and in the past six days Blade had developed a thorough distaste for the man. Horun was a supercilious palace soldier, alternately brutal and condescending toward slaves-especially Zungan ones.

"We'll be home in a couple hours, Blade," said Horun.

"I haven't heard any orders on it yet, but if custom is any guide, the queen will be wanting to look you over."

"Queen Roxala?"

Horun nodded. "Indeed. She's a collector of things rare and fine. Animals, birds, jewels-she's got enough firestones to fill a river barge. And men. Arena men particularly. She picks the best fighters from each new lot of slaves for her personal arena teams. And you'll be coming in with a reputation running ahead of you. If I were as sure of making general as you ought to be of getting picked for the queen's team, I'd be a happy man."

"Are her teams treated well?"

"Oh, nothing but the best for them. Slaves they may be, but they live better than nine out of ten freemen in Rulam. The best meat and wine, girls any time they want them, baths and doctors waiting for them when they come in from the arena. And some of them get a real extra bonus."

"What kind?" From what Blade had heard of Roxala and from what he could see in Horun's face, Blade had a fairly good idea. But he wanted to be certain.

Horun practically simpered, and dropped his voice to just above a whisper. "Oh, Roxala has a roving eye, and picks out the best of the stable for her bed. As long as they aren't Zungans, anyway. She'd die

before she bedded with one of those smelly black savages. But the others, like you." Horun licked his lips. "They say she's worth it just as a woman."

"What does the king say about this?"

Horun dropped his voice still further. "King Meptor doesn't like it a bit. If the laws of Rulam allowed it, he'd have put Roxala away years ago. As it is, all he can do is poison or murder one of her favorites every so often. These days he doesn't even have much time for that. War preparations." Horun's eyes showed that he suddenly realized he was saying too much to a mere slave. He swung back up to his formal pose, and was silent as the caravan began climbing the hill toward the city.

Meanwhile, Blade was turning what Horun had said over in his mind. So Queen Roxala had a taste for gladiators-including a bedroom taste? That was something he had put to good use in the past. Risky, but so far he had always come out on top. Anything within reason that could keep him alive and give him freedom of movement was worth grabbing.

And war preparations? War with whom, and for what? Rulam and Kanda were on bad terms, but that bad? He hoped so. Or was King Kleptor perhaps thinking of an all-out war against the Zungans? That was something to watch out for. But there was nothing he could do about it now. He turned his head as far as he could and stared at the approaching city.

The walls stretched for miles along the top of the ridge, forty and fifty feet high, built of massive blocks of stone and crowned with square towers every hundred yards or so. Behind the wall, more towers rose black and gray against the blue sky. So did columns of smoke from dozens of chimneys, as bakeries, forges, and tanneries settled down to the day's work. The breeze blowing from the city carried the smell of all of these and much more to Blade's nose. Dorkalu was a village compared to Rulam. Whatever the Zungans might someday do to Kanda and its priests, they would be hard put to do anything to Rulam inside its walls.

As the caravan approached a massively towered gate, someone hailed them from the gatehouse.

"Horun! Do you bear the prisoner Richard Blade of the English?"

Horun shouted back. "Yes, I do."

"The queen has left orders that he be brought to the Summer Palace at once." Horun looked down at Blade, with a lewd grin on his face.

Then Horun rapped his mount sharply on the right side of its head with his goad. The animal swung ponderously to the left, turning away from the gate, and lumbered along the wall. The rest of the caravan vanished through the gate, while Horun goaded the animal to a lumbering trot that kicked up a cloud of dust behind it. They kept on at that pace for a good two miles, until they came to a sprawling gray-brown palace, and rode into its fore courtyard. Horun brought his mount to a stop just inside the gate. A dozen slaves ran out to help him dismount and unload Blade.

After carrying Blade like a piece of furniture into the cellar of a nearby building, the men unwrapped him. They left the chains on, however. Word about Blade's qualities indeed had run on ahead. Chains and all, they bathed him, shaved him, oiled and perfumed and pumiced and scraped him, massaged him-the process went on for what seemed like hours. Blade began to feel like a prize bull being groomed for a cattle show.

Horun watched the process with a continuous grin flickering across his thin face, openly amused at Blade's mounting annoyance. "Don't fight it, Blade. If you aren't looking your best, the queen may turn you down. And if she turns you down for her team, you can be damned sure she won't let anybody else grab you for theirs. You'll be on your way to the firestone mines before you can turn around. They say a man is lucky to live a year there-and usually wishes he could die after a single day."

Horun ran on. Indicating the slaves scurrying around the chamber, he grinned. "Look at those poor bastards. Practically wetting their pants for fear you'll have one hair out of place or one bit of skin not oiled up sleek. They're right, too. Roxala'd have their backs striped if you did. You, boy!" He shouted at the nearest slave, who stopped as if he had run into a brick wall. "Turn around!" The slave turned his back toward Blade, who started counting the welts and scars criss-crossing it. He got up to fifty before another barked word from Horun sent the slave back to his business. Blade decided that it would be a pleasure to kill Horun, if the time ever came.

Eventually the slaves finished their work. Blade was dressed in a tight-fitting loin-guard and given an empty sheath to hook over it. "There'll be a sword in that sheath soon enough," said Horun. Then, with a bawdy chuckle, he added, "And your other sword may be in another sheath even before that. Lucky man."

Now a squad of soldiers tramped in, and Horun unlocked Blade's chains. The soldiers surrounded him with drawn swords, and he was marched out of the cellar. They went along a damp, twisting corridor, each section seeming gloomier than the last, for what seemed like hours. Finally their journey came to an end as they mounted a flight of stairs and Horun pushed open a massive door. Sunlight poured in, for a moment dazzling Blade's eyes. The soldiers paid no attention to his stumblings, but shoved him into the open.

Slowly his eyes readjusted to the daylight, and he saw that he was standing in the center of another large courtyard-no, garden would be a better description. It was nearly as large as a football field. Where it was not covered with lush green grass manicured to almost billiard-table smoothness, white gravel walks led through rainbow-colored masses of flowers. Their scents filled the air, striking Blade hard enough to almost make his head swim. After the austere plains and the foul smells of his journey, such an overpowering mass of perfumes seemed unhealthy. He felt almost ill.

"The queen's private garden," said Horun. "I wonder if you'll be the only thing on show today-no, I see somebody else coming."

Out from the shadows of one of the porticos around the garden came a line of slaves. They were struggling with something immensely long and thick, done up in a version of the canvas sack that had carried Blade. Whatever it was, they were sweating with the effort of carrying it, and wide-eyed with fear. They kept on coming, until there were nearly two score of them. The thing they carried seemed to nearly sixty feet long. After the slaves came yet another squad of the ubiquitous soldiers, carrying a thick iron collar, a massive chain, and an iron post pointed at one end. By the time all this hardware was gathered together, Blade hardly needed to hear the explosive hiss that sounded from inside the bag to know what the slaves were carrying.

Then Horun jabbed Blade sharply in the ribs and pointed up toward a second-story balcony half-screened by the tops of a quartet of small trees. A woman had stepped out onto the balcony, and even in the shadows she made an impressive sight. Tall-nearly six feet-with a great foaming mane of blue-black hair pouring down her back. She wore a golden gown that above the waist might have been sprayed on, so tightly did it cling to her luxuriantly curved figure. In her hair sparkled a thin tiara of rubies.

"The queen?" whispered Blade.

"Yes. But don't pay any attention to her until the trumpeters blow. That's the sign that she's officially present. Until then we treat her as just part of the scenery. A very nice part of the scenery," added Horun.

Blade kept his eyes fixed on the woman nonetheless. A moment later two men in yellow tunics and green tabards joined the queen on the balcony, each carrying a yard-long brass trumpet. They raised these to their lips, and blew a long raw blast.

Blade winced at the sound. Then from behind him the hiss exploded again. This time it did not die away. And then he heard the clank and clash of iron, scrapings, thumpings-and a chorus of mad screams of panic.

Blade whirled around. His eyes flicked from the queen, frozen motionless on her balcony, to the great snake rearing up in the middle of the scattering slaves. Horun shouted an order, and several of the soldiers ran forward, drawing their swords. But instead of attacking the snake, they waded into the ranks of the slaves, slashing and thrusting. The slaves were screaming in agony now, falling and writhing on the ground. Some of them abruptly stopped screaming as the snake writhed over them, its tons of scaled mass crushing the last bits of life out of them.

Blade could not contain himself. "You idiot!" he roared at Horun. "Get that snake and let the slaves alone!"

Horun whirled and backhanded Blade across the face. "Keep your mouth shut, boy. This is just another slave trick. I don't need you to tell me how to handle it."

Four soldiers were holding onto Blade, so he did not lunge forward, pick up Horun, and break the officer in two with his bare hands. He watched the snake slowly coiling and uncoiling itself, as the fact penetrated to its tiny brain that it was free. Its head bobbed up and down like a yoyo, sometimes rising twenty feet above the ground, sometimes lying flat on the grass.

Now the head rose again, and swiveled toward the balcony. The snake's blank green eyes flickered open as they caught sight of Roxala, still frozen by the railing. Blade's mind was yelling at the queen, "Get back inside, you stupid woman! Don't just stand there gaping like an idiot!" He knew that in another second he was going to shout it out loud.

Then the snake moved. Perhaps it was cunning, perhaps it was blind rage. But the huge head shot forward and then up, rising under the balcony, smashing into it with a tremendous clang. The queen staggered and went sprawling. The head rose again with another clang. Blade heard the screech of metal twisting. A third time the snake drove its head like a battering ram into the balcony. This time the whole balcony pulled free of the wall. Balcony, queen, and trumpeters plunged down fifteen feet to land with a thundering crash on the stone walk. The snake reared up and back, then swung forward again. Now its jaws opened, revealing foot-long teeth and a tongue the thickness of a fire hose. The tongue flicked in and out, the eyes stared down at the victims below. The queen lay sprawled on the walk, motionless, her gown half ripped off by the fall.

Horun seemed as stunned as his queen. The officer stood motionless. His mouth kept opening and closing, but no sound came out.

"Do something, you useless little palace pimp!" roared Blade. "Don't just stand there." But Horun still did

not move, nor did he give any orders to his soldiers. Both soldiers and slaves had scattered in panic. Some had hidden under the bushes, others had vanished into the porticoes and peeped nervously out from behind the pillars. The four soldiers holding Blade had not fled, however. Either they had their orders, or like Horun they were too paralyzed with fear to move an inch.

Suddenly Blade slumped backward, catching the four men holding him by surprise. He let himself fall to the grass, feeling himself slide through the soldiers' hands. He felt the last set of hands let go-and suddenly jackknifed at the waist and shot to his feet, bowling over the nearest soldier. Before the others could reach for him or draw their swords, he leaped high over a line of bushes. Ignoring Horun, he ran for the iron stake lying on the grass. He saw the snake's head swaying still, but dipping lower and lower toward the sprawled bodies on the walk. Blade knew he would first have to draw the snake away from the queen. To fight it where it was might kill the queen just as surely as letting the snake close those foot-long teeth on her.

Blade reached the stake. He lifted it, feeling his muscles strain under the weight, then jerked. Chain and collar flew off the ground, into the air, and nearly caught in the branches of a tree. Before they came down, Blade spread his legs wide for balance and began whirling the stake around his head. The chain and collar swung through the air like a whip. The massive collar sailed straight at the snake's back and slammed into it with a crunching thud.

Instantly the snake forgot all about the victims almost in its jaws. It reared up with a savage hiss until almost half its length was off the ground. Its head and neck twisted and lashed about, searching for the attacker. Again Blade swung his iron whip. Again the collar cracked into the snake's neck, ten feet below the head. The head dipped, and Blade saw the huge eyes focus on him, glaring at him.

He had its attention. Now he had to fight it. He swung the collar a third time, aiming straight at the vast flat head. The jaws snapped shut and the collar smashed into the scaled nose, just above the nostrils. The jaws opened again, dripping foam, as the snake shook its head back and forth. Blade reversed the stake in a quick shift of hands. Now the chain and collar lay on the grass and he held the stake out with its point toward the snake. A clumsier spear he could perhaps imagine, but he hoped he'd never have to fight with it. Certainly not against a monster like this.

The snake lunged, jaws open, hissing like a leaky boiler. Blade danced to one side, jabbing downward as the head flashed past, aiming for the eyes. The point slammed into the scales with a jar that half-numbed Blade's arms. The snake quivered all over, but its recovery was as fast as ever. A second stroke, a second thrust with the post, and a second recovery. The snake was as fast as before. The massive head showed only a few broken scales to mark where Blade had struck.

Perhaps the throat would be a better target. This time Blade crouched low as the snake came in, thrusting upward. The scaly flank tore along his legs, rasping the skin off like a file. But he felt scales crunch and skin part under the thrusting post. The snake jerked its head back, rearing high. This time there was a trickle of blood flowing down the gleaming scales of its neck.

Blade crouched again, shifted aside again, stabbed again. More blood flowed across the scales. He reversed the post, holding it as a club. The snake came in again, aiming low, seeing Blade crouching before it as he had already done twice. This time it would finish off this annoying interference with its meal!

As the snake came in, Blade leaped to his feet and swung the post down at the full stretch of his arms, with all his strength. Again the jar was rumbling, but the snake jerked and heaved throughout its full sixty-plus feet. For a moment it was motionless. Blade reversed the post again, whipping the hundred and

more pounds of iron through a complete circle. Then he stabbed point-down at one of the eyes. This time the thrust went home. The eye burst apart in a spurting of blood and greenish slime.

The hiss that came out of the gaping mouth now had a rasp that set Blade's teeth on edge. Then the snake lashed its head and twenty feet of its body sideways. Blade jerked the post up and held it out, but the whiplash smashed the iron back against his chest and knocked him sprawling. The scales flayed more skin off his arms and chest and stomach, and he felt as though all of his ribs had been smashed.

Blade lay on his back, fighting for breath, while the snake reared up again, swaying back and forth. It was half-blinded and from its slow motions more than half-stunned. It had taken punishment. But so had Blade. He wondered if he could outlast the monster, in what had now become a contest of endurance.

As the snake twisted its head this way and that, Blade lurched to his feet. With a desperate heave of his arms, he lifted the post, point forward. The snake's head loomed in front of him like a mottled brown and black wall now slimy with blood. He lifted the post high over his head. Then he thrust it home with all the strength left in his arms. Again he felt scales crack and flesh tear, and this time a great gout of blood spurted out and all over him. The snake toppled sideways and thudded down onto the grass. Then it gave a final, convulsive jerk, sweeping Blade to the ground again, and lay still.

Gradually Blade felt his strength returning. He relaxed his death grip on the post and sat up. Seeing that all the soldiers were still frozen with surprise and terror, he stood up and walked over to where Queen Roxala lay on the walk. Looking down at her, he found his original impressions of a ripe and mature beauty confirmed. More than confirmed, for in the fall the queen's tight gown had burst from the neck down to the waist. A bruise extended in a purple line across her ribs where the railing of the balcony had caught her. And her magnificent breasts were fully bared.

As Blade stood looking down at the queen, the courtyard gradually came back to life. Horun barked orders, and the soldiers began to rout the slaves out of their refuges, kicking, cursing, and occasionally sword-whipping them. Horun himself drew the sword that had stayed in its scabbard all during Blade's death struggle with the snake, then came over to Blade.

"All right, Blade. Quit staring at the queen. If she saw you doing it now, she'd have your balls cut off." He jerked his thumb at the center of the courtyard. "Get back where you belong."

The harsh sound of Horun's voice made Roxala's eyes flicker open. Then they widened as she saw the two men standing over her. She looked down at herself, nodded, but made no effort to close her gaping gown. Then she looked at Blade and said, "This is the Richard Blade of the English I asked to have brought?"

"Yes," said Horun quickly. "An unruly and bad-tempered slave my queen. He tried to escape while I was killing the snake. I had him beaten by the soldiers. I can have him beaten again if you wish."

But Roxala was not listening to Horun. Her eyes roamed up and down Blade's body, noting his muscles, other parts of him, and his bloody and battered appearance. Then they moved away from him to the body of the snake lying beyond in the grass. And then she burst out laughing, pointing first at Horun, then at the snake, then at Blade.

"You killed that monster, little captain? You killed it? You couldn't kill a kitten if you had a whole squad of soldiers at your back. No, you could kill a kitten. It's little and helpless and weak, and you like stamping on the little and the helpless and the weak. But that snake wasn't any of these things. You killed it? Richard Blade of the English killed it. The signs are all over him. Smell them, Horun, if you can smell

anything through that perfume you bathe in."

"But-" and then Horun stopped. His brains weren't the best, but apparently they were good enough to keep him from the folly of arguing with Queen Roxala.

The queen grinned. "That's better, Horun. Keep your mouth shut, and then you won't have a chance to put your foot in it. You'd look even sillier than you do now, standing around on one foot." She turned her gaze onto Blade. "Well, Richard Blade of the English. I wanted to see what kind of fighting man you were. But I think you have already proved that you are a good one. I wish very much I could have seen you kill that snake. Now you are going to come with me. I will see that you get bathed and cared for."

"Your Majesty," exploded Horun, "this is a fresh-caught slave and a terrible warrior. He's not safe yet! Are you-?"

"Are you going to teach me my business, Horun? If you are, perhaps you have some lessons coming also. And Blade is not a slave. Not for long, at any rate. He is a warrior. I will have him entered in the Caste of Warriors. I have never had a free warrior to head my team of arena men because there were none of mine worthy to be more than slaves. But now I have a man." Roxala said the last word as though it were a title of honor. The way she looked at him left Blade in no doubt that it had a good many other implications as well.

"Ho, slaves!" Roxala's voice carried all over the courtyard like the blast of a trumpet. A dozen slaves practically tumbled over each other running to answer her call. She pointed at Blade and said, "Take this warrior Richard Blade of the English and have him bathed. I will send the surgeon to him later." She spun about and strode away, still without bothering to fasten her gown. Obviously in her eyes the slaves were not human enough to require any modesty before them.

As the slaves gathered around Blade, Horun pushed through their ranks and shoved his glaring face into Blade's. "The queen is going to do well by you, it seems. A warrior, yet. But remember, warriors can die just like slaves. I hope I get a chance to remind you of that, boy. How I hope so!"

Blade smiled blandly into Horun's flushed face. "Don't hope too much, little captain. But don't worry. If I ever want a few minutes' easy amusement for myself and the queen, I'll look you up." He turned his back on Horun and let the slaves escort him away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Queen Roxala's bath would not have been out of place in a luxury apartment in London. The sunken marble tub was almost large enough to be used as a swimming pool. Thick gold-colored woolen rugs covered the floor. Blade sank into them up to his ankles as the slaves led him to the bath. He waited while a relay of slave girls clad only in short trunks poured hot water from gilded bronze buckets into the bath. Then he let himself be guided down the steps until the water was lapping around his chin. He lay back, floating luxuriantly, feeling the water sting as it cleaned his scrapes and abrasions and soothed his aching muscles.

Looking up at the ceiling, he saw that it was covered in mosaic tiles. At first he could not make out any patterns in the swirl of steam-fogged colors above. Then gradually he realized he was looking at a spectacular, vivid, and explicit series of erotic illustrations. He noticed that most of the women on the ceiling, no matter what their poses, were full-figured and dark-haired. They weren't exactly portraits of the queen, but as far as body type they all might have been sisters. A new variation on decadence, thought Blade. Have your erotic fantasies done so you can look at them while you take your bath. He

wondered if Roxala picked what she would do with her next partner from this sexual catalogue in tile while she bathed.

Several of the slave girls now dove into the water with him, carrying sponges, soaps, and pots of soothing ointments. They clustered around him, working away industriously to scour and anoint him. It was as thorough a job as the slaves in the cellar had done. What kept Blade from enjoying it more was the complete lack of any life or spirit in the faces of the girls. They seemed completely unaware of his maleness or their own near-nudity. Their joyless attentions to him once more made him feel like a prize steer being groomed for showing.

To see if he could put a little life into the proceedings, he gently patted one of the girls in the appropriate place. She gasped and spun around to stare at him. It was as though he had jabbed her with a red-hot iron. Her eyes were filled, not with anger or indignation, but with raw fear. Were the girls afraid of him-or was it just that Queen Roxala had a "hands off" rule for her chosen studs?

Before Blade could ask any of the girls, the surgeon came in. He was at least seventy and stooped with age and rheumatism. Moreover, he was ugly, not only by nature but as a result of a series of scars that furrowed his cheeks and neck.

"You are Richard Blade, warrior of the English and soon to be warrior of Rulam?" The man's voice was high and quavering.

"I am."

"I am to examine you for your fitness in all things. Please lie down upon the floor." As Blade did so, the surgeon opened a leather bag, and with his gnarled hands began removing instruments from it.

In spite of his age, the surgeon's hands were skilled and swift in their movements. The surgeon went over Blade from head to toe, examining his abrasions and bruises with particular care. He also paid particular attention to Blade's genitals, examining them with such care that Blade began to wonder about the surgeon's sexual preferences.

Finally the surgeon stood up. "You are a very fine physical specimen," he said. Then he added, with the first trace of expression Blade had heard in his voice, "Possibly even good enough to meet our queen's requirements for more than a few months. For your sake, I hope so." The surgeon bent over until his thin-lipped mouth was close to Blade's ear. "And for your sake, remember that Queen Roxala is eaten up by jealousy. When she picks a man or a woman, that man or woman is hers until she tires of them and has them killed."

"Woman?"

"Queen Roxala has a wide-taste in pleasures, Blade." The surgeon's thin mouth hardened. "Once she caught me with a girl she had picked for her own. I got these." He pointed at his scars. "I would have been castrated if the girl hadn't persuaded the queen that she had seduced me. So Roxala had the girl tortured to death. Whips were the mildest part of it. Be careful, Blade. When the queen is well satisfied, it is easier for all of us."

Blade nodded, keeping his face expressionless. He was beginning to dislike the Rulami nearly as much as he did the Kandans. He couldn't hope to see the Zungans storm over the walls of this city. But if the Rulami ever sent an army south to try to overcome the Zungans, he would be very happy to see the bodies of its soldiers littering the plain all the way to the horizon.

The surgeon went out and the girls followed him. Not one of them even looked back at Blade. He was alone in the whole vast bath chamber, lying on the rug, looking up at the figures writhing across the ceiling.

He was not alone for long, though. The faint squeal, of a door opening was followed by the padding of bare feet approaching him across the rug. He looked up. He hardly needed to do so to know that Queen Roxala was standing there, looking down at him.

She wore a shimmering blue gown bordered with black and gold, with ruby buttons down the front. Blade could not help staring at the rubies. Some of them were the size of pigeon's eggs.

Roxala misinterpreted the stare. "You want me, do you Blade? I could see that in the garden. I can see it now. Am I right?" There was a bantering note in her voice, but also an implied threat.

"You are a superlatively beautiful woman," said Blade carefully. "How could I help but want you?" And in fact the thought of embracing the body he had seen half-revealed earlier that afternoon had certainly aroused him. Within seconds it had increased to the point where eyes less sharp than the queen's would have seen it. Blade was glad for once that his reason did not control every part of his body. If it had, he would have been hard put to conjure up the response necessary for dealing with this lushly decadent queen.

"You obviously cannot help it," said Roxala. She reached out a bare foot with gilded toenails and squeezed Blade's stiffened organ with her long supple toes. "That is good for both me and you." Her hands moved to the top button of her robe and undid it. "Would you like to see me dance for you, Blade?"

Blade was able to come up with what he hoped would be a tactful answer. "If it will display your beauty to yet a greater advantage, Your Majesty, then by all means dance."

That seemed to please her. She smiled-Blade could almost call it a simper. It seemed horribly out of place, here and on the face of this woman, considering what he knew about her. He despaired of ever trying to make sense of Queen Roxala, and lay back on the rug, head propped on one arm to watch her dance.

She started off with a slow swaying of her hips that made the gown swirl and wave and throw off reflections. The rubies flashed fire. She bent forward, slowly, gracefully, until she was bent almost double, swaying her upper body as she did so. Blade could see the full breasts moving under the thin material of the gown. She bowed further, until her long black hair flowed down to the rug. Then she snapped upright and arched almost as far back as she had arched forward. As she curved backward, thrusting her breasts up at the ceiling, she unhooked another of the buttons. Then she swayed forward again.

This time as she bowed, she shrugged first one shoulder, then the other. The gown slipped down until it was held halfway up her arms. Her breasts were outlined against the gown, full, ripe, and now half-exposed.

She straightened up and began to move in a rapid circle, feet flicking in and out under the skirt of the gown. At the same time her hips went into action again. Not a circular motion this time, but a slow, infinitely sensual rocking back and forth. Inch by inch the gown slipped down. Now it was held only by the swell of her breasts. With thumb and forefinger she teased the third ruby out of its hook. The gown gave up the struggle entirely and slipped down onto the floor.

She waited as it flowed down into a blue pool around her feet, then stepped out of it. Now she was nude except for a golden girdle that rose to just below her breasts. The breasts themselves swayed free, ripe and full like summer melons, boldly tipped with nipples whose darkness was a startling contrast to the white skin with its net of fine blue veins.

Free of the gown, Roxala's movements became freer-and wilder. She whirled and leaped and swayed. She cupped her breasts in her long-fingered hands and thrust them toward Blade. She knelt down and shook her whole upper body, making her breasts wiggle and her hair leap and flow about her shoulders. A thought passed through Blade's mind, ludicrous but undeniable. Perhaps he should try to kidnap Roxala and get her back to Home Dimension. The project could be run for years on what the queen would earn as an erotic dancer. Then Roxala's hands fluttered down to the hooks on the girdle and Blade's attention snapped back to her.

One hook, two hooks-he could see the cleft of her buttocks now, and faint curls of dark hair in front. Three hooks-a quick wiggle of now bared hips, and the girdle slipped down to join the gown on the rag. Naked, flaunting all the magnificence of her body, she rose on tiptoe, raising her arms high over her head and arching her body. Then she flowed down in a single motion onto the floor and rolled over on her back.

"Come to me now, Blade. Come to me now," she sighed. He did not need her urging. The long slow stripping and the wild erotic fury of her dance had him aroused more than he would have believed possible without physical contact. He did not even take time to rise to his feet, but rolled over and over, across the rug to her.

Her body was already wet with sweat from her dancing and as slippery to his touch as if it had been oiled. She moaned as his hands clamped down on her breasts. Blade sensed she wanted no gentleness, no tenderness, rather strength and fury. So his hands squeezed down hard on the full breasts she again thrust toward him. He was rewarded by feeling those startlingly dark nipples rise and stiffen under his hands, thrusting out into dark spears. It seemed impossible that they could be so long, so hard. He said so.

"Ah, but its how hard you are, how long you are, that's important now," she said in a half-gasp, half-moan. She reached for his erect phallus and grabbed it with the same vigor he had used on her. "Come on, Blade. Come-on!"

He obliged. He rolled toward her as she twisted on her side and rolled toward him. They met, they joined, he thrust deep into her already slick vagina. He felt her stiffen and saw her head roll back and her eyes roll up as he drove into her. Again he made no effort at gentleness or tenderness, again he hurled himself into the play with all his force. He made no effort to slow himself or hold himself or pace himself, and got away with it all. It was barely seconds before the queen's body shuddered for the first time, enormously and terribly, breath rasping in her throat. It was not much longer before she peaked again. And then Blade's furious vigor brought him to the peak also. His own hot fury spurting into her brought her to the third and most savage - climax. She collapsed beside him, limp and numb. But her arms-strong arms too-held him so tightly that even if he had wanted to, he could not withdraw from her.

They lay on the rug, silent, bodies locked together for a long time. Gradually their breathing slowed to normal, gradually the glazed animal look left Roxala's eyes. She lifted herself up to look at Blade, her nipples brushing his now sweaty chest, and smiled.

"Blade, I think you are what a woman needs. Even a woman who is a queen. You will be staying with

me." It was not a question, not even an order. It was a flat statement, intended to have the force of natural law. And for Roxala, Blade realized that her will was just exactly that.

That was the first time they made love, but not the last. It was not even the last time that day, because Roxala drew Blade into four more bouts before the next dawn. Blade wasn't sure if it was correct to call the queen insatiable, since she was eventually satiated. But no one could ever call her moderate in her pursuit of pleasure.

But Roxala was not a complete slave to her pleasures-far from it. Though the laws and customs of Rulam offered much freedom to women, it still took unusual force of character for Roxala to have held her own against King Kleptor for nearly twenty years. This was particularly true when one considered that King Kleptor was not in fact a weak character.

"He indeed is the one pushing for all-out war against Zunga," said Roxala as they lay in her bed watching dawn break over the city. Blade managed to avoid any visible reaction. But the queen's words were a considerable surprise to him. So Kleptor was actually pushing for the thing the Zungans most feared, an invasion in strength by Rulam's ironclad soldiers?

But Roxala was going on, too concerned with her own views of the situation to pay any attention to Blade's reactions. "Yes, he is massing the beasts and the men and the wagons in his camp already. In another two or three months he will start south, as soon as the summer heat leaves the plains. He thinks that by conquering the Zungans he will obtain such glory that he will be able to move against me, remove me, execute me even." She turned to him and flowed against his chest. "And it was Kleptor who ordered the efforts to capture you. The-whatever you call your Minister for War down in Zunga-the-"

"The On'ror?" Blade's voice was flat and cold.

"Yes, that one." She made no attempt to pronounce the name. "He and your priests sent word that if you were allowed to train the Zungans in your new fighting arts, it would become almost impossible to defeat them. So Rulami soldiers were wandering all over the Kandan forests looking for you." She smiled. "I didn't care much whether the Zungans learned to fly through the air on broomsticks and land on top of the royal palace. I still don't. The important thing is, I have you. Here. With me. And no other woman can have you again." Then they made love once more.

Fortunately Roxala had some affairs of her own to attend to, so Blade was left alone after breakfast. He badly needed both the breakfast, to fill his stomach, and the solitude, to set his thoughts in order.

Roxala was lusty, scheming, fiercely jealous, and feared nothing and no one, not even King Kleptor. She was a dangerous protectress, but would be an effective one as long as he satisfied her physical desires. And she was not ambitious for conquest. Kleptor was. And that made him the real enemy. Behind Roxala's protection-from behind her skirts, as it were-Blade had a priceless opportunity to work against the man who dreamed of conquering Zunga. He wished he could also get word back to the Zungans of the On'ror's treachery. That would give Afuno all the excuse he needed and ten times more besides to move against the Ulungas. But without Kleptor, there would be no one left to whom the On'ror could betray Zunga. The On'ror and his priestly allies would be left stranded and harmless. Kleptor had to be the main target for now.

Blade found the next two months maddeningly frustrating. He had complete freedom to move about within Roxala's palace, and all the servants jumped to obey any order he gave. Or almost any. He could not leave the palace without the queen accompanying him, nor could he pay any attention to the woman slaves. He did not mind so much being confined to the palace most of the time. Certainly not after four

black-masked men leaped out of the bushes in the courtyard one night while he walked there in search of fresh air. He was unarmed, but fortunately they only had knives, so he found it easy to kill two at once and hold off the others until the guards came up and finished the work. If Blade had doubted Kleptor's hostility before, he did so no longer. Even the queen was surprised by the limits to which the king seemed prepared to go.

"I think he truly fears that you are a threat to his throne, not just to his possession of me," Roxala said. "Before, the men I have taken were good, stout fellows, lusty and strong and inexhaustible. But what brains they had were between their legs, not between their ears. He knows that you are a different kind of man. You have all the talents of those who have come before you-" she grinned wickedly "-and many more besides. When Kleptor thinks of you, I'll wager he has visions of you sitting on the throne of Rulam beside me and his own body staked out on an ants' nest. That might happen. It might."

So there was another thing for Blade to worry about. Was Queen Roxala suddenly going to start plotting to overthrow Kleptor? Not that Blade objected to overthrowing Kleptor-in fact it was the best thing that could happen for the Zungans. But he did not want to get any more involved in anything Roxala was planning than was absolutely necessary. He neither liked her nor trusted her.

He liked and trusted her even less after seeing what she did the one and only time he spoke to one of the slave girls. The poor girl made matters worse by replying. She even smiled at Blade as she did so. The next morning Roxala led Blade down into a deep cellar, where the girl was chained to a wall. She had Blade stand and watch while the girl was whipped until her back was pulped, raw, bloody flesh. Then the girl was turned around-and this time when the whip stopped she was dead.

But Roxala let herself go that way only a few times. Meanwhile, she taught Blade or had him taught an immense amount about living among the Rulami. He was initiated into the Caste of Warriors. Roxala took particular delight in making Horun one of the warriors whose role it was to stand up and bear witness to Blade's skill as a fighter. He was taught the use of Rulami weapons, which he learned easily and well. He was taught to ride and manage the Ivory People. That he did not learn so easily, but he put so much effort into it that he also learned it well. When and if the time came for escape, he would find that escape far easier mounted on one of the great beasts, pounding along at seventy miles a day. He also studied all the maps of Rulami and Kandan territory he could get hold of. He told Roxala that he wanted to be able to play a part in the coming war with the Zungans worthy of his rank.

Roxala was almost skeptical. "But were you not aiding the Zungans to develop new ways of fighting us?"

"I was. But I see things rather differently now. This is a great city and a mighty people. The Zungans are a bunch of black savages living in huts." Never mind that Afuno was a better and wiser leader than any Blade had seen in Rulam or Kanda, or that Princess Aumara was worth ten of this lust-driven and sadistic queen. Blade knew he had to fill Roxala's ears with what she wanted to hear. And what she wanted to hear was what all the Rulami believed-that the Zungans were worthless black savages, fit only to be stamped out under the feet of Rulam's soldiers and made slaves.

For all her sophistication in intrigue, Roxala took Blade's remarks at face value. She was too prejudiced and vain to do otherwise. She grinned and said, "In that case, have you thought of teaching our soldiers how to cope with those new methods of fighting you taught the Zungans? That would certainly convince King Kleptor that you were to be trusted."

Blade looked sharply at Roxala. "Do you really want me to help Kleptor's dreams and schemes?"

Roxala laughed and shook her head. "No, I suppose when all is said and done, I don't. But I do know

what I want you to do now, with me."

They did it and afterward while Roxala went off to let her women bathe her, Blade lay in the bed and let out a long sigh of relief. That could have been a nasty one. The Zungans would have little enough chance against the Rulami army as it was. If their enemies knew and could meet the new fighting style their chances would shrink away almost to nothing. He would have done his best to get out of helping the Rulami, but it might have been hard to think up a good excuse if Roxala had insisted.

Blade's luck and quick wits kept him out of trouble for the rest of the two months, while he made love to the queen, practiced with his weapons, and sharpened his skills as a rider of the Ivory People. As long as Roxala was getting enough loving, she was willing to think of politics and war only at intervals, although she thought dangerously well at those times. If it came to the crunch, Roxala looked like she'd be a treacherous but probably competent ally. And from his experience, Blade much preferred treacherous allies to incompetent ones. The latter were totally unpredictable, most likely to open their mouths when they should keep them shut.

At the end of the two months, word came up from the south that a Zungan army was marching north into Rulami territory! It was now just south of the main forest belt, with one wing thrown out to mask Kanda. The Kandans had retreated into their city, and the Rulami patrols in the area had already been swept up or forced to retreat into the forest.

Blade could not keep a straight face when the news came. Fortunately, he was able to pass off his amazement as surprise at the Zungans' folly. "How can they think of doing anything against the army of Rulam, fighting on its home territory? If they are defeated, they will never get home, and the whole of Zunga will lie open to its enemies." He was entirely sincere in that attitude and those words. What had possessed King Afuno?

The queen shrugged. They were lying in bed after a bout of love, and she was reluctant at such times to discuss politics and war. "I don't know. They say the Ulungas had omens, and the-the On'ror-interpreted the omens as telling the Zungans to march north."

Blade felt slightly sick inside. That was just what the Ulungas and the On'ror would do if they wanted to ensure the defeat of the Zungan army. No doubt they had realized how their schemes for restricting the training in the new fighting had been outflanked. They had realized that the Zungans might soon become invincible and their own position become precarious. So, once again, they had chosen to doom the Zungan people rather than risk their status. Under the covers, Blade's fists clenched. He wished he had the On'ror there before him. He would drive his fists into the man's face until there was nothing but splintered bone and mashed flesh.

That was only the first news. Over the next few days more poured in, and then more. Kanda was under siege, its armies finding it safer not to take to the field. The Zungans had no method of scaling the walls, but they held the city's fields and the shores of the lake where its fishermen drew their nets. It had food for less than a month within its walls. If the Zungan army was not driven away soon, it would be the end for Kanda.

Personally, Blade thought that the end of Kanda was an excellent idea. So did more than a few of the Rulami leaders, including, so the rumor ran, King Kleptor himself. They had always chafed at having to pay out good firestones for ivory and slaves. If Kanda and the Ivory Tower fell, this would end. Rulam's boundaries could be extended a full two days' march southward. And the Zungan army, weakened from its long campaign against Kanda, would be easier prey. Kanda and Zunga, a clean sweep of both rivals to Rulam's power! Blade saw and heard sober elder statesmen drinking confident toasts to their city's

new glory.

Then there came rumors and then hard news of a fair-sized battle between Rulami patrols and the Zungan outposts. A battle in which the Zungan king himself had been present, and some of his family captured. There was no report of who had won, or of what the casualties had been. But rumor had it that the Rulami had been quickly beaten off after their first attack, and driven away with heavy losses. Considering how the same elder statesmen who had been prematurely celebrating victory suddenly began going around with sober, even grim faces, Blade was inclined to believe the rumors.

"But at least we've got some of that bastard Afuno's family to play with," said Roxala as she and Blade sat over dinner talking of the battle. "One of them's a princess, daughter to Afuno himself."

It took a greater effort than ever before, but Blade managed to keep his face calm. Then he fought down an impulse to ask about the princess. Her name, for example. Roxala did not know about him and Aumara, but if he started asking questions, she might easily become suspicious. And then the fate of the princess, whether she was Aumara or another, would at once become much, much harsher.

"Kleptor wants to hold the princess as a hostage. For what, I wonder? That band of savages can't have any proper family ties. What good would it do? No, I have a better plan." It seemed that Kleptor was going to hold a massive field day at the army's camp, with large-scale combats between the various teams of arena men. This was to be Kleptor's day of vaunting and glory. But Roxala would have her moments, too. She would offer the crowd an unprecedented show-the public execution, by torture, of a real live Zungan princess. She could be quite sure of getting her hands on the princess, so the matter was all but settled.

"And you will be there beside me, Blade, fully armed, with the firestone of the Queen's Champion on your chest. You will lead my arena men in the contest, and Kleptor and all Rulam will get a chance to see you in action."

Roxala kept that promise. When she took her seat in the Queen's box at the camp arena three days later, Blade was indeed standing beside her. His helmet and armor were silvered, his sword of the finest steel with a gold hilt, his boots and shield choice polished leather from the hides of the Ivory People. A red plume nodded from the crest of his helmet, and on his armored chest dangled the promised ruby. It was the finest pigeon's-blood color, and larger than he would have believed possible-as large as his own clenched fist. He heard a clank every time it swung on its gold chain against his breastplate. Queen Roxala wore another one of her tight-fitting gowns, this one a dazzling mixture of silver and gold, with rubies on ears, throat, wrists, fingers, and along the seams of the gown. Blade tried to reckon up the value of her rubies, then abandoned the struggle.

The arena before them was about two hundred feet on a side. From its hard-packed earth it obviously served as a drill field for Kleptor's army. Wooden stands rose along one side for the high-ranking spectators. Of the other three sides, two were occupied by soldiers drawn up in flawless formation, standing motionless under the broiling sun. On the third side a vast mass of slaves, mostly Zungan, also stood motionless. What little breeze there was blew from them, blowing their stench across the arena to Blade and the queen. The queen buried her nose in a perfumed pomander, and even Blade found himself wrinkling his nose.

Now came a mighty blare of trumpets, echoed by the bellowings of the Ivory People. Through the corner between the two masses of soldiers came a procession of a dozen or more of the great beasts, each carrying half a dozen soldiers. Blade saw Horun mounted on the neck of the first one. At the end of the procession came a beast whose tusks had been gilded and tipped with gold balls, whose flanks were

hung with silver cloth shimmering with rubies, whose claws had been painted a glossy black. On its back sat King Kleptor.

Like all the Rulami, he was a well-fleshed type. But even from this distance Blade could see that Kleptor had carried the tendency to extremes. A massive paunch swelled out his gold tunic, and his swollen thighs and calves strained at their hose. A square-cut black beard did not conceal the jowls, the double chin, or the sagging cheeks. Blade grimaced in disgust. Kleptor seemed an appropriate king for Rulam, proud, rich, and decadent as it was. He looked aside for a moment at Roxala. At least her decadence had some life in it. Kleptor looked like a thing dying, if not already dead.

The processions stopped in front of the stands, and four slaves ran out pushing a wheeled ladder to the side of Kleptor's mount. The king heaved himself off the saddle and lurched and staggered down the ladder, while the slaves struggled to hold it upright.

"Once the slaves let it fall, and Kleptor with it," said Roxala. "He had all four of them burned alive over a slow fire."

As Kleptor lumbered toward the far end of the stands, two servants from his train ran toward where Blade and the queen sat. Each was carrying a ruby-studded gold cup. As they approached, Blade could see that each cup was filled with translucent green wine. Standing on the hard earth in front of the stands, they could just reach up high enough to offer the wine cups to Blade and the queen. Roxala stared at the slaves, then over at Kleptor, then at Blade.

"Slaves!" she barked. "You will drink first from each cup, then offer it." Blade started, then stared down at the two slaves. Did the one in front of him look a little startled?

He leaned over and stared closer, then said, "The queen commands you to drink." The slave with the queen's cup lifted it to his lips and drank deep. The slave with Blade's cup hesitated, then his cup too rose. Blade watched the wine trickle down from the corners of the man's mouth. Then in one leap he was out of his seat, over the edge of the stands, and down on the ground. His sword rasped out and jabbed the slave in his wine-stained neck. His voice was a rasp as he spoke. "The queen said drink, you swine, not spit it out. Now drink! And I want to see your throat move."

The wine cup rose again, and this time the wine did not trickle down. The slave's throat jerked in swallowing motions once, twice, three times. He stood in silence a moment, the wine cup still raised to his lips. Then his hands loosened. The wine cup thudded to the ground, spilling out a green puddle. He bent double, hands clasping at his stomach. Then he fell forward onto the ground, kicking wildly. As he hit the ground, he began to scream.

Blade turned to Roxala. Her face was pale, but she only shrugged. "Kleptor must be getting overbold, to try to poison my champion before all the nobles and the army," She smiled grimly. "Or perhaps he thought it would be part of the day's entertainment. Perhaps I can make a few changes in the plans, too." Blade did not like the expression on her face. If he had been Kleptor, he knew that he would have liked it even less.

Blade looked toward the king's end of the stands. Kleptor was sitting as still and silent as a temple image. But watching closely, Blade saw the king's eyes occasionally flicker toward the queen, then to Blade, and finally down to the slave dying in agony on the ground. There was no expression on his face during any of this. Kleptor, Blade suspected, would prove a shrewder plotter than the queen.

Then the trumpets blared again. Through the gap in the corner of the arena more armed men were

marching. These were tough-looking, rangy men of all colors and sizes, in a variety of dress and fighting equipment. The arena men. They were marching in two columns of fifty-odd men apiece, one headed by the king's standard, one by the queen's. The players were here; the game was about to begin.

No, there was still something missing. The Zungan princess Roxala had snatched. Her death by torture was supposed to be the opening event. Blade was glad he had eaten only an early and light breakfast. Seeing helpless women die by inches was not something he could watch unmoved. But at least he hoped he could keep his face straight. Doing anything to arouse Roxala's hair-trigger jealousy would simply prolong the girl's torment.

There came another blast of trumpets, and after it the sound of a Zungan iron gong. Someone was beating it in a mocking parody of the Zungan processional.

Then three clusters of figures marched into the arena. Two Zungan slaves carrying a gong, with a Rulami walking behind them and beating it with a mallet. Four armed guards with drawn swords, escorting a large wooden stake carried by half a dozen more slaves. And finally four more armed guards, marching along in a square. In the middle of the square, a woman. Naked, her mahogany skin layered with dust, sagging under fatigue and the weight of the chains on her neck and limbs.

Princess Aumara.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Blade knew within seconds after recognizing Aumara that he was not simply going to sit quietly in the stands and watch her die in agony. King Afuno might forgive him for that, considering the circumstances. But his own conscience never would. In fact, there was no point in even trying to sit still. He knew he could never control himself well enough to avoid rousing Roxala's suspicions. And her suspicions would lead to jealousy, and her jealousy to his death. He would simply be signing his own death warrant, without giving Aumara a quick and merciful death.

So he did not climb back into the stands and sit down beside the queen. He whirled, drew his sword again, and sprinted out into the arena toward the princess and her guards. As he ran, his mind was working furiously. Was there anything he could do for Aumara except give her that quick death?

His headlong charge across the arena took everybody totally by surprise. Before the gasps and yells rose into the air he was halfway to Aumara. The guards stared at him as though he were an apparition from another world.

He charged in among the guards around Aumara while they were still staring. His sword whistled through the air and through two necks before either of their owners could make a move in their own defense. One of the guards had the keys to Aumara's chains on his belt. Blade snatched them from the falling man and threw them to the princess, then spun about to meet the surviving guards.

All six of them were coming at him now. Then the shrill screams of Roxala rose above the crowd's roar as she yelled orders to her arena men. They swung about, and fifty of them began to move toward Blade. This is it, he thought grimly. He flicked a glance toward Aumara, who was almost free of her chains now. If he was going to kill her, it would have to be soon. He killed another guard, leaving five, then stepped back and raised his sword. Aumara looked up at it and then at him. She understood. He tensed-

And then pulled his downstroke to a stop in midair as the king's arena men also turned. Their swords and spears and maces rose. Then their commanders barked orders, and they moved at a quick jog

toward the mass of the queen's arena men. The five guards drew away from Blade, and dashed away, around toward the queen's men.

Blade stared. So did Aumara. Then Blade realized what was happening-or at least what might be happening. Kleptor was pretending that the queen's arena men had revolted, and was sending his own to wipe them out-and incidentally to wipe out Blade and rescue Aumara. The second goal Blade approved of, the first not so much. But with luck, though, Kleptor's move would hurl things into such confusion that nobody would pay attention to Blade and Aumara. All at once they had a chance of escape.

But it was only a chance. The arena was still surrounded by Keptor's soldiers, who could trap them if anybody gave the right orders. He and Aumara would have to move fast, before anybody thought of those right orders. Blade knew that whether he survived or not there would be more bad blood between Kleptor and Roxala over this day's work, but he had a preference for surviving.

Here came a new danger. And, Blade suddenly realized, their best chance of safety! Horun had wheeled his mount out of the line before the stands and was goading it across the arena toward Blade and Aumara. The officer was crouching low in his saddle, bending far out and down and swinging a long sword in his right hand. The other soldiers that had ridden the beast had dismounted. Horun could not resist the chance to be a hero in front of the whole Rulami army by striking down Blade.

The big beast was moving at a trot by the time it approached Blade. Blade stood his ground as Horun thundered down at him. As the animal's long tusks came within reach, Blade calculated the precise moment, then grabbed a tusk in each hand. Swinging his whole weight upward on his powerful arms, he vaulted onto the animal's forehead before Horun could react. Blade's sword rasped out of its scabbard again, whistled through the air, and sank with a meaty chunk into Horun's neck. Blood spurted high, Horun's eyes rolled up in his head, and with a bewildered and stunned expression he toppled off his mount onto the ground. Blade snatched the man's goad out of his hand as he went down and pulled the animal to a stop. Then he yelled to Aumara, and a moment later she was lithely scrambling up beside him. Blade grabbed her around the waist and rapped the animal smartly with the goad again.

Before anybody realized what was happening and could give those necessary orders, Blade had his mount up to a full trot again. Everybody was too stunned by the swift flurry of events, or perhaps too engrossed in watching the arena men slaughtering each other to notice. Blade headed his mount to the right, toward the gap between the two masses of soldiers. A few hardy spirits broke out of formation and tried to block the animal's path, then lost their nerve at the last minute and scampered to safety. One of them, slower of foot than his comrades, died screaming, spitted on the beast's left tusk. Blade applied the goad again, and they thundered down the passage at a full gallop.

Blade kept the beast moving at that speed as he swung it still further to the right, down the main street of the camp and toward the main gate. If any orders to close those gates were given, the sentries either never heard them or were too stunned to obey. Blade took his mount through the wide-open gates at full speed in a cloud of dust and the cheerful curses hurled at the guards by Aumara.

Almost at the gate of the camp lay forest, the northern fringes of the great Rulami forests that stretched south toward Kanda-and now toward the Zungan army. Again Blade did not spare the goad, and they plunged into the forest still at a gallop. They trampled bushes and smashed aside small trees like a runaway tank, putting more and more miles behind them, between them and Kleptor's army.

It was not until late afternoon that Blade let the animal drop below a trot. Even then, he would have kept it going if he thought it could have stood the pace any longer. But even the fabulous endurance of the Ivory People had its limits. A little while later they came to a stream, and Blade let the animal drink while

he and Aumara dismounted and did the same.

After drinking, they let the animal browse among the bushes and saplings while they bathed. Blade felt as though he were bathing away more than the sweat and grime caked on him by the battle and the mad flight. He felt as though he were washing away the strain and frustration of his captivity as Roxala's chosen stud, and all the filth and decadence of Rulam in general.

He looked at Aumara. She was almost as pleasing to the eye as before, as she splashed about with the water beading on her dark skin. She had not been a slave more than a few days, not long enough for hunger or confinement to thin her ripe body or take the spirit out of her. But her back showed a mass of criss-crossing welts, and her wrists and ankles were half raw from the chafing of the irons.

Blade pointed at her back. "Queen Roxala's doing, by any chance?"

She nodded. Then she looked at him and said, "Blade, I knew you were favored by the Sky Father. But I did not think that he would work such a miracle for you and for me. How did we ever get away? I can hardly believe that we are here, free."

"We're not completely in the clear yet," Blade cautioned her. "Kleptor and Roxala may not be at each other's throats enough to prevent a search party from being sent out. But at least we've got a good headstart." He shook his head to clear the water from his ears, then went on.

"I knew that Roxala and Kleptor were just short of open warfare. Not very short, considering that he tried to start off the day's business by poisoning me in full sight of his whole army. And your death by torture was Roxala's project-Kleptor didn't approve of it at all. At least not right then. When Roxala ordered her arena men to kill me and get you ready for the torture, it looked to the crowd like they were getting out of hand. So Kleptor could order his arena men to move in on the queen's, wipe them out, kill me, rescue you-and nobody in the crowd would know what was really involved. After that, Horun made us the gift of his mount, and there was nothing left to do but run like the wind. There's an English saying that covers what happened today. 'Order, -counterorder-disorder.' And there was certainly enough disorder!"

Aumara nodded. "But before that?"

"Yes. I would have killed you, to spare you what Roxala had planned. I'd seen what her mind ran to, in the way of tortures."

"So had I. I didn't mind dying so much myself, but-Blade, I am carrying your child. I am glad that is safe for now."

Blade held her for a moment, then said, "I think our friend of the Ivory People has got back some of his strength. It's time we were on the move again."

They were almost continuously on the move for two days without hearing any signs of pursuit. Occasionally they had to sneak past isolated forest dwellings or across roads, but there was little activity and less habitation in these forests. Aumara recognized this as more good luck, and made solemn prayers to the Sky Father in thanks for it and hope that it would continue.

Possibly the prayers were effective. Possibly also the fact that the Zungan invasion had scared the normal forest population into fleeing north helped. But for whatever reason, natural or otherwise, their luck held all the way south.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that Blade was scouting ahead across a clearing rank with long, dew-laden grass. He saw dark figures moving in the woods across the clearing, froze, watched, and waited. The mahogany colored skins and spears became visible. His spears too-he recognized the balance weights at the butts. He stepped out into the open, made the Peace Hand, and shouted.

All the Zungans instantly faded into the undergrowth, except for one who stepped out into the open, made the Peace Hand in reply-and then dropped his spear in astonishment. His mouth sagged open so wide it was awhile before he could choke out the words, "Richard Blade of the English?"

"Yes. And Princess Aumara escaped with me. She is back there in the forest." He turned and shouted. "Aumara, we are safe! A Zungan patrol!" Again the Zungan gaped and stared as Aumara stepped out into the open. Finally he managed to get his mouth closed, then opened it again to greet the princess and call his men out from cover.

Blade noticed that all eighteen of the Zungans were carrying the new spears. He asked about that.

"Ah, the new fighting art is all over Zunga now," the warrior replied. "Half our warriors have the Blade-spears, and many hundreds can use them well. The On'ror and the Ulungas grumble, but we have not yet violated the letter of their decision. And the letter of their decision is all that King Afuno will let them enforce."

"King Afuno is a wise and great king," said Blade. "I am glad to be able to make him happy by bringing his daughter back to him. And I do not think the On'ror will be able to enforce anything very much longer."

His tone as he said this discouraged questions. The patrol leader nodded and said, "Tell us about what has happened to you."

Blade told of his adventures once there in the clearing, twice more on the way back as they met other patrols, and a good half dozen times after they got back to the main camp of the Zungan army that afternoon. By this time he was getting a little weary of the repetition. But that evening King Afuno arrived from a visit to the part of his army that was besieging Kanda. Blade did not mind at all telling the king the story of his capture and escape-and what he learned in Rulam.

Afuno's face went dark and hard as stone when Blade told him about the treachery of the On'ror. "Aumara had very nearly convinced me of this before she was captured," said the king. "But I-after she was captured, I did not..." He shrugged, for the moment too filled with a mixture of emotions to go on.

Finally he shook his head. "I am glad she is back. In truth I was not sure that I cared whether Zunga lost or won this war after Aumara was captured." He fixed Blade with his old familiar sharp look. "What does Aumara truly want of you?"

That was a question it took Blade some time to answer. He wanted to pick and choose his words, and he was too tired for that amount of mental effort. Finally he said, "She would like me to be her husband. I do not know whether she wants me also to be King of Zunga, or whether she is willing to step down from her place in favor of a younger sister. If I were you, Your Majesty-

"You are not me, Richard Blade," said Afuno. "And I will decide whether I will offer a warrior of the English to the Zungans as their king. Certainly I will not ask Aumara to step down from what is her right unless there is nothing else I can do. But I do not know if even what you have done will make my people

accept you as king. As a great warrior and the new On'ror, almost certainly. But as king?" He shook his head. "There must be something more you can do to make yourself a name. I wish I could make it something not dangerous, because I think Aumara will pull what hair I have left out by the roots if I send you into any more danger. But the Zungans are a warrior people, so..."

"I know," said Blade. "But I think I know a possible answer. Remember what I said about the rivalries among our enemies? Rulam and Kanda have little in common, and Kleptor and Roxala even less. I think there are ways we can take advantage of these divisions. Above all; this will make our fight easier and less costly. There is an English saying that applies here. It is 'divide and conquer.' "

Blade outlined his scheme in a few sentences. Afuno's eyes widened and gleamed with satisfaction. He practically rubbed his hands.

"Marvelous," he said finally. "It will do all you say, I hope. And at least it will allow us to make the best use of the few really good new-style fighters we have. A great many of our warriors can wave their new spears around marvelously, but all they could do in battle with this spear-waving is to scare off birds. If only we could have dealt with the On'ror beforehand. Ah, well, we shall not have to worry about him again."

Blade nodded. "I hope not. As much as the king and queen of Rulam hate each other, I do not think they have stopped hating us even more. I think a Rulami army will be coming soon against us within a few days."

Both Afuno's prediction and Blade's were accurate. The On'ror vanished from his tent in the dark hours of the next morning and was never seen again.

And a week later, the northern patrols reported that the army of Rulam was on the march.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There had been a light rain the night before, so the Rulami army raised no dust clouds to mark its advance. But King Afuno had thrown out a swarm of scouts well to the north of his own army. These formed a broad arc across the Rulami line of advance. He would not be taken by surprise. The Rulami army had hardly broken camp and begun to file out of the forest when the messengers began coming back with their reports from the scouting line.

King Afuno sat on a hide spread on the ground in the shade of a small tree, listening to the reports as they came in. Beside him stood Blade and Nayung. Both now carried new-style spears adorned with the double tuft of blue feathers that marked Great D'bors.

"I can think of no two men in all the army of Zunga who deserve the rank more," Afuno had said the night before as he handed them the spears. "In fact, if there was time to call a meeting of the War Council, I would raise Blade to On'ror in place of that traitor we have now sent to his fate. But there is no time for that. We will be giving battle tomorrow morning at the latest."

And now it was tomorrow morning, and it was obvious that they would indeed be giving battle before the sun rose much higher. Afuno nibbled on a piece of bread and swept the crumbs from his lap onto the ground as he listened to the latest report.

"That makes at least fifteen thousand men facing us," he said to Blade. "Are there likely to be many more from Rulam?"

Blade shook his head. "Not impossible, but not likely either, Your Majesty. They have to leave a large force at home to prevent rebellion among their conquered cities and their slaves. And both King Kleptor and Queen Roxala have probably left their best men in Rulam, each to watch the other."

"Probably," said Afuno, sourly. "I hope you are right, Blade. With fifteen thousand men of Rulam, we will be facing twenty thousand or more when the army of Kanda joins them. And we are less than eighteen thousand now. There will be no more coming in before the battle. And we have little or nothing left at home to defend our towns if we lose. We are playing for high stakes in this battle, Blade-will Zunga survive or not? I hope your plan works. More depends on it than whether you become king of Zunga or not. Much more."

"I know, Your Majesty," said Blade. "But it should work. I've seen what good fighters with the new spears can do to even the best Rulami soldiers. So have you. And I know what will happen if we behead the enemy's armies. We will loose intrigue and treachery among them like a plague. They will be too busy fighting civil wars and each other to worry about us in Zunga for many years to come. Consider what would happen to Zunga if you were killed, Your Majesty. Then consider that among our enemies things will be ten times worse."

Afuno grunted. Blade wasn't sure whether the king agreed with him or was simply trying to shut him up. Nayung shook his head. "All this is well and good, provided that the Kandans actually unite their army with that of Rulam, so that we get a chance at both leaders."

"Indeed," said Blade. "But I do not think they will have any choice. The only man in Rulam who can speak to the Kandans and be listened to is King Kleptor. And similarly, the only man in Kanda who can be taken seriously and obeyed by the Rulami is the High Priest himself. They will not dare to fight separate battles, for fear of being defeated separately."

"Or of being betrayed by their ally," said Nayung.

"Or betrayed," said Blade with a nod.

Afuno rose. "Enough of this gabble about what may be or must be. Let us go forward and see what is. That is what we must face, and that is what can kill us." He picked up his two war spears and motioned to his eight guards. They fell in on either side of him. Blade and Nayung brought up the rear, and the whole little group turned north, toward the Zungan battle line.

That line formed an arc more than a mile from end to end. It was divided into three divisions, each of about five thousand men under a Great D'bor. Of the men in each division, four thousand stood in the main battle formation, nine ranks deep. The rest stood in reserve in the rear of the division, and this thousand included a proportion of men armed and trained with the new spears, about five hundred to a division. Each division formed an independent unit, that could advance or retreat as circumstances demanded. The right-flank division was drawn back a little, since the Kandan army was expected to appear from that direction.

Except for the presence of the men with the new spears, there was nothing about the arrangement of the three divisions that had not been standard Zungan tactics for many generations. The three divisions included all but about three thousand of the army's men.

Behind the main line lay the reserve, all three thousand warriors in it armed and at least somewhat trained with the new spears. That was the army's secret weapon, its shock troops-and Blade's. It was the

beheading sword he intended to swing at the armies of Rulam and Kanda. With Kleptor and the High Priest dead or possibly captured, there would be chaos in both enemy cities, their alliance would fall apart, and there would be no need to risk the lives of Zungan soldiers killing the Rulami and the Kandans one by one.

That was the chief reason for Blade's plan. If there had been no more reason for it than to make him famous among the Zungans, he would never have proposed it. But it also promised a swift, decisive, and long-lasting victory over Zunga's enemies, perhaps without as long bloody battle that would waste the Zungans as much as their enemies. To defeat their enemies' armies in the field would be no victory for Zunga if their own ranks were demolished in the process.

So the Zungan army stood in its battle formation under the rising glare and heat of the sun. Blade noticed many of the warriors looking upward toward the clear blue sky. It was a good omen, to be fighting under a clear sky. The Sky Father could look down upon his people, watch their fighting, see and approve their courage. The good weather was lending the Zungans extra confidence. Blade was glad of that. He himself was a great deal more on edge than he cared to admit, even to Afuno or Nayung.

The thud of drums and the off-key wailings of flutes off to the right heralded the arrival of the Kandan army. It was more numerous than Blade had expected—the mass of men looked nearly seven thousand strong. Red shields among the black and white ones showed where a fair number of Rulami soldiers had been included in the Kandan ranks, to stiffen them. But still, the Kandans must have stripped their walls almost bare of fighting men to make up their army to such a size. If the Kandan field army died in today's battle, the city would be a plum ripe for plucking. Blade told himself not to count his victories before they were won, and stared north, watching and waiting for the army of Rulam to appear.

He did not have to wait long. Within a few minutes he saw the Zungan scouts coming back, sprinting for the safety of their own lines. Then the sun glared on acres of polished armor moving down from the north, and the army of Rulam flowed into view. They were as well trained and disciplined as the Zungans, far more so than the Kandans, and made a fine show. They were also taking formation in three divisions of five thousand soldiers each. But their divisions stood one behind the other. High above the second division rose Kleptor's own red banner. One of the Zungans' principal enemies was in the field. Where was the High Priest?

Then the Kanda flutes broke out again, their discordant wailing setting Blade's teeth on edge as they broke the silence of the waiting armies. To the left of the Kandan army a small cluster of figures appeared, bearing above them a black banner with the white tower badge of the Priests of the Ivory Tower. The red banner of Rulam started to move, moved toward the Ivory Tower banner. A body of Rulami soldiers broke out of their second division, escorting a litter. Even from where he was standing in front of the Zungan lines, Blade could make out the obese figure of King Kleptor in the litter. The two big fish were swimming into the same pond.

But not now. Blade had no intention of leading his shock troops straight into the jaws of the enemy's armies, particularly when those jaws could close so easily. Let the enemy make the opening move, come to the Zungans, and be immobilized. Then would be the time to strike. But would the Rulami attack?

The Rulami did not attack, but orders must have gone to the Kandan army. In a few minutes it began sidling slowly around toward the Zungan right, with a great uproar of drums and flutes and shrill war cries. Its commander was moving it as a single mass, not trying to divide it for greater flexibility. Considering the quality of Kandan soldiers, that was probably wise—dividing the army might have caused chaos rather than improved flexibility. But it made a formidable body of men slipping toward the Zungan flank.

Afuno barked an order, and messengers dashed off. The Great D'bor of the right-wing Zungan division in his turn snapped orders, and the division began to wheel toward the right, facing the Kandans. If they had planned a flank attack, they abandoned it when they saw the wheeling movement. Once again the three armies stood in their places under the hot sun. The silence was broken only by occasional shouted orders and the murmur of voices among the less-disciplined Kandans.

Afuno came shouldering his way through the Zungan line and moved up to stand beside Blade. His guards followed him and took formation around him. They were plainly unhappy about having the king standing out here in plain sight of more than twenty thousand enemies. Blade felt much the same way.

"Your Majesty, don't you think you should get to the rear?"

"Why? Those bastards over there look like they're going to stand and look at us until the carrion birds think they're dead and come down to nibble on their ears and noses."

"Maybe. But I think they will attack soon."

"Perhaps you are right. Do you want to take command of your force now?"

"With Your Majesty's permission."

"You have it."

Blade turned and dashed back through the Zungan lines, to where the three thousand shock troops waited. They would not be committed to the head-on collision of the two battle lines that Blade expected. Rulami tactics would probably take them straight to the Zungan center, planning to break through there and then wheel to the left and the right with the following divisions. In such a mob scene the Zungans' discipline would make their traditional fighting style effective enough for a while, as long as they held formation. And the enemy's massed ranks would in any case be less vulnerable to the new Zungan techniques. But once either side broke its formations open...

Blade ran up to Nayung. "The king has said we can move."

"Good. Where do you want us to go?" By royal command Blade had absolute control over the shock troops and could move them at will.

"The king and the High Priest are on their left."

"So is the whole Kandan army, Blade."

"I know."

Nayung looked sharply at him. "Blade, are you sure you are not too concerned with vengeance on the High Priest? Vengeance for a girl you knew for barely an hour?"

"Nayung, I am not such a fool. The High Priest is the weak spot of all Kanda. I would be aiming for him if his life was as blameless as a maid's."

Nayung shrugged. Whether or not he was convinced, he was obviously prepared to obey. "Then-"

Before Nayung could get his suggestion out of his mouth, the trumpets and drums of the Rulami sounded in a hideous, thundering brazen chorus. Following hard on their heels came a series of harshly bellowed orders. Then the sunlight flashed again as the lead division of the Rulami began to move forward.

They came down against the Zungans at a walk that soon became a run. Their swords struck fire into Blade's eyes as they flashed in the air, and the repeated blasts of their trumpets drowned out even the thunder of ten thousand marching feet. They struck the Zungan center with a hideous metallic crash and a chorus of screams as spears and swords took their first victims. Blade saw the Zungan center reel bodily backward several yards, then steady itself as its D'bors hurled threats, curses, and encouragements at their men. A forest of waving spears sprouted above it as all of the first three ranks went into action.

Blade turned to Nayung. "They've committed themselves to the attack on the center. At least for now. We'll never get a better chance." He did not mention his fears that King Afuno had been unwilling to retreat behind his warriors before the Rulami charge hit the Zungan line. The whole plan depended on cutting off the heads of the enemy's force-it would be sheer folly to lose the Zungan's own leader.

But it was a folly that Blade could do nothing about now. He gave his orders and a thousand of the shock-troop spearmen wheeled about and broke into a run, heading for the extreme right flank of their own army. To take the whole force would be foolish-and hopefully unnecessary. The men of the right-hand Zungan division waved and cheered as Blade's men pounded past. Then the thousand were out in the open, curving around toward the north again, toward the Kandan army.

They had better than half a mile to cover, but it was level ground, open and hard, and the Zungans were running as Blade had never seen them run before. How they found breath to shout was a mystery to him, but they screamed threats and curses at the Kandans as they ran. Blade saw the Kandan army clumping itself to meet the charge. He grinned. The fools were expecting a frontal attack, and not extending their flank to their left at all. Time for the end run.

Blade found the breath to shout an order, heard it relayed by Nayung, and saw the entire mass of running men swerve hard to the right. They passed along the front of the Kandan army so close that Blade could see the pale, drawn faces of the enemy soldiers. They were clutching their swords like drowning men clutching branches, and there was fear in their eyes as they listened to the curses and war yells of the Zungans.

Before the slow-moving Kandans could block their path, the Zungans were clear around the flank of the Kandan army. Looking along the enemy's rear, Blade saw the little cluster of figures around the two banners less than another five hundred yards away. He took deeper breaths and lengthened his stride.

He did not expect the enemy to simply sit and wait while a thousand Zungans charged their commanders. He knew that his thousand might get in without help, but they could never get out without it. But he was certain that surprise and speed and their own fighting skill would give the Zungans the edge over any defense the enemy could improvise for his generals. Enough of an edge to bring down those generals, Blade hoped. Again he lengthened his stride.

The Kandan army seemed paralyzed by the spectacle of the Zungans tearing down along their rear. Not so the Rulami. Blade heard the trumpet calls rise, and saw soldiers pouring out of the second Rulami division to form a circle around the two banners. He saw them begin to move back, and if he could have lengthened his stride still more, he would have. But his strength and his wind had reached their limits, and he could move no faster. But neither did he slow down. He was still moving at full speed as he led his thousand men into the ranks of the Rulami soldiers. Again there was a terrible noise of metal and screaming men as the two formations clashed. The Rulami had thrown a circle six ranks deep around

their king, but the Zungans nearly broke straight through it by sheer impact. A section manned by more than a hundred men was hurled violently backward by the Zungan charge. The two outer ranks simply vanished, stamped out of existence under the Zungans' feet or smashed down by whirling spears. Rulami and Zungan bodies piled up in a hideous bloodstained shrieking tangle. With Nayung beside him, Blade charged the inner ranks of the Rulami.

He was a terrifying spectacle as he lunged and thrust and swung with his spear, eyes blazing, mouth open to shout savage war yells, splattered with the blood from the smashed skulls and the crushed chests of his victims. A Rulami officer ran at Blade, thrusting with his sword. Blade leaped aside, swinging the weighted butt of his spear down across the man's lunging arm. Bone cracked and the sword fell. Blade's spear butt flashed up and took the man under the jaw, again smashing bone. The officer's mouth spewed blood and fragments of teeth and he fell back, opening a gap in the third rank. Blade plunged into it.

He parried a downcut from the left and thrust the soldier in the throat, jerking the spear free in time to ram the butt into another's armored chest. This blow did not kill, but it stunned and slowed. The spearhead came over and did the killing as it drove into the man's open mouth. Another rank penetrated.

Now it was Nayung's turn to move into the lead, and he cleared two more men out of the way with swift strokes. Not as quickly as Blade, for the two men were better opponents. But they both went down. The gap they made let Blade through into the last rank of the circle, spear whirling like a machine, the head and butt both dripping red by now.

A windmill slash outreached a soldier's sword and laid his face open, cheeks and nose gaping red above his screaming mouth. The swinging spearhead smashed into the side of another man's helmet, not doing any direct harm but knocking him off balance. Nayung took advantage of that to smash the man's thigh, then stamp on his face as he went down into the welter of bodies on the ground.

By now Blade and Nayung were only the tip of a wedge. It was a wedge of darting Zungan spears wielded by shrieking Zungan warriors. The pressure of a thousand fierce men was driving the wedge into the protective circle. The circle was beginning to sag, crumble, and collapse. Over a third of its men were down now, and the Zungans were killing the Rulami faster than they could reinforce their circle. And then Blade and Nayung burst through the last of the six ranks and into the center, where Kleptor and the High Priest stood.

If either of the two men had vanished into the Rulami ranks before Blade charged in, they would certainly have escaped. But Blade entered the center before they realized the nearness of their danger, with Nayung hard on his heels. Both dashed for the far side of the circle, to get behind the two enemy leaders. The two attackers reached the far side, then turned on Kleptor and the High Priest.

The two leaders stood for a moment, frozen by surprise. Between them and their only line of retreat stood Blade and Nayung, even bloodier, even more terrifying than before. On all other sides the circle was steadily crumpling under the Zungan attack, and nothing but certain death awaited them. Even as they stared, three soldiers of the inner rank gave way before a dozen Zungans. The Zungans poured through the gap and hurled themselves on the handful of guards and attendants that stood close around the two fat men and their standards.

Then Blade and Nayung attacked. For the moment they did not worry about guarding their backs, though an entire division of Rulami soldiers stood behind them. Their entire world was the two men in magnificent robes, standing like carved images as the battle swirled around them.

Blade and Nayung thrust together at the first soldier to charge them, smashing his sword out of his hand.

Brave or mad, he charged Blade barehanded, got under his spear, grappled with him. But Blade did not have to drop his spear. Nayung's spear butt flashed in an arc and smashed the back of the soldier's neck. Blade shoved the sagging body away from him savagely and moved on. He had to block a downcut so strong that it took both hands to hold the spear. Then he slammed the spear shaft forward across the swordsman's throat, splintering the larynx. He felt a man behind him, aimed a backward thrust by sound alone, and was rewarded by a thud and a gasp.

But the Rulami were breaking out of their division's ranks and moving up behind Blade. Nayung did not wait to be asked. He spun about and leaped across until he was behind Blade, facing the main body of the Rulami, guarding Blade's back as the Englishman plunged on into the ranks of the bodyguards. The two men he was after still did not move. Were they paralyzed with fear? Or did they still hope their guards could beat off both Blade and the Zungans?

Blade didn't know and he didn't care. As he broke through the bodyguards at last, he saw the High Priest turn pale. The man turned to flee, then raised his hands to heaven when he realized there was no place to flee to. But Kleptor was made of braver material, for all his grossness. He drew a sword five feet long and came at Blade, swinging it in both hands.

The first swing of that sword smashed into Blade's spear and all but smashed it out of his hands. Blade wanted to jump back, for here was a weapon against which he might not be able to defend himself. But there was no room. He and Kleptor were like the proverbial two scorpions in a bottle. So he moved forward as fast as he could, driving in under the sword, risking everything on his speed. If that speed could take him in under the sword before it came down...

His spear rose high, held crossways in both hands. The sword came down, again jarring Blade to the marrow of his bones as it struck the spear shaft. But he held onto the spear, and slammed the tough wood of the shaft down across Kleptor's forehead. The king wore no helmet. The sledgehammer blow made him reel. The sword rose again, but it was wavering now. Blade swung up his spear butt, knocking the sword away, then thrust down. There was a thick layer of fat over Kleptor's ribs, but the downstabbing spear point got through the fat, between the ribs, and into the king's heart. The wide-set eyes rolled up in the fleshy face, the pudgy hands came up and clawed at the beard. The mouth opened and blood spurted out all over the beard, over Blade. Then the king fell.

Blade turned to the High Priest, spear flashing up again. The High Priest still stood. But as Blade's sweat-dimmed eyes focused on the man, he saw that the High Priest still stood only because he was supported by half a dozen Zungan spears thrust into his body. A seventh Zungan warrior strode over to the High Priest's banner and shoved it over. It fell down with a silent-thud, lost in the roar of the battle all around. Blade did the same with Kleptor's banner.

Whether that alone was what brought victory, no one could tell later. In the exact moment that the banners fell, the Great D'bor commanding the Zungan right ordered his whole division forward at the charge. The commander of the remaining two thousand shock troops followed. Blade could not see the seven thousand Zungans hurling themselves at the Kandan army, but he heard it when they struck. And he saw the results. The entire Kandan army lurched backward, nearly trampling Blade's force to death by sheer numbers. But the Kandans' morale had gone, and they were only interested in reaching safety by the shortest route.

By chance and the skill of the Zungan charge, that route lay through the ranks of the Rulami. The panic-stricken Kandans smashed into the ranks of their allies, breaking them apart, dying on Rulami swords, communicating their own panic to the Rulami. As word of Kleptor's fall spread through the Rulami, their second division began to waver and leak stragglers. Then it broke, and before Blade's eyes

the entire center of the Rulami army dissolved into a mob of scattering fugitives.

Blade neither joined in the pursuit that Nayung led, nor held his men back from following Nayung. He watched the warriors he had led to victory go tearing out across the plain after the fleeing Rulami, and then turned toward the Zungan center. He had seen and heard nothing of what might be happening there, since he had led his warriors out for their charge. He badly wanted to find out what had happened to Afuno.

He had to wait a while longer, because the stouthearted soldiers of the Rulami first division did not break and flee. The Great D'bor of the Zungan left had to finally lead his division around and encircle the Rulami. Even then the sound of clashing weapons and dying men rose into the air for the better part of half an hour. When it faded, another third of the army of Rulam lay dead. The Zungans took no prisoners.

Blade was finally able to rise and walk toward where he had last seen Afuno. If he had wanted to, he could have walked every foot of the way without touching the ground. The bodies lay that densely, both Rulami and Zungan.

He was approaching a circle of Zungan warriors standing in the middle of a particularly thick patch of bodies when two things happened. A blinding pain stabbed through his head, making everything go black in front of him for a second. The computer had lunged like a spear at him across the dimensions. It had missed this time, but the next time would come soon. He would be on his way back to Home Dimension soon. But there was still more that he had to do here, damn it!

He was still shaking his head, trying to clear the spots from in front of his eyes, when the Great D'bor who had commanded the center division came up to him. The Zungan's left arm dangled limply, slashed open for much of its length and roughly bound up in blood-caked cloth. But his voice was steady and urgent as he spoke.

"Blade, King Afuno has been wounded."

Blade swallowed. "Badly?"

The Great D'bor nodded. "The Sky Father has laid his hand on him and will take him soon. He wants to speak with you before then."

Blade nodded and followed the Zungan. The circle of warriors opened to make a path for them, then closed behind them as Blade knelt beside the king. The Sky Father's hand was indeed on Afuno. His mahogany face had paled, and the piercing black eyes had softened. Looking down at him, Blade could see why. Any one of the gashes that crisscrossed Afuno's belly and thighs would have been sufficient to kill. That he was still alive now was a miracle. And that he was able to speak was a still greater one.

But he did speak.

"Blade, will you obey me?"

"You know that I will, Your Majesty."

"Good. Soon-soon you will not have to obey anyone at all-anyone except Aumara," The king managed a faint smile. "Even kings must bow to their wives at times. But you-will be king in Zunga." He beckoned the Great D'bor to him. "Swear by the Sky Father."

"I swear."

"You are-witness. Witness according to the-laws of the Sky Father." Afuno's voice gained strength, and for the last time it came out as the voice of a king as he said the ritual words. "I, Afuno, King of Zunga, find Richard Blade of the English, Great D'bor of Zunga, most worthy as consort and king with Princess Aumara. Say you yea or nay?"

"I say yea, oh, King," said the Great D'bor.

"Good." Afuno's voice faded. "The Sky Father keep you, Blade." The last effort had exhausted him. Presently his eyes closed, then his breathing stopped. The Great D'bor knelt beside him and spread a cloth over his face, then remained kneeling, tears running openly down his cheeks.

Blade was not far from doing the same himself. But, he knew there remained still more to do before he could accept calmly the computer's snatching him home. He turned to a warrior. "Go quickly, and summon the Great D'bor Nayung and the Princess Aumara. I must speak to them." The tension must have showed in his voice, because the warrior stared at him.

"Is the hand of the Sky Father on you, King Blade?"

Blade started at being addressed as king. "Not yet, but it may be soon. The Sky Father deals in strange ways with those of the English. Go quickly!"

"There is no need to summon me," said a familiar voice from behind him, and he whirled to see Aumara standing there. She held out her hands. "Zunga is ours, Blade. Or rather, it is yours. You have broken all our enemies and offered them up to the Sky Father. This is the greatest victory in all the history of our people. And my father-did he . . . ?"

"He lived long enough to see it, Aumara. And he found me most worthy to be king after him. Will you have me?"

She came into his arms. "When I bear your child within me? How could it be otherwise, even if I wanted it?" Tears began to trickle down her face, cutting paths in the dust that caked it. Blade lifted her face to his and kissed her on the lips. They stood for a time in each other's arms. Then Blade stepped back to arm's length and spoke quickly.

"Aumara, I must tell you this now. The hand of the Sky Father may be upon me also. If it is, I want you to choose the Great D'bor Nayung as your next consort. He is a wise man and a good one. He will do well for Zunga, and justly for our child."

Aumara nodded, reluctantly. "He is what you say. But the Sky Father will not lay his hand on you, Blade. Not you and my father both. He has no thought for Zunga if he does so!"

Blade shook his head-then stiffened as another tentative pain struck through it. "No, Aumara, I am the Sky Father's creature. I have come from him, and I must go to him when he calls. He is calling me now, Aumara." He reached out his hands and took Aumara's, clutching them hard as another stronger pain hit him.

Then Aumara screamed, and the scream seemed to echo endlessly and terribly in a great hollow chamber. Blade saw Aumara blur and waver as if he was seeing her through a sheet of water. Her face was turned toward him. Her staring eyes were gleaming as they had done that first night on the plain.

They kept on gleaming as the rest of her faded away into a blur, kept on gleaming as the field and the strewn bodies were swallowed up, kept on gleaming-gleaming. Then they winked out like fading skyrocket, and darkness slammed down over Blade.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The cocktail party was beginning to warm up, and Richard Blade was hoping the girl beside him would do so too before long. It would be a pity if she didn't-she was a strikingly handsome brunette, with a fashion model's graceful, economical figure. Unfortunately she was also a rather aggressive feminist, and little inclined to talk about anything else.

Suddenly the crash of glass broke through the chatter of conversation. Blade whirled, dropping almost by instinct into a defensive stance, hands raised. One of the male guests was holding an aluminum clothespole and staring sheepishly down at the rug. Fragments of glass littered the plush red carpet, and, looking up, Blade saw the chandelier swaying violently, minus rather more than half its glass.

The hostess came bustling through the crowd, "Freddy, what on earth are you doing?"

"I was just showing these chaps a little quarterstaff work," the man with the clothespole said plaintively. The four men around him nodded vigorously.

"Well, you've certainly done a fine job on the chandelier," said the hostess sarcastically. "Perhaps you'd like to start working on the windows? Or even better, go outside and do your demonstrations there?" Freddy nodded sheepishly and led his audience out through the French windows. Blade stared after him, his mind racing back to the last time he had seen quarterstaves used. They had been smashing more than chandeliers then. They had been smashing down Kandan and Rulami soldiers, winning the day for Zunga.

The girl noticed the expression on his face. "What's so interesting about that, Mr. Blade? I call it a typically adolescent piece of male fooling around. So eager to show off the skill he thinks he ought to have that he won't admit the possibility that he doesn't have it."

Blade nodded. "He certainly isn't very good with that pole. But then it's not right for quarterstaff work in any case. It's much too light and not at all well balanced."

"Oh?" said the girl. She seemed genuinely interested, and Blade felt a momentary flicker of hope. "Do you know how to use a quarterstaff?"

Again Blade nodded. "It's one of the deadliest weapons ever invented for hand-to-hand combat if you use it right," he said.

"Have you ever-used it in combat?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

Her mouth was now open wide. "Where?"

Blade stiffened. Was the girl probing him for details out of sheer curiosity, or for other reasons? Such as being a Soviet agent, perhaps? He shook his head. "It was sort of a private matter. I'd rather not discuss it."

The girl snorted. "Meaning a woman would never understand it. Typical masculine attitude." She turned

her back on him, and edged away to a safe ten-foot distance. Blade grinned wryly. She had been genuinely curious-no foreign agent would have picked a fight with him that way. And there went the evening's chances. Well, a good night's sleep would not do him any harm. He had brought no wounds back from Zunga, but it had been a lively time there, and even his magnificent constitution needed to be restored a bit.

He followed the path of the quarterstaff demonstrators out through the French windows and onto the lawn, but did not go near them. Even from a distance he could see they were making asses of themselves. None of them would have lasted two minutes in combat with a Zungan warrior. He was almost tempted to go over and show them what he could do, but that would risk the same sort of awkward questions he had just fended off from the girl. And the Official Secrets Act was adamant.

But in the privacy of his own mind he could consider the latest adventure and what he had done in Zunga. Most of his memories, frankly, revolved around Aumara. For her he had been no casual affair; the memory of him would remain with her as long as her memory would stay with him. No doubt after a time she would take Nayung as her consort, and together they would rule Zunga, bring up the child, and generally do well by both themselves and their people. But she would remember him, and so she would keep alive the story of the English warrior sent by the Sky Father to aid Zunga. He had done what the Sky Father had bidden, and then returned to his homeland. In time Blade would be a legendary figure among the Zungans-and in Rulam and Kanda, a figure mothers used to frighten naughty children, perhaps?

In any case, Blade knew he had done well. He would indeed be a legend in his own time-if not in his own dimension.