
Blade 19: Looters of Tharn

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

The last words of the christening ceremony, echoed away through the high vaulted nave of the church. As the echoes died away, Richard Blade heard the bells in the tower high above begin to ring.

Bim-bong-bunnnng. Bim-bong-bunnnng.

Reginald Smythe-Evans turned to Blade. His thin face split in a broad, toothy, but unmistakably sincere grin. "Well, Richard. Very glad you could be young Edward's second godfather. Zoe wanted it badly, but we couldn't be sure you'd be around for the christening. Dashedly awkward if one of the godfathers didn't show up, eh? And we know you're always flitting off on dangerous business of some sort. But you made it." He thrust out a pale, long-fingered hand, to grip Blade's with surprising strength.

Blade found himself able to smile back with almost as much sincerity as Reginald. He hadn't felt much like smiling when Zoe's letter first arrived, asking him to be second godfather to Edward Thomas Richard Smythe-Evans. A long time ago Richard Blade had loved Zoe. She had loved him, too. But one evening she had said good-bye, and a few months later she married Reginald. That had hurt. It stopped hurting for a while, but Zoe's letter picked away at the old scar.

Yet there was nothing Blade could have done about it. It was his "always flitting off on dangerous business of some sort" that had done in his relationship with Zoe. But he couldn't give that up. It was a matter of duty-duty to England.

Richard Blade's business was to travel into other dimensions-the infinity of other dimensions that exist parallel to the one where he had been born and lived most of his life. It was an infinity called Dimension X, to conceal how little even wise men really knew about it.

It had been discovered the day Richard Blade's mind was linked to Lord Leighton's latest computer. The scientist had wanted to combine Blade's mind and the computer into a superintelligence.

Instead Lord Leighton had altered Blade's mind until he sensed and lived entirely in one of those parallel dimensions-a barbaric land called Alb. Blade was a superb mental and physical specimen, so he had survived in Alb long enough for Lord Leighton to figure out what had happened and bring him back to England. It had also helped that Blade was a top agent for the secret intelligence agency MI6. That made him very much a professional survivor type.

It didn't require much thinking for people to realize how valuable the ability to travel among dimensions might be for England. It didn't require much argument to persuade the Prime Minister to underwrite Project Dimension X from the secret funds.

But it did require Richard Blade to keep his sudden and mysterious comings and goings secret from the woman he loved. The Official Secrets Act dropped down between him and Zoe like an armored wall.

Eventually she had decided she wanted a husband who would stay close at hand and said good-bye. Blade went off to a land called Tharn, and a few months later Zoe married Reginald Smythe-Evans, the

only son and heir of some large and wealthy figure in the city's financial circles.

Blade had seen her get married. In fact, he had seen the wedding nearly disrupted by an actor pretending to be him making a drunken ass of himself. That had been part of a trick to throw the Russians off the scent of Project Dimension X. Poor Zoe couldn't know that, of course.

But apparently she had forgiven the wedding and remembered other things. Thus the request that he stand as godfather to her son.

There was Zoe now, coming up the church aisle with the nurse behind her, carrying young Edward. She walked up to her husband and took one tweed-covered arm, but her eyes were on Blade and her smile was for him. The eyes were as bright as ever, and the smile as warm. She hadn't changed or aged much, in spite of two children and marriage to Reginald. Blade didn't imagine that Reginald was complaining, either. Over the years they would no doubt make a marriage as good as most and better than a good many.

But Blade couldn't look at the red-faced, whimpering bundle the nurse was handing to Zoe without remembering how it had been between him and that baby's mother. If things had been otherwise, that baby might be his son as well-his and Zoe's.

The christening party drifted out into the sunlight on the church lawn and broke up. Blade exchanged a few polite words with the parish priest, a few more with Reginald, and finally a long last exchange with Zoe. Then he turned his back on the party, buttoned up his Burberry against the chill breeze, and climbed into his MG.

It took him three tries to start the car, and once again he considered trading it in on something newer. He could afford a much better car now, if he wanted one. From his last trip into Dimension X, he had returned with a diamond worth so much that even Lord Leighton had whistled at the appraiser's figure. Twenty thousand pounds of that sum sat in a special tax-free account for him. If he wanted to, he could afford a Lotus or even a Rolls-Royce!

But luxury cars drew attention. That wasn't a good idea for a man in any kind of secret work. Blade had learned that many times over during his years as a secret agent. Secret agents who didn't learn that didn't live very long.

Besides, Blade knew he drew enough attention as it was.

He stood six feet one in his socks, weighed two hundred and ten pounds, and his heavy-boned frame was layered with masses of perfectly conditioned muscle. He was an expert with a dozen kinds of deadly weapons, as well as holding a black belt in karate. About him hung the mysterious air always attached to a strong, attractive man who does something unknown but obviously dangerous and refuses absolutely to talk about it. It drew many women to him, but since Zoe Blade had discouraged any who showed interest in more than a casual affair.

Blade threw in the clutch and the MG went jolting down the church driveway. He shook his head in weary amusement. He almost filled the classic picture of "the man who has everything." He even had the best of all imaginable jobs, for Blade preferred to live on the frontiers of danger. Dimension X gave him all the opportunities for that any man could ask for.

But he had never found a woman who could or would live out there on the frontiers with him, or at least understand what drove him out there. So he did not have everything, and sometimes it hurt.

Chapter 2

The elevator door slid silently open, and Richard Blade stepped out into the corridor beyond it. He was two hundred feet below the Tower of London, in the overgrowing complex that housed most of Project Dimension X. At the end of that corridor stood Lord Leighton's computer. In less than half an hour that computer would be hammering its complex pulses into Blade's brain, twisting his perceptions so that for him reality itself would also be twisted.

When it untwisted itself again, he would be seeing Dimension X.

Blade strode down the apparently empty corridor, listening to the echo of his footsteps from the tile floors and the whir of machinery behind metal doors. There was no sound from the all-seeing, unsleeping electronic sentinels that kept watch on every inch of the corridor.

He found that he felt his usual mixture of tension and anticipation as the time of his next journey came closer. It was impossible for even a man as used to danger as Blade to ignore the fact that each trip was a leap into the unknown. So far there was no way of controlling or even predicting where he would land. The one thing that was certain was that Richard Blade was the only living man who could return from Dimension X both alive and sane.

One day, from one dimension, Richard Blade would not return to England. His body would lie in the soil of an unimaginably distant land. The project itself would come to a grinding halt until they found someone else equally tough. Lord Leighton would curse the delay and the Prime Minister would curse the loss of a man valuable to England. The head of MI6, the aging spymaster known as J, would mourn Blade as he would have mourned the son he never had.

But Blade was also palled with anticipation. If each dimension had unknown dangers, it also held unknown adventures, challenges, opportunities. He could and did live the way he could live best-by his own wits, his own skills, his own strength. He did not have to worry about women who wanted stay-at-home husbands. He could say what he wanted, to whom he wanted, as he had to, without any damned Official Secrets Act mucking up the works! He was a free man in Dimension X, and that was good for him and often for the people he traveled among. Everywhere he went, Blade left marks of his passage. More often than not what he left behind was better than what had been there before.

J once referred to that sort of thing as "interdimensional social work." But the old man wasn't nearly as cynical as he sounded. That was just a mannerism, picked up during too many years of sending men to their deaths and playing deadly games. J had seen too much to really sneer at anything or anyone that helped make any world a little less grim and harsh for even a few people.

As though Blade's thoughts had conjured him out of the floor, J appeared in the corridor ahead.

"Hello, Richard."

"Good morning, sir. Lord Leighton on schedule?"

"Have you ever known him not to be?"

Blade shook his head and laughed. Lord Leighton was one of the greatest scientific minds alive, and also one of the greatest curmudgeons. All the skill he refused to use in getting along with his fellow human beings he put into getting along with computers. So computers that drove other men mad with frustration

worked flawlessly for him.

The two men walked side by side down to the first of the computer rooms. Usually Lord Leighton came out to meet them at this point. But there was nobody in the room except two technicians in white coats, seated in steel swivel chairs and monitoring the visual readouts on a bank of consoles.

One of them turned in his chair as the two men entered. "Lord Leighton says he's using a new variant on the main sequence. It doesn't allow as much time as before, so you're going to have to hurry."

J raised an eyebrow and exchanged looks with Blade. In both their minds was the thought, "The old bugger might have told us in advance." But when Lord Leighton got a technical bee in his balding bonnet, there was no power on earth that could halt or delay him.

They practically trotted up to the door of the main room. Lord Leighton was waiting for them there, scurrying back and forth on his polio-twisted legs, rubbing his hands together. With his hunchback under his white coat, he looked like an overworked gnome.

"Ah, very good," he said briskly as the two men came up. "The new sequence is underway and I'd rather not interrupt it. So if Richard can be in the chair within-oh, five minutes-it will make life simpler for all of us."

J fixed Lord Leighton with a singularly chilly stare. "It might have made life simpler for us if you'd told us beforehand. We could have been here earlier."

"Oh, quite, quite. But-"

Blade knew that he would never have time to listen to the argument and still be in the chair on time. He nodded politely to both men and darted into the chamber.

In the little changing booth in one corner, he stripped to the skin. Then he smeared himself with greasy, foul-smelling cream for protection against electrical burns and knotted a loincloth around his waist. By the time he stepped out into the chamber again, Lord Leighton was already standing by the black metal chair in its glass cubicle.

Blade sat down in the chair and began breathing slowly and deeply, trying to relax as much as possible. As usual at this point, he didn't find it easy. Meanwhile, Lord Leighton scurried about again, fastening cobra-headed metal electrodes to every conceivable and inconceivable part of Blade's body. From the electrodes masses of wires trailed off into the bowels of the computer. By the time the scientist was finished, Blade looked and felt like a part of the computer himself.

"There," said Lord Leighton, stepping back. Usually he stopped at this point to make a final visual inspection. This time he trotted straight over to the main controls. He also drew a grimy, crumpled handkerchief from his coat pocket and mopped his bald forehead.

Blade grinned. Lord Leighton, the mighty scientific intellect, was more nervous than he was! Yet it was he who would be risking life and limb in no more than a few minutes.

But it was worth it. He had felt it at the church after the christening of Zoe's child, and he felt it even more strongly now. Life in Home Dimension was too bloody complicated, sometimes. In Dimension X it was more often than not a very simple matter of survival.

In Dimension X there had also been women Blade had loved as deeply as Zoe. He had left at least two of them carrying his children. There was Princess Aumara in Zunga. Probably Queen Aumara now, raising their child to rule after her over the warriors of Zunga.

There was also Zulekia, the red-haired Maiduke woman of Tharn. She too had been carrying his child when the computer had snatched him back from Tharn. But he had been there long enough to do much of what needed to be done. He had smashed the decadence that had gripped Tharn for centuries and opened a future for it. He wondered how they were coming along in their struggle toward that future. Those who had survived the great battle with the Pethcines and the destruction of Urcit would be Lord Leighton's hand came down on the master switch. Blade saw it too late to relax, to compose his mind, or ever to clear his musings about Tharn out of it. Zulekia's high-browed golden face with its mass of red-gold hair floated before his eyes as the switch snapped downward.

It still hung there as Lord Leighton, the computer, the whole gloomy chamber snapped out of existence in a single moment. There was no light or sound, no sense of heat or cold. Blade was alone in a lightless, soundless, senseless void, motionless, speechless. Nothing registered on his senses except Zulekia's face in front of him.

Then the face flared brightly, the gold hues of her skin turning luminous. It rose to incandescence, flickered, and was gone. The void was all around Blade, and a chill of utter loneliness entered his bones. In a single moment all awareness left him.

Chapter 3

Blade came back to consciousness several feet up in the air. He landed with a thud and rolled down a grassy slope, arms and legs flailing wildly. At the bottom he crashed against a small tree, picking up a few more bruises, then lay quietly.

Gradually the splitting pain in his head and the ringing in his ears faded away. Now he heard the thin moan of wind sweeping past from vast distances, the creak of strained trees, the whispering ripple of wind-blown grass, the chirrrrr of a bird or an insect.

Off to his right a mighty range of hills sprawled across the horizon, towering against a pale blue sky where white wisps of clouds raced before the wind. Blade sat up, and perspective returned to his vision in a moment.

The hills were not a mile high and many miles away. They were only a low undulating ridge, perhaps two hundred feet high at most. A few stunted trees, no more than saplings, poked out above the bushes and long grass along the crest. Between Blade and the ridge lay a grassy depression no more than a mile wide.

Blade rose to his feet and brushed grass and dirt off his bare skin. He reached down and broke off one of the saplings, then stripped it of leaves and branches. It was hardly thicker or heavier than a walking stick and wouldn't be much of a weapon against any human or large animal. But he could at least jab it into the ground ahead of him, testing his way. It also made him feel better, which was even more important. The right frame of mind was always a good part of the job of survival.

Blade looked toward the ridge again. It certainly looked like the highest point anywhere close at hand. In the other three directions gently rolling grassland stretched away endlessly to a distant horizon. The grass grew thickly, in tangled masses. It was dark green, with pale yellowish brown stripes and spots on it that made it look diseased. Blade turned back toward the ridge and strode down toward the valley, the

sapling over his shoulder like a rifle.

He moved forward with long, steady strides, occasionally prodding at the ground ahead of him with the sapling. Tangles of grass jerked at his ankles and an occasional thistlelike plant jabbed thorns into his calves. But these slowed him only slightly. The hope of seeing something more than miles and miles of grass from the top of the ridge pushed him on.

Beyond the ridge, the ground dropped away again, then swept out across more miles of grassland. But the horizon was no longer a featureless line where green plain met washed-out blue sky.

On it rose a city. It sprawled across nearly half the horizon, a mass of graceful white towers mixed with lower buildings, bridges, walls, amphitheaters-every sort of architectural shape. Everything had been conceived and built on a soaring, monumental scale. But even from many miles away everything showed the telltale signs of long abandonment. Windows gaped darkly, bridges sagged, here and there a wall had collapsed and grass had already overgrown the spilled rubble. It was a beautiful city, so beautiful that Blade involuntarily stopped to admire it. But it was also a dead city.

Blade swore and sat down. Had the computer finally hurled him into a dimension without human life? Men-or something intelligent-had built that city, no doubt about that. But he had equally little doubt that the builders of the city no longer lived and ruled in it.

Who did?

Perhaps no one did. Perhaps nothing moved in that city except grass waving in the wind. In any case, Blade knew that he was not going to find out anything standing there on top of the ridge.

Blade was striding down the far slope of the ridge toward the city when he heard the sound. Like the thunder of a distant storm, it rolled across the plains from the direction of the city. First a single sharp clap, then a long, slowly fading rumble. Blade felt bits of grit drive into his eyes and sting his skin. The bushes, trees, and grass danced for a long moment in something that wasn't the wind.

Somewhere not too far away, something had produced a violent shock wave. Blade doubted that it was natural. This land seemed to be as flat as a billiard table, and just about as unlikely to produce anything noisy and geological.

So whatever had made the shock wave was probably artificial. Blade crouched low behind a bush. Anything or anybody able to make an explosion this powerful might also be able to detect a man miles away.

Blade started to shift his position to where he could see out in all directions and no one could easily see him. Another crack-boom-rumble sounded from the direction of the city. Blade scanned the horizon and the buildings for some possible sign of where the blasts came from. No flash of flame, not even a rising and spreading cloud of smoke. What was making the explosions, and where?

For the third time the sounds blasted their way across the plain. Watching closely, Blade saw the blast wave kick up dust and debris in the streets of the city. There was a lot of power behind those blasts, whatever they were. No doubt his view of the blast site itself was cut off by the mass of thousand-foot buildings. But why no smoke clouds rising even higher into the sky? There was something increasingly odd about those explosions, if that was what they were.

Three more explosions came in rapid succession, then five minutes of silence and after that three more.

Blade waited in concealment as the silence following the last three explosions grew longer and longer. Five minutes, ten, twenty. After half an hour, Blade crawled out from under the bush, stood up, and scanned the city again. It stood as before silent and grim. Nothing moved in its rubble-strewn streets or buildings with windows staring like the eye-sockets of bleached skulls.

Blade headed down the ridge toward the city. He couldn't help wishing he had something more than the sapling as a weapon. The explosions had been too powerful to think about with an easy mind. He would have felt a damned sight more comfortable walking toward the city with a couple of light antitank rockets or something like that slung on his back.

Oh well, they couldn't send through the computer everything he might need in a new dimension. Even if they could, they'd need to send six porters or a Land Rover to carry the whole lot! Blade smiled for a moment at the idea of seven stark-naked men tramping across some other-dimensional landscape, himself in the lead and six others following with heavy packs.

The grass rose a yard high as Blade descended the ridge. Once again he had to plow through it like a ship through pack ice, his massively muscled legs moving up and down tirelessly. His eyes continuously scanned the city, and from time to time looked to either side and behind him. He couldn't imagine what danger might come at him from the miles of empty, open plain. But a man in a new world seldom died from the dangers he expected.

Blade had covered about half the distance to the city when something in the grass ahead made him stop and look more closely. Something gleamed whitely there, reflecting the sun from among the greens and yellow-browns of the waving grass. Blade took two more steps forward and saw the unmistakable glint of sunlight off metal.

White, bleached bones lay scattered in the grass, the bones of human beings and horses all mixed together. The sunlight glinted from the unruined portions of swords, spear heads, iron-studded belts, round helmets, the metalwork of harnesses.

Blade picked up the most intact of the belts and tied it around his waist. Then he thrust the least-ruined of the swords into it and stood up. That made him feel better. Now he might stay alive if he ran into more of the people whose bones littered the ground around him.

Blade crouched down again and examined the remains more closely. At once he noticed a few odd things about them. For one thing; there were clearly three different types of people among the dead. One type was short, almost bandy-legged, broad-framed and squat, with round skulls and wide faces. A second was taller, some of them six feet or over, thinner, long-limbed and graceful. A third-the most numerous-looked like the results of cross-breeding between the first two. What was even odder was that most of the tall skeletons seemed to be those of women! The lighter bones and the pelvic girdle were hard to mistake.

There was also something odd about the armor and weapons. There was quite a lot of metal there-good but crudely finished wrought iron, most of it. Efficient but primitive. Yet some of the helmets, many of the breastplates, and nearly all of the belts were made of some pale, tough, plastic-like material.

Blade picked up one of the belts and tried to snap it in his hands. He pulled at it until the muscles of his thick arms stood out like rocks and the sweat popped out on his forehead. But he might as well have been trying to snap a length of steel cable. He braced one of the breastplates-designed for a woman, he noticed-against a horse's ribcage and tried to drive the sword through it. He put all his strength into the thrust, but the armor only dimpled and sprang back into shape. It took several jabs before he was able to

drive his sword through it.

Tough stuff, this, thought Blade. He looked more closely at the belt in his hands. He'd be damned if this stuff wasn't almost identical to teksin, the ubiquitous material that the people of Tharn had made from the mani plant. Almost? He couldn't see any difference at all!

Could he be in Tharn?

The thought made his pulse race and his breath come more quickly. He couldn't help it. The idea that after all the failures he had finally returned to a particular dimension was too exciting.

Then the excitement faded. So far he had nothing to prove that he was in Tharn except a few pieces of something that looked very much like teksin and a few skeletons of warrior women. That wasn't enough. There was no reason why the people of some other dimension couldn't have come up with something identical to teksin. Nor were fighting women unique to Tharn. Until he had more to go on, he would assume that this was a new world, with a whole set of new dangers.

He turned back to examining the skeletons. They lay scattered every which way, and wind and time had broken some of them apart. But all the bones were intact, none of them broken or gouged. Some of the skeletons looked as though the people had simply lain down to sleep or fallen off their horses and never got up again. To Blade, those bones didn't look like those of people and horses who had died in battle. What had killed them, then?

Blade knew he could only guess for the moment. Meanwhile he would watch his step and his back even more carefully. He rummaged through the remains until he found a helmet and a breastplate that more or less fitted him. Then he tied two or three of the belts together at his waist as an improvised loinguard.

He looked toward the city again. He was armed and armored now. If any of the three peoples still lurked in the city, he felt he could give a good account of himself. But what then? None of these people could be the ones who had built the city. That was the relic of an advanced civilization. None of these people seemed much beyond early Iron Age.

But there was still that damned teksinlike stuff they used!

How did an Iron-Age people get that? Tharn had been a land of advanced if decadent science. These people-

Blade shrugged. Speculating in advance of facts was never a very good idea. It seemed even less a good idea in this dimension, which seemed to be throwing four or five mysteries at him all at once.

However, multiple mysteries didn't bother Blade. They just made him more curious and more determined to satisfy his curiosity. Hitching his sword into position for a quick draw, he strode on toward the city.

Closer to the city the grass seemed shorter and the ground firmer. Blade plunged along with long, powerful strides. In another twenty minutes he was more than a mile closer to the city, and stopped again.

Now there was more than that teksinlike material to make him wonder if he was back in Tharn. Seen closer up, a good many of the city's buildings were beginning to remind him of Urcit, the capital of Tharn. Urcit was gone now, destroyed by the final explosion of its Power. But parts of this city might have been

Urcit's ghost-if a city could have a ghost.

Again, this could be coincidence. But two coincidences between this dimension and Tharn? Blade couldn't help wondering. He also couldn't help moving forward even faster than before, until he was almost trotting. He covered the next mile at that pace, then stopped again.

No, the resemblance to Urcit was just a coincidence, startling as it was. Blade couldn't see a single case of the phallic theme that had dominated art and architectural decoration in decadent Urcit, with its people of beautiful, sex-starved women. Several of the buildings bore large, complex designs in red. They looked to Blade more like three or four large snakes having an orgy than anything else. Definitely they weren't the magnificently explicit phallic themes of the people's art.

He felt almost disappointed. He remembered Zulekia's face hovering before him as the computer worked on his brain, thrusting him into this dimension. He would have liked to see the changes made in the time since he left Tharn. He had broken the mold in which both the people and their barbaric enemies, the Pethcines, had been trapped. He had given them-call it their freedom, for want of a better word. What had they done with it?

He doubted that he or anybody else from Home Dimension would ever find out.

He rose to his feet again and started forward. Then in the next moment he stopped, stared, and threw himself flat on the ground.

Out from behind a building on the edge of the city slid a gleaming metal machine. It rode some thirty feet off the ground, and the air blurred under it. With one glance Blade could see that it was a machine built for one purpose, and one purpose only.

War.

Chapter 4

The machine was so ugly that Blade couldn't imagine it being used for anything but war. It was swinging back and forth across a narrow arc as it moved cut from the building. The movement reminded Blade of a hunting dog in the field, casting about for a scent. Blade watched it move steadily closer, noting details as he made them out.

The machine must have been a good forty feet long, twenty feet wide, and ten feet from its flat silver belly to the domed turret on top. It looked like two half eggshells, flat side down, a smaller one perched on top of a larger one. At the rear of the main body was a railed platform.

From the front of the turret a long silvery tube stuck out, ending in a glowing purple lens. Seven antennae sprouted in all directions from the top of the turret. On either side of the turret were streamlined but featureless bulges. Four other bulges projected near the front of the hull, two on either side. At the bow itself were four circular ports. As the machine drew closer still, Blade could see four more bulges on the otherwise flat bottom of the hull. The polished metal of the hull and turret shimmered and gleamed in the sun.

The machine closed to within a hundred yards of where Blade crouched in the grass. He stayed totally motionless. But he never took his eyes off the machine. It was obvious that whoever had built it was advanced enough to use antigravity. That meant comparably advanced weapons of some sort. Blade didn't want to find out the hard way just what they were.

At fifty yards the machine came to a stop, then sank until it was only a few feet above the grass. The four bulges on the bottom split open and four articulated metal legs unfolded, reaching for the ground.

The broad metal plates at the end of each leg touched the ground. Instantly the shimmering in the air under the machine faded away. With an audible creaking and clanking the machine settled down. Blade saw that the metal finish was not as polished and flawless as it had appeared. The underside was stained and discolored, and the upper hull and turret showed pitting and scarring. This was an old machine. As old as the city and built by the same people? Possibly. But the machine's age didn't necessarily mean that its weapons would be useless.

Slowly the machine's turret began to turn. The two projecting bulges on either side of the turret also split open. From one rose a blinking yellow white light. From the other rose a round metal disc. Both wobbled upward on jointed metal arms until they, were some twenty feet up.

Blade noticed that two more identical machines had slipped out of the city while he watched the first one. But these were not moving toward him. Instead they were drifting away to either side, riding their shimmering antigravity fields fifty feet above the ground. After a few minutes they came to a stop and landed. They formed a triangle with the nearest machine, a triangle more than a mile on each side.

The patrol has deployed to survey their area of operations, thought Blade. Now-what's the next step in their standard operational procedure?

Gradually Blade became aware of something distinctly unpleasant filling the air around him. It was not an odor, not a sound. It was a something that his senses couldn't register, that his mind couldn't define precisely. But something that was gnawing away at the heart of his self-confidence, filling him with a swelling, nameless fear and dread. The machine began to seem like a fanged monster gathering itself to leap on him like a man-eating tiger. Blade felt a cold sweat breaking out on his skin and heard his teeth begin to chatter. He realized that his hands were shaking so hard that he couldn't have drawn his sword to save his life. He knew that in another moment he was going to lose control of his bowels and stomach. He would be lying there, helpless in his own filth, when the machine came marching over to him, to crush him under those massive metal feet, or-

Then, somewhere in Blade's mind behind the mounting fear, a light dawned. A faint light that flickered at first, like a candle in a rising wind, then swelled and grew until he realized what was paralyzing him with fear.

Subsonics.

A modulated sonic pulse at a frequency below the range the human ear can pick up produces fear reactions. The more intense the subsonic pulses, the more intense the fear reaction.

Blade heaved a sigh of relief. Now that he knew what he faced, he could use all of his training, all of his self-control, to fight his instincts. Part of the fear had been the deadliest, most uncontrollable sort of fear-fear of the unknown. Now that was gone. He could think and fight again.

Blade did not relax, however. He was quite sure that the machine had nowhere near exhausted its bag of tricks yet. He crouched and waited to see what it would try next.

He did not have long to wait. The light on the end of the other arm began blinking in a steady pattern. Flick-flick-flick-flick. It was becoming monotonous, boring, almost hypnotic.

Hypnotic. That was it. The light was set to a pattern designed to have a hypnotic effect on anyone who watched it for long. Such as anybody who was already half-paralyzed with fear induced by the subsonics? Probably.

It was certainly a waste of time to try that trick on Blade. He wasn't half-paralyzed with anything. The subsonics were only making him mildly nervous now, like a man sitting in a dentist's waiting room. He was also nearly impossible to hypnotize. This wasn't a boast, it was a fact, tested by many psychiatrists over many years.

So far so good. The war machine hadn't come up with anything Blade didn't think he could handle. But he was quite sure there was still more to come. Again he settled down to wait for the machine to show its hand-or whatever else it used for finishing off its victims.

The turret kept turning as the subsonics and the blinking light went on. Blade noticed that it turned not only slowly but irregularly, as though, it were badly lubricated or had an unreliable power source.

Blade lay motionless in the grass until he felt one foot beginning to go to sleep. Cautiously he shifted position until the foot was comfortable again. The machine paid no more attention to his movement than if he had been a mosquito whining about the turret.

Blade realized that if he had been carrying that antitank rocket or even a hand grenade, he could have hit the machine easily. It seemed to have nothing except the subsonics and the hypnotic light to keep somebody from lying in wait and attacking it. But this war machine was too big, too powerful, too complex to be so weakly armed. It must have other weapons.

But what the devil were they? Blade realized that at the present rate he and the machine might sit here on the plain outside the city until winter came and covered them with a foot of snow, without his finding out anything. He was going to have to move into action, and find out what the machine's other weapons might be.

He reached down and cautiously pulled off the belts he had tied into an improvised loinguard. Lifting one that was all strips of leather and teksinlike plastic, he gathered his legs under him. Then he exploded upward in a mighty leap, throwing the belt as hard as he could toward the machine. It soared thirty feet into the air and halfway to the machine before dropping into the grass. Before it hit, Blade dropped down flat on his stomach, once again not daring to move and hardly daring to breathe.

The turret swung toward the place where the belt fell, the long tube jutting out like an elephant's trunk feeling the air. The turret swung like the head of a man with a bad case of arthritis in his neck. Blade realized that if things got really tight, he could probably run faster than the turret could turn.

The turret swung until the tube was pointing at the spot where the belt had fallen. The purple lens at the muzzle lit up and blinked three times. Blade waited for something to shoot out of the muzzle-laser beam, death-ray, rocket, shell, whatever. But nothing happened.

For a moment Blade wondered if the weapon in the turret had stopped working. The machine looked old enough. But he wasn't going to make that dangerous assumption on the basis of one test. He would try again.

This time he picked a belt of teksin with a number of iron discs tied onto it. Again he leaped, again his arm whipped out, again the belt soared through the air. Being heavier, this one flew a good deal farther.

Blade was back flat on the ground before it even reached the peak of its flight. The machine's turret was turning even as the belt hit. The light blinked again. Then the tube sank down until it was aiming at the belt, and a solid bar of searing, glaring purple light stabbed out of it. Blade buried his head in his arms and listened to the angry sizzling noise as the beam stabbed out, again and again.

He had been right. The war machine had unleashed another weapon, the most powerful yet.

Chapter 5

Blade had expected fireworks when the machine unleashed its heavy weapon. Clouds of smoke, wreckage flying high in the air, the belt and an acre of grass around it blasted to fragments or burned to a cinder, a ground shock or concussion violent enough to knock him unconscious.

Almost nothing happened. A slight quiver in the ground, a purple glow and a slight wavering in the air above the grass where the belt lay, a hiss of disturbed air. Then even the after-image of the searing purple glare was fading from Blade's eyes. He stared toward the belt. The grass around where it had fallen looked fresh and undisturbed. No smoke, not a blade out of place. The machine stood motionless, its turret still turning slowly and steadily.

Blade crouched in the grass and began to run his thoughts back over what he had just seen. He was no scholar, but he had a mind superbly skilled in analyzing any practical situation. It was a mind that had worked with computerlike efficiency long before Lord Leighton had gone to work on it. If it hadn't, Blade would never have lived long enough for Lord Leighton to deal with him.

Some sort of warning device tracked targets for the main weapon, the purple ray. Some targets called that ray into operation, some didn't. What was the difference? Blade considered how he had thrown the two belts. He couldn't remember any real difference in the way they had flown through the air or landed in the grass.

No, it was something in the targets-the belts, in this case-themselves. The two were virtually identical in size, shape, and weight. But-they weren't identical in material.

Blade's mind raced. The first belt had been made of leather and the teksinlike plastic. The second had been made of leather with iron discs sewn all over it. Iron, a metal. Or at least something nonorganic-something that had never been living. Now suppose the plastic was really made of something like the mani plant of Tharn? Then it would be organic. Leather was certainly organic.

Blade's mind raced on even faster. The detectors in that machine worked on a principle that Home Dimension scientists hadn't even imagined, let alone studied! The ability to distinguish between even small amounts of living or once-living matter and any and all nonliving matter seemed to be there. It was hard to believe, but it was there.

There was an awesomely advanced science behind that machine, however battered and rundown it might have become. Getting a closer look at it was something worth enormous risks. Getting inside it would be even better. The idea that there was such a detectable difference between organic and nonorganic matter would throw a bombshell into half a dozen branches of Home Dimension science. The idea that machines might be built to detect it was something that might leave even Lord Leighton temporarily speechless. Blade suspected there were a good many people, J included, who would enjoy the spectacle of a speechless Lord Leighton.

One thing was certain-this dimension could hardly be Tharn. The neuters of Tharn had served well at

keeping all the complex machinery functioning. They had known more of magnetism and gravity than Home Dimension scientists could have imagined.

But the neuters had not had creative, curious, exploring minds. There was nothing of interest for them beyond what they already knew well. They had not discovered anything for many centuries, nor had they any need or wish to do so.

When Blade was among them, they certainly had not discovered anything that might have gone into making the war machine.

So he had solved one problem. But he still faced another-how to approach that machine which squatted grim and gleaming, so tantalizingly close at hand.

If a target carried metal-or at least some nonorganic material-it presumably was not an animal and might be dangerous to the machine. Then the purple ray was called into play. What it did to what it hit, Blade still didn't know. But he remembered those skeletons bleaching in the grass. Had they been struck down by this same purple ray, to lie there until the flesh was rotted and weathered away from the bones?

Perhaps. Well, the machine would find that Richard Blade was a tougher opponent than those poor helpless savages! Blade mentally shook his fist at the war machine. The effort cleared his head. His mind leaped ahead again, mapping out a strategy.

To get any closer to the machine would risk detection. But what if he was detected as nothing but a moving mass of organic matter, nothing but a large animal for all the machine could tell? The machine seemed to be programmed to fire at anything that might be an intelligent and therefore dangerous being. But it might not fire at all on something that merely registered as an animal. Or it might at least hold its fire until Blade was too close to be hit.

That meant stripping himself of all his equipment. He didn't much like going up against the machine naked and barehanded. But if his reasoning was correct, he had no choice. The first belt he had thrown was the only item of gear that wasn't metal or metal-studded. It was unfortunate that the people of this dimension hadn't learned to work their plastic into effective sword blades as had been done in Tharn.

Blade laughed at himself. It was unfortunate that the people of his dimension hadn't provided him with a good many things that would have made him feel better about tackling the machine, starting with that antitank rocket. But regretting their absence wasn't going to conjure them out of the ground or out of thin air.

Moving slowly and carefully, staying low to the ground, Blade stripped off his equipment. He piled it on the grass beside him, marking the place by pulling out several clumps of grass. It might be handy to be able to find the gear again in a hurry. The war machines weren't necessarily the only enemies roaming in this land.

Still moving slowly and carefully, he crawled away from the gear, occasionally sticking his head up through the long grass. The war machine showed no sign of moving. But something new was happening in the city beyond. Several columns of thick black smoke were coiling greasily up into the air, rising as high as the tops of the tallest towers before the wind broke them up and spread them out. Blade froze for a minute, watching and listening. He thought he could hear occasional hissing and crackling sounds, followed by the crash of heavy weights falling.

Blade would have given a good deal to be able to stand up and get a better look at what was going on in

the city. Something new and perhaps deadly was at work there. But he couldn't risk being detected prematurely by the war machine. He went on crawling.

Finally he reached his intended position. He was less than thirty yards from the machine. That was a distance he could cover in a matter of seconds even in the long grass. The ray-tube was pointed a hundred and eighty degrees away from him. It would take time for it to swing back toward him. Hopefully it would take more time than it would take him to reach the platform on the rear of the machine. He could see some kind of hatch there.

If his guess was right, he didn't need to worry about the purple ray. But he might be wrong, and then he might be dead if he made too easy a target of himself.

Blade took a deep breath, sprang to his feet, and ran toward the machine.

Chapter 6

Blade hurled himself through the grass in great leaping bounds. Once grass tangled around his ankles and he staggered and nearly went sprawling on his face. Several times thorny branches raked his calves, leaving oozing scratches. His heart pounded with the exertion, but even more it pounded with the tension of waiting. Would the turret swing in time, and if it did, would the purple ray lance out at him?

He was barely halfway to the machine when he saw that the turret was turning faster than he had expected. The tube would be bearing on him in seconds. His throat went dry at the thought, but his legs went on churning and his mind went right on working. If death was only moments away, he would die on his feet, fighting and thinking to the last.

Clank-clank-clank-screeeeeech. The tube was rising into firing position. Thirty yards to go. Twenty-five. Twenty. The tube was bearing directly on him now. More lights flashed on, and the purple lens at the end of the tube glowed like a neon sign.

Nothing happened.

In a moment of wild joy Blade realized that he had guessed right. The machine would not, could not fire at something that did not register as a possible enemy.

If he had been able to spare the breath, he would have let out a sigh of relief. But he didn't have the breath, or time to stop and catch it. He lengthened his stride, arms and legs pumping furiously. The machine might not fire at him, but it might still fly or walk away.

Fifteen yards.

Ten yards.

Five yards.

The machine's legs flexed, and it let out an ear-torturing howl like a dozen fire sirens all going at once. But before the machine could move, Blade reached the platform in the rear. He grasped the railing and vaulted over, landing on hands and knees with a clang and a thump. It vibrated and quivered under the impact of Blade's two hundred and ten pounds.

The turret continued to turn until the ray-tube was pointing directly backward, over the platform and only

a foot or so above Blade's head. Blade flattened himself against the hatch as the tube sank down. With an audible click it reached the bottom of its slot and stopped. The siren died away. Apparently something in the machine had concluded that the danger was past or that the ray would be no good against it. Blade hoped it was the first and raised his head to look about him.

The smoke was rising from nearly a dozen places in the city now. The individual clouds merged into a vast sullen gray black pall that was spreading ahead of the wind. The hissing noises were louder now and almost continuous. So was the crashing and rumbling of great weights falling. Something powerful and destructive was at work in the city.

It certainly wasn't the other two war machines. They still stood motionless where they had been, their turrets turning slowly. They seemed to be paying no attention to anything that was going on in the city. They also seemed to be ignoring what had just climbed aboard their companion.

Blade turned toward the hatch. It would not be a bad idea to get away from here for a while. Something much more powerful and destructive than the purple ray was at work in the city. Blade couldn't help feeling that it would be wise to be ready to leave in a hurry if the something turned his way. The best and fastest way to leave would be aboard this machine. If he could learn to run it, he could put a good many miles between himself and whatever was tearing the ruins apart, then study the machine at his leisure.

Step one get inside the bloody thing! Blade examined the hatch. It offered no obvious knobs, dials, latches, handles, wheels, or any other way of opening it. It was simply a slightly recessed circle of metal about three feet in diameter, set in the rear slope of the machine's hull. Blade thumped the center with his clenched fist. The metal resounded with a faint hollow boom, but that was all.

There were no visible hinges, and it wouldn't have helped Blade much even if there had been. Without tools he would have been hard put to dismantle them. He went to work with both fists, systematically and carefully tapping the whole surface of the hatch.

A metallic rattling from the front end of the machine interrupted Blade. He broke off his examination of the hatch and craned his neck to peer around the curve of the machine's hull.

Four long flexible metal tentacles were creeping out of the ports in the front of the machine. They seemed to be composed of hundreds of circular segments, like giant earthworms. At its base each tentacle was a good six inches in diameter. Three of them tapered to whip-fine tips. The fourth ended in a flared section, crowned with a circular knob. All four crept slowly out of their ports until they reached out a good thirty feet or more. Then they began to rise, bending backward as they did so, over the turret, toward Blade.

Blade stopped his work on the hatch and froze, his eyes fixed on the tentacles as they arched toward him. His mouth was dry again, but his mind was still racing furiously. The tentacles could only be a back-up defense for the machine, to handle anything that got through the other defenses.

Or help it? The idea flashed into Blade's mind. The machine was almost certainly unmanned now. But if it ever had a live crew, there might be times when a wounded or helpless crewman needed help to get inside.

How to imitate a wounded man? The tentacles were already reaching down toward him. The one with the flared end and knob was the farthest away. Blade suspected it held some sort of lens or other sensing device, to study any doubtful specimens and pass on the word to the machine's computers.

If it passed on the wrong word, the other three tentacles would grip Blade and tear him apart like a rag doll in the hands of an angry child. He knew that as clearly as if he had seen it done. A vivid picture of it happening flashed through his mind for a moment as he got ready.

He made his breathing as slow and shallow as he could without blacking out. If he could have done it, he would have slowed his heartbeat as well. He let himself go limp and slid down the hull to sprawl on the platform, arms and legs outflung. He let his head sag to one side like a drunken man's. But behind half-closed lids he kept his eyes fixed on the hatch. With luck the tentacles would show him the way into the machine. Without luck-

The first tentacle touched him. Its touch was chill, hard, with a nightmarish fumbling quality about it. It tapped at his shinbone, curled around his ankle, tugged gently. Blade forced himself not to tense his leg, but instead to let it rise as the tentacle pulled. It rose only a few inches, then the tentacle uncurled. Blade let his leg drop back to the platform with a thud. Pain flared as his shinbone smashed into the metal, but he clamped his teeth down hard on a gasp of pain.

Now another tentacle was curling around his waist, roaming up and down the area between his navel and his groin. Blade felt the tentacle grip his testicles, and had a harder fight than before not to freeze or yell out loud. A third tentacle crept into his hair and explored there. Its chill metallic touch was a grisly parody of the caress of a woman's fingers.

Meanwhile the fourth tentacle was hovering in the air over Blade's head. The knob at the end was turning slowly, with audible clicks and beelike dronings. Blade continued to force himself to stay limp, quiet, and calm. The struggle was getting harder by the minute. He had no idea what conclusions the machine was reaching. Would it conclude he was somebody who had a right to be where he was, perhaps even a right to be helped? Or would it conclude that he was an enemy who had slipped through the other defenses and order the tentacles to-

The knob-ended tentacle reared up until its full length swayed in the air. It looked uncannily like a giant cobra. The siren sounded again-three ear-splitting boots. The tentacle exploring Blade's hair moved over to the hatch. So did the one at his feet. The third one remained wrapped loosely around his waist.

The two at the hatch hovered for a moment in the air. Then both plunged their tips into the narrow crack around the edge of the circular hatch. Metal scraped against metal as they wedged themselves deep into the crack. Ripples ran up and down the tentacles as they explored it. The one around Blade's waist tightened its grip.

Then the tentacles found what they were looking for. Two sharp clicks sounded. Silently, without the faintest whine or hiss or clanking, the hatch swung outward. Blade saw darkness in which a few humped metal shapes gleamed dully.

The tentacle around his waist tightened its grip still more. Blade held his breath. The other two tentacles arched downward again. One crept under his head, to cradle head, neck, and shoulders in its coils. The other supported him from knees to feet. Then all three tentacles lifted. They lifted him in through the hatch as easily as a housewife lifting a loaf of bread from the grocery shelf. They laid him down as gently on a smooth but warm and yielding surface. Then they withdrew, and in the same silence the hatch swung closed. Two clicks sounded again in the darkness as the latches snapped into place.

Chapter 7

Lights flashed on. For a moment the sudden white glare after the darkness dazzled Blade. He closed his

eyes, then opened them slowly as they adjusted to the light. He did not try to rise or even move so much as a finger or a toe. The relief at being safe for the time being from those coiling tentacles was too great. His skin dripped a cold sweat from head to foot.

His plan had worked. He was where he had to be to learn to operate the machine and then drive it away from the city. But awareness of that stayed in the back of his mind for a couple of minutes, while he savored the sheer delight and relief at being alive.

After those minutes Blade gathered his legs under him and rose to his feet. His head promptly banged into the roof of the cabin, hard enough to make him wince and swear. He hunched his shoulders, rubbed the sore spot on his skull, and looked about the cabin.

The machine had obviously been built by and for humans, or at least beings about that size and shape. That was good news. Blade had been too busy to consider the problems of operating a machine designed for a crew with seven stalked eyes, four arms, three legs, and a prehensile tail. But they would have been nasty problems. He was perfectly happy not to have to face them.

The layout of the controls was a model of simple design. Six screens on the forward wall of the cabin. No doubt they showed views in four directions plus up and down when they were turned on. A control panel with various dials and large switches. A black-enameled wheel on a central shaft in front of a leather-upholstered seat. Three more control levers sprouting from the shaft.

Blade sat down in the chair and fastened the seat belt snugly around his waist. His first few efforts to control the machine would probably be a bit erratic. He didn't want to be splattered all over the cabin if the thing turned over or started doing loops. Then he examined the switches and levers more closely.

One was most likely the main power control. The dial above it glowed silvery blue for about a quarter of the way across its face. Blade left that one strictly alone for the moment.

Of the three levers on the control column, the bottom one had a purple button on top. Blade left that one alone too. The color suggested it might be the firing button for the machine's ray-weapon.

Of the other two, one had a silvery zig zag on its black handle. Blade had to study it for a while before he realized that the silvery zigzag looked like a stylized metal leg. It would be the control for starting and stopping the machine's four metal legs. The computer probably took care of controlling their movements on a continuous basis.

Probably. Blade wished he didn't have to use that word so often. But what else to do? It would be silly to press the wrong button and blow himself and the machine all over the plain. But it would be a damned sight sillier to sit here doing nothing, after going to so much trouble to get into the machine in the first place!

Blade grasped the leg-control lever and wiggled it gently. it would not go forward or sideways. Even more gently he pulled it back. A shudder ran through the machine and the grating of badly lubricated metal echoed in the control cabin. The machine shuddered again, then lurched upward with clanking and clashing noises as the legs extended themselves. The machine settled down again as the legs bent. Then it rose and fell in a steady, slightly wobbling rhythm as the legs settled down to "walking" across the plain.

Blade took his hand off the lever. It made no difference to the steady gait of the metal legs. He leaned forward, found the switches to activate the screens, and turned them on. The screen overlooking the view of the city showed the smoke billowing still thicker and still higher, and the other two war machines still

standing motionless. So far no one seemed to have noticed that the third war machine was walking off on its own. Blade suspected that he had better be ready to leave in a hurry when somebody did notice it.

Blade pulled the lever farther back. The speed of the legs increased, and so did the shuddering of the machine. It began to corkscrew around both axes at once. Blade pushed the lever forward. Obviously the machine couldn't walk too fast without risk of something vital shaking loose.

The legs slowed. Blade looked at the screens again. It seemed that the whole city must be aflame now, although Blade found it hard to believe there could be that much left to burn in the long-deserted buildings. The noise must be terrific, but none of it got through the hull of the war machine. It was like watching a particularly eerie silent movie.

Then Blade saw something gleaming and metallic flash near the base of one of the nearer towers. He watched more closely, not sure that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

They weren't. Something large and metallic was moving slowly out of the city toward the open plain. Blade kept his eyes on the screen. What was emerging looked like an enormous slab-sided box with a large square turret on top. Blade could see no other signs of weapons, tentacles, or legs. But to loom so large at this distance, the new arrival must be three or four times the size of the war machine.

One thing was certain. It was time for Blade to try operating the antigravity and find out just how high and fast this war machine would go. He didn't want to have to learn with somebody shooting at him.

He bent forward, and one long arm reached out to the lever under the large dial to the right of the control column. It was at the bottom of its slot. Blade took a firm grip on it and pushed it upward.

Instantly a new humming and vibration filled the cabin. Then a light over the large dial on the left side, the power dial, lit up. The machine seemed to heave itself upward, then sag down again onto its legs. Somewhere a warning signal sounded with a fast, angry beep-beep-beep-beeeeeee that swiftly rose to an ear-torturing screech.

Blade pulled the lever back down. Instantly the signal died away and the light over the main power dial went dark. Blade flicked his eyes across the control panel, then relaxed. What he had done wrong was almost childishly simple. He hadn't realized that lifting the machine on its antigravity might take more power than walking it on its legs.

He reached for the main power control and slowly opened it until about two-thirds of the dial above glowed blue. Then he grasped the lift control a second time and pushed it upward.

Again the war machine heaved itself upward. But this time it went on rising slowly. On the screens Blade saw the ground slowly dropping away and the dark smashed-down trail the machine left in the grass behind it.

Blade let the machine rise until it was about thirty feet above the ground. Then he inched the lift control back down until the machine stopped rising and hovered as steadily as a rock.

Blade turned back to the screens. The big square machine was now well out from the city. It seemed to be moving slowly and steadily toward the center of the triangle that had been formed by the three war machines. A second large machine was emerging from the city. The turret on top of the first one was now clearly visible. It bristled with antennae and lenses. In the center of one side was a large black tube.

Blade decided it was time to test out his machine somewhat more. He didn't like the purposeful way the two big machines were moving out from the city. If they were armed in proportion to their size, he didn't want to play sitting duck for their weapons.

The bottommost of the three levers on the control column could only move horizontally. That made it the most likely candidate for sending the machine forward and backward. Once again Blade's hand gently closed on a lever and moved it. For a moment there was no sign or sensation of anything happening. Then, in the rearward-looking screen, Blade saw that the grass below was slowly drifting away behind him. He was on the move.

He fed in more power and shoved the speed control up farther. Now the plain rolled toward him at an increasing clip. He guessed he must be hitting close to thirty miles an hour. The machine's massive weight still kept it as steady in the air as if it were running on rails.

Blade took the control wheel firmly in both hands and twisted it to the right. The plain slid across the screens and the floor of the cabin tilted as the machine swung around in the same direction. Blade turned the wheel left. The machine swung back on course, then over to the left. Blade looked at the speed control, tempted to open it wider. He resisted the temptation. He didn't yet know enough about controlling this machine or its power.

A faint whistle sounded high overhead, from outside the machine. It rose in seconds to an ear-splitting shriek. Something trailing grayish white smoke plunged out of the sky and struck the plain a mile ahead. No explosion, only an enormous mass of red smoke rolling and boiling up. Moments later Blade's machine wobbled slightly in midair, then started to slow down of its own accord. The dance of the lights on the control board began again.

Blade noticed that the speed lever was sliding backward and that the machine seemed to be sinking toward the ground. He reached for the lift control and shoved it back to its previous position. Then he pushed the speed control forward again. By the time the machine passed through the cloud of red smoke, it was moving as fast as before.

The temptation to make a run for it was growing in Blade. It was obvious that the red smoke rocket had been some sort of signal to the machine to stop and land. The computer had been doing just that when he overrode it. That override would be a signal to the other machines that something was wrong in this one. Blade wanted to find out what they would do next, and for that he knew he would have to stay around for a while. On the other hand, he had to get away if he wanted to study this machine at leisure and in detail. He was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. He was also a man who hated to turn his back on an opponent, even for the best of reasons.

So he did not speed up. But he did lift the machine until it was some fifty feet up. Then he started zigzagging, making sharp turns at irregular intervals. He was not going to be an easy target, if he had to be one.

A minute passed, a second, then a third. Blade's teeth were locked tight together with the strain of waiting. When were they going to shoot, if they were? Or maybe they weren't? Maybe he had succeeded in overloading whatever tracking computer the other machines might have? Maybe-?

The howl of an incoming rocket sounded from above. This time the burst came off to the right, less than a hundred yards away. Masses of earth and grass flew into the air on top of a vast cloud of gray brown smoke. This time the blast wave in the air snatched at Blade's machine like a terrier grabbing a rat in its jaws.

The machine lurched wildly, tilting far over to the left. If Blade hadn't been strapped in, he would have sailed out of the chair and smashed into the wall hard enough to break every bone in his body. He clutched the control wheel, his knuckles standing out white. Now he knew what weapons the big machines carried. Now it was time to-

Another rocket hit, this time a hundred yards almost directly behind him. The blast practically stood Blade's machine on its nose. By sheer reflex he pulled the control wheel backward. The machine straightened out of its dive just above the grass.

Blade threw a quick glance behind him. For the moment the machines firing at him were invisible behind the smoke from the second burst. Was he invisible to them?

Probably not. Very likely they carried radar or something like it to track him. But neither radar nor the human eye could see over the horizon. If he stayed low as he ran- Before he had completed the thought, his hand was shoving the speed control all the way forward in one smooth motion.

A giant rubbery fist shoved him back hard into the control chair. On the screens the plain suddenly turned flat, featureless, seemingly as bare as a tabletop. The smoke cloud from the second burst shrank as if by magic. The towers of the abandoned city dwindled to toys, sank down toward the horizon, and vanished. In the dim distance behind him, Blade saw a third rocket burst in a third tree of smoke. But he neither heard nor felt anything. Then the last smoke vanished and he was alone in the machine as it raced away over the plain.

How fast was he moving? There was no speed indicator he could read. But from the blur below him, he knew he must be going not much less than four hundred miles an hour.

Four hundred miles an hour, in a machine with the strength and some of the weapons of a tank. The builders of this machine had built something worth studying, no matter how badly they seemed to have maintained it.

And after he had studied the machine, perhaps he should try studying its makers? Blade grinned. That might be a good idea, if he could ever find them. For all he had seen, he might be the only human being alive in this dimension. But it was going to be interesting nonetheless.

Chapter 8

Blade kept the machine low and fast for a while, partly to be sure he was completely out of range, partly to test the machine's power. By the time he slowed down, even the miles-high cloud of smoke rising above the city had long since dropped below the horizon.

Blade slowed down to about two hundred miles an hour and climbed to a hundred feet. He could now see for miles across the plains and there was far less danger of the ground suddenly and disastrously rising to meet him. The machine looked indestructible but probably wasn't. Blade knew he certainly wasn't.

From the position of the sun Blade guessed he must be heading almost due west. An hour later he came to a stop and landed. By that time he knew he must be a good three hundred miles from the city. If anyone was going to chase him, they would almost certainly have done so long since. As far as he could tell, he was alone on the plain.

Blade did not bother deploying the legs, but simply brought the machine down on its metal belly. It rocked back and forth once or twice, then dug itself into the earth with its own weight. Blade unstrapped himself and began examining the machine more carefully.

The first thing he looked for was food and water. He was not particularly hungry. But he was as thirsty as if he had been marooned in a desert for three weeks. Fortunately the first thing to turn up was a water tap lurking under the control panel, complete with plasticlike cups. Blade emptied his cup seven or eight times before he stopped feeling thirsty.

After that Blade scrambled up into the turret and examined the controls for the ray-tube. They were as simply and carefully laid out as the main controls. After a few minutes Blade felt he could hit anything he aimed at with the purple ray. What the ray would do when it hit was still very much a mystery.

In lockers on either side of the hatch Blade found boxes and cans of concentrated food, as well as sets of clothing. The food was just edible, like emergency rations in every dimension. The clothing was obviously combat uniforms of some sort, camouflaged coveralls with heavy padding from throat to groin, and knee-length boots. The belts, packs, and helmets were made of something that looked like leather but weighed a good deal more. When it came to finding an outfit that he could get into comfortably, Blade had his usual struggle. There were times when he couldn't help wishing he was about three inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter.

There were no hand weapons, but there were a couple of businesslike knives on each belt. There was also a long sharp-pointed tool, rather like a short crowbar with a heavy needle on the end. Blade realized that this was probably the tool for opening the hatch from the outside. After pressing the button to release the hatch and climbing outside, a quick test confirmed his guess. Now he could climb in and out of the machine without having to let those grisly tentacles fumble over him.

He turned on the power, lifted the machine into the air, and headed west again.

The sun sank down toward the horizon, swelling and turning from yellow to orange and from orange to red as it did so. Blade began to think about landing for the night. He did not want to push on in the darkness and risk missing something important or suddenly running out of power.

Then on the plain two miles ahead he saw the horsemen.

There were at least twenty of them. Blade's machine was coming at them out of the twilight, so he saw them before they saw him. But when they did see him, they scattered in all directions, as fast as their horses would carry them.

Blade swooped down and examined the fleeing riders on the screens. All the horses were of the same kind-heavy-chested, heavy-rumped, short-legged, shaggy. They looked enormously tough. They also looked like the horses whose skeletons Blade had seen near the city.

The riders, on the other hand, were unmistakably of three different peoples, apparently the same three whose skeletons Blade had found along with the horses. Some were as stockily built as their mounts. Others were tall and graceful, and most of them were unmistakably women. Still others seemed to be combinations of the first two.

Then one tall rider's horse put a foot wrong and stumbled. The rider went sailing out of the saddle and sprawled on the grass as his horse bolted. In the fall the rider's leather cap came off, revealing a totally bald head. The man turned a grimy, deeply lined face up toward the approaching machine. Blade could

see terror on the man's face, terror that fought with a grim determination not to show it to a hated and despised enemy.

Blade's hands danced over the controls, swinging the machine in a wide circle around the bald man. There was something familiar about the bald man-not as an individual, but as a type. Memory stirred in Blade, forming more precise images.

Blade could have sworn he was looking at a neuter of Tharn!

The man's garb was barbaric, his face was filthy and aged by strain and fear. But the bald head, the thin neck and limbs, the great intent eyes-if this wasn't a neuter of Tharn, what was it? And where was he?

Blade decided he'd been offered a perfect opportunity to find out where he was. A quick glance at the screens showed the horsemen still heading for the horizon as fast as their mounts could cover ground. They were already far out of bowshot. Soon they would be clear out of sight. The bald man below carried a short sword and a knife in his belt, but no bow. Nor did he look like a fighter, with his spindly limbs.

Blade's hands moved again. The machine spiraled down in a tighter and tighter circle, until it touched down on the grass less than fifty feet from the neuter. No-from the bald man. Blade told himself sharply not to let his hopes rise. The man might be the image of a neuter of Tharn, but it was long odds against his actually being one.

But the impossible had been known to happen, a small voice in the back of Blade's mind put in.

Blade unstrapped himself, rose, and stretched. Then he went to the locker and pulled out a helmet with knives and a hatch-key. He wouldn't need any other weapons or protection against this man.

He drank several cups of water, found a canteen, filled it, and added it to the gear hanging from his belt. He looked at the screen again. The bald man was standing knee-deep in the grass, motionless, his arms crossed on his chest. He looked like a man resigned to his fate, but still slightly bewildered by the suddenness of it all. Or was he bewildered by the absence of subsonics and the hypnotic light? He must have realized by now that there was something unusual about this machine's behavior.

Blade stepped to the hatch and jabbed the button in the center. The hatch swung open and the cool evening breezes flowed in and played pleasantly over his bare skin. He stepped out onto the rear platform, closed the hatch behind him, and turned to look at the man.

The man was staring wide-eyed at Blade. His hands had dropped to his sides and Blade could see them shaking slightly. The man's tongue was creeping back and forth over trembling lips. Whatever he had been expecting to crawl out of the machine, Blade was certainly not it!

Blade stepped down off the platform and strode through the grass toward the bald man. As he moved he spread his arms wide and kept his empty hands in clear sight, in an unmistakable gesture of peace. There was no danger for him in that. Blade suspected that he could break this man in two with his bare hands, if it became necessary. He hoped it wouldn't.

The bald man froze as Blade started toward him. When Blade was twenty feet away the other swallowed convulsively several times, then spoke.

"You-you are of the Looters?"

Blade stopped in mid-stride so suddenly that he nearly fell on his nose in the grass. The man's speech had come out in a series of clicks, whistles, and trills. Yet Blade's brain had registered them as plain English words.

That was a miracle, but it was a miracle that Blade was used to by now. The computer altered his brain each time he entered a new dimension, so that he could both understand and speak the language there. How this happened was something still poorly understood even by Lord Leighton and the high-powered doctors and linguists on the Project Dimension X staff. But this was not the miracle that stopped Blade dead in his tracks.

That series of clicks, whistles, and trills was unmistakably the language of Tharn.

He was back in Tharn.

He had returned to a dimension he had once visited.

Chapter 9

For a long moment Blade stood as motionless as the neuter. The realization of what had happened was too overpowering for him to do anything else. It flooded into his mind and completely absorbed his attention. He could not have moved or spoken to save his life.

At last he cleared his mind of the shock and bewilderment. His eyes focused again on the neuter. He replied in the same clicks, whistles, and trills the neuter had used.

"I am no Looter, whatever they may be. I have come to Tharn from another land, for other purposes than those of the Looters."

The neuter quivered all over as though he had just been stabbed. Then he clasped his hands together until their calloused and grimy knuckles stood out white and the fingers knotted together stopped shaking. It was his turn to speak.

"How is it that you know the true name of this land?"

Blade smiled. He had to fight to keep the smile from turning into a foolish grin. "I have been in Tharn before. I saw the great battle with the Pethcines, and saw them perish by the thousands. I saw the end of the power and the destruction of Urcit. Then I went away. I have traveled far since then, but now I have returned to Tharn. Now I have returned." Blade was having trouble keeping complete control of his voice. The first overpowering surprise was passing now. In its place was a swelling exaltation, bubbling up inside him like vintage champagne in a glass.

They had done it! After all the time and money wasted on a dozen schemes to bring about a controlled return, he was back in a dimension he had visited before! Back in Tharn, by pure accident. Or was it pure accident? He had been thinking of Tharn as the computer gripped his brain. A clear image of Zulekia, the Maiduke girl he had loved, the girl he had left carrying his child, had been floating before his eyes as he was whirled away from Home Dimension. Did this possibly have something to do with where he had landed?

Possibly. But that was a question for Lord Leighton, back in Home Dimension. For the moment he had landed in Tharn, on his own, as he had always been. But in Tharn he had been Mazda, HE WHO

CAME TO THEY. He had been given godlike reverence even before he turned Tharn upside down, ended the power, slaughtered the Pethcines, and finally helped bring about the destruction of Urcit, the great city of Tharn.

A thought struck Blade. Could he be sure that Mazda was remembered with favor, considering how much destruction he had wrought in Tharn? It had been needed to break the mold which had caught and frozen Tharn for centuries, the mold that held people, neuters, Maidukes, bearer maidens, ceboids, and even the Pethcines. They had all been dying in that mold. But what he'd wrought was destruction nonetheless.

Blade remembered the battlefield littered with the corpses of men, women, and horses, the smoke boiling up from Urcit as the explosion of the power pool destroyed it, the screams of the maimed and dying. Was it possible that Mazda would be remembered as a force for evil, who had brought destruction and death when he came to his people?

Blade could not really blame the people of Tharn if that was their attitude. But he had to find out, preferably before he came up against some Tharnians who would take vengeance on Mazda by filling him full of spears and arrows on the spot.

In fact, now seemed the best time. This neuter was weakly armed and comparatively feeble. He was also likely to know more of what had happened and was happening in Tharn. Blade looked at the neuter again.

The neuter had been growing increasingly uneasy as Blade stood silent and motionless thinking over his next move. Now he called out almost plaintively, "How is it that you know all those things? You are no neuter, for you have a Lordsman's body-or a Pethcine's. Yet you cannot be either, for you are too large for a Pethcine and all the Lordsmen were slain in the great battle with the Pethcines. Other than the Pethcines, the only being who had such as a Lords. man had-" He stopped and his mouth fell open as if there was a heavy weight attached to his lower jaw. His eyes widened until it seemed that the eyeballs were going to fall out of their sockets and drop to the ground.

"Yes," said Blade, nodding. "I am Mazda, HE WHO CAME TO THEY. I came once and did much in Tharn. Now I have come again." He tried to keep his voice low, soothing, and as calm as if he was buying pipe tobacco in a store. He had to fight down the urge to shout "I am Mazda!" until it went rolling away across the plains on the wind.

The neuter raised one skinny, shaking hand and pointed a finger at Blade. His mouth closed enough so that he could get out a few halting words.

"You-Mazda-once again in Tharn-you-"

Then the neuter passed out and fell flat on his face in the grass. Blade stepped over to him with a weary sigh. People in all sorts of dimensions had all sorts of reactions to him. But this was the first time he had ever made his first contact pass out cold.

Blade easily picked up the neuter and carried him into the machine. Then he poured water on the neuter until he woke up, spluttering and snorting in surprise and indignation.

He nearly passed out again when he realized he was inside one of the deadly Looter war machines. But he quickly realized that there could be no danger to him from this. The machine was obviously under the control of Mazda, so it was no longer dangerous to the people. Unless Mazda was returning as an ally of

the Looters? The neuter unmistakably turned pale at the thought, and his lips trembled as he asked Blade.

"You do not return as an ally of the Looters, do you?"

"I do not," said Blade indignantly. "Their ways are evil and destructive." Presumably the Looters were the people whose machines had been demolishing the abandoned city.

"They are," said the neuter. He struggled into a sitting position, but apparently thought better of trying to stand up. "I would make all slave-face in the old way, Mazda. But I hope you will pardon me if I do not. I am not the youngest of the surviving neuters, and this has been a day of shocks and surprises for me."

Blade laughed. "I can well believe it," he said. "What is your name, by the way? I do not think I remember you."

"I am-I was-Krimon, Neuter of the 11th Level. I served in the baby plants. We would have seen little of each other when you were in Tharn the first time. Even if you had seen me, I would not expect Mazda to remember one neuter after so many years have passed. Though Mazda's body seems not to have aged, yet even he can keep only so much in his memory."

The phrase "so many years" struck a jarring note in Blade's ears. Admittedly his first trip to Tharn had been back in the early days of Project Dimension X. But the whole project had only been running for a few years, not "many." Unless the year they had adopted in Tharn was much shorter than Home Dimension's?

"Much has happened to me since I left Tharn, as I told you," said Blade. "But Tharn has been much in my mind during that time." Blade had many years ago become an expert at telling lies-or at least half-truths-with a straight face. "Tell me, Krimon, what has happened in Tharn during those many years? I would know it, and know it before we travel on to meet any more of the people."

With an obvious effort Krimon gathered his scattered and befuddled wits and nodded. "I am honored that Mazda asks me. But I wonder if I am the best to tell him. My work was in the House of Bearing, and it was hard work that left me small time to concern myself with other things. I was never high among the ranks of those who fought the Lesser War or reared your son or--"

"My-son?" Krimon looked blankly at him. Blade realized that he had let out a wordless croak. He swallowed hard and tried again. This time the words came out clearly enough so that Krimon understood them. His face looked slightly less blank as he asked, "You did not know that the Maiduke woman Zulekia was carrying your son when you departed from among us?"

"Yes--I knew. But-I did not know what would happen to it-or her. I knew life would be hard for them both, so I did not want to go away. But--"

"We understand. Zulekia did, and so does your son. He will be happy to welcome you to Tharn."

"He-he is important there?" Blade realized that he was asking his question in a very ungodlike way. He sounded more like a village idiot than a god. But he simply could not force his brain to absorb so many stunning facts at one time. He was facing a situation that he not only had never faced before, but had never in his wildest dreams imagined that he could face.

"Your son is King in Tharn," said Krimon simply. "Certain neuters who knew much of the legends of ancient Tharn said that was the proper title for a man who ruled. Also, the Pethcines already used it. It

was easier to get them to accept your son's rule when he bore a title they knew. But it was not truly easy even then. The Lesser War was a bloody affair. Fortunately your son was a man by then, a mighty warrior. His vengeance upon the Outlaw Pethcines for his mother's death was terrible. They will not-

Blade held up a hand. "Wait a minute." He wanted to shout it out, but didn't. "Zulekia is dead? And my son old enough to be a warrior? How-?"

"Yes, Zulekia, Beloved of Mazda, is dead. She was slain in the Lesser War by the Outlaw Pethcines. A long-delayed vengeance for the Great War. But they gained nothing by it. In fact even more of them died than would otherwise have been the case. Your son-

"My son," said Blade. The idea of his son seemed the only fixed point in a world that was whirling faster and faster around him, threatening at every moment to explode into a thousand fragments. "How old is my son?"

"I do not know how time is reckoned in the worlds where you have traveled," said Krimon. "Our wisest neuters-" He broke off hastily as he saw Blade's face turn dark with impatience. "Your son has wives of his own now, and they have borne him children old enough to run and ride and begin training in weapons."

Blade nodded, keeping his self-control with a considerable effort. "Krimon, how do you measure time in Tharn? Is the chronos still used, or-?"

"Oh no," said the neuter. "It is sometimes cold and wet, at other times hot and dry. We now measure time by a complete cycle of these particular times. Your son-I think he has now lived through twenty-five of these cycles. In fact, I know that for certain, because I was one of those present to watch over his birth, though I have been kept aside from him since. But when it came time for the child of Mazda to be born, none who had knowledge that might keep it and the mother alive were excluded. I-

"Krimon," said Blade quietly. "I would ask you to be silent. If you go on babbling like this, I will pick you up with my own two hands and bounce you off the walls of this cabin until you are quiet."

Krimon showed no sign of fear. Instead he smiled. "Mazda, it is your right to do with me as you choose. But may I ask you not to kill me until after I have eaten some food? It has been a long time since I last ate. I would like to die on a full stomach if I have the choice."

Blade laughed. He was beginning to like Krimon. The neuter might have been only of the 11th Level, but it was obvious that surviving twenty-five years of hard living had sharpened his wits considerably. He wondered what it had done for the others who had survived. Then he thought of his son, his son who ruled in Tharn, and for a moment he could not think of the others.

His son. His son, King in Tharn. The words kept repeating themselves in his mind, over and over, going around and around like the spinning wheels of a car stuck in the mud.

With a great effort he dragged his mind back to reality and looked at Krimon. Suddenly he realized that he also was ferociously hungry. It had been a long day for him, too.

"I think that is an excellent idea, Krimon. I will get us both food and water." Blade rose and went over to the storage compartments.

The emergency rations in the storage compartments were obviously intended for people with raging appetites, robust digestions, and no taste buds at all. For the moment Blade didn't mind. But he couldn't say that he looked forward to the possibility of having to eat this food for several days or weeks. Obviously, neither did Krimon.

However, Blade's mind was not that much on the food. As they ate, Krimon told of what had happened in Tharn over the past twenty-five years. It was a fascinating and occasionally terrifying tale.

"There were sadly few of Tharn left alive when the smoke of Urcit cleared away," said the neuter. "But more than half the people lived; as did more of the Maidukes and bearer maidens than one could have hoped for. But the Lordsmen were all dead-by your plan, I think?"

Blade nodded.

"I thought so. There was also a terrible toll among the neuters. Much knowledge died with them. But at least a few of each level and each skill escaped."

"What about the ceboids?"

"Between the battle and the explosion, all but a handful perished. That handful fled eastward, and we have not seen them since. That was fortunate, as otherwise they would have bred and become so numerous that without the magveils we would have sooner or later faced a terrible war with them."

Blade suspected that Krimon was leaving out a few gory details of what had happened to the ceboids, but did not raise the point. There had never been much love lost between the neuters and the ceboids they ordered about. Besides, Krimon was probably right. The ceboids had been highly fertile but only marginally intelligent.

Blade hoped that the ceboids had not been exterminated, but had managed to flee and flourish. But he also hoped that they had fled a long way and were flourishing somewhere far from Tharn and the people.

Eventually a count of the survivors was made. There were a great many women of the various classes, more than two thousand in all. Most of them were in or approaching their best child-bearing years.

There was an obvious problem facing Tharn. The people would have to produce as many children as possible in as short a time as possible, particularly male children.

But who was to sow the seed for this desperately needed crop of children?

The neuters could advise, teach, do a thousand and one jobs. The younger ones could fight if necessary. But not the wisest of them could beget a single child. Tharn needed men. The dialogue went like this:

Well, there were the Pethcine survivors, but-

Why "but"? They are men, aren't they?

Yes, but-

Are there any other men left?

Perhaps elsewhere on the plateau, in-

Can you promise that we shall find them before all our women are too old to bear children? If we cannot, then there will be nothing but death for our whole people.

But the Pethcines are barbarians!

They are men.

They are savage warriors. We have just fought a terrible war to keep them out of Tharn. Now you ask that they be let in!

That was the old Tharn. It is gone, and nothing can bring it back. We must consider only what is needed to build a new Tharn. What is most needed now is men. The Pethcines are men.

And so the argument ran, on and on and on. Eventually common sense carried the day. The Pethcines might be as horrible as their worst enemies said they were. Their only assets might be their penises and their sperm. But they did have those, and that brought an end to the discussion.

There turned out to be fewer problems than even the optimists had anticipated. Several hundred stunned Pethcine stragglers had been rounded up after the battle. A good many of them were still alive. Offered the opportunity to stay that way in return for stud services, most of them accepted.

Several hundred more Pethcines were rounded up in raids down into the Gorge. This produced more breeding stock. It also left the surviving Pethcines aware that Tharn still stood, however shakily, and could strike at her enemies.

The grand total of Pethcine males gathered together was close to five hundred. By and large they settled in and settled down peacefully. Their own people were broken and without a future. In Tharn they could become the ancestors of a new, strong, proud people, and have great pleasure doing it. The women of Tharn were far more beautiful than their own. It also helped that the average woman of Tharn was a head taller and every bit as strong as the average Pethcine male. Wife-beaters got short shrift, rapists got even shorter shrift, and those offenders who survived seldom repeated their offenses.

Ensuring the supply of babies was the first problem that had to be solved, but far from the last. Food (other than mani), shelter, domestic animals, weapons-all had to be found or made. Arrangements had to be made for bearing and raising the hoped-for swarms of babies. The list went on and on.

There were hard grim years in Tharn, too many of them. But the new people survived. Occasionally they survived by the skin of their teeth, as when the newly discovered grain crop failed and nearly half the year's babies starved to death because there was no milk for them, either human or animal. But they survived, and that was enough of a miracle for Blade.

"What is a miracle?" asked Krimon.

"Something-something that it seems really couldn't have happened, when you think it over," said Blade, smiling.

Krimon nodded. "That is a good way of saying it. But the people live, there is no doubt of that."

"They are all-'the people'-now?"

"Yes. It seemed the best name, when we had all become one and few could even remember what they were before the coming of Mazda."

"You were wise."

Much of the mating and child-rearing had been communal at first, to save as much labor as possible for building, farming, herding, fighting, and everything else that had to be done. Over time, some women came to prefer to bear the children of one man rather than another. A man came to prefer seeing his children born to some women more than to others. As the struggle for survival became less desperate, families of one man and three or four women slowly emerged. One woman would care for the half-dozen children while the others worked.

It was not polygamy, for the man was far from supreme. It was not really anything for which there was a handy name. But that was not important. The important thing was that it worked.

There was also Zulekia, Beloved of Mazda, and her son. There was no doubt that the child was Mazda's. Too many people knew of Mazda's coi with his Beloved. From the moment when it was known that she was carrying Blade's child, Zulekia was a woman set apart.

She had the best of care and feeding when her time came.

She alone of all the women was exempted from bearing any more children. She had fulfilled her destiny in bearing the child of Mazda. She was much in demand to honor other women's birthings with her presence, but that was all.

The son was called Rikard, and he was so strong and healthy that he might have survived and flourished even without all the care he had. But it was accepted from the first that when he reached manhood he would be King in Tharn, for who would dare to give orders to the son of Mazda?

It was also obvious that he would have his choice of any and all the women of the people. There was no woman who would turn down a chance to bear a child descended from Mazda and his Beloved.

Rikard's oldest children were just past their second birthday when the Lesser War came upon Tharn.

"More of the Pethcines survived than we thought," said Krimon. "They fled deeper into the Gorge and bred sons who grew to be warriors filled with a desire for vengeance. They did not hope to conquer us this time. But they did hope to destroy us, and they did not care if they all died in doing so."

"They must have been terrible enemies."

"They were. And-though it shames me to remember it-many of us had doubts about those Pethcine men we had taken to be the fathers of the new people. Where would their loyalties lie? We could not help wondering."

But those who had once been Pethcines were now of the people. They could not turn against their children and the women who were the mothers of those children. They marched out against the attackers. From that moment there was truly one people in Tharn, and the attackers didn't have a chance.

"It was soon clear that we would win, and we did not care to do more than drive the enemy back into the Gorge. But then their raiders struck deep into Tharn, and among our dead was Zulekia, your

Beloved."

Gentle Zulekia, dead in war with the Pethcines. The fate she had once escaped had finally caught up with her. "May she rest in peace," said Blade, half to himself.

"After that we did not willingly leave a Pethcine alive," said Krimon. "We drove them from the plateau. We marched down into the Gorge and rooted them out of every cave and valley there, like a farmer rooting out weeds from his grainfields. What we could not kill we brought home. What we could not bring home we burned where it was, or threw it off high cliffs. If there are enough Pethcines left to make a good drinking party, it is not our fault. We have explored through the Gorge and out to a quarter of a year's travel beyond it without finding any of them."

"I see," said Blade. It was not a pretty story, but he couldn't see any reason to mourn for the Pethcines. They had tried to destroy the best hope for human civilization in this dimension, and instead they had been destroyed. It was rough but undeniable justice.

"The Lesser War made us truly one people, and Rikard the Son of Mazda became King at the time of the harvest that year. We moved forward swiftly from that time, with good crops, the children growing up and beginning to have children of their own and do much work, and so on. Among the children the men and women began to pair off and raise their families and work their fields. Until two years ago it seemed that the worst was over. But then-came-the Looters." Krimon's head wobbled on his skinny neck and sank down on his chest.

"What about the Looters?" asked Blade sharply. Krimon was silent. Blade reached over and shook the neuter. His eyes flickered open briefly, then closed again. Then he toppled over on one side with a thud. A moment later Blade heard a rasping snore. Krimon was sound asleep!

Well, it was hard to blame him. It had been a long and eventful day for the neuter, who was no longer young. Blade nodded, fought back an enormous yawn, and realized that the day's events had taken a good deal out of him too. Perhaps sleep was the best thing for both of them. He wished he could set some kind of alarm, but he wasn't sure how to do it. If the Looters came-

The Looters could wait until tomorrow. Blade laid his head down on the floor and was asleep in less than a minute.

Chapter 11

Blade had left the screens on when he fell asleep, and the first golden blaze of the sun creeping over the horizon woke him. A drink of water cleared his head, and he awoke the sleeping Krimon. The neuter awoke very slowly, with many mutterings and yelps of pain as aching muscles complained.

Blade was cheerfully unsympathetic. "Come on, my friend. We have another long day ahead of us. Breakfast first, and while we eat you will tell me of the Looters. Then we fly west until we come to the new homes of the people."

Krimon looked uneasy at the last idea. "That-it will spread fear among the farms and villages, Mazda. They will not know that it is Mazda in the machine. They will see only the Looter war machine and fear it. Is that the way you wish to come again to Tharn?"

"I was planning to fly directly to my son's home if the machine will carry us that far. How far is that?"

"At least five days on a fast horse."

That worked out to at least two hundred and fifty miles. "Krimon, that is much too far to walk if we want to get there soon. But I will listen to what you say of the Looters, and say nothing. If when you are through I am satisfied that I should indeed not come to Tharn in the Looter machine, we will get out and start walking. But I am very stubborn, as you have no doubt heard."

"Indeed, it is always said of Mazda that he had a will harder than the hardest jewels. Very well, I will tell you what we know of the Looters."

Urcit had been the last city of Tharn, the one where everyone had retreated by the time Blade arrived. But it was not always the only one. Scattered across the vast plain stretching half a year's ride toward the east were a score or more of other cities.

But even with the power, the magveils that controlled the weather and let the mani grow could not be spread over more than a tiny fraction of the great plain. Urcit was the fairest of all the cities of Tharn, and the soil around it the most fertile. There was plenty of room and plenty of mani there for the dwindling remnants of a once-proud people. So they retreated to Urcit and the other cities drifted off into the realms of legend. Even Sutha, the wise First Neuter who had been Blade's principal ally, had not considered them important enough to mention.

But the legends survived. Now they drew explorers eastward across the plain, seeking out the substance of the legends. Two years ago the first explorers of the people reached the distant cities. But at almost the same time, so did the Looters.

Who were the Looters, and where did they come from? They seemed to come from nowhere and to go back there when they had finished their deadly work. One woman said she had seen their war machines appear out of thin air, with a terrible sound and a blast of air that knocked her down. But she went mad afterwards. Did Mazda think she spoke the truth?

Blade couldn't say for certain. But he could wonder. Teleportation? Possibly. Or possibly-possibly even interdimensional travel. Had the Looters discovered it on their own?

There was no evidence at all that the Looters were even living creatures. No one in Tharn had ever seen anything except the terrible machines.

"Or at least nobody has seen a living Looter and lived to tell about it."

"Have any tried?"

"Quite a few of our bravest young men and women have tried. None have succeeded, nor have any come back from the attempts." Krimon's face was grim at the memory.

But the machines were there, and in terrible strength. There were the war machines, like the one Blade had captured. All of them had the fear-making sound, the mindnumbing light, and the deadly purple ray. There were also the tentacles, to tear captives limb from limb-or kill them in ways far slower and more agonizing.

"That means there must be living creatures inside the war machines at least some of the time," said Blade. "Only living creatures take pleasure from the pain they can inflict on other living creatures. Machines do not have that bad habit."

Krimon was able to describe for Blade the effects of the purple ray. Blade concluded that the ray somehow burst every blood vessel in a victim's body. The victim dropped on the spot, dead almost before he hit the ground.

Unfortunately Krimon's account didn't tell Blade anything about his own theory that the machines could distinguish living from nonliving matter. He decided against raising the question now. Why get the poor neuter's hopes up before giving the theory the thorough testing it would need anyway?

The Looter war machines were bad enough. But there were also the great boxlike machines that fired the rockets. The rockets were sometimes used as weapons, but not often. Mostly the big machines used a destructive red ray.

"Could it possibly be that the Looters do not have very many of the rockets?" asked Blade.

Krimon shrugged. "I do not know. I do not think anyone else does either." It was obvious to Blade that the neuter had never considered the possibility of the Looters having any weaknesses at all. Morale in Tharn seemed to be down lower than a snake's belly. He was going to have some work to do there.

However, being a god was a real asset when it came to getting people to believe in you.

There were the big box machines. They seemed to be in command. There were other kinds of boxlike machines that carried cutting rays, or large metal claws that scooped things up. Finally there were machines that were nothing more than enormous platforms, the size of a village square, with a small cabin in one corner. They carried away the machinery, the stone, the metalwork that the Looters stripped from the cities they attacked.

The Looters had started far to the east of the city where Blade saw them at work. So far they had destroyed five Tharnian cities.

"When the Looters have finished taking from a city everything they can use, they destroy it the way the release of the power destroyed Urcit. A terrible ball of flame rises up, and then a great cloud of smoke soars into the sky, spreading out at the top."

The mushroom cloud of an atomic explosion. It was hardly surprising that the Looters had the atomic bomb, considering everything else they had.

"And they are moving toward the settled lands of Tharn, Mazda. They know of our existence. Sooner or later they will fly all the way to the settled lands. Their rays will strike, people will die horribly in the metal arms, and then the ball of flame will sweep away what is left. We cannot prevent their coming, and we cannot survive it either."

Definitely morale in Tharn was down. With good reason, Blade had to admit. To have the Looters come tramping along, murderous, destructive, and utterly mysterious, just when things had started to improve for the people-it would have been demoralizing to any people.

Most of the knowledge that would have helped fight the Looters had been gone for centuries even before Blade arrived. After the destruction of Urcit, the surviving neuters were too busy learning what they needed to save the survivors to have time for anything else.

It looked as if the job of organizing Tharn for battle against the Looters was going to be largely in the

hands of Richard Blade.

His hands and his son's, he reminded himself. He was not only father to the people, but father to their King. He had found strange allies in stranger dimensions, but he had never dreamed that he would find one sprung from his own loins.

He shook his head and set his thoughts in order. "Well, Krimon, I have listened as I promised. You have made many things clear. I now say that we must fly to the house of King Rikard, as fast as the machine can take us. We must stop the Looters soon. Who knows what machines and what knowledge they are taking from you in the cities they loot? And those who fear that they will someday soon march upon the people are correct. Beings like the Looters will kill and destroy for the sheer love of killing and destroying, unless they are stopped. For all their science they are like the Pethcines of the Lesser War."

"But this machine-"

"This machine is now a terrible weapon for us against its masters. We shall take it to King Rikard, and I and the wisest of the people shall study it. We shall find how it may be destroyed. And then we shall march out against the Looters, and destroy the machines one by one until there are no more of them and Tharn is saved."

Krimon looked impressed. Blade realized he must have made the road ahead sound easy. He sighed.

He very much wished it were as easy as he had made it sound.

Chapter 12

As soon as they finished breakfast, Blade lifted the machine into the air and headed west. Krimon turned pale as he saw the ground drop away beneath them. His prominent knuckles stood out as his hands clenched into fists. But he said nothing, and slowly relaxed as he saw that the war machine would neither fall down nor explode nor run away with them into the empty sky.

Blade stayed low. He had no idea how much of the machine's power supply he had used up. He didn't want to plunge hundreds of feet to the ground if the lift-field suddenly died.

The plain rolled past beneath them, mile after mile of grass and scrawny shrubs and gentle swells and depressions in the ground. Two hours after starting out Blade saw a herd of wild horses on the horizon. When he was certain that there were no Tharnians anywhere around, he sent the machine sweeping in toward the herd. It was an unpleasant job, but it had to be done. He had to test out the purple ray's effects on a live target and see them with his own eyes. Yet he could not reasonably ask the people to sacrifice any of their animals.

The horses began to scatter as the machine swept toward them. Blade activated the controls for the purple ray, but did not unlock and swing the turret. From the air and against a moving target it was easier to aim the whole machine. He sighted in on one young stallion running a little apart from the herd, and held him in the cross-hairs as Krimon watched, pale and wide-eyed.

Two hundred feet. A hundred and fifty. A hundred. Get in close-beam weapons dissipate energy at long ranges. Fifty feet away, and right behind the poor beast. Blade swallowed, and pressed the firing button.

The whole inside of the machine filled with a purple glare. Krimon let out a yell of fright, started so violently that he nearly fell to the floor, and clapped both hands over his eyes. Blade watched the purple

ray leap out and envelop the horse. Then it was his turn to let out a yell.

He had made a perfect shot. But the horse was still alive, still on its feet, still galloping like the wind. For all the harm Blade had done the horse, he might as well have hit it with a ping-pong ball!

"Krimon!" he snapped. "Watch what happens when I shoot at the horse this time!"

The neuter forced himself to watch the screen as Blade swung the machine in a wide circle around the horse and swooped to the attack a second time. Again purple light and purple death struck out. Again the horse galloped across the plain without even breaking stride.

Krimon's eyes widened until they seemed to fill his entire face.

"What-that-it cannot be!" he stammered.

"But it looks like it is," said Blade shortly. "We'll try a third time. If that damned horse keeps running after that "

It did.

Krimon shook his head. "Never has the purple ray failed to bring death wherever it strikes. Mazda, have you-done something-to alter this machine?"

Blade shook his head. "I don't yet know enough about this machine and its weapons to try." Perhaps it wasn't wise for a god to admit that he didn't know everything. But the people would find out sooner or later that on some things Mazda was as much in the dark as they were.

Blade went on. "I wanted to see with my own eyes how the purple ray killed. But it did not kill. This surprised me. I would like to know why."

"So, I think, would the people," said Krimon. His voice still shook slightly, but there was a wry grin on his thin face that told Blade the neuter had recovered his nerve. Blade headed the machine west again. When he had it back to the desired course and speed he turned to Krimon.

"I thought that the machine would not strike down living creatures who carried nothing that was not once also living because it had orders not to. But I begin to wonder if the purple ray cannot strike down such a living creature even when the machine has orders to fire. We must learn more about this."

"We certainly must," said Krimon briskly. "This is a weakness of the Looters. Until now we in Tharn did not believe they had any weaknesses. We would have laughed at anyone who told us we might be wrong. But now Mazda has shown us that our enemy has a weakness. We can learn ways to take advantage of that weakness and fight the Looters. With Mazda to show us the way-"

Blade shook his head. "Though I am Mazda, I cannot show you the whole way. You must discover much of it for yourselves. All that is learned the people must remember. If I die"-Krimon shuddered--"or must go away again before my work is done, the fight against the Looters must go on until victory."

"It shall be done as Mazda wishes," said Krimon solemnly.

Blade knew it would be. In this dimension people would willingly follow his orders. But however willing the people might be, could he give the right orders? Could he teach them everything they needed to

know-particularly when he didn't know half of it himself?

They spotted their first herdsmen of the people just before noon. Blade made no effort to follow either the herd or the herdsmen as they scattered wildly in all directions.

Krimon smiled thinly. "They will be very surprised when they ride into the villages and learn that the machine was carrying Mazda."

"They will," said Blade. Provided, he thought, this machine carries us as far as we want to go. If it ran out of power suddenly, they wouldn't be able to test out the machine's weaknesses and demonstrate them to the people. Also, the two of them would be practically defenseless. They might not live long enough to tell anyone that here was Mazda, returned to Tharn after a whole generation!

Less than half an hour later they passed to the north of a small village, sprawling along the bank of a small stream tinged dark red.

Krimon's eyes noted on the screen the village's streets suddenly exploding into activity as people and animals ran in all directions. His mouth hardened into a thin line.

"It will take days to calm the people after this," he said with a sigh.

"Would you rather have them panic-stricken now, or dead when the Looters move in sooner or later?"

"Put that way, there is no choice," said Krimon wearily. He was silent for a moment, then pointed. "The New City of the People, where King Rikard has his house, is off that way." His hand pointed roughly north-northwest.

"How far is it?"

"Three days on horseback from Red Water, the village we just passed."

"At this speed we should be there in less than two hours."

They passed over more herds. Then they passed over villages surrounded by checkerboard fields of growing crops. Then larger villages, with smoke spiraling up from shops and forges, and roads winding away toward the horizon. Each time they saw the people explode into frantic activity as they saw the Looter machine bearing down on them. Each time they were past and gone too fast to see what happened. Krimon's face grew more strained each time. It was obvious that he was fighting a battle inside himself.

Then suddenly the horizon turned gray white with mountains of billowing clouds. Krimon sat up straighter.

"Clouds over the Gorge, Mazda." With a finger that trembled slightly, he pointed at the screens. "There-on the Plain of War. That is where we built the New City of the People."

Blade had already seen the little cluster of buildings inside its earthen wall, and the machine was curving toward it as Krimon spoke. Blade could not keep his mouth from growing dry with excitement, or sweat from breaking out on his forehead. In a few minutes he would step forth among people who knew him. Even more important, he would step forth as Mazda, the godlike being who had for better or worse made these people what they were now. And above all, he would see his son.

Blade brought the war machine down so low that a thrown rock or even a high-flying chicken could have hit it. He slowed until they were moving barely faster than a strong man could walk. On the screens he noticed that some of the people who had dashed off in panic at first were slowing down and stopping to look back. This was a Looter machine, but it was behaving like none they had ever seen or heard of! Curiosity was beginning to compete with their fear.

The New City of the People hardly deserved its grand name. It was only another village, larger than any Blade had seen so far, but holding at most five hundred to a thousand people. It was surrounded by a sod and gravel wall about eight feet high. Two more cross-walls divided its interior into three sections.

"The center part holds the House of the King," said Krimon, pointing. "He-you're not going to land right in the King's yard?"

"Why not?"

The war machine floated in over the walls so low that the sentries on top had to jump for their lives to keep from being knocked off. Blade slipped in over the sod roof of the King's House, stopped in midair directly above the center of the courtyard, and settled down with a thump on the ground.

Several spears and a dozen or so arrows promptly flew at the machine and bounced off with clangs and clatters. Krimon gasped.

"They are shooting at us, Mazda."

"Of course they're shooting at us!" said Blade. "All at once we're an easy target. They're thinking that perhaps if they get their shots in first, they can-"

"But we're friendly!"

"I know it. You know it. But they don't know it yet. To them we're just another Looter machine, and it takes real guts for them to do what they're doing. Let's sit quiet and wait. Sooner or later they'll realize we're different."

Krimon sighed. "Mazda has spoken." His tone of voice indicated he rather wished Mazda hadn't.

An occasional spear or arrow banged off the machine's armor at intervals for about five more minutes. Blade spent the time getting himself a drink of water and watching the screens. He decided against putting on any clothes. Mazda had come naked the first time; he would return naked.

Time passed. One by one people reappeared. As cautiously as mice, they peered out of the windows and doors, crept out to lurk behind bales of grain, flattened themselves on the roof. Blade noticed that in front of the King's House was a pile of teksin blocks, and on top of the pile a short flagpole with a banner. The banner was dark green, and bore a flaming sword in gold-the huge Pethcine sword Blade had carried in the Great War and taken back to England with him.

Finally Blade stood up and went to the hatch. "Krimon, I think we've got our audience. Will you follow me and speak for me?"

Krimon bowed and replied formally. "I will speak for Mazda."

"Good." Blade pressed the button to open the hatch. The heavy steel disk swung open. He clambered through the opening onto the rear platform, then drew himself up to his full height. Krimon followed him.

A buzz of voices rose as Blade appeared on the platform. It rose higher as Krimon appeared. Then the neuter took a deep breath and somehow managed to come out with a full shout, a shout that echoed around the courtyard.

"Behold, oh people. Behold-Mazda has returned to us!"

Silence fell as suddenly and completely as if all the watchers had dropped dead on the spot. Blade raised both hands over his head and turned from left to right through a half-circle, letting everyone get a good look at him. The silence continued.

Then brief whispers sounded off to the right. After them came soft, slow footsteps. In one of the low, dark doorways a woman appeared. She was tall and gray-haired, and still had a good deal of what must have once been great beauty. She carried a long teksin knife in one hand. Blade recognized it as one of the knives used to hamstring the horses of the Pethcine chariots in the Great War.

The woman approached Blade, knife held in front of her with the grip of an experienced knife-fighter. She moved slowly and carefully, her eyes roaming searchingly up and down Blade's body.

"You call this one Mazda, Krimon?" she said.

"I am Mazda," said Blade. He spoke quietly. Any raising of his voice might seem like blustering and arouse more suspicion.

The woman brought the point of the knife close to Blade's genitals. Her wide gray eyes met his, watching for a reaction. Blade stared back, keeping his face more expressionless and calmer than he felt inside.

"It seems he is no neuter with false manhood pasted on," said the woman at last.

"Did ever a neuter grow as he has?" said Krimon coolly, with a gesture that took in all of Blade's massive physique.

"Did ever friend of the people appear in a Looter war machine?" asked the woman.

"Is Mazda bound by what common men may or may not do?" replied Krimon. He was beginning to sound annoyed.

Blade kept his mouth shut and his face still expressionless. He was beginning to feel exactly the same way as the neuter. But Krimon had told him that he might find the people not quite ready to fall down and worship someone stepping out of a Looter machine. He should-he would-keep calm, until those who watched from the shadows made up their own minds. Even for those who had seen him the first time in Tharn it had been twenty-five years. Memories fade.

"He is not so bound," said the woman grudgingly.

"Then do not doubt Mazda because he comes in a machine that he has taken from the Looters, a machine whose secrets he has learned." That brought the woman's head up with a jerk and a gasp.

"He-"

Someone moved in the shadows of a doorway. Then a man stepped out into the light. A man standing well over six feet tall, with an athlete's build and muscles, red gold hair that flamed in the sun-and a face out of which Blade's own image stared at him.

The man wore a green tunic with a flaming golden sword embroidered on the chest, and two metal swords hung from a wide leather belt at his waist. On his feet-but Blade found that he could no longer notice such details. In his mind a voice was sounding.

This is my son.

The voice built to a roar. Blade opened his mouth and shouted out:

"This is my son! This is my son, borne by Zulekia beloved of Mazda, King of the People!"

The tall young man flung his long arms wide and tossed his massive head, making the long red-gold hair-Zulekia's hair-swirl about like a halo. Then he drew both swords, cast them on the ground in front of him, and knelt to Blade. "This is Mazda. This is my father, returned to his people. Hail father! Hail Mazda!"

Chapter 13

Pandemonium followed.

People jumped down into the courtyard from the roof. They swarmed out of the doors and climbed out of all the windows. They ran into the courtyard from outside the house. There were hundreds of them, men, women, and children.

Everybody was waving something. All were jumping up and down and shouting, "Mazda, Mazda, Mazda!" with all the breath in their bodies. The roar of the crowd half-deafened Blade. His ears could pick up the cry spreading out beyond the King's House, out into the streets, through the city. No doubt it would go on out into the country, until the houses were too far apart for a shout to carry from one to another. Then people would run as fast as they could to their neighbors, bringing word that Mazda had come again to Tharn.

It was an awesome feeling. But it was not quite equal to the feeling of looking into the face of his son. Nothing could be quite equal to that.

Blade stepped down from the platform to the ground-and immediately rose into the air again. People swarmed forward, reaching out for him, grasping him, hoisting him up. He was tossed about wildly until he felt his joints protesting. He realized that he was in real danger of being torn apart or trampled underfoot by this mob of hysterical worshipers of Mazda.

King Rikard's voice boomed out above the crowd roar.

"Stop! Cease! Stand back and stand away from Mazda! This is not the way the people do him honor!"

Then the king plunged forward into the crowd, clearing a path toward Blade. Those the king's massive hands didn't grab and pull aside scrambled out of his way on their own. After the king came half a dozen armed fighters, including the gray-haired woman. They kept the path open with shouts and glares and brandished weapons.

Blade finally felt solid ground under his feet again. He took a deep breath and stepped forward to embrace his son. Rikard's own arms went around his father. They stood there for a moment in silence that said more than either of them could have said with words.

Blade was glad he did not have to speak. He was closer to being completely overpowered by his emotions than he had ever been in his life.

Seeing father and son embracing set off the crowd again. For several minutes everyone in the courtyard and the house shouted themselves hoarse even more furiously than before. Blade and his son could not have made themselves heard if they had wanted to.

The crowd finally ran out of breath. King Rikard stepped back, looked Blade up and down, and slapped him on the shoulder, as one warrior chief to another.

"Father, come. We have much to say and we have no hope of saying any of it out here."

He turned toward the door into the King's House. Blade followed, Krimon fell into step behind him, and the guards brought up the rear.

The inner chambers of the King's House were as cramped, dark, and stuffy as the chambers of any other building made of turf, stone, and hides. But they were much cleaner and less smelly. The people of Tharn might have to live for now in barbarians' houses, but their memories of what had been and their hopes of what might be again kept them from becoming barbarians themselves.

Blade sat on a bench of teksin slabs covered with furs, and was presented with a large bronze cup of strong beer. King Rikard swept a glance around the room, and all the guards except the gray-haired woman vanished like puffs of smoke. Krimon turned as if to follow them, but Rikard motioned him to a seat.

"No, Krimon, you stay. You have seen and heard the most since Mazda returned. Your advice is needed. Yours too, Anyara," he added, pointing at the woman.

"Of all the people Anyara was the one who did most to raise me, next to my mother Zulekia. She has proved herself strong in war and wise in council as well. I owe her much, and Tharn owes her more, over many years." Anyara bowed her head with sober dignity at the praise.

Rikard undid his belt, poured himself beer from another jug, and sat down on a pile of furs in one corner. He drank deeply, then grinned. "By law and custom I should call in the whole Council of the People to listen and speak out. I suspect they would do more speaking out than listening if I did." The grin faded. "But there is nothing in law or custom to say what shall be done on the day of Mazda's return. I think we shall listen to what Mazda has to say first."

Blade grinned. His son obviously had some of his own shrewdness. "I do not think so, either. But I will ask you to stop calling me Mazda, at least when we are alone. It makes me feel like an image set up in a temple, to be worshiped faithfully but not really much good to anybody."

"All right, Maz-father," said the king, smiling. The smile made him look quite a bit younger than his twenty-five years. The smile faded. "Krimon spoke of your having captured the Looter war machine and learned its secrets. I-I won't ask if this was true. I can't imagine you lying, at least not to the people. But tell us more. Tell us-have you found some way we can defeat the Looters? Is there any hope for us?"

"I honestly do not know," said Blade. "I myself need to learn much more. But let me tell you what I have learned already." He poured himself more beer.

"To start with, I believe there is a chance to make the purple ray of the war machines harmless. If we face the Looters wearing only things that once lived-wood, teksin, leather, cloth-the ray may not kill. I have seen things that make me believe this is so. But I cannot yet be sure. We must test this further."

King Rikard's eyes widened. Blade knew he now had his son's full attention, and would not lose it.

Hours passed. So did much more beer and a large meal of roast meat and steamed porridge. The light that crept in around the leather curtains in the window began to fade and turn red. Blade went on talking, answering his son's questions and getting answers to some of his own.

Eventually darkness came down. King Rikard rose and stretched out his long muscular arms until his hands seemed ready to punch through the ceiling.

"Father, I know that you have more to say. But in a single day I can only hear so much of things that I can hardly believe. You do understand?" Blade nodded. "Then we can finish tomorrow. And after we have finished, will you speak to the whole council? They must all hear what you have learned, and decide what must be done."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Father, it is obvious to me. I know it will be just as obvious to the council when they have heard it. But they must hear it. Otherwise it will be said in Tharn that the return of Mazda is making the king return to the old ways of ruling. None wish that." Anyara and Krimon nodded.

Blade grinned again. "I see you haven't much to learn in statecraft."

"Thank you, father. Now-there will be a chamber ready for you in a few minutes. Would you care to do us the honor of taking one of the women of the King's House to you this night?"

Blade hadn't expected this. Handing a woman over to a male guest for his amusement was a custom he hadn't expected to find among the people, who were trying so hard not to be barbarians. Had his son really become so much the barbarian warrior chieftain as that?

Except-

Blade shot a look at Anyara. She was nodding enthusiastically, and so was Krimon. There was something definitely odd here.

"What does the woman have to say in this?"

Anyara and King Rikard both laughed out loud. "I see. You think we have gone back to the habits of the Pethcines, handing our women about as though they were swords or boots. It is not so. Even if I wanted to make it so, the first seven women I met would claw out my eyes and cut off my manhood with dull knives if I tried.

"But the seed of Mazda is precious and powerful. Many women of the people who are of an age to bear children would most gladly take that seed into themselves, in the hope of bearing a child of Mazda. Girl

or boy, they would be happy with either. They know it will be a strong child. We need strong children, father. We need all the strong children we can get, so that in time we will have all the strong men and women we need."

"Even children of the seed of Mazda?" said Blade.

"I do not understand, father. Is-is there something wrong with your seed? Certainly I show no signs of it if there is."

Blade laughed. "You do not. But consider that you are King in Tharn because you are the only one sprung from the seed of Mazda. What will happen to you when there are a dozen or a score of such?"

"Or even hundreds. Why not be hopeful?" put in Anyara.

King Rikard shook his head. "It will be good for Tharn, even so. I am indeed the first. I am the son begotten from the Beloved Zulekia by Mazda during his first appearance. I am set apart from all others by this, and I always will be set apart. Also, I have already ruled a good many years. With luck and long life I will have ruled many years more before the first of your new children is old enough to bear a child or swing a sword. I cannot see what they can do before then that I need fear. What they do after that is far in the future. We have things much closer at hand to worry about."

Rikard rose. "It grows late." He reached out and clasped Blade firmly by one hand and the other shoulder. "It is time for sleep. Anyara will show you to your chamber, then leave you. Krimon, there will be a chamber in this house for you also." Rikard strode out, the neuter following him. Blade rose and followed the woman.

Blade's chamber was low and even more cramped than King Rikard's meeting hall. Smoke from the grease-soaked taper that was the only light hung in the air. The floor was covered with hide mattresses filled with straw and a spectacular array of furs. On the wall hung a magnificently jeweled set of armor and weapons, obviously from old Urcit.

Blade shook his head. It was going to take some getting used to, this mixture of crude living conditions, relics of one civilization, and hopes for another one. Here in Tharn it was hard not to live in three worlds at once.

The leather curtain swung aside and a young woman entered. She too was a mixture. She wore baggy trousers and a shapeless tunic of leather, and her feet were bare. But she was freshly scrubbed, and her dark hair flowed clean and glossy down her back.

The Pethcine blood in her showed in the olive complexion, the black hair, the slight tilt to her eyes. But she had a massive, almost jutting nose, plump round cheeks tanned from many hours in the sun and the wind, and an even rounder bosom and hips that showed through her baggy garments. Around her hips was a rawhide belt, and from it hung a sheathed dagger. She moved with a sturdy grace, her stride long and free, her pose showing no sign of submission or fear.

She stopped as she saw Blade.

"So you are Mazda." Her voice was low and respectful, but she did not sound at all awestruck at being in Mazda's presence.

"I am Mazda," said Blade.

"Do you find me fit and pleasing for coi, Mazda?" Again her voice was respectful, but not submissive. She looked at Blade as she spoke, as if defying him to say that she was not fit and pleasing.

"I think you are both fit and pleasing," said Blade. She certainly seemed to be. Blade had been longer than he liked without a woman, but he hadn't lowered his standards. He never did, unless there was a sword pointed at his throat or some equally persuasive argument in favor of bedding a woman he would normally have ignored.

Blade rose, went over to the woman, and took her in his arms. She was taller than he had realized, at least five feet six. After a moment's hesitation her own arms went around him, and her hands began stroking the small of his back.

"What is your name?"

"Chara," she said softly. "My father was-" Blade bent down and kissed her before she could finish. For a moment her lips were taut under his, then flowered open, warm, wet, and clinging. Her arms tightened around him. He reached down and grasped her tightly by the hips, pulling her hard against him. He was erect now, and her eyes flickered open as she felt his maleness-Mazda's maleness-thrusting up against her.

"It is-I must-" she murmured, gently disentangling herself from him. She unbuckled her belt and let it slide to the floor. Then swiftly she reached down and drew her tunic over her head. She wore nothing under it. Her skin had a coppery glint to it in the faint lamplight, and her full breasts swayed gently as she moved. Her nipples were large and dark, and Blade could see that they had already sprouted into hard little points. He reached out and stroked those points with thumb and forefinger. Chara swallowed hard several times and squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

Her fingers fumbled at the cords of her trousers. Eagerness was pushing her on, desire was distracting her and making her clumsy. Finally she snapped the last cord and hastily shoved her trousers down her hips. They wadded around her ankles; she stepped free and kicked them aside. Naked, open, her breath coming fast, she came toward Blade.

She knelt before him, highlights chasing each other up and down her broad straight back as it curved down. She unknotted Blade's loincloth and threw it aside. Then her head swooped down on his manhood like a falcon on its prey. Warm, wet lips closed around him, swallowed him up, began to slide up and down on him.

Blade gasped, arching his back, knotted his jaw and throat muscles. Chara was no expert at this, but she was enthusiastic. Her enthusiasm was doing everything that skill could have done.

He reached down and locked his hands in her hair, then raised her head. Those maddening lips slid up and away, and Chara's raised half-glazed eyes stared at him.

"Enough," he said firmly. He let go of her hair and raised her to a standing position. She pressed against him. He could feel the triangle of fine, straight hair between her thighs already damp and rapidly getting damper.

He curled an arm around her, cupping one breast and stroking the nipple, then led her toward his sleeping couch. She seemed almost too eager to take him into herself to be willing to walk that far.

Eventually he lowered her onto the furs. Her body arched as she lay down, her eyes closed, and her hips thrust up and out toward him. He did not have far to go to slide into her.

She was warm and wet and ready, so ready that her body twisted and writhed almost at once. Blade let the spasm pass, then continued his own thrusts. He drove in faster, drove in deeper, locked his hands around her to pull himself all the way into her.

Again she bucked and thrashed and heaved back and forth, tightening her legs about his hips in a bone-cracking hold as ecstasy tore through her. Blade felt himself on the edge, kept on thrusting, felt himself reaching the edge, arched his body forward until his lips were brushing Chara's nipples. He went over the edge. Now it was his turn to heave and thrash and gasp as he poured himself, poured the seed of Mazda, into the woman who was so ready and willing to receive it.

A desire to relax struck Blade all over. His head sagged down to pillow itself between Chara's full breasts. He lay there for a moment, until he realized that his weight must be flattening the woman under him into the furs. Slowly he rolled off, and lay on his back beside her.

A moment later her eyes flickered open, and she sighed long and deeply. "Mazda," she murmured. "I have taken into me the seed of Mazda." For the first time there was a note of awe in her voice.

It passed quickly. She raised herself on one elbow and looked Blade up and down. "You are not as large as the tales I heard as a child made you out to be."

"No doubt." Blade laughed. "I imagine that I grew a bit every time my adventures were retold, until people began to think of me as ten feet tall."

Chara nodded. "You did. When the lot fell on me to be the first one to come to your bed, I was frightened for a moment. You were a god in my mind, but also a monster. Then I realized that you could not have been a monster, for I had seen Zulekia, your Beloved, and she was as other women are. If she had not suffered, then I would not."

"I don't think you suffered at all, Chara," said Blade. "And neither did I."

"No," she said, smiling and resting her head on his chest. "No," she repeated, sleepily, her eyes flickering several times and finally falling shut. "No," she murmured, as her breathing grew regular and gentle.

After a while Blade reached down and pulled the furs over both of them. Then he too drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 14

Several days and several women later, Blade appeared before the Council of the People. It took time for King Rikard to summon the members of the council from far and wide across Tharn.

King Rikard also had to call out a good part of the army to guard the King's House from people who wanted to see and hear and touch Mazda. The people accepted being shut out. But few of them went home. Every house in the New City was crammed to the roof, while an improvised city of tents and lean-tos sprang up outside the walls to shelter those who could not be accommodated inside.

Anyara threw up her hands in disgust at the spectacle. "The herds will go untended and un milked, the weeds unpulled, the babies unbathed, and the roofs unpatched all over Tharn as people wait for Mazda

to perform miracles."

"They're going to have to wait a long time," said Blade. "As I have said-I must learn more, and then teach the people. Even then we may not know enough to fight the Looters."

"We know this," said the king. "It is still good that you have returned to Tharn."

"It will be far better when people get used to your being among us and get back to work," said Anyara, with a sour expression on her face.

"Anyara keeps her mind on the plain, ordinary things," said the king with a smile.

"On the essential things, you mean," the woman corrected him.

"True. And Tharn owes you much for that."

Eventually the council gathered and Blade went before it. He spoke briefly of what he had done and where he had been since he left Tharn. Then he went on to describe his experiences since his return.

This took him longer than he had intended. Chara had not been in awe of him, but the councilors certainly were. Most of them were old enough to remember his first appearance. The thought of what he might do this time apparently had their minds reeling. About every third sentence someone would interrupt Blade to intone, "Mazda has spoken," or "It is the will of Mazda."

This went on and on and on. Finally King Rikard rose to his feet and thundered, "Yes, Mazda has spoken! But have any of you listened to him, or heard as much as a single word he has said? This is a meeting of the Council of the People that may have to decide the fate of Tharn, not a chorus to sing songs in praise of my father! There will be other times and other places for that if you and he both wish it. In the meantime, silence, and let Mazda speak!"

After that Blade finished speaking in a silence where a hiccup would have sounded like an explosion.

"So we must do three things. We must find out more about the Looter machines, and their strengths and weaknesses. For that we must use the machine I captured, until its power is gone.

"Then we must train the best fighters of the people how to attack the Looter machines-and live to do it again and again. We must train many of them, and quickly, for the Looters are strong and they are on the march.

"Then I will lead forth the trained fighters against the machines of the Looters, and destroy them."

He had half-expected applause, but instead met dead silence. Everyone seemed to be looking from him to his son and back again. Finally the king spoke.

"Mazda-father. Is-do you-must you lead our fighters against the Looters?"

"I will not send any fighter of the people where I am not willing to go myself," said Blade quietly. "That is not my way-not Mazda's way." Time to put that awe to some use!

King Rikard bowed his head. This time it was he who intoned

"Mazda has spoken."

The first thing to do was find out if the purple ray could be harmless to human beings, and if so, under what conditions. Anyara volunteered to play guinea pig for this test before Blade could say a word.

As Anyara herself explained it to King Rikard:

"I am old. I have borne my share of children to the people. I have done all the work I had to do. If I die, the people will have lost little. If I live, we will have gained useful knowledge. If one as old as I survives the ray, then the younger and stronger fighters that Mazda will lead forth should be even safer."

As reluctant as he was to risk Anyara, King Rikard had to admit her logic.

So one morning Blade, his son, and an odd assortment of others marched out of the city. There was Anyara, Krimon, assorted other neuters to watch what happened, and a dozen or so experienced fighters to keep away spectators. It was a warm morning, with a gentle breeze from the west.

The machine was sitting on the grass where Blade had parked it after moving it out of the city. It was now covered with hides and dyed cloths, so that from a distance it looked like a large tent.

Blade found it hard to keep his eyes from straying to the eastern horizon, half-expecting a dozen Looter machines to come racing across the plain in search of their vanished companion. Were the Looters so careless or so rich in machines that they didn't care what happened to this one? That was hard to believe. They had certainly done their best to destroy it before it fled out of range.

They-or their other machines. Blade shook his head. He wondered more and more if the Looters had come themselves, whoever they were. Or had they just sent their machines? If just the machines were roaming about in Tharn, that could explain why there had been no pursuit. The programming of the machines' computers could be too rigid to permit that.

Blade climbed into the machine and punched the screen controls and power switch. The screens flickered into life. The machine still had power, hopefully enough for all it still had to do. Fortunately it would not be taking any more long trips.

Anyara appeared on the forward screen, striding vigorously out across the plain. She was pulling off her tunic as she walked. The plan called for her to start the test naked. Then bit by bit she would add gear-all of it once living-until she was either dead or fully-equipped for war. Which would come first?

Anyara stopped fifty yards away and stripped off her trousers. She raised her arms in signal to Blade, the sunlight gleaming on her bare body. It was a body that still had a good deal of its former grace and beauty, in spite of childbearing and hard living.

Anyara signaled more vigorously. She was obviously getting impatient. Blade sighted in the ray, then hesitated for a moment. Logic told him that Anyara would be standing there, proud and impatient, after the purple ray struck her. Instinct kept telling him that she would be lying stiff and dead on the plain. With her would lie most of Tharn's hopes for fighting off the Looters.

Delaying matters made no sense at all. Blade leaned forward, pressing the firing button as he did so.

Flash! Purple fire lanced out across the plain, and the glare surrounded Blade. A line of purple darted from the ray-tube to Anyara, enveloped her-and left her standing as though it had been no more than a

puff of wind.

Through the open hatch, Blade could hear the cheers.

Someone threw Anyara a leather belt with a leather pouch attached to it. She put it on, and Blade fired again. Once again she stood tall and proud, her graying hair streaming out behind her.

Tools now-hammers and wedges, made of bone and wood and teksin. Anyara put them on, and was still standing after another dose of the ray.

Leather boots, leather bottles, leather trousers, a leather tunic. Then teksin-a teksin helmet, teksin armor, teksin knives. Anyara piled on piece after piece, the purple ray leaped out at her time after time, and each time she stood unharmed and waving defiance to the Looters' purple death.

By the time the test was over, Anyara was staggering. But this was from the weight of the equipment she was carrying, not from the effects of the ray. When Blade finally cut off the power in the machine, the last thing he saw on the screen was Anyara beginning to strip down again.

She was down to trousers and helmet by the time Blade climbed out of the machine and stood on the grass. He was grinning from ear to ear and felt like cheering. His guess had been right! He had discovered the key to making the fighters of the people immune to the Looters' deadliest weapon.

Anyara dashed up to Blade, grabbed him by the shoulders, kissed him wildly, danced about him like a young girl. On either side he could hear the neuters and the fighters cheering again, louder and longer than ever before.

Gently Blade pulled himself free from Anyara's embraces and turned to face the others. They were crowding toward him, joy and worship shining from their faces.

Blade raised his hands for silence.

"We have learned the first part of what we must know to fight the Looters. We have learned how to keep their machines from destroying us. Now we must learn more how to destroy them!"

"It shall be done, Mazda," said Krimon. "This day and for all the days to come until our victory, all the people stand behind Mazda. We will go where he sends us, do as he bids us, speak or be silent as he wishes us."

Blade nodded, but he was not so happy now. To come to a people who saw you as all but a god meant you had no problem being accepted or obeyed.

But you did have a problem of living up to what they expected of you.

Chapter 15

A month of hard work followed.

Blade began to train ninety picked fighters in his methods for attacking Looter machines. Much of the training was guesswork, and would be guesswork until it was tested in combat. This bothered Blade.

It didn't bother the people. They would follow wherever Mazda led, sure that Mazda could and would

lead them only to victory.

Blade wished he could be that confident. Pretending that he was soon became one of the hardest parts of his job.

None of it was easy. Day in and day out, he spent twelve and fourteen hours a day in grinding training. He ended each day sweat-soaked, dry-throated, dust-covered, all his muscles aching. But then he would have to face a council meeting, and finally take a woman determined to have Mazda's seed in her.

That normally would have been a very pleasant part of his duties. But now more often than not a woman was the last thing Blade wanted to face at the end of the day.

Fortunately Blade had the capacity of at least three ordinary men when it came to sex. Otherwise there would have been a good many disappointed women among the people, and rumors running about that Mazda was not all that a man should be!

The machine's power lasted nearly a month. By the time it became immobile, it had given up nearly all the secrets Blade felt he needed to know. Meanwhile the building of teksin weapons and armor, research into explosives, and a dozen other projects went forward at top speed.

A week after that Blade rode east with an expedition fifty strong. Besides himself there was Anyara and eight fighting teams of six. The other forty trained fighters stayed behind, to start the training of more of their comrades. "In time a thousand or more of the people will know how to fight the machines of the Looters. In every town and village, on every farm, in each band of herdsmen, there will be some. Against such numbers the Looters cannot win."

"They may kill many of us," said King Rikard soberly, concerned for his people.

"True. But those who die will make sure that the people live." Blade did not mention his reason for saying this more confidently than before. He was more and more certain that the Looter command system must be incredibly cumbersome, inflexible, unable to adapt rapidly to meet new threats.

In war, that was a sure road to defeat.

Nearly two months had gone by since he captured the machine. Surely a command with any sort of normal wits about it would have done something to search out the missing war machine! But the eastern horizon remained bare of any signs of Looters.

Now, however, they would be riding out toward that horizon. For the first time in two years the fighters of the people would ride out, hoping to see the machines of the Looters ahead of them.

Each of the fifty rode his own horse. Along with them went a string of baggage animals, carrying extra food and weapons. Some also carried the few pieces of metal the expedition needed-cooking pots, arrowheads, and the like. If they met the Looters, those animals would be cut loose and driven away. Otherwise not a man, woman, or animal of the expedition carried anything that had not once been living. There were a good many grumbles and growls of "A little bit won't hurt," but Blade was taking no chances.

They rode toward the city of Miros. The councilors and experienced fighters and neuters suggested it might be the Looters' next target. Certainly the Looters would most likely be seeking new prey by now. Even if Miros was not yet under attack, it was better and wiser to go there than to ride up and down and

back and forth across the endless plains, hoping by chance to meet the Looters.

Eight days' travel brought them to Miros. It had been a small city, a tenth the size of vanished Urcit. It stood on a low rise of ground, looking down on a shallow lake surrounded with bushes almost the height of trees.

Blade walked along the white gravel beach on the side of the lake nearest the city. Anyara walked beside him. Behind them they heard cheerful shouts and playful splashings as half the fighters stripped and plunged into the lake. The other half remained on guard by the horses or in a mounted scouting line thrown out toward the east. That was another strict rule Blade had laid down-half the force on the alert at all times by day, a third of it on guard by night.

Anyara looked up at the city above them and shivered.

"I feel as though the ghosts of all of the people who lived in that city are up there, watching us and judging us."

Blade could see that she was genuinely on edge. "What do they think of us, I wonder?"

"You-you are something apart from the rest of us, for you are Mazda. But the rest of us-I don't know. They may wonder who these horse barbarians are. Surely not their descendants! We came so far, to build that city and the others like it, and then it all faded away when the men were driven out."

"They have come back now," said Blade gently. "And none of the people will ever make that mistake again."

Anyara shuddered. "No, by all that we believe in and hope for!" She laughed. "No doubt we shall make every other mistake a people can make, twice or three times over. But that one we shall never make again."

Blade was about to suggest that they also get into the water, when a shout from behind froze the words in his throat. He turned, to see one of the scouts come galloping toward the lake. The young woman took her horse over the bushes like a steeplechase rider, then came plunging down the bank. As she rode, she waved an arm and shouted. She reached the beach, and Blade made out what she was shouting.

"Looters! Looters come! Four war machines! They are coming!"

Chapter 16

Anyara grabbed Blade's arm.

"Now we see how well we have learned." Her voice was steady but her face was grim and set. She brushed her hair back from her eyes, then turned and dashed toward the rest of the expedition.

The people who had been in the lake were already scrambling out of the water. Some did not even bother to dress, snatching up only their boots and weapons and dashing naked toward their horses. Those who had been guarding the horses were already mounting up. Some of them were already driving the baggage animals with the metal in the packs out across the plain. Several more of the scouts rode in, all shouting the same thing as the first woman.

Blade and Anyara scrambled up the bank, tearing skins and clothes on the thornier bushes. Blade could

see no smiles or any signs of fear on any of the faces, only intense concentration.

By the time Blade and Anyara saddled up, the scouts had reported two more Looter machines. That made a total of six war machines. To Anyara and the others within earshot, Blade called out, "Good. The more we find, the more damage we can do at one blow."

Privately he was less confident. Six machines at once might mean that someone among the Looters was expecting trouble. The machines might have been reprogrammed to coordinate their actions better or take more notice of what was happening around them. The purple ray should be harmless. But against the subsonics the only defense was not letting the fear they inspired overwhelm you. Against the tentacles the only defense was not letting them grab you. Blade had done his best with the training of the people's fighters. All he could do now was to hope that his best had been good enough, and fill in as many gaps as he could.

Blade spurred his horse to a trot and headed out toward the scouting line. Anyara followed him.

The scouting line was pulling back, following their orders. Blade could now see the six Looter machines out on the plain. They were coming along slowly, about as fast as a galloping horse. They were spread out in a single line a hundred yards or so apart.

Blade drew his signal baton out of its sling on his saddle. It was a telescoping wooden pole with a great bushy tuft of yellow-dyed feathers on top. He shook it out to its full eight feet and raised it high. Then he waved it to his right, drew it sharply downward, and swung it from side to side.

That signal meant, "Everybody move over to the right, spread out, then stop."

Trying to catch the machines on the run would soon exhaust the horses. Let the machines come to them, then strike!

If the machines noticed Blade's signals, there was no sign of it. But the riders of the people did. The scouts pulled their horses around in wide circles and headed in the direction Blade indicated. The rest fell in behind and on either side of him and Anyara. Blade slowed to a trot to spare the horses and the formation eddied and swirled as the other riders did the same.

In minutes they reached the position Blade indicated. He reined in his horse and hurled the baton downward. The butt, tipped with sharpened teksin, sank into the hard earth and the feathers bobbed wildly. On either side Blade saw the others rein in, spreading out to form a line stretching two hundred yards from end to end, parallel to the path of the Looter machines.

The machines paid no more attention to the horsemen than if they had been so many tufts of down blowing in the breeze. All six advanced as steadily as if they had been running on rails. The nearest one passed down the front of the horsemen less than a hundred yards away.

Blade felt forty-nine sets of eyes flicking from the machine to him and back again. He could almost smell the desire to plunge forward in a mad charge against the enemy. But he shook his head and jerked his thumb down toward the ground. He heard murmurs of disappointment and even Anyara's face fell. But Mazda had made his decision, and the fighters of the people would obey.

The machines glided away toward the lake, still in their unbroken line. They reached the nearer shore of the lake, then their line split apart in the middle. Three machines moved around each side of the lake, shifting into a single line as they did so.

Blade reached out of the saddle, jerked the baton free of the ground, and waved it three times toward the lake. It was time to move out on the trail.

The machines reached the foot of the hill where Miros stood about the time the riders reached the nearer edge of the lake. Blade ordered a halt and watched the machines. Each trio was shifting into a triangle less than a hundred yards on a side. They were also slowing down. A moment later their legs sprang out and all six of them settled down on the ground.

Blade could hardly keep from cheering out loud as he saw the way the machines had arranged themselves. The two triangles stood, one on each end of the hill and the city, a good mile or more apart. Each was well-placed to scan its surroundings in all directions, but not to support the other one. They were too far apart. Two machines of each triangle were also fairly close to the bushes around the lake. The people's final attack could go in on foot, under cover. There would be no need to take horses within range of the subsonics.

Blade signaled for the team leaders to gather around him and then dismounted. Each fighter unslung his pack of combat gear from his saddle, then drifted over to join the circle assembling around Blade. With the point of his teksin sword Blade drew his plan on a bare patch of ground. When he had finished giving his orders, he straightened up and looked soberly at the even soberer faces around him. "This is our moment, our moment to stand up to the Looters and prove that the people can defend themselves against all enemies. The eyes of all the people are on us, not just the living but all those who have died that the people might live to this moment.

"We shall not let them down."

Blade shrugged his shoulders to settle his pack into a more comfortable position on his back, raised his baton, and led the way toward the shore of the lake.

The bushes were thick and thorny. The fighters creeping through them made enough noise to be heard a mile away by anyone not totally deaf. Fortunately the machines seemed to be just exactly that.

As they slipped within range of the subsonics, Blade noticed apprehensive or grim looks spreading across the faces of the fighters. Was their new knowledge, the loss of the fear of the unknown, going to be enough of a defense? For a minute or two Blade couldn't help wondering. Then slowly the faces straightened and the eighteen men and women moved on steadily.

The fighters in Blade's teams were scratched and sweating by the time they settled under cover. Then came a hot, nerve-wracking wait in the grass and under the shrubbery. They had to allow Anyara's teams plenty of time to get into their positions on the other side of the lake. Both attacks had to go in as nearly as possible at the same moment.

So they waited, impatiently whittling at twigs with their teksin knives, slapping at the insects that whined maddeningly around eyes and into ears, wiping off the sweat that trickled down foreheads and necks. The sun moved higher until it burned down almost straight out of a cloudless sky, baking the earth and filling the day with a sleepy warmth.

Hot, sweaty, insect-ridden minutes followed each other, one by one, until Blade knew that at least half an hour must have gone by. Had something happened to the other teams? Had they been ambushed and destroyed, silently and swiftly. They might have- A woman lying next to Blade grabbed his arm and pointed off to the right. Blade's eyes followed the woman's pointing finger. Through a gap between two

branches Blade saw an orange handkerchief waving on the other side of the lake. It was the signal "ready and waiting" from Anyara's teams.

Blade took a deep breath. He reached into his pack and took out a bag of teksin wedges and a hammer with a teksin head and a wooden shaft. He tied these to his belt. He saw flickers of movement in the bushes all along the line of fighters, as each one of them got out his particular equipment and hung it on his belt.

Then Blade reached into his pack once more, and pulled out a teksin whistle with a gilded leather thong. He looped the thong about his sunburnt neck, put the whistle between his lips, took another deep breath-and blew with all the power in his lungs.

Bushes exploded with cracklings and crashings as Blade and eighteen others leaped to their feet and plunged out into the open. Some of them were obviously dizzy from heat and strain and the subsonics. They lurched and staggered as they ran. But they stayed on their feet and kept going.

Blade swung to the right as he ran, moving up to join the team that was heading for the right-hand machine. It grew larger and larger as they ran, squatting there in all its metallic ugliness. The turret was turning slowly, but the machine showed no sign that it noticed the approaching people.

Then the turret stopped dead and began to swivel slowly back toward Blade. It had registered that the world outside was sprouting something strange, possibly unnatural, possibly even dangerous.

Run, run, run! Blade almost shouted the words out loud. Get to the machine before it starts moving or shooting. Thirty yards, twenty, ten. Breath rasped in his throat, his chest was tight and painful with strain and tension. Five yards, four, three- A young man, even more agile than Blade, sprang into the air like an Olympic broad-jumper, leaping for the machine's rear platform. He landed on his feet, nearly going forward on hands and knees. Metal clanged and boomed under him. He turned forward, grabbing for the bag and the hammer at his belt. Blade leaped up onto the platform beside him.

The young man bowed his head to Blade. "I am sorry, Mazda, that I took from you the honor of being first. It was rightly-"

"Never mind honors now, Zeron," said Blade sharply. "Let's get to work."

As Blade spoke the turret's turning swung the ray-tube toward them and over them. Clinging to the tube was a young woman. She was pounding wedges into the opening in the turret from which the tube jutted. As the turret's turning carried her out of sight, hammers sounded forward. The two men with the most dangerous assignment were at work, driving heavy plugs into the holes from which the tentacles emerged. If they didn't work fast, they would be the first to die.

Blade took his own advice and pulled a wedge from his pouch. He slid it into the gap between the turret's base and the ring on which it revolved, pushed on it hard, then grabbed the hammer and swung it with both hands. Whang! Whang! Whang! Each blow sent a tingling through Blade's hands and arms and a vibration through the metal under his feet.

Whang! Whang! Whang! Zeron was doing the same thing. The machines might have enormous power stored in them. But how much of that power could they feed to the motors that turned the turrets, extended the tentacles, maneuvered the legs? If that power was not enough to overcome the resistance of a dozen or so teksin wedges swiftly driven into place by fighters of the people, it would be the end for one of the machines' prime weapons.

From underneath the machine came more hammering. Someone was driving wedges into the joints of one of the legs. A machine could not get up and fly away unless all four legs were retracted. Now someone was busily at work making sure that at least one leg on this machine would never retract.

Blade rammed in a second wedge and went to work with the hammer. Then a third. Then a fourth. By the time the fourth wedge was in place he was streaming with sweat. His bare chest and arms were as wet as if he had just climbed out of the lake. But the turret was as thoroughly immobilized as if it had been seated in concrete.

The young woman on the tube sprang lightly to the ground. Blade recognized Chars. As she did so there was a whoosh and flickering orange yellow flame suddenly enveloped the tube. Greasy black smoke streamed up into the sky.

Chara smiled at Blade. "Burns good, doesn't it?" She had wrapped a layer of cloth soaked in teksin oil around the raytube, then set it on fire. The burning cloth raised the temperature inside the tube high enough to ruin the sensitive electronic equipment.

Something went pffffssssshsssstttt!-like the biggest of all cats-from underneath the machine. The machine shivered, then sagged down at one corner. The man who had been working on the legs scrambled hastily out from under. His face was black with smoke and his hair and eyebrows a good deal skimpier than they had been before. His teeth flashed white as he grinned.

"It tried to pull up the leg. But I think something went wrong with the little machine for the leg. Am I right, Mazda?"

"It seems like it."

Blade hung his hammer on his belt and climbed on top of the turret to get a better view. He nearly shouted out loud as he saw a tentacle flashing around the other machine they had attacked. Then he saw that the turret was motionless, the ray-tube a smoking, half-melted mass, and not one but two legs jammed and buckled. One of the tentacles had pushed out its wedge, but that was all. The six members of the attacking team were standing back at a safe distance, watching the deadly tentacle clutch at nothing but empty air.

A hundred yards away stood the third machine of the group, now moving slowly around on its legs in a small circle. The tentacles were still retracted but the turret was swinging quickly back and forth through a half-circle that faced the two captured machines. Occasionally the third machine sounded its siren.

Apparently the machine couldn't make up its programmed mind what was happening and what it should do about it. There was no reason to give the machine the time it needed. Blade motioned his third team forward at a run. As they passed down between the two captured machines, Zeron sprang down to join them. Apparently the young man hadn't had enough fighting for one day!

The third team was halfway to the third machine when it suddenly exploded into action. All four legs snapped up into its belly with a loud clang. At the same moment the machine leaped into the air, wobbling slightly. The turret swung to aim the ray-tube at the approaching people.

Purple flame darted from the rising machine. Blade heard men and women alike screaming in surprise and terror. The memories went too deep-always before the purple ray had brought death wherever it touched. For a moment the seven running figures were lost in the purple glare. Then it faded, and the

seven ran on, not missing a step. The screams turned into shouts and cheers.

They reached the spot where the machine had been and looked upward to where it hovered some thirty feet above them. If it would just drop a bit lower-

The tentacles! There they were, flicking out of the front of the machine. Blade opened his mouth to shout at the seven to scatter, but they were doing that before he could even take in a deep breath. Against a war machine armed, alert, and out of reach, what else was there to do? There hadn't been any explosives ready for the expedition.

The machine seemed to stoop toward the ground, like a hawk sighting a mouse. Two tentacles flashed through the air. Their tips curled around the waist and legs of a running man. It was Zeron, the same Zeron who had wanted to see more fighting, Zeron who had been too slow or too bold to get beyond the machine's reach:

The tentacles tightened. Zeron screamed, a long, rasping, utterly horrible scream, a raw-throated shrieking rejection of a world that was letting this happen to him and of the pain that seemed to be tearing him apart.

A moment later he was torn apart. One tentacle snapped one way, one the other. With a gruesome craaaak Zeron's body tore apart at the waist in a shower of blood and fragments of bone and internal organs. The two tentacles rose high into the air, as if brandishing their horrid trophies. Then they unclasped and the two halves of Zeron's body fell down to land with small puffs of dust.

That machine was going on the hunt, thought Blade. It was time for all of them to scatter, and fast.

Before he could give any orders, a second war machine swept into sight from behind the towers of Miros. It was a hundred feet off the ground and moving at well over a hundred miles an hour.

This time people did start scattering, as fast as their legs would cover ground and before Blade could even think of giving an order. Blade himself leaped down off the turret and started running. There was absolutely nothing else to do, except run so far and fast that the machines would lose interest. Sooner or later they would. They always did. But how many of the fighters of the expedition would still be alive by that time?

Then Blade stopped almost in mid-stride, to turn and stare. The second machine was not plunging down on the scattering fugitives. Instead it was circling the first one. The first one seemed to be standing still in the air, its tentacles drooping listlessly.

Then the second machine stood on end and leaped for the sky. It dwindled with a rush and roar of air into something small and gleaming in the sky nearly a mile above. Then it plunged down on the first machine. It must have been doing more than three hundred miles an hour when it plummeted out of the sky and smashed into the first machine.

Blade went flat on the ground, hands clasped over his face, not sure that this mechanical lunacy wouldn't be as deadly to his people as the two machines could have been. If the Looters' machines were atomic-powered and these two exploded, there wouldn't be much left of the expedition or the city of Miros.

But there was no explosion. There was only an earsplitting metallic crash like the biggest of all automobile collisions, as a hundred tons of metal slammed violently together. Blue smoke and sparks

filled the sky as high-powered electrical equipment died spectacularly. Then there was an earthshaking thud as the two wrecks plummeted to the ground, followed by the pattering of odd bits and pieces raining out of the sky.

Blade waited until the rain had stopped before getting slowly to his feet. He had picked up several small burns from hot bits of metal. Others lay smoldering in the grass. The two war machines lay where they had fallen, mangled and blackened hulks.

He heard someone calling his name and turned to see Anyara running toward him from the direction of the lake.

Her face was covered with sweat-caked dust but her grin spread clear across her face.

"Mazda, it was incredible. We took the two we attacked, then the other one took off. For a moment we thought it was going to attack us, but it went out of sight behind the city. We didn't lose anyone, not anyone at all. I was bringing my people over to join yours when we saw the second machine come out again. I didn't believe for a moment that they would do what they did, I couldn't believe it!" She reached Blade and embraced him wildly.

Blade kissed her, then realized that he was swaying on his feet from the sudden release of tension. His throat was so dry that he had to take a drink from his water bottle before he could speak.

"Yes, I was surprised too. But I think I know what happened. The computers-the thinking machine-that guide the war machines sometimes go-mad-when they don't understand a situation."

Anyara laughed. "Some thinking machines! They certainly didn't think very well today, did they?"

"No," said Blade. "At least not today."

Chapter 17

Blade knew that the Looter machines had made mistakes that day which they probably would not make again. Nobody else seemed to care about this. Everyone was feeling too good. After a few hours Blade gave up trying to remind them of unpleasant possibilities. It didn't matter that much for now, anyway, as long as they didn't get sloppy in keeping the guards and scouts posted.

Besides, they had done well, and it had really been a memorable victory. Six Looter machines gone-four crippled and captured in usable condition, two smashed to twisted wreckage by the errors of their own computers. Only one of the people dead, and only a few minor injuries. They had won a battle, not a war. But they had won, and winning had lowered the Looters' strength a good deal and raised the spirits of the people even more.

Blade made a quick round of the sentries and scouts on horseback. Then he dismounted, stripped, and joined those who were celebrating the victory in the lake. He heard several people wishing there was some beer. But everybody was already feeling too happy to need any.

The celebration went on for a good many hours, until night fell on the expedition's camp. Then those who had guard duty took up their posts. Those who didn't fell asleep with dreams of bigger and better victories to come.

Originally Blade planned to withdraw after the first successful encounter with the Looters. But they had

been so successful that he decided on a new plan. They would stay in and around Miros and wait for the next wave of Looters to move in. Blade was sure there would be another one. If it was weak or badly commanded, the people would fight. If it was strong and well commanded, they could disperse and lay ambushes.

Some of the towers of the city were more than a quarter of a mile high, offering a magnificent view over the plain. The lake would provide water, some of the bushes bore fruit and berries, and the neighborhood seemed rich in game for the people and grass for the horses. They could sit almost in the lap of luxury and wait for the Looters to appear.

That optimistic plan left out a few things, of course. Blade mentioned some of them to Anyara.

"If they use one of the superbombs that make the flat topped clouds, they can wipe out all of us. The only way we could avoid that is to disperse so far that we could not attack effectively."

"What about their rockets?"

"I am less afraid of those. They are powerful, I admit, and they will do a great deal of damage if we let them. But I doubt if the Looters bring very many of them from their homeland. They probably cannot afford to fire them off the way we fire arrows. If we do not give them a tempting target, I doubt that we will have much to fear from them. I have even been thinking of ways of attacking the big machines, the ones that carry the rockets and the red rays."

"That is something you did not speak of before."

"I did not expect that we would have any more of the smaller war machines to use against the Looters. But we do."

Blade had discovered that the legs of the captured machines could be retracted manually by someone cranking a wheel inside the cabin. After that, all four of the captured machines could move and fly almost as well as before. Blade, however, was the only one who could fly a Looter machine.

"Their weapons do not work, Mazda, and I do not see how we are going to repair them."

"We are not. But I do not think we will need the weapons if my plans work."

The next day Blade spent several hours maneuvering one of the captured machines around the streets of Miros. After that, he spent the rest of the day and all of the next working with twelve particularly good fighters from the expedition. When he finished that, he told Anyara that he had plans ready for meeting any of the big Looter machines.

"But I do not know how much chance I have of coming out of that battle alive," he added.

"When will you know that, Mazda?" said Anyara, her face pale. "It is not good to think of the death of Mazda, even in victory."

Blade smiled grimly. "It may happen, Anyara, whether you find it pleasant to think about or not. Accept that fact. As for when we shall know if I am going to live or not—we shall know that the next time the Looters come."

The Looters did not come during the rest of that week. The roof of the highest building in Miros was

manned day and night by particularly keen-sighted fighters. They kept an endless watch over the plain, waiting for the flash and flicker of metal to break the even line of the distant horizon.

It never did.

Blade used the unexpected gift of time to start training several volunteers in the basics of piloting a Looter war machine. It was easy enough to learn, provided you weren't paralyzed by fear of the power and weapons you had at your command.

This was hard for the younger people to do. They had never controlled anything more powerful than a team of plow-horses. But some of them controlled their fear well enough to learn faster than Blade expected.

Chara turned out to be the best of these new pilots. Blade gave her the job of rescuing the watchers from the top of the tower when the fighting started. After that she would ride with him as a spare pilot for his own machine.

The days ran on into the second week. Many of the people were openly wondering if the Looters had lost their courage. Even Anyara could not help thinking out loud.

"They sent six machines against Miros, and it must seem as though they have all sailed away to another world in the sky. Those six are gone. This is not something that has ever happened to them before. Are they brave enough to try again?"

"I don't think their courage has that much to do with it," was all Blade would say. In his own mind, he was far less certain. The empty horizon perhaps did mean that the Looters were stunned by the disappearance of the six machines, stunned and paralyzed.

It could also mean that they had finally realized a deadly enemy was lurking somewhere out there, an enemy with new skills. They might be busily making plans to send a stronger force against this enemy. Perhaps they were even making plans to come forth themselves, instead of relying on their rugged but fatally inflexible machines.

Yet Blade was sure of one thing. Sooner or later, in one way or another, the Looters would return.

Chapter 18

Dawn in Miros. The coolness was not yet out of the air and the dew not yet dried from the dust in the empty streets. Blade sat with Chara on the platform of a war machine, in a corner that still lay deep in shadow. Suddenly he heard her suck in breath with a sharp hiss.

"Look-on the tower! The signal!"

Blade raised his eyes to the top of the watchtower. The thick black smoke of burning teksin oil was streaming up into the windless sky.

The Looters had come again.

Chara was already diving for the hatch of the machine. Blade leaped through behind her and took the controls. They rose swiftly, climbing up into the sunlight, up to the top of the tower.

The chief of the sentries met Blade as he sprang out of the machine. "They are half a day's march toward the horizon, Mazda. They are low, and if they move, they move so slowly that we cannot see it."

"How many?"

"We count only six, Mazda. Three of the small war machines, and three of the big ones that are shaped like boxes."

"Nothing else?"

"We have seen nothing else, Mazda. If it had been there, we would have seen it."

"Very good. You've given your signal. Get your people into the machine. We'll drop you off by the horses when we pick up my attack team."

The sentries piled into the cabin of the machine. Blade was the last in. He was keeping a rigidly calm face, but he was not entirely calm inside. Six machines—that was not nearly as strong a force as he had expected. But they were fighting machines only. There were none of the other kinds that would have been part of any force intended to simply move into Miros and start to loot and smash it. The Looters were also standing off at a distance rather than heading straight in.

It looked like a fighting force, sent by someone who expected trouble, and under command of human brains. No, not "human." Call them "live" brains. The Looters were humanoid. But human? That remained to be seen.

Blade suspected that with luck they might see the answer to that question today. Then he put the Looters temporarily out of his mind and concentrated on getting the machine off the roof.

They plunged down to the street and leveled out so low that their passing kicked up dust. In minutes they were at the north camp, where Blade had stationed the twelve specially trained fighters.

Blade dropped the machine on its belly with a crunch of rubble underneath and opened the hatch. "Get to your horses and ride out of the city as fast as you can. If you do not hear true word from me or my people by nightfall, we will be dead. Then ride for the lands of the people as fast as you can. Ignore any message that doesn't contain the word 'Zulekia.' "

"Zulekia? The name of your Beloved?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I think that there may be some living Looters with those machines out on the plain. They may use a false message from me to lay a trap for all of you. But they will not know my Beloved's name."

It was obvious that the people did not quite understand. But he was Mazda, and they would obey him.

Now Blade signaled to his attack team. "I want six of you to climb into the machine and ride with us. The other six will ride out of the city with the rest. If I die today, you will return to the lands of the people and help teach others what I have taught you."

All twelve pushed forward, hoping to be among the six. Blade picked out his six by pointing a finger and going, "You-you-you." He stood on the platform until the chosen six were inside and the others had reluctantly joined the rest of the fighters. Then he took several deep breaths and felt his mind and body settle, readying for action. Some of the fighters were still standing around the machine, staring at him. Other more sensible ones were already leading out their horses and mounting up. Blade made a final sweeping farewell gesture to all of them, then climbed through the hatch and pulled it shut behind him.

Blade saw the coming battle as a trap, with himself and the machine as the prime bait. He would have been happier if the attack team had not been in the machine with him. But there was no choice. When the battle was joined, the streets of Miros would be no place for an unprotected human being, no matter how well trained.

Blade headed for the northern edge of the city, toward the Looter force. He wanted to offer them a target that would draw their fire as soon as possible. It was risky, but not half as risky as going into the battle not knowing as much as possible about his enemy.

On the northern edge of the city Blade took the machine behind a medium-tall building and lifted it up several hundred feet. Then he swung it out into the open street. He had a clear view across the plain toward the Looter machines. They showed up plainly on the screens, several miles closer now. He hoped he showed up as plainly on theirs.

A puff of smoke rose from one of the large machines, followed by a long white trail. The trail climbed into the sky as it climbed toward the city. Metal glinted at the head of the trail. Blade held his machine in position.

Chara stared wide-eyed at the screen. "Mazda-aren't you going to-?"

Blade shook his head. "Not yet. We still need to find out how well they can shoot."

Several miles up, the rocket curved over and began a downward plunge toward its target. At the last moment, when it was obvious that he was that target, Blade swung the machine out of sight behind the building. With a roar and a howl of torn air audible even inside the machine, the rocket plunged down the last few hundred feet and exploded in the street.

The heavy war machine bounced up and sideways like a floating log hitting rapids. One corner slammed into the building, sending everybody except Blade sprawling. Then he dove toward the street without waiting for people to get settled again.

At street level he turned to the team. "Everyone all right?"

Apart from bruises, everyone was. One of the men couldn't help asking, "Are we going to be doing this again?"

"Quite a lot of it," said Blade calmly. "We have to make them decide to move in close. Otherwise you won't get a chance to do any fighting." Several people looked as though they really wouldn't mind that much missing their chance.

Blade kept the machine darting in and out of the towers of the city for nearly half an hour. Every few minutes he would make it do the equivalent of jumping up and down and thumping its nose at the distant Looter machines. They would reply with a rocket. The rockets came in unguided, blowing large chunks of real estate to bits but not doing a thing to Blade's machine. Even the attack team members were

beginning to look more cheerful, although a couple of them got airsick from the rough ride.

After the seventh rocket there was a long pause. Then the large machine in the center fired another rocket. This one climbed in a straight line until it was directly over the city, then exploded. Blade watched the smoke cloud drift away on the wind. He thought he saw something small and gleaming standing still in the air where the smoke had been. Not a war machine-it was far too small. What was it? There was only one way to find out-the same way as he found out everything else so far.

Once more a move into the open drew a rocket. The Looters obviously felt there was some good reason for not moving in close now. The ninth rocket rose on the beginning of a normal flight-then straightened out and came whizzing straight at them.

Blade dove and ducked behind the nearest building, as usual. But this time on the screens he saw the rocket waver in flight, rise in a sharp climb, then turn and plunge back down at him.

Chara gasped and turned pale; half the others cried out loud. Blade's teeth clamped together as he swung the machine around toward the other side of the building. The rocket plunged straight toward the side they had left, looking as though it would keep right on going and explode against the building.

At the last second it swung clear, vanishing around the opposite side of the building. Blade pulled his machine to a stop in midair. A moment later the rocket appeared on the upper screen, climbing upward again. It wavered, nosed over, and plunged back down at the machine again.

This time Blade was the only one in the cabin who didn't shout out loud. He was too busy with the controls, swinging the machine sharply up and to one side. The rocket howled downward past them. Its smoke trail blanked out the screens for a moment. Blade dove for the street again. A moment later a thunderous explosion from below told him that he didn't need to worry about that rocket any more. Its controller hadn't been able to pull it out of that last dive.

"What-what were they doing with that last one?" gasped Chara.

For a moment Blade was too busy with the controls to answer. The machine leaped upward. As they cleared the towers of Miros, he checked the screens. There were the Looter machines, exactly where they had been. High above the city the same small metal shape glinted against the blue sky. Blade watched it grow on the screens from a point to a dot to a small solid sphere. Good. It was no more than four feet across. Nothing that size could be heavy enough to damage the war machine.

"Hang on!" Blade shouted again. This time it was a needless order. The others were all clinging to something solid as if this was their only hope of life.

Crrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr! A sound like a ten-ton hammer hitting a stack of tin cans placed on a twenty-ton anvil. Metal belled, boomed, and crushed. The shock threw Blade's hands completely off the controls for a moment. He grabbed the controls again and put the machine into a dive. As the towers below grew rapidly larger, he snatched a glimpse at the screens. Trailing smoke and bits of wire, the metal sphere was falling along with them. But it wasn't a sphere any more. The collision with the war machine had half-flattened it.

When they pulled out of the dive just below and behind the top of a building, Chara was able to find her voice. "Mazda, what-?"

"The Looters sent that sphere up on the rocket to float over the city and watch us. It would send a

picture like the one on the screens back to the Looter in one of the big machines. Then the Looter would send signals to the rocket, telling it to follow us wherever we went. I have seen such machines during my travels. I knew we had to destroy the seeing machine, or sooner or later the Looters would hit us with a rocket."

Chara nodded, but her face was still bleached and drawn. "What happens next?"

"We have destroyed their seeing machine. With luck, they will come in close, where we can fight them as I have planned."

"What if we are not lucky?"

Blade kept silent, since there was no good answer to that question.

Chapter 19

Blade knew the Looters' weapons. He knew their strength. He was certain that he faced living opponents. He was nearly as certain that they would move in to close quarters and fight him in the streets of Miros.

They would be fighting him with weapons that could rip apart his machine or demolish a building a thousand feet high. They would be fighting his small swift machine with larger, clumsier ones, in a rubble-strewn maze of streets he knew far better than they did. They would probably have no one to fight on foot, while he had six fighters whom he could hurl at the enemy when the time was right. Blade was certain that the Looters faced a memorable battle, and probably defeat. Whether he and his comrades would survive to enjoy their victory was another question.

Blade kept his machine under cover for a few minutes, to give the Looters time to react. When he did dart out to take another look, he was relieved to see the Looter machines creeping in toward the city. They were moving as cautiously as soldiers making their way across a minefield, but they were moving in.

It took the Looters nearly half an hour to get to within two miles of the city. During that time they ignored Blade-launched no rockets, fired no beams or rays, made no sounds, flashed no lights.

Two miles north of the city they stopped and divided. The three small war machines moved out and around to cover the east, west, and south sides of the city. The three large machines stayed where they were. Blade realized he was now nicely boxed in. If he tried to avoid action, the machines on his flanks and rear would beam him down or ram him out of the air.

The smaller machines weren't shooting at anything as they took position, as far as Blade could see. That meant that the rest of the expedition had either got clear or was being ignored. Blade had no doubt any more that he was the Looters' number-one target.

The three large machines remained motionless until the smaller ones were in position. Then they began to move forward again. Blade could now see that the center one differed from the other two. Its front end was rounder and topped by a dome of some glassy-looking material. At the rear was a tripod mast with antennae and screens sprouting from it in all directions.

Good. Now he knew which one was the command machine, the one probably carrying the living Looters. Now he knew which machine had to be his number-one target.

A mile from the city the Looters unleashed their beam weapons. There was no warning, only a blaze of red light lancing out at Blade's machine. The core of the beam missed and slashed into a building. A section of wall fifty feet wide and three stories high scattered in glowing bits and pieces down into the street below, while smoke boiled up from the hole. But the fringe of the beam caught Blade.

For a moment all the screens went dark. Every dial and light on the control panels whirled and flickered hysterically. Blade heard Chara and the others screaming and bit back a gasp of pain himself. He felt as though a thousand red-hot needles were being jammed into every part of his body. He blinked, swallowed, felt blackness creeping up on him-then the pain was past and the screens were clear. A quick check showed no damage to either machine or people.

Vast clouds of smoke billowed up from the gaping hole in the building behind them. More rose from the rubble in the street below. Screened by the smoke, Blade dove the machine down to street level. Another discharge of the red ray ripped into the damaged building, but missed Blade's machine completely. More smoke boiled up and more debris crashed down, some of it hitting the machine. The metal hull boomed under the impact and Blade clung like a monkey to the controls to keep from being hurled out of his seat. The rest of the attackers tried to hang on as best they could.

They leveled out just above the ground and stopped. Blade saw that the street was blocked by smoking rubble piled two stories high. Thick smoke screened it to a height of several hundred feet. It was impossible to see the Looters through that smoke.

Blade and his three opponents skirmished through the streets of the dead city with grim caution for half an hour. The Looter machines were certainly under living control. Blade was also beginning to suspect that those living beings were getting nervous. Several times he heard the crackle of the red ray many streets away, as the Looters fired at phantoms of their own imagination. The crackle was always followed by the crash and rumble of falling wreckage and new billowing clouds of smoke.

That was fine with Blade. He knew the streets of Miros as well as he knew the West End of London. If the Looters wanted to make it even harder for them to find their way around a city they didn't know in any case, that was their problem, not his. He was the hunter; he could choose his own time to move out.

At the end of the half hour Blade decided the time had come. Half of the city's streets were fogged with gray, brown, and black smoke. Piles of rubble that offered concealment lay almost everywhere.

Like a prowling cat Blade's machine glided through the smoky streets, only a few feet above the ground. He headed for one of the Looters' flanks, to slip around and come in behind them.

Suddenly a mass of gleaming metal shone through the smoke a hundred yards down a street to the right. Blade sent his machine darting for cover as the red ray crackled past. The people felt only a mild prickling as the fringes brushed them. But thirty feet of pavement and the front of a three-story building rose into the air and came down in a rain of smoking bits and pieces.

Instantly Blade was heading back out into the street, into the smoke boiling up from where the ray struck. The gaping front of the building loomed through the smoke. Blade swung the machine inside and perched it precariously on the heaped-up rubble fallen from the upper floors.

"We'll need somebody to go outside for the next move," said Blade. He explained briefly what he wanted. Naturally all seven immediately volunteered. Blade picked out one of the men and gave him the signal baton, then opened the hatch briefly. Smoke swirled into the cabin, setting everybody coughing. The man slipped out into the street and was gone.

A moment later Blade had the machine in motion again, backing away into the building. A few hard shoves against the rear door enlarged the opening until the machine could slip through. Once back out in the street, Blade swung around until he was back in the first street, where the Looter machine stood. He was able to sneak into cover behind the smoke and the wall of piled rubble. But the observer high in the building they had left could see the Looters, and signal their movements to Blade.

Flick, flick, flick went the baton. Two Looter machines were coming straight down the street. They were getting rattled if their tactics were becoming this sloppy.

The baton flicked downward. The first Looter machine was passing the observer's position, only a hundred feet away. Blade wanted it to get still closer. He used two of the tentacles to grasp two large chunks of rubble.

Now the first Looter machine was practically on top of them. Blade's hands danced over the controls and his machine rose into the air only yards in front of the first Looter machine. As it rose Blade sent the tentacles whipping about, hurling their hundred-pound missiles at the second machine behind. They sailed through the air, dropped toward the street, and disintegrated in smoke and dust as the red ray caught them.

But they didn't absorb more than a small fraction of the red ray's power. The second machine's ray tore with deadly force into the first one. The ray turret on top flew off its mounting and crashed into the street. Antennae melted like candy canes in the sun. Metal buckled and bulged and gaped, letting out vast clouds of smoke from burning and exploding machinery inside. Blade backed hastily away as he saw molten metal beginning to ooze from the Looter machine.

The red ray wasn't quite as hard on Looter machines as it was on Tharnian buildings. But that first machine was no good for anything now except scrap metal.

Blade continued to back away until he was several hundred yards down the street and completely invisible behind clouds and piles of rubble. By that time the cheering had died down and Chara had stopped trying to throw her arms around him.

"Mazda, you have done it! You have done it! It is dead, and we have won!"

"No," said one of the other women. "There are two more of the big ones, besides the small ones. Mazda will not rest until he has destroyed all of them, or he is dead."

Blade nodded. He headed down a parallel street until he reached the point for picking up the observer. He saw the man run out of the smoke and leap on the platform. The hatch opened for a moment and the man darted inside. Then Blade lifted the machine again and headed away through the smoking streets of Miros, once again on the prowl.

Chapter 20

If the Looters had been nervous before, now they would probably be scared stiff. Blade had half a dozen other tricks up his sleeve. If he could move fast, before the Looters decided to bring the smaller war machines into the city, he could press home his advantage.

The machine darted through the streets at high speed. In a few minutes Blade knew he had come far enough to be behind the second Looter machine. He wanted to pick it off first, then move in on the

command machine with fewer worries about his flanks and rear.

Blade landed on a roof surrounded by high walls that kept the machine entirely hidden from below but provided excellent perches for observers. This time he stationed four observers on the walls, one looking in each direction.

In five minutes the second machine stopped beside a damaged building less than three hundred yards away. Apparently the Looters had realized that roaming around the streets of Miro's might not be the wisest thing to do now. The command machine was nowhere in sight. Had it left the city?

Another five minutes passed. Blade knew he couldn't safely wait any longer before launching his attack on the second machine. He called in the observers and lifted off the roof, heading for the building beside his target.

One particularly wild ray-blast had chewed out a three-story hole in the building nearly five hundred feet above the street. Blade's machine darted from the cover of one building to the cover of another, moving across the city street by street. At last he landed on the roof of a building across the street from his target, a roof almost on a level with the gaping hole. He waited until the wind sent smoke swirling more thickly than usual across the street. Then he sent his machine plunging out across the street and into the hole.

They landed with a crunch. Blade felt the floor sag and groan under the weight of the machine. He would have to work fast. He backed well inside the building, swung the turret to the rear, then ordered everyone to hang on tight. Then he slammed the machine sideways into the outer wall of the building, the wall directly above the Looter machine on the street below.

The building shook and the machine vibrated like a drum. The wall showed no sign of damage. Fortunately neither did the machine. Blade drove it sideways again. This time the wall showed cracks, and bulged outward at the bottom. A third time, a fourth, a fifth. The wall was unmistakably weakening, but it was still there. Blade was beginning to wonder whether the wall or the machine would give up first.

A sixth time. Now he was hitting the wall higher up, to distribute the impacts evenly. A seventh. An eighth. Backing off and going in for a-

Crrunnnnk! Almost elegantly, seventy or eighty feet of wall detached itself, sagged outward into thin air, and vanished from sight. The floor under it began to crumble away, then the ceiling began to sag down.

In seconds Blade had the machine racing out through the hole into the open air, so fast that he nearly rammed the building across the street. He swung up over the roof with feet to spare. A ray blast crackled through the air just below him, a wild shot that chewed away much of the wall surrounding the roof but didn't touch Blade's machine. Then the falling piece of building came down on the Looter machine.

The Looter machines were built strongly, but they weren't built strongly enough to stand a direct hit by a twenty-ton slab of building falling five hundred feet. The machine quivered, vanished in a cloud of dust and smoke, then seemed to burst apart in flame. The spare rockets exploded, shooting up huge gouts of yellow orange flame and spraying bits of hot metal in all directions. The top of the machine opened up like a sardine can and more explosions sent more bits flying. High above, Blade felt his machine rock from the concussion.

The blast must have also been the final blow to the tall building, already torn by the ray and by the impacts of Blade's machine: Slowly its top three hundred feet leaned forward, crumbling away at the bottom as it did. Then suddenly gravity took a firmer grip and the whole ponderous mass plunged

downward. Blade darted clear a moment before the falling mass came down on the building across the street like a piledriver. The second building seemed to burst outward from the impact, pieces as big as small houses flying in all directions and crashing through the walls of its neighbors. Rubble poured down, more smoke and dust rose up in a cloud that swiftly blotted out the whole scene, and the world was filled with thunderings and crashings that rose to an ear-splitting roar.

Blade waited only long enough for the smoke and dust to clear away enough to give a good view. Both buildings had collapsed into the streets below, burying the Looter machine under a pile of rubble a hundred feet high. It would take a thousand men a month's work to dig out what was left of it.

Blade sent the machine spiraling downward. As it dove, he snapped out orders to Chara and the six members of the attack team. The Looters in the command machine should be hopelessly stunned and bewildered by what had happened. There would never be a better chance to attack them. He saw fierce grins on the faces around him as all seven started checking their weapons and equipment.

As the machine dove, Blade saw metal glinting through the smoke half a mile away. That would have to be the command machine! He headed for it as fast as he could twist and turn his own machine through the streets of Miros, only inches above the pavement. Several times they hit chunks of rubble with bone-jarring crashes. Blade did not stop or slow down. Nothing was more important now than speed and more speed. It didn't matter if his own machine didn't survive the coming battle. He and his fighters could evade the smaller machines and walk out. But they had to get the Looter commanders!

The machine plunged out into the open street. A hundred feet away stood the command machine, its turret with the ray-tube pointing away from them. Blade did not slow down. His machine bounced off a building across the street as it turned. But the impact and the controls hurled it in the same direction. The command machine's turret swung toward Blade. Before it could take aim, Blade's machine smashed down onto the turret.

Metal clanged and crunched and sparks flew as electrical equipment died spectacularly. The turret ground to a stop. Blade backed his machine away, one hand on the controls and the other furiously pressing buttons to extend the tentacles. He hoped they still worked. For a moment he wished he had three or four extra hands.

The tentacles lashed out. The tentacle with the heavy sensor-knob at the end snapped downward at the bubble dome at the front of the other machine. The transparent material shivered and cracked under the impact. A second blow and it splintered and smashed inward.

The other three tentacles swept across the top of the Looter machine, ripping the tripod signal mast free and hurling it to the street. More electrical fireworks. Then Blade wound all three around the beam tube and jerked them sharply upward. The ten-foot tube bent upward into a curve, then ripped free of the turret. A tremendous cloud of smoke spewed out of both tube and turret, momentarily blanking out the screens.

Blade didn't wait for the smoke to clear or bother retracting the tentacles. He drove the machine forward against the side of the other one, like a bull goring a farmer. The other machine slammed hard into the nearest wall. Bits and pieces showered down with clangs and thumps. Blade charged again. This time both the wall and the side of the other machine gave. Great slabs of wall crashed down on both machines. Two of Blade's screens went dead, and metallic screeches sounded as tentacles were ripped out of their sockets.

A third charge. This time it sounded as though the end of the world had come, in a hideous, ear-splitting

din of metal twisting and crumpling and tearing apart. Something smashed into Blade's turret hard enough to dent the armor and send most of the fighters sprawling. A purple glare filled the cabin as the beam-tube shorted out. Pungent smoke followed it.

Blade cut off the power. The machine dropped with a final crash six feet to the street. Everyone who had stayed on his feet until then went sprawling.

Blade unbuckled his seat belt and sprang to his feet. For a moment he felt a little unsteady on his legs, and hoped that all his teeth and internal organs were still in place. Then he drew his sword and pointed at the hatch.

"Up and at them, oh people! Capture them if possible, for they may tell us even more than their machines!"

Chara stabbed at the hatch button with the hilt of her sword. With squeaks and squeals the hatch slowly opened. Four people dove out through an opening Blade would have sworn was too narrow for one. No one was worrying about depriving Mazda of any honor now. They were all too eager to get at the Looters.

As Blade's feet hit the platform outside, something went pffftttt from the Looter machine and something else went spannnngggg! beside Blade. One of the men let out a gasp of pain and clapped a hand to his thigh. A small metal dart gleamed there, the blood just starting to well out around it.

But the Looter machine was less than twenty feet away. Before the Looter with the dart gun could fire again, the other attackers converged on a hatch that gaped open below the nose dome. One of the women flattened herself against the hull, then threw a wad of blazing cloth in through the hatch.

The black smoke of burning teksin oil poured out of the hatch. A moment later came a raw-throated gurgling scream. A human figure stumbled out of the hatch and fell to its knees, clothing and hair blazing. Somehow it lurched to its feet, one hand holding a small tube out in front of it. The tube spat out another dart-and this one took one of the women in the throat. She dropped her sword, swayed, and raised both hands to her throat. Then slowly she folded forward to the ground, kicked for a few moments, and lay still.

For a moment a red haze seemed to flicker in front of Blade's eyes. To bring the people so far, and now-! His breath stuck in his throat for another moment, then he charged forward.

He knocked two other fighters aside as he reached for the hatch. Both hands closed on the edge. It must have weighed two hundred pounds, but Blade ripped it free and hurled it away as easily as if it had been a playing card. Then he leaped through the opening, into the Looter machine.

Another dart clanged off the floor as Blade landed inside. He flattened himself against the forward bulkhead while his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Then he whirled around and sprang up into the cockpit. A glance told him that it was full of strange shapes and strange instruments. But for the moment he didn't care about them. All that interested him now were the two remaining members of the Looter crew.

One of them was a woman. She was backing away into a corner as Blade entered. The other, a lean red-haired man, stood on one of the control consoles and aimed his dart-thrower at Blade with one hand while he drew a sword with the other.

Blade lunged forward and up. One hand chopped upward under the wrist of the hand holding the dart gun. Blade felt the other's bones splinter under the impact, heard the man scream, saw the dart gun go flying. He pivoted and drove his other fist into the man's stomach. The man doubled up and lurched forward off the console.

Blade caught him as he fell, grabbed him around the waist, and hurled him up and back as hard as he could. The man seemed to fly through the air, then jerk to a sudden halt. His mouth opened, letting out a scream and a spray of blood. His arms and legs waved frantically as he hung, impaled on the broken points of the canopy, then went limp.

Blade turned to the woman. She was still backed into her corner and had drawn a short sword. One of the people moved in with his own sword drawn. A flicker and a clack of teksin meeting metal. The attacker's sword went flying. He dove to retrieve it. The woman's sword slashed down at the back of his neck, and he jumped clear just in time.

Blade took a closer look at the woman. She was small and lithe, with curling brown hair piled on top of her head. Her eyes were wide, but with intense concentration on her opponents, not with fear. This was someone who meant to sell her life as dearly as possible.

"Don't kill her!" shouted Blade. The woman might not want to be taken alive, but she was the last chance for a Looter prisoner. He drew his own sword and moved in. The woman thrust, fast and well, but his own down-cut was faster and delivered with a much stronger arm. It beat down the woman's guard. Blade thrust high, aiming to smash the flat of his sword into the woman's head and stun her.

Instead she dropped under his thrust and came up with her sword darting at his groin. The point drove into his teksin loinguard and was held there for a moment. Blade's left hand chopped down at the woman's sword arm. She jerked it back from under the chop just in time. Blade's hand came down on the sword itself, knocking it out of the woman's hand.

Instantly she dropped into an unarmed-combat stance. One small booted foot darted out at Blade's chest in a high kick. He pivoted so that it struck his left shoulder. Then he clamped both hands on the woman's ankle and twisted, hard. The woman screamed but had to turn over on her face to keep her ankle from being twisted apart. The moment she did so, Blade lunged forward and brought the edge of one hand down across the back of her neck, just below the hairline. He struck with only a fraction of the force he could have used. The woman went limp, but a quick check told Blade that she was unconscious rather than dead.

Blade quickly stripped off the woman's belt and tied her hands tightly behind her back. He lifted her across his shoulders easily-she could not have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. Then he turned to the fighters behind him.

"Two of you go and bring our comrade with us. We shall not leave her. But we must get away from here as fast as possible, before the smaller machines come."

The five nodded. Blade shifted the woman to a more comfortable position and led the way out into the street.

Chapter 21

Blade led his survivors into the nearest deep cellar. He would have liked to sit down and spend hours or days with the command machine and the prisoner, digging out secrets. But to do that he and the others

would have to live through whatever attack the three machines on guard outside Miros might still launch.

They stayed down there in the stifling, dusty darkness for a good two hours. After perhaps half an hour they heard the sound of three distant explosions, one after another. Then silence. After the savage violence that had thundered through its long-dead streets, Miros seemed to be returning to its former peace and quiet.

Blade realized that he was more exhausted than he had realized, both physically and mentally. His throat was as dry as the dust lying inches deep on the cellar floor around him. It got drier every time he breathed. His skin was caked with sweat and grime and his wounded hand sent a dull, continuously throbbing pain up his left arm to his bruised left shoulder. In the darkness Blade could not see the others. But their silence suggested that they were too stunned by the terrifying violence of the past few hours to even realize they had won a victory, let alone rejoice over it.

After the two hours had passed, Blade stood up, brushed off as much dust as he could, and gave his orders.

"It's time we got back on the streets and out of Miros. If the smaller Looter machines were going to move in, I think we'd have heard them by now."

"This is true, Mazda," said Chara. "But what if they have gone off after our comrades?"

"Then we go on managing as best we can ourselves," said Blade. "We have done that all this day and so won our victory. We can go on doing it as long as necessary." He bent and lifted the Looter woman onto his shoulders again.

The first living things they met in the streets of Miros were not Looters, but a party of six of their own scouts on horseback. These broke into a gallop when they saw Blade's party, and came pounding up in a cloud of dust. In the lead was Anyara. She sprang down out of her saddle and ran up to Blade.

"Mazda, the Looters are gone from here, all of them."

"The other three machines?"

"Half an hour after the battle in the city ended, they exploded with much flame and smoke. They are nothing but pieces of black metal now, harmless to everyone."

"Good." No doubt the machines had been programmed to destroy themselves if they lost contact with the command vehicle. The Looters had realized that it was not wise to let their enemies capture their machines. "Are the four machines we captured in the first battle intact?"

"They are."

"Good again. Let them be brought into the city. I want to examine the machine in which the Looters themselves rode. There may be heavy things in it we want to take away, too heavy for our horses to carry."

"Mazda has spoken. And-the prisoner?" She pointed at the woman still slung across Blade's shoulder.

"She should not be harmed for now. If we treat her well, she may tell us much about the Looters and their machines." Blade was determined that the woman should be well-treated at all times and never

tortured. But the people would not accept this attitude toward an enemy even from Mazda unless he gave them some good reason.

Anyara's eyes wandered past Blade to the two men carrying the dead woman. Blade shook his head. "The prisoner did not do that. It was one of the two men with her. They are both dead. The woman is the only one left, the only one who can tell us anything."

"Only three of them?" said Anyara, wonderingly.

"Yes. Their machines still did most of their own thinking. These people only gave them orders when the machines could not figure out what to do on their own."

"It didn't help them much, did it?" said Anyara with a grin. "They lost just the same as they did the first time."

Blade nodded. He did not point out how little they would still know about the Looters if the woman refused to talk. That would only start Anyara thinking of torture again.

Instead he said, "Three or four of the scouts ride out and take word of our victory to the others. Have them come here and bring the captured machines with them. Everyone else start making camp. We will stay here for tonight, and study the big Looter machine."

There were uneasy looks around the streets where smoke still lay thick over piles of rubble and around ruined and mutilated buildings. Obviously no one cared for the idea of spending the night in the devastation that had been the city of Miros. But no one ventured a protest. Once more, Mazda had spoken.

Before sunset the rest of the expedition appeared, bringing all their gear and the captured machines with them. A foraging party to the lakeshore brought back firewood. Campfires crackled and sparked among the tents, driving back the darkness and some of the gnawing fear. But no one sang, no one cracked a joke, no one slipped off into the shadows to make love. This was not a time for laughter or joking, and the shadows were unfriendly.

Blade worked through the night, examining the wrecked command machine. It was one marvel after another, and he learned much. He knew that he would have learned much more with the woman helping him. But the woman still sat unsmiling and unspeaking in her closely guarded tent. She took food and water when it was given to her, and showed no sign of fear or panic. But she said nothing, and her alertness never slackened. Blade hoped she would decide to speak soon. Otherwise he would have trouble persuading Anyara and the others that she should not be tortured.

Like the other Looter machines, the command machine was obviously old, perhaps centuries old. The design and construction were such that it would not wear out for a long time unless it was very poorly maintained. But it was also obvious that for some years at least it had received very little of the maintenance it needed.

Blade suspected that the woman and the two men were of two different peoples. The woman was small and slender, with a dark complexion. The two men were both tall, large-boned, heavily muscled, pale under their tans. Their curly hair was reddish brown. They also had the callused hands and feet of men accustomed to hard work-or handling weapons-and hard walking. A people of scientists and a people of soldiers or workmen? The woman knew, certainly. But the woman wouldn't say anything! Blade felt like pounding his fists against the walls of the command machine.

He had just reached that point of frustration when he found something that made him forget it and the woman alike in a single moment. In a heavy locker sprung open by the damage the machine had taken, Blade found a long, finned cylinder. It was about eight feet long and two feet in diameter, with an unmistakable fusing mechanism at one end. On its gray metal flank was the even more unmistakable symbol of an atom, in luminous red.

This had to be one of the Looters' atomic bombs. If the woman would only talk about it!

Blade had taken the basic nuclear weapons course at the British Army's Royal Engineer school, and all atomic bombs were more or less alike. They had to be. But the same wasn't true for booby traps or fusing mechanisms. The woman might save his life, and she would certainly save him weeks of tedious and perhaps dangerous work, by revealing the secrets of the bomb.

There was no way around it—the woman would have to speak. Anyara would be more than happy to try direct and drastic methods. Blade himself had to admit that a time might come when it would be a choice between torturing the woman and risking the existence of the people of Tharn.

But he would try other methods first. He would start by getting the woman away from the nightmarish ruins of Miros. Why not get her away from the rest of the people entirely, while he was at it? With no witnesses, he could be as gentle as he wanted to be with her. He suspected that if the woman responded at all, it would be more to gentleness than to threats or abuse.

Fortunately, he had the perfect excuse. The atomic bomb weighed nearly half a ton, far too heavy to be carried back to the lands of the people on horseback. To send for wagons or chariots would take weeks. But if the bomb could be loaded aboard one of the captured machines, Mazda could fly it swiftly back to the New City of the People. And if Mazda wanted to take back the prisoner as well, since she was almost as important as the bomb, who would object?

No one objected. Before dawn the next morning, twelve strong fighters carried the bomb to the rear platform of one of the captured machines. Then Blade carried the Looter woman, carefully bound hand and foot, into the machine.

He took off and circled three times over the battered city, watching the people in the camp below wave and brandish their weapons. He was very conscious of the burden he was carrying. It was not only the atomic bomb and the prisoner, but perhaps the whole future of the people of Tharn.

He hoped he would not stumble while he had this burden on his shoulders.

Chapter 22

Blade flew straight west at low altitude for several hours, politely ignoring the woman. She lay quietly on the furs spread across the cabin floor, still not speaking a word. But Blade had the impression that his flying away with her was not what she had expected. Perhaps she had been expecting the torture Anyara would have inflicted? Perhaps. In any case, she was surprised—too surprised to be able to completely hide the fact.

As the plain rolled past beneath them, the woman began to relax. She stretched out as much as her bonds would let her. She stopped staring continuously at Blade as though expecting him to attack her or turn into a monster at any moment. Finally she quietly drifted off to sleep. Blade left the controls long enough to spread a fur over her, then returned to his seat. The woman would need that sleep, whatever

happened to her in the next few days.

About four hours out of Miros, Blade spotted a small lake to the north. This was as good a place as any to land and begin his "interrogation" of the woman. They were hundreds of miles from both the people and the Looters, as alone for the moment as Adam and Eve.

Blade landed the machine without waking the woman. Still without waking her, he carefully locked away all the weapons except his own sword, then disconnected the main controls. He tied the hatch key, the locker key, and the sword to his belt. Then he sat down beside the woman and gently rested one hand on her shoulder.

She came awake in an instant, eyes widening and body going rigid. Her eyes never blinked or left Blade's face as he drew his sword. But he could see her teeth biting into her lower lip until beads of blood appeared and a trickle crept down her chin. She was seeing death in that drawn sword, and she was determined to face it and endure it without a cry or a moment's loss of courage.

This, Blade realized, was a warrior. Or at least a brave woman determined to look as much like a warrior as she could.

He reached over behind her back with the sword. A quick flick of the sword, and the leather thongs binding her hands fell to the floor. Another flick, and her feet were also free.

This time the woman not only didn't hide her surprise, but looked as though she was going to faint from it. Blade quickly rose and got her a cup of water. Slowly she sat up, straightening and flexing bruised and cramped arms and legs. Then she took the cup and drank, holding it in shaking hands.

"Drink as much as you want," said Blade. He spoke quietly and politely, as he would have spoken to a female guest in his own London flat. "There is plenty of water and food. I do not wish to harm you in any way."

"You are-who?" the woman said. Her voice was low and husky, more with strain than with anything else. Blade nearly sighed with relief. He had seriously begun to wonder if by some mad joke of fate the woman was a mute! That would have meant a thousand kinds of unwanted fun in trying to interrogate her about the Looters!

"I am the Mazda of the people of the land of Tharn," he replied. "I lead them in their wars."

"My name is Silora," the woman said. "I am a-" She stopped suddenly and her mouth clamped shut.

"Yes," said Blade. "You are a-?"

"Why should I tell you?" said Silora, her voice chilly. "You are Principal Technician of War for your people. Anything I tell you, you may use against mine. You are an enemy."

"I do not know that this is so," said Blade. "Even if it is so now, it need not be so in the future. But I know almost nothing about your people, so how can I tell? You know practically nothing about the people of Tharn, so how can you tell either?"

"I ask you to think this over. In the meantime you are free to walk about, drink, eat, bathe-to make yourself as comfortable as you wish. As I said, I do not wish to harm you. You have no good reason to wish to harm me, either." Blade rose and went to the hatch, opened it, and stepped out onto the platform,

leaving the hatch open.

He wasn't going to trust the woman enough to leave her with any easy chances to try escaping or killing him. But he was going to trust her to respond to decent treatment and no threats.

Besides, there was that intriguing possibility that the Looters might be two different peoples in an alliance. An uneasy alliance? Possibly. An alliance that might be broken? Also possibly. If he could just learn enough- Blade stepped down off the platform and started walking around the machine, trying to walk off some of his impatience.

He kept walking for an hour, moving in wider and wider circles, farther and farther from the machine. Finally he walked over to the shore of the lake and hid himself behind a bush, watching the machine carefully. If Silora took this apparent chance to escape, it would mean she was absolutely desperate. She would have to be desperate, to walk away barefoot into the endless plains of this unknown land. If she was even more desperate but cooler-headed, she might try to fuse the atomic bomb and set it off.

She did neither. Blade spent two tedious hours under the bush, broiled by the sun and jabbed and nibbled at by assorted bugs. At the end of that time he rose and walked back to the machine.

Silora was asleep on the floor again. An empty food container beside her showed that she had eaten. Blade bent over to listen to her peaceful breathing. So far so good. She was not desperate, at least not now. But she might take a long time to become friendly, if she ever did.

Silora didn't become particularly friendly during the next several days they spent camped by the lake. But she didn't need to. If she had been facing one of the people, the odd phrases she let fall might have been as meaningless as the gruntings of a pig. But Blade was a trained and expert interrogator. He knew a good deal about the Looters and had guessed a good deal more. He could make Silora's most casual phrases into pieces of the puzzle he was assembling.

He suspected more and more that the Looters were actually two people. But he still wasn't sure. He was still less sure what the exact relationship between those two peoples might be. Could they possibly be turned into enemies, in the ancient tradition of "divide and conquer?"

He could risk asking Silora directly, of course. But that might shatter the slim trust in him she had let herself develop. She could turn silent and sullen again. Would Anyara-or even his own son-give him the extra time to win her trust again? Could he win it? If he couldn't, sooner or later they would ask him to turn her over for torture. He would refuse-he knew it. What would the people and his own son say then, if he refused something that might save them?

Damn! There were risks either way. He could decide which course to take almost as well by flipping a coin as by any other way.

Evening came down on the plain, the evening of their fourth day at the camp. Blade had put arrows into a couple of gopherlike animals that stuck their heads up at the wrong moment. Now they made a savory smell as they roasted on a spit over a campfire laid out on the shore of the lake. Smoke rose into the darkening sky and the light of the fire glimmered on the gently rippling water of the lake.

Silora sat cross-legged on the grass, her freshly washed tunic and trousers steaming themselves dry on her body.

She still did not trust Blade enough to strip down in his presence, although he had gone naked day and

night since the second day. This surprised her and made her nervous at first. But after a day she obviously became used to it. Blade even noticed her casting one or two interested looks at him.

He picked up the spit and cut it in two with his sword, handing her one animal. She tore greedily into the fresh, smoking meat, letting the grease ooze down her chin. That was another thing that she found hard to accept. Blade always served her first and made a special point of giving her the choicest pieces.

When they had both finished off their meat, Blade poured both their cups full of beer from the last skin bag. He drank, then smiled. "Silora, what is a 'Principal Technician of War'? What does he do, among your people?"

Silora did not stiffen or glare as she had done before. She only replied, "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I don't know if I am really one or not, among the people of Tharn. It's a strange title, and you've made me curious about what it might mean."

"It means it is what the commander of the shtafari calls himself. It is not a title that is rightfully his, but he uses it anyway." Both her eyes and her voice showed indignation.

Blade nodded. "And who-or what-are the shtafari? That's something you haven't mentioned before."

He caught the sudden tightening of her lips and the veiling of her eyes and laid a hand gently on one of her knees. "It just struck me-you know very little of how we live in Tharn. So why don't I tell you of it, and what I am as Mazda. Then you can tell me whether I am indeed a-a Principal Technician of War-or whatever." He said the title as though the words left a bad taste in his mouth.

She nodded. "That-that seems fair enough. I would like to know more about you." The curiosity in her voice was genuine. So was the curiosity in her eyes as they ran over his body again.

Blade launched into his description of life in Tharn. He didn't say very much about the history of the people or how they had ended up in their present situation. Instead he gave the impression that life in Tharn had gone happily along this way for centuries.

Blade got quite caught up in his own tale, enough to stop paying attention to Silora. It wasn't until he broke off for a drink of water that he realized she was staring at him, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. He hadn't seen her eyes so wide since the day of her capture.

"What is it, Silora?" he said. "Has my face turned blue or something like that?"

Silora swallowed and shook her head. "No, it is-it is-it is-"

"It is what, Silora?" said Blade gently.

"Your warriors-your shtafari-do they rule the-the neuters?"

"What do you mean by 'rule,' Silora? They-"

"They keep them behind bars at home, don't they? And the women-no, there aren't any women neuters-but if there were women, they would-" She realized she wasn't making any sense, stopped, took a deep breath, and went on. "The warriors-do they give the orders and the neuters and the women obey? Or-" Her voice trailed off, as if she could not imagine any other way of living.

"I'm still not sure what you mean," said Blade. He was quite sure, in fact. The truth about the Looters was coming out at last. He had his victory, and the torturers would not have Silora. "Both our men and our women fight, as you have seen. Our neuters do not fight, but that does not mean they obey. They are often wise teachers, and much respected."

"Then-then your warriors are not-shtafari. They-there was no war between them and the neuters and women?"

"War? No." Almost the truth. "Why should there be? They-"

Silora swallowed. "The shtafari-they rule in Konis. They have ruled since their revolt, the revolt that took away all the power of the Peace Lords. All the hope of the Peace Lords." Her eyes were wet and she seemed about to burst into tears.

"The Peace Lords?" repeated Blade, nodding as though he understood absolutely. "Naturally you as a Peace Lord were-abused-by those two shtafari who were with you in the machine?" That was a gamble, a shot almost in the dark. But he couldn't think of anything to say that would do more good if by some chance it did hit its target.

Silora quivered as if she had been struck by a real arrow, and her eyes closed for a moment, squeezing out tears to make trails down her soot-darkened cheeks. "Yes. Yes. They-the shtafari do-always have done-what they wish with Peace Lord women. But these-" She could not go on. It was as though the memory of what the two shtafari had done made her so physically ill that words would not come.

Blade nodded. But this time when he spoke he made his voice sound harsher and more suspicious than he felt. "I see, almost. But-then why were you armed with that sword, if you and the shtafari were ene-"

Silora giggled hysterically. "Oh-if you had seen me with those two-animals-you wouldn't ask. I did-they thought I was so hungry for everything they wanted me to do that I would never turn against them. Never, never, never! They thought I was a hungry little pet they could keep tame by feeding what she wanted. What I wanted!" The giggle rose to a hysterical laugh. Silora threw back her head and howled and shrieked open-mouthed, eyes staring blindly up at the starlit sky. Blade reached out to take her and hold her, but she sprang to her feet and away from him. For a moment her eyes drifted down to focus on him, then she turned and ran off into the darkness.

Blade threw another armful of wood on the fire and lay back on the furs spread on the ground. There was no need to follow Silora. In fact, she might become more hysterical and run faster if he did. She would come back when she was calm enough to say to Blade all the things that were obviously bubbling up inside her. That would take time. But after tonight Silora would be talking much more freely, and Blade would be learning about the Looters-the people of Konis-much faster than he had been.

Gradually the warmth of the fire made Blade feel sleepy. He considered trying to stay awake until Silora returned, then decided there was no need. She had no weapons and could not fly away in the machine. There was small chance that she would want to either harm him or flee, in any case. Blade quietly drifted off to sleep, feeling more at peace with the world than he had felt since he returned to Tharn.

He awoke to the sound of soft footsteps approaching him along the lake shore. Without rising, he slid his hand under the furs over him and clasped the hilt of his sword. He lay motionless as the footsteps continued to approach, then stopped. In the silence Blade heard the faint whisper of the wind, the even fainter whisper of breathing close at hand, then a small, nervous laugh. He turned his head in the direction

of the sound, and saw Silora.

She had obviously been swimming in the lake, and had not bothered to dress again. Beads of water glistened like jewels on her skin. The moonlight silvered one whole side of her body from forehead to ankle. Her hair flowed in a dark straight cascade down her bare back.

She was utterly beautiful standing there, and Blade felt desire springing to life in him. It was a desire that Silora obviously shared, a desire to which she was ready to respond. Their eyes met and she smiled. It was a somewhat uncertain smile, reminding Blade how much of Silora's experience of sex had been rather ugly. He would have to be more than usually gentle with her.

Before Blade could move an inch Silora came over to him and knelt down beside him. She bowed her head over Blade's middle, then shook it until her hair was flowing down over her shoulders and breasts. It flowed on down over Blade's genitals, caressing them with a thousand tiny soft delicate brushes. Then Silora began to slowly sway back and forth from the waist. The movement sent exciting little shudders through the taut flesh of her small, perfect breasts. It also drew her hair back and forth across Blade, which was far more exciting. His desire rose further, and his body began to show it. He would not have believed that what Silora was doing could draw such a response from him, no matter how much skill a woman put into it. But he couldn't deny that she was doing it.

Blade had not wanted to move for fear of alarming the woman. Now he could not have moved if he had wanted to. His body would not obey his brain any more. It would obey only its own desperate desire to receive more of the caresses of Silora's hair.

How long she could have gone on this way Blade never knew. He did know that he was about to throw caution to the winds and reach out for her when she took the next step herself. It was a short step, and it left her astride his body. Then she gently lowered herself onto him, taking the whole of his erection into herself so slowly that she seemed to be wanting to test his massive member an inch at a time. Blade saw her eyes widen and the muscles of her throat tighten as he entered her, and the rise and fall of her breasts quickened. Her nipples were small but very distinct, dark brown, and now standing out hard and surprisingly long.

Then Silora closed her eyes and began to rock back and forth and twist around and around with Blade inside her. She moved slowly at first, without any pattern, feeling her way along. Then she found a pattern that pleased her, and she began to move faster.

Blade did not move. A move would no longer frighten Silora away-she wouldn't notice. But on top of what he was already getting Blade knew any movement of his own might push him to climax and beyond. He didn't want that now, not with this woman. With this woman it was more important than ever before to match his pace to hers, however hard he had to fight for it, whatever he had to do to manage it. He knew as clearly as if it was written across the night sky above that she must reach her peak first. That would set his lovemaking apart from anything she had ever experienced before, and Blade wanted to be certain of doing that. It was no longer just a question of getting out of her all the information the people so badly needed. It was a matter of kindness and decency on his part toward a woman who had been hurt in so many ugly ways.

Silora kept on. Her eyes were no longer wide, but shut tight, and a tear traced a path down each cheek. The water was drying off her now, but beads of sweat were breaking out on her forehead and neck and breasts as she moved. Her mouth tightened into a line that looked more grim than ecstatic. Blade was beginning to wonder if she was somehow beyond reaching a climax, if the damage over the years hadn't been too great. But he didn't know, he couldn't know, he had to hold on. He had to hold on, and if

holding on meant dying he would die and there was an end to the matter.

A moment later Silora's mouth opened, but not to smile. She let out a wide-mouthed, almost terrifying yell, that went floating away across the lake into the silent darkness of the plain. There was pain in that yell-real pain-but also triumph, joy, surprise-all mixed together in a terrible, wonderful confusion. The tears turned from a trickle into a flood, sweat broke out all over her body, her pelvic muscles jerked in a frantic rhythm, her body arched and bowed and twisted. Then she started sagging forward, eyes glazed. If she had to save both her life and Blade's by a single extra movement, they would both have died on the spot.

Blade's own moment arrived as Silora sagged forward onto his chest. He clutched at her until his fingers dug into the firm flesh of her thighs and buttocks and twisted his own hips around as his terribly pent-up beat jetted upward into her. As that jetting came to an end Silora collapsed onto him, as boneless as a jellyfish and for the moment as helpless as one cast up on the beach after a storm. Blade did not need to disturb her and wouldn't have done so even if he had needed to.

How much time passed before Silora's eyes flickered open, Blade didn't know or care. The same warm bath of satisfied desire was washing over both of them. But eventually he found her dark eyes staring into his, and her lips curling in another smile. Then she raised herself on her elbows and looked down the length of his body, then the length of hers.

"What are you looking for, Silora?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. The shtafari-"

"-are not here. I am not one of them, not a Principal Technician of War, not even a Very Unimportant Technician of War!"

For some reason his feeble joke made her giggle and then laugh long and loud. "No, you are not anything of that sort," she said, after catching her breath. "I think it is time we found out more about what we really are, as you said. I do not know for certain what you will do with what you learn, Mazda. But I am as certain as I need to be that you will not use it to hurt me or the Peace Lords. That is something new for me. Just how new, perhaps you will understand in time."

Chapter 23

They stayed in their Adam-and-Eve home by the little lake for several more days. By the end of that time Blade understood clearly why a bout of healthy lovemaking was something so rare and wonderful for Silora. He also knew nearly everything he needed to know about the Looters in order to continue the people's fight against them. He did not know enough to guarantee victory, but no general ever knew that much. So Blade did not worry. He and Silora would do their best.

To start with, there were two different groups among the Looters: the shtafari-which meant "mercenaries"-and the Peace Lords. Most definitely they were not on good terms. Silora made it clear that the two groups in Konis got along about as well as sheep and wolves.

The Looters could indeed travel between dimensions, and in fact had been doing so for nearly a century. That was one of the causes of their present problems. When Blade heard this, he could not quite manage to stay seated or keep his face straight. Eventually he had to tell Silora his full story, swearing her to secrecy beforehand.

"Do you think that the people of Konis have ever reached your-your England on earth, you call it?"

Blade shook his head. "Not with their war machines. If they did, they would be discovered quickly. And most of them would not get back to Konis."

"That is likely, from what you tell me. But for the moment the mercenaries are here in Tharn. If they are to be fought, it must be here."

"Too true, unfortunately."

Konis was, or had been, a nation of the world in Silora's "Home Dimension." It was a world with a history as long and complex as earth's. But most of that history had nothing to do with what Blade faced in Tharn now. The part that did began only about a century before, with a full-scale global atomic war.

"No one knows any more what caused it. Most of those who did were killed in the war. But the principle of travel among the dimensions was discovered in Konis about then. Perhaps some of the nations that were our enemies got word of the discovery and decided to try to destroy us before we gained too great an advantage over them."

"Possibly." It was a sobering thought for Blade. What would England's enemies say if they knew about Project Dimension X? What would even her friends say-and do?

In any case, Konis won the war, as much as such a war can ever be won. It was left as the only relic of civilization in a world rapidly reverting to wilderness inhabited by savages.

Over two generations, Konis came to have only two groups that wielded real power. There were the scientists and learned people in general, the Peace Lords. They were busy trying to recover lost knowledge, and also kept control of the process of interdimensional travel.

Then there were the mercenaries, the formidable warriors who held the line against the barbarians and even extended the frontiers of Konis from time to time. As formidable as they were in war, the Peace Lords held them in contempt and showed it.

"That was a mistake," said Blade.

"It was," said Silora grimly. "Even some of the Peace Lords themselves realized it, my parents among them. They tried to change the minds of their fellow Peace Lords. Then when that failed, they joined the mercenaries in a rebellion. They thought it was only justice. I think what they really hoped was that it would be easier for them if someone else took over and ruled Konis. They were sick and tired of endless work that produced nothing."

The mercenaries were of course only too glad to take over Konis and rule it according to their own notions. The Peace Lords soon found that one of those notions was treating all nonmercenaries as virtual slaves, particularly the women. But that was only the beginning.

"They had defeated and driven back most of the barbarian peoples on the frontiers by then. So they thought-why not use the dimension door to go raiding in other dimensions? They dreamed of more war and killing and loot and slaves they could keep themselves or sell in Konis to make people grateful to them."

So the Looters were born. Frightened Peace Lords built a dimension door in the heart of the mercenary

city. Then the mercenaries took the machines they had been using to fight the barbarians and went off to other dimensions in them, to kill and destroy and loot.

"Of course it wasn't quite that simple, or I wouldn't be here now and you and your people would mostly be dead. The mercenaries had been fighting nobody but barbarians for so long that they had lost the knowledge of how to use many of the weapons and machines they had. Also, some of the machines themselves were only powerful enough to fight against people who could not really fight back. I think of the ones with the purple rays, for example."

So the mercenaries needed the help of the Peace Lords after all, to program and fight their machines. This meant that each expedition of Looters that traveled out from Konis through the dimension door into the unknown contained two groups who hated and distrusted each other. The mercenaries needed the Peace Lords and the Peace Lords usually had to leave hostages behind. So most of the time there was peace, at least on the surface.

But the Peace Lords seldom gave the mercenaries the best advice on tactics, or did the best possible job in programming the computers of the war machines. Some committed open acts of sabotage. The boldest of the Peace Lords plotted to find chances of running away entirely.

"For us, even exile in another dimension sometimes seemed better than living in Konis under the rule of the mercenaries. But the mercenaries knew this as well as we did. They did not trust us in positions where we could escape easily. Not many Peace Lords got into my position-one of three people on a fighting expedition in an almost new dimension."

This was not surprising, considering how Silora convinced the mercenaries that she could be trusted. She convinced a succession of them that she had such an insatiable appetite for the most grisly sexual perversions that she would never run away from anyone who would give her what she needed. That succession ran from the Principal Technician of War himself down to the two other men in the crew of the command machine. Her painfully acquired skill in unarmed combat further convinced the mercenaries that she had accepted their values and way of life.

Neither Silora's tale nor that of her people was a very pretty one. But when he heard it, Blade had more hope than before of saving the people of Tharn, which was what mattered here and now.

Still-

"Silora, I think I see a way of fighting the-the next expedition from Konis, when it arrives. But I need to know even more about the way that expedition will move and fight. Can you tell me? Will you tell me?"

"How can I do otherwise?" asked Silora simply. "I would do it even if I could do otherwise. I would not speak before, because I thought you were another barbarian warrior who had enslaved a civilized people."

"It has been a dream among the Peace Lords for many years that the mercenaries would one day meet a people who could face them in war. You are only one man, but you are so terrible in war that you are almost an army by yourself. You are also very-very worthy-in things other than war. Anything I know, you will know too."

It took quite a while for Silora to keep her promise. In spite of her intelligence, courage, and skill, she was not really a military expert. Blade had to draw much of her knowledge of Looter strategy, tactics, and weaponry out of her in bits and pieces. But it did come out.

When they were finished at last, Blade was tempted to take another day off for celebration and spend it swimming, lovemaking, and lying in the sun. But he did not know how much time they might have before the Looters arrived in Tharn in swarms. He had to assume that every day was precious.

So a week after landing by the lake, Blade and Silora took off again, heading west at full speed toward the lands of the people.

They arrived only a day after the triumphant return of the fighting expedition. Everyone in the New City was beginning to get worried over Mazda's "disappearance." He had flown off into the sky with a Looter prisoner and superbomb. Perhaps the prisoner had somehow slain Mazda and was on the way to drop the bomb on the people?

Blade's return put at least those fears to rest. But there were mutterings when Mazda and King Rikard gave orders for the Looter woman to be treated as an honored guest instead of locked up and tortured as an enemy prisoner.

Blade got even louder and more persistent mutterings from his own son when they discussed plans for the rest of what now both called the Looter War.

"The Looters make camp, as a rule, in three widely separated sections. One section is the tents of the mercenaries. Silora expects that when the Looters come again from Konis to Tharn, they will bring several thousand mercenaries, their soldiers, as well as the various machines. Another is the tents of the Peace Lords, well-guarded so they cannot get out to attack either the mercenaries or the war machines. The third is all the machines except a few that patrol around the camps. The machines must be our number-one target. A few Looters can do more damage with many machines than many Looters can do with a few machines. Also, it is easier for them to replace men, up to a point, than to replace machines."

"I see. What you wish to do is drop the captured superbomb on the machines, and then fight the living Looters as we fought the Pethcines."

"That's about it."

"What makes you think they will camp as Silora says they have done before?"

"They have no way of knowing that we have a superbomb. Also, their war leaders apparently do not like to make changes in the way they fight. That is a habit I have seen in many war leaders during my travels. It is always a bad habit."

"I can see why it would be one," said King Rikard. "Very well, you drop a bomb on the Looter camp and destroy most of their machines. How will you know when the Looters arrive and where they are?"

"Silora has shown me--"

"You trust Silora that much?" Father and son looked at each other sharply. Their stares collided with an almost audible crunch.

"So far I have seen no reason not to trust her," said Blade in a carefully level voice. "Do you see any reason to disagree with me on this? If so, speak out now, in private. Let us settle this between us before we take our plans before the council. There is already enough muttering about Silora and me without you adding to it."

"That is true," said Rikard slowly. It was the slowness of a man weighing his words very carefully, not the slowness of a man reluctant or disagreeing. "But I will say this- neither of us should be prepared to risk the whole people, everything, on what she says. Is that not so?"

Blade had to nod. "What are you thinking of, exactly?"

"I cannot know that until you finish explaining your plans, father. So go on, and I will not raise the matter of Silora again."

The Looter war machines were equipped with radio receivers and direction-finding gear that could give warning of the arrival of a Looter force in Tharn and the course to follow to reach it. Silora knew how to operate this equipment, and had showed Blade the same.

"With these devices, I will know when the Looters arrive and where they are. Silora and I will fly directly to the Looter camp. On the way she will prepare the superbomb to explode. We will sneak in low in the darkness, and drop the bomb on the Looter machines. This should destroy most of them."

"And if it does not?"

"Then obviously we must be ready. But if only a few war machines survive, it will not be too serious. We have four of the Looter machines ourselves, and more of our people can learn to fly them. The Looters will not know that our rays do not work. They will think we can use our machines against their soldiers if they use theirs against ours. Their mercenaries go into battle against people like us wearing much metal, so they also would be afraid of the purple rays.

"I see," said the king. "And with the machines destroyed, the Looters will be easy to fight?"

Blade shook his head. "There may be several thousand of them. They are well-trained and they will fight bravely. They have large pellet-throwers that can match the range of our bows and small dart-throwers that are deadly at short ranges. They also have helmets, armor, and swords and knives they can use well. If several thousand of them come, there will be a greater battle than was ever fought against the Pethcines, let no one doubt that. But I think we can win if we prepare and equip ourselves properly. It will help greatly that the explosive bombs are now ready."

It was nearly dawn before Blade finished explaining to his son what the people would have to be ready to do in the battle against the Looters. King Rikard seemed to have no more doubts about Silora's trustworthiness. The questions he asked were those of a warrior taking the measure of an enemy and a leader responsible for his followers. That was a great relief to Blade.

Finally, as the eastern sky began to turn pale, King Rikard stood up and drained the last of the great leather jug of beer that had stood beside him through the night.

"Father, I will speak for all of your plans and schemes and say nothing against Silora if you will speak for one plan of mine."

"What plan is that?"

"The moment the Looters arrive, all the children and all those too old to fight will go down into the Gorge. They will take food, clothing, weapons, tools, seeds, and written records of all the knowledge of the people, including what you have taught us about the Looters. There are caves down in the Gorge

where ten times ten thousand of the people can hide so that the Looters will never find them. Those who go down into the Gorge will enter the caves and stay there until the Looter War is over, one way or another."

Blade laughed. "I will speak with pleasure for that plan. I was going to suggest something like that myself, if there was a place where some of the people could hide from the Looters." He rose and embraced his son. For a long moment they stood looking at each other, then Blade turned and went out into the courtyard of the King's House.

The hard-packed earth was damp with dew and the eastern sky was rapidly getting lighter. A cool breeze blew up over the New City from the Gorge. Blade stretched and stretched, until every knotted muscle was extended to the full. Then he headed toward the chamber he shared with Silora.

Chapter 24

The people threw themselves into preparing to fight the Looters with an enthusiasm that surprised even Blade. Part of it was their desire to please Mazda. More of it was the joy everyone felt at being able to strike a deadly blow at the Looters, a blow that might end their threat for good. This joy was all the greater because when the people's fighters rode out to battle this time, they would all be going. No one who could fight would be left behind.

This was perhaps the biggest gamble of the whole war. If the Looters did come to the battlefield with a strong force of war machines and were willing to risk using the purple ray, the people could be slaughtered. But without bringing out the whole three thousand fighting men and women of the people, there was no chance of inflicting a truly crushing blow on the full strength of the Looters. Blade wanted to smash the Looters-especially the mercenaries-not just defeat them.

Most of the people shared Blade's desire, but did not know all his reasons. Vengeance for their dead and a desire for peace in the future drove most of the People onward. Blade had another reason, one Silora gave him.

"If all the mercenaries are destroyed by your people here in Tharn," she said, "Konis will be free of them. It can start on its own road back to civilization, and perhaps I can even go home." Her eyes filled with happy tears at the thought.

Blade put his arm around her to console her but said nothing. It was a lovely fantasy-saving two dimensions for the price of one battle. But he suspected it was only a fantasy. From what Silora had told him, Konis was too far gone to have much hope of clawing its way back up to civilization, in spite of dimension doors and war machines. They had let the barbarians take over, barbarians they had created themselves. If there was any hope at all for them, it probably lay much farther in the future than it did for Tharn.

But it was obvious that Silora wanted to go home to Konis in spite of that, to take her chances there with her own people, to live and die there. Blade made up his mind that he would do everything he could to see that she got her wish, or at least everything that he could do without danger to the people.

A month passed, a month of furious training and making weapons and explosives, of stocking the refuge caves down in the Gorge, of packing up tools and seeds and written records ready to go. Three of the captured war machines were also hidden down in the Gorge. Their pilots were trained on them down there. One remained on the plateau, carefully disguised. Silora tuned its receivers to pick up the signals that would tell of the arrival of a Looter expedition. For the first few days she spent most of her time in

the machine listening for that signal. She worked herself close to collapse listening, so Blade set up a regular rotating watch in the machine, reliable fighters trained by Silora to recognize the signal.

But it was Silora herself who came to Blade in the darkness one night to shake him gently awake.

"Mazda, the signal has come. The expedition is in Tharn. A large one, as we expected. I have never seen so many strong signals."

"Where are they?"

"No more than two days' ride away, I think, and almost straight east."

"Good." Blade rose and started pulling on his clothes.

"Go quietly to the King's House and give them the message. Then join me at our machine."

"I shall." She rose on tip-toe to kiss him long and warmly, then vanished into the darkness.

They could have reached the Looter camp in less than twenty minutes by flying fast. But Blade did not want to fly quite that fast just a few feet above the plain on a pitch-black night. They had to fly low, to stay below the Looters' horizon for as long as possible.

Halfway there they landed and Silora crawled out onto the rear platform to arm the bomb. Blade was waiting until now for safety's sake. He was quite sure that Silora would not betray him and the people by setting off the bomb deliberately. But he was equally sure that she could make mistakes, and mistakes with atomic bombs can lead to rather impressive displays of fireworks. Blade wanted to be sure that any such fireworks were a good safe distance away from the people.

The clatter of tools and the scraping of metal sounded from outside for about ten minutes. Then a pale and perspiring Silora climbed back in, unreeling a long teksin cord. She handed the leather loop at the end of the cord to Blade, then closed the hatch, leaving only a two-inch opening. Blade carefully pulled on the cord to make sure it would slide freely back and forth through the opening.

Silora sighed with relief and sat down cross-legged on the cabin floor. "That's done, Mazda. Now all we can do is to hope everything works as we planned it to work and that the mercenaries have followed their usual camp plan."

Blade nodded slowly. "If they don't-" It was time to face something he had not felt it necessary to mention until now. "Suppose we can only destroy the machines if we are willing to destroy your people, the Peace Lords, along with them? Will you stand by me even then, or would you rather be left here and picked up on my way back rather than see that?"

Silora was silent for a moment. "I will fly with you all the way, Mazda. That is as it must be. But if the bomb must fall on the Peace Lords as well as the mercenaries, then-" Her voice failed her for a moment. She swallowed and continued. "Then when it comes time to drop the bomb, I want to go out on the platform and jump with it. It is better that the Peace Lords die than that Tharn and its people die. But if the Peace Lords die, then I must die with them. That is also as it must be, for I could not live long in that case."

Blade was silent for quite a long time. He hoped she wasn't expecting an answer to that, because he honestly couldn't think of one. Finally he turned back to the controls and lifted the machine into the sky

again.

The armed bomb now rode securely in a complex and rugged cradle of leather strips and teksin rods. A quick tug on the cord running in through the hatch and the whole cradle would collapse, letting the bomb roll off the platform of its own weight and fall free. It was fused to explode when it hit the ground. That would not give absolutely the best results, but with an atomic bomb who needed absolutely the best? It would flatten everything; for a mile in every direction, which was more than good enough.

They slid onward through the darkness, listening to the signals of the Looters grow stronger and stronger. About twenty miles out they saw a dim glow on the horizon ahead. It grew steadily stronger as they steered straight for it. At ten miles both of them shouted out loud in delight, as the glow began to separate into three distinct parts, the center one fainter than the other two. At the same time it became possible to distinguish three distinct signals on the direction-finder, each coming from a slightly different location.

Silora's face was one enormous glowing smile that seemed to light up the whole cabin. "They are as usual, Mazda. The Principal Technician of War has not thought anything new was needed against this opponent."

Blade did not smile. He merely nodded and said, "He will be a very surprised man before too long. Which one is the machine camp?" Within, he felt a great relief. He had not been looking forward to returning home without Silora, after watching her leap to a death he knew she welcomed.

"The farthest one is giving off the usual signal of the machine camp," she said.

Blade swung the machine to the right and started it on a long curve around the triangle of Looter camps. The one with the machine was at the opposite point of the triangle. If they could skirt the whole patrolled area, they could come up on their target without any warning.

But whatever else he hadn't done, the Looter commander had extended his patrols farther than usual. Five minutes later the radio crackled into life with a loud, harsh voice that completely drowned out the directional signals.

"Unknown machine approaching Sector Seven of Patrol Zone, identify yourself immediately."

Silora switched the radio to SEND and replied, "Machine 576 returning to operations in control of Peace Lord Second Class Silora Jou after escape from natives. Repeat, this is Peace Lord Second Class Silora Jou. I have escaped from the natives of this dimension. I have-"

"Understand, Peace Lord," said the voice sharply. "Identification insufficient. You are ordered to ground your machine immediately and await inspection. Failure to do so will lead to your being fired on. Repeat, ground your-"

Silora switched the radio back to SEND and made a rude noise into the microphone. As she shut off the radio entirely, Blade was at work on the power and the controls. The machine shot forward as he fed in the power, accelerating rapidly. When it was moving as fast as he dared to go this close to the ground, he shouted at Silora:

"Hang on!"

He put the machine into a steep climb, opening the power even wider. The machine leaped upward, its

speed mounting rapidly. On the screens the plain began to spread out below them, an endless velvety black rug with moving sparks of light on it that were the patrol machines.

Now came the most dangerous part of the whole mission. Instead of using stealth they would have to use speed, hurtling straight down the center of the triangle of Looter camps and dropping the bomb by sheer guesswork from a high altitude.

Blade fed in still more power. The shriek and howl of the air rushing past outside blasted in through the open hatch. It sounded like a hundred madmen all screaming in chorus. Silora put her hands over her ears and Blade would have done the same if he hadn't been too busy with the controls.

They must have been doing close to five hundred miles an hour. The circle of lights that was the camp of the machines was a good fifteen miles away, but it swept toward them with frightening speed. Blade kept the machine lined up precisely on the center of the circle. He wished he didn't have to fly a straight course, but there was no choice. Otherwise he might miss the target, even with the atomic bomb.

At least they would be hard to hit at this speed. Hitting them with a ray or a rocket now would be like hitting a flying mosquito with a pistol shot. It could be done, but it would take good luck as well as good shooting.

The target leaped toward them out of the night at the rate of more than a mile every ten seconds. Blade checked altitude, remembered wind conditions on the ground, did a quick set of mental calculations, wished for a pocket calculator, let alone a bombsight. Now the machine camp was about to pass below. Blade saw the perimeter lights reflected from scores of humped and curved and flat metal shapes in a dozen different sizes spread out in a circle a mile across. As the nearer edge of the circle passed across the center of the forward screen, Blade jerked on the leather loop at the end of the bomb-release cord.

He felt the machine give a little jump as it suddenly became half a ton lighter. A black finned cylinder swept across the rear screen, plunging downward, appearing on the down-looking screen. Blade didn't pay any attention to it. He nosed the machine over into a dive and pulled the hatch shut. The madmen's howling of air outside died to a distant mutter and moan as the machine plunged down through the miles of air, heading for the relative safety of low altitude.

So far, there was no sign that anyone on the ground had even noticed them, let alone fired at them. That was just as well. Blade knew they would have to stay closer to the Looters than he liked until after the bomb went off-or didn't go off. He had to watch what happened and then return to the people to tell the tale. If the defenders would just stay asleep until the bomb woke them up, that was all right with him!

Blade had guessed it would take the bomb roughly two minutes to reach the ground. Before the first minute was past they were racing through the patrol line. On one screen Blade saw a distant flash of purple as one of the patrol machines let loose with its ray. A desperate shot at them, or was the enemy firing at some ghost sprung from his own surprise and nerves?

One minute. One minute twenty seconds. One minute forty seconds. Two minutes. Two minutes ten seconds. Damn it, was the bloody thing going to take forever to fall? Or had it already hit and smashed itself to bits instead of going off? In another min-

Then there was no darkness anywhere, as the sun seemed to rise behind them. Silora screamed and clapped her hands over her eyes as the rear screen dissolved into a searing blaze of blinding white light. Blade shut his eyes and fumbled for the button to cut off the screen. When he heard the switch click over he opened his eyes again.

The plain still showed up with almost daylight clarity in the other screens. Blade nosed upward, so that the shock wave would not slam the machine against the ground.

The shock wave caught them a hundred feet up, throwing the machine nose down and tail up until Blade thought it was going to turn a complete somersault, end over end. Then the roar and rumble was past, spreading out into the darkness that was slowly returning to the plain.

Blade cut in the rear screen again. The fireball was almost gone now. Where it had been a terrible glowing gray white pillar of smoke loomed miles high in the night. The top was already reaching the stratosphere and beginning to spread out in the high winds and thin air many miles aloft. Around the base of the pillar were scattered hunched dark shapes, some of them giving off their own clouds of smoke.

Blade swung the machine around and raced back toward the base of the pillar. Three miles out he stopped. That was close enough to see clearly, not close enough to risk catching too much fall-out or being an easy target if some Looter was somehow still alert and on his feet.

Blade did see clearly, and what he saw was enough to make him turn away again. Not a machine in the whole machine camp could have been more than a mile from ground zero. The ones that hadn't been vaporized completely or melted into slag would never fly or fight again. Less than a hundred yards away a full-sized war machine lay on the ground, flung three miles through the air by the blast, half-buried and half-crushed by the impact of its landing. On one blackened metal side a pale man-shaped silhouette stood out with startling clarity. That was doubtless the shadow cast by a Looter, a Looter who had been standing between the machine and ground zero, a Looter who now formed part of the cloud that towered ten miles above the plain.

A crack Royal Air Force bomber crew might have dropped the bomb more precisely. But any more precision than Blade had managed would have been wasted. Blade's eyes and reflexes and instincts had done all that was needed.

Blade let out a sigh of relief as he turned the machine homeward. He could return to the people bringing word that the first part of their victory had been won this night.

He could also return bringing Silora with him. He could not say that he loved her as he had loved Zulekia. But he could say that he would not have been at all happy to leave her behind as part of that monstrous cloud-pillar.

Chapter 25

Blade's return with news of destroying the Looter machines set off a grand celebration. Only the fighting men and women of the people were now left in the camps around the New City, nearly three thousand of them. It was they who danced wildly up and down the streets, drank up what seemed like every drop of beer in Tharn, dragged each other off into deserted butts and sheltered places to make love. Blade saw Chara leading one of the lines of dancers, waving a sword in one hand and a beer cup in the other.

"They seem to think the war is already won," said Blade as he watched the celebration from the roof of the King's House.

His son shrugged. "A great victory has certainly been won, as you yourself promised. They are happy about that, happy that now they can face the Looters on equal terms."

"The terms will not be equal if in their pride and courage they forget what we have taught them," said Blade quietly. "Even if they can remember, many of them will still die in the battle against the Looters."

King Rikard smiled. "All the more reason for them to celebrate. For many of those down there this may be the last time they will ever make love, taste beer, dance with their friends. Would you deny them these last pleasures?"

Blade could hardly argue that point. In fact, it reminded him of Silora. He was Mazda, but that did not make him immortal or mean that tonight might not be his last chance to make love.

So he went off to the chamber where Silora lay, and soon they were locked around each other. They did not unwind until the light of dawn and the sound of drums and trumpets told them it was daylight and time to mount up and ride out.

Blade did not leave the New City on horseback. He and Chara and Silora rode in one of the war machines that formed a scouting line well out in front of the advancing people. Possibly the mercenaries would stay where they were, paralyzed by the shock of the bombing. It was even possible that they were right now marching through the dimension door, back to Konis. But Blade doubted it, and Silora doubted it even more.

"The Principal Technician of War is not a fool," she said. "But he is stubborn enough to seem one. The mercenaries will fight, and fight hard. We must face that."

That meant the Looter army would have to be found, in all the endless miles of plain. Three of the captured machines formed an aerial scouting line, radioing reports back to the fourth, which flew just above the center of the main army.

There was something strange in aerial reconnaissance for an Iron Age cavalry army. But Blade knew that the plains of Tharn would see even stranger sights before much longer. The coming battle would mix more ages and stages of weaponry and the military art than Blade would have believed possible.

It was a pity that no Home Dimension military historians were ever likely to hear of this battle. He would have liked to hear them trying to explain away all its apparent contradictions and impossibilities. He was not going to worry about those contradictions and impossibilities, however. He would worry about winning, and nothing else.

The Looters were easy to find and not hard to count. There were more than two thousand of them. An army of that size could not be hidden on the open plain even in camouflaged uniforms.

They advanced on a front of about two miles, with their main body in three columns. Behind them came a fourth column, most of which seemed to be unarmed. In that column were also three large machines - a command machine, a large cargo machine, and a gleaming silver ovoid shape.

"That fourth column will be mostly unarmed Peace Lords under guard. They are bringing them along so that their guards can aid the main force when the fighting starts." That was Silora's guess.

She went on. "The Principal Technician of War doubtless rides in the command machine. The second probably carries ammunition and spare weapons. The oval one carries the machinery for creating the dimension door."

"They can create it at will, from one side or the other?"

"Yes. But it needs a machine at each end to sustain it after it has been opened."

God, what science Konis had, even now! And how little opportunity he was likely to have to examine the dimension door machine and try to discover some of its secrets. Lord Leighton's scientific curiosity would be frustrated, and that would not make his Lordship terribly happy.

Damn Lord Leighton's scientific curiosity and Lord Leighton too! He was in Home Dimension, not here in Tharn facing a battle for the life of the people, the life of his son's people, the lives of those he had helped once before and would help again. Blade knew what his first job was, and would worry about anything else he might be able to do when and if he had the time to do it.

Only three of the smaller war machines were visible, flying in a V-formation high above the Looter army. The technician wouldn't want to let his last possible air support wander off and be swallowed up by whatever monsters might be lurking beyond the flat horizon. None of the three paid any attention to Blade's machine.

After looking as long as he needed and getting as close as he dared, Blade swung his machine away into the sky. He saw that Silora's face was grimmer than it had been for some time.

"They have not come in the strength I hoped they would," she said. "No more than half or a third of the mercenaries march against the people."

As far as Blade was concerned that was quite all right. He would not care to try pitting the people against five or six thousand of the mercenaries. But he could see why Silora was unhappy. Even total victory for the People of Tharn today would still leave the mercenaries able to rule Konis and leave her forever an exile in Tharn.

The army of the people camped for the night about twenty miles from the Looters. They did not camp until the air scouts reported that the Looters were also settling in for the night. Neither Blade nor King Rikard wanted to risk a night attack by the mercenaries.

Blade and Silora had a tent to themselves, but it seemed stiflingly hot inside it. After an hour or so of desperately trying to get to sleep, they both went out and lay down on the grass to stare up at the star-filled sky. The cooler air and the peaceful stars soon sent both of them off to sleep.

The next morning Blade could see the Looters in their camp from a war machine only a few hundred feet up. They were less than ten miles away. Once again their three war machines floated high above them-and stayed there.

The army of the people moved out, three thousand cavalry, a hundred chariots, a dozen portable catapults. Some of the chariots and all four of the captured war machines carried loads of bombs, and practically every fighter had at least one or two grenades.

As the people trotted and rolled toward the enemy, a Looter war machine swept low over the head of the column. A hundred or so archers loosed futile arrows at it. That should be enough to give the Looters the impression of a typical undisciplined barbarian horde. Blade's plans depended on the Principal Technician of War continuing to despise his opponents until it was too late.

Within an hour the Looter army was in sight from the scouting line on the ground. Blade saw that so far his plan was working. As Silora had predicted, the Principal Technician was bringing a strong force of the

mercenaries to Tharn, to fight it out on the ground. The battle would be terrible for both sides, but it could be a much greater victory for the people if they won.

The Looters were drawn up in an enormous square nearly a mile on a side. Most of the two thousand mercenaries formed the four sides of that square. Each side was a single line, with no more than one man every ten feet. In the center of the square was a small reserve, who doubled as guards for the Peace Lords and the three large machines. One of the war machines now floated only a few feet above the center of the square. Blade caught strangely brilliant sparkles of sunlight from the equipment of someone moving about on the rear platform.

"That will be the Principal Technician of War himself," said Silora. "On days of battle he dresses in his most elegant uniform and equipment, including a wide belt studded with jewels. You see the sun sparkling on the jewels, I think."

The technician might be a fop, but he also seemed to know his business. The great hollow square gave equal firepower on all sides. Even with only one man every ten feet, the automatic pellet rifles could slaughter anyone trying to close within a hundred yards. The grenade launchers that every tenth man carried could finish the job. Against a barbarian enemy able only to charge in wildly, the battle would have been won the moment the square was formed. But the people had done Mazda's bidding in training and arming themselves, and they were no longer that kind of barbarian enemy.

Blade watched from the rear platform of his machine as the people deployed, spreading out until they completely surrounded the square. The catapults were unloaded from their chariots and assembled. Then their crews carried them to just inside accurate range of the Looters and opened fire.

Just inside accurate range for the catapults was well beyond accurate range for the Looter's rifles. On full automatic they could hit anything within a hundred yards with enough pellets to rip it to pieces. Beyond that range things got more difficult. At two hundred yards they were doing well to hit a man, at three hundred yards it was almost hopeless unless they simply sprayed away on full automatic. The catapults were firing from a carefully calculated three hundred and twenty-five yards' range.

Even there they had pellets buzzing about their ears soon enough. But at long range the light pellets lost much of their speed and striking power. They could hardly kill or disable unless they hit a vital spot. All the catapult crews were encased from topknot to toe in teksin, iron, and boiled leather armor. Most of the pellets bounced off harmlessly, and those that didn't seldom did more harm than a wasp sting.

Meanwhile the catapult crews were shooting back, alternating three-foot arrows with expanding heads and explosive bombs. When the arrows hit a mercenary they tore through his armored vest as though it were made of paper. When a bomb landed on a mercenary there wasn't enough of him left to put on a stretcher, while the men on either side of him were likely to be out of action for at least the rest of the day.

Many of the arrows missed, many of the bombs didn't explode. But all of them kept the mercenaries shooting with one eye on their target and one eye on what might be coming down on them. Their shooting was enthusiastic-the rattle of their rifles soon became almost continuous. But its accuracy left a good deal to be desired.

After each few shots the catapult crews picked up their weapons and ammunition and ran fifty yards or so. They lost men, but each time they lost someone the gap was filled in a moment.

On and on went the duel as the sun rose higher in the sky and began to bake the plain with all its usual

fury. Eventually the mercenaries got tired of standing under the shower of bombs and arrows and blazing away almost impotently at their distant enemies. A portion of one side of the square surged forward at a dead run, firing from the hip as they ran, trying to close to effective range.

Instantly a score of chariots and ten times that many horsemen swept forward. The chariots swung around between the mercenaries and the catapults, shielding them. The catapult crews threw their weapons into the chariots and scrambled on the backs of the chariot horses, while the archers in the chariots rained arrows on the approaching mercenaries. Then the chariots rolled away across the plain, rapidly drawing out of range. The cavalry swept across between them and the mercenaries, and a blizzard of arrows answered the enemy's massed rifle fire. A good many horses went down and a good many saddles were suddenly empty. But out of more than a hundred mercenaries, no more than forty were left on their feet. All of those forty ran—the sensible ones back toward the square, the brave or foolish ones on toward the people. None of the second group got very far or lived very long. Then cavalry and chariots and catapults were all drawing rapidly out of range of even the longest and wildest shots from the square.

In any land, in any age, in any dimension, the man who rides a horse can still move faster than the man who walks on his own feet. At least he can when the land is flat, and the plain where Blade had chosen to give battle was as flat as a tabletop.

The mercenaries were tough, well-trained soldiers. Their courage was undoubted, their weapons were on the whole well-chosen and effective. But they had not fought a well-disciplined enemy of any sort for more than twenty years.

They had never fought a disciplined army of horsemen, neither in Konis nor in any of the dimensions they had looted.

This was a gap in their military education that Blade was determined to fill. In fact, he was determined to fill it so thoroughly that most of the mercenaries would not survive the lesson.

The duel of catapult and bow against rifle sputtered on around the square, occasionally flaring up savagely. The next time the mercenaries tried to charge the catapults on foot, the people's cavalry got a little out of hand. Instead of retreating, they charged the flanks of the advancing mercenary line. If they had tried to charge it from the front, they would have been butchered. As it was they hit it on either end, where only four or five mercenaries could fire accurately, and that wasn't enough. The butchery was mutual. The mercenaries chopped the people out of their saddles at point-blank range moments before pain-maddened horses trampled them into the ground. Then in full sight of hundreds of their comrades and the technician himself, the surviving mercenaries all turned and ran. All their discipline and courage could not hold them in place against the ancient terror of a wall of advancing horsemen.

For a moment it looked as though the whole battle would explode into a mutual butchery. The three war machines of the Looters surged forward to the threatened side of the square and hung in the air just above the line of infantry. Blade's hands tightened on the railing of his own machine. If the technician panicked and unleashed the purple rays-

But the technician's nerve or commonsense held firm. The three war machines slipped back inside the square. Two of them began ferrying reinforcements and ammunition out to the weakened side of the square. The technician's own machine rose into its usual place, to hang grim and gleaming in the sky above the center of the square.

By noon Blade felt as if the battle had been going on for a week. In the three hours since the first shot

had been fired, the people had lost more than two hundred men and women and slightly more horses, as well as half a dozen chariots and two catapults. But the mercenaries had lost between three and four hundred men dead or out of action for the day. They had also fired off an astounding quantity of ammunition.

That was the Looters' vital spot, their ammunition supply. A good part of their supply must have gone up with the machines destroyed in the atomic-bomb explosion. Now they could have no more than they carried on their backs and was stored in the remaining machines. When this supply was exhausted, there was no more ammunition closer than the other side of the dimension door.

Now it was time to offer the Principal Technician of War what would look like a chance to score a solid victory against the enemy. It would look like a victory cheap in ammunition, a victory solid enough to restore the spirits of men who must be losing heart from their casualties and the broiling sun. To win such a victory the technician would almost certainly be willing to weaken his square, confident that at least the enemy would not charge home against an unbroken line of mercenaries.

That confidence would be misplaced.

Fifty or a hundred at a time, most of the people's cavalry drifted around to one side of the square and massed there. Before long two-thirds of the people's mounted fighters were there, under the command of King Rikard himself and Anyara. Under the eyes of their king, son of Mazda, they would maintain the discipline that had been hammered into them. Meanwhile Blade would be free to be wherever his understanding of the Looters' machines was most needed.

The massed cavalry galloped forward, pulled to a stop within bowshot, fired their arrows, took heavy fire and heavy casualties in return, then retreated. But they did not retreat at a gallop. They retreated at a walk, a slow pace not beyond the reach of a man on foot. They seemed to be flaunting themselves in the faces of the mercenaries, flaunting a willingness to meet them at close quarters, man to man, throwing caution and even commonsense to the hot winds blowing over the battlefield.

It looked like folly. It looked like such folly that the Principal Technician of War swallowed the bait dangled before him even faster than Blade had expected. The war machines began shuttling ammunition out to the side of the square facing the people's cavalry. Mercenaries from the other three sides began walking across the square to join their comrades in the great attack. The vision of a smashing blow at the enemy was obviously dancing in front of every man in that square.

Blade looked down from the platform of his machine to the opposite side of the square, where some two hundred horsemen and all the surviving chariots were assembled. Then he shouted an order to Chara at the machine's controls. Silora clung to him as the machine turned and headed toward the chariots.

Chara landed the machine and Blade and Silora both leaped out and scrambled into the four-horse chariot reserved for them. All of the other chariots were drawn by three horses instead of the usual two, and carried three fighters instead of the usual two. Each fighter was heavily protected and carried a bow and a sword. In each chariot was a box of grenades and in the chariots of the third line each man had a bomb and a captured Looter rifle or pistol. The fighters in the third line were the ones most likely to get all the way to the center of the square and need the extra firepower. Blade hadn't expected to have so many Looter weapons, but he wasn't going to turn down an unexpected stroke of good luck.

Blade's own chariot was in the center of the second line. Quickly he pulled on his gear. When he was finished, he carried a bow, a sword, two knives, a Looter rifle, a pistol, and a grenade launcher. He wore an iron helmet, a teksin vest, and leather boots and breeches. He looked like a pacifist's nightmare and

would have felt ridiculous if he had not been so keyed-up.

Blade gave Silora another minute to finish putting on her gear. Then he took out the signal baton, extended it, and waved it three times over his head. Trumpets and drums sounded from both the chariots and the cavalry, and the whole mass began to move forward.

Five hundred yards from the square the screen of cavalry in front of the chariots parted to either side and Blade had a clear view ahead. The enemy line was still there, but it was perilously thin. There was at most one man for every thirty yards. The technician had not contracted the square to save men. He was making the fatal mistake of trying to hold all his ground.

The first line of chariots came within range and the mercenaries opened fire. A chariot and horses made an enormous target. Horses began to go down, sending chariots bouncing wildly into the air, hurling their fighters free. But there were too many chariots coming too fast, and too few mercenaries with too little ammunition. Some of them simply turned and ran as arrows from the surviving chariots whistled about their ears. Others turned tail when they ran out of ammunition. Some stayed and died, changing magazines or still firing. But over a space of five hundred yards there were suddenly no more mercenaries at all. The seventy surviving chariots and the whole two hundred cavalry swept through that gap, trampling the corpses of both sides into bloody paste, thundering onward toward the heart of the mercenaries' square.

Around Blade the thunder of hooves and the shrill war cries from four hundred throats drowned out the roar of gunfire from the far side of the square. Beside him Silora was screaming like a banshee, beside herself with excitement. He knew she was screaming, for her mouth was wide open, but he could not hear a sound she was making.

The people raced toward the center of the square. Its three machines loomed higher and higher as they drew closer. Looking ahead through the dust, Blade saw the mercenary guards scrambling into a small square around the three machines and the mass of Peace Lords. Their rifles began spitting pellets at the oncoming people. The first line took the full blast of their fire. Blade saw one chariot flip over at a full gallop, bouncing fifty feet into the air. Its three fighters sailed out and crashed to the ground. Two lay still, the third was still moving feebly when a chariot of the second line ran right over him, its driver unable to swing it clear in time. Hooves and wheels and the slashing knives in the hubs of the wheels all did their work, and the bloody thing left behind did not move again.

To press home a cavalry charge against automatic weapons is impossible in theory and always costly in practice. But when there are a lot of cavalry and not very many automatic weapons it becomes possible. The first line of chariots was almost gone now, and the second line was beginning to show ragged holes as the Looters shifted their fire. A chariot in the third line disintegrated in a blast of flame and smoke, and flying fragments mowed down two other chariots. Blade saw the Looter square disintegrating in its turn as the mercenaries on the disengaged sides ran around to reinforce their comrades who were facing the oncoming people.

Then suddenly the whole mass of Peace Lords standing beyond the winking guns of the mercenaries exploded into action. They had seen the mercenaries too distracted to keep watch on them. They took advantage of that distraction to strike, most of them unarmed but all of them burning with rage and a desire for vengeance.

It was another scene of butchery on both sides. Mercenaries shot down half a dozen Peace Lords, then died under stamping feet and clawing hands and flashing knives. Others kept their faces toward the oncoming people and died with arrows in their throats as they shot their attackers out of their chariots.

None of the mercenaries could look in two directions at once and so all of them died in not much more than a minute.

By frantically waving the signal baton, Blade was able to keep the people's charge from crashing straight into the Peace Lords. Blade's driver pulled the chariot to a stop just beyond the Peace Lords, between them and the three machines. Seen close up, the command machine looked identical to the one Blade had fought in Miros. The cargo machine was still a great featureless box. The machine carrying the dimension door was so highly polished that the sunlight reflected from it was almost blinding.

Several men scrambled out of the chariots of the third line, carrying sacks of bombs under their arms. They ran toward the door machine, zigzagging to make themselves harder targets. They were running to place their bombs beside the machine and destroy the Looters' road home.

No one fired at them. But twenty feet from the door machine they seemed to run into a solid wall. They staggered and began to crumple, sparks flashing around them. As they fell their bombs exploded with tremendous crashes. Black smoke rolled up, concealing the door machine for a moment, and fragments of iron, armor, and bodies flew in all directions.

Blade turned to Silora and grabbed her by the shoulder with one hand, pointing at the Peace Lords with the other. "Quick. Get over to them, tell them that we are friends. Also ask if anyone can help us break through the electrical field into the dimension door machine. Everybody else should arm themselves from the cargo machine or the bodies and then run for it."

Silora nodded and leaped to the ground. As she began to run, a shadow swept over Blade. A moment later he heard the rattle of a Looter rifle. Silora stopped dead, then staggered and turned around to face Blade as she went down on her knees. From belly to throat she was nothing but chewed and bloody flesh. A final bullet had smashed her jaw, and as she tried to speak it sagged downward in a ruin of bone and blood. Her eyes met Blade's for a final second, then she collapsed face-down in the dust.

An icy coldness filled Blade. He looked upward, to see a Looter war machine sailing over the Peace Lords. On the rear platform knelt the Principal Technician of War, his jeweled belt flashing in the sun, other flashes coming from the muzzle of his rifle as he fired into the Peace Lords.

With deadly precision Blade loaded his captured grenade launcher, raised it to his shoulder, sighted on the war machine's hatch, and fired. The grenade arched through the air and vanished exactly where Blade had aimed it.

The technician could think quickly enough when his own skin was in danger. He plunged head-first off the platform, turned a somersault in midair, and landed on hands and knees halfway between Blade and the Peace Lords. His rifle landed beside him. He was reaching for it when Blade snatched a throwing spear from under the seat of the chariot and hurled it with the same deadly accuracy as the grenade. The technician was just rising to his feet when the spear took him in the neck, driving clear through from one side to the other and bursting out on the other side. He finished rising, stood erect for a moment, then went over backward. He made a neater corpse than Silora once he had stopped thrashing around, but he was just as dead.

Meanwhile the grenade went off inside the war machine. The hatch flew off its hinges, smoke and flame shot out of the turret, and the machine wobbled and lurched in the air. Then it nosed down and plunged toward the door machine. It struck the electrical field in an explosion of sparks, then drove through the last twenty feet to crash into the metal with a terrible clang. It bounced like a stone- skipping on a pond, sailed on a hundred feet farther, and thudded to the ground in a cloud of smoke.

Blade shook his head. The glistening metal of the door machine showed no sign of damage from the impact of the falling war machine, not a dent or a scratch. If it was that strong the people's explosives wouldn't do it much harm even if they could be dropped close enough to it.

Meanwhile, the dimension door was forming, just as Silora had described it. A great milky sphere appeared in the air a hundred yards beyond the door machine, as its power was focused. The sphere seemed to wobble and pulsate, as though it were a balloon tied to the earth by a cord, and glowed with an inner light. It looked both beautiful and monstrous, but Blade remembered from Silora's description that it would be some time before the door was open between Tharn and Konis.

The rattle of mercenary rifles broke into his thoughts. He turned and saw half a dozen figures in the open door of the command machine, all blazing away. Blade picked up the grenade launcher and was loading it again when several of the people got in their blows first. Trailing smoke, their grenades sailed through the air, two of them straight into the command machine's door. Smoke and flame erupted half a dozen times in as many seconds and bodies and pieces of bodies fell smoking out of the murk. Then people and Peace Lords together were running frantically toward the command machine. Blade leaped from the chariot and joined them in time to be only a few seconds behind the leaders in reaching the machine.

The battle in the dark, smoke-filled corridors of the command machine was still another butchery. Blade remembered guns roaring in his ears, strangling one mercenary with his bare hands, stamping on the chest of another until the ribs caved in, being grazed by pellets in half a dozen places. But that was all he remembered between the moment he entered the machine and the moment he stood looking, down at an open locker. In that locker lay another atomic bomb.

Calculations dashed through Blade's mind like the people's charging cavalry. Here was a weapon to destroy the dimension door and perhaps even destroy the mercenaries on the other side of it, in Konis. Blade had given up hope of doing that for a while. Now he felt his heart leap up at this new chance. Silora was beyond help, but not beyond vengeance, and this was the best vengeance he could offer to her valiant memory.

He grabbed one of the people and shouted in his ear. "Run outside, take the signal baton from my chariot, and signal one of our war machines to come here. Run!"

He would have to move fast, before the door opened completely and more mercenaries perhaps came streaming into Tharn through it, or the people in the door machine realized what he was doing. He knelt to inspect the bomb, then ran outside, shouting for a dozen strong men. As fighters crowded around him, he noticed three of the captured Looter machines floating in above the chariots. The fourth was just landing almost beside the command machine. The hatch opened and Chara scrambled out. Good, sensible Chara. The four machines should keep the mercenaries at a safe distance while he finished the job.

There were crushed feet and broken arms as they hustled the bomb outside, but in five minutes it was safely inside Chara's machine. Again Blade knelt beside it, working furiously but carefully to arm it. He set the fuse for ten minutes from the moment the timer began counting, then ran a length of teksin cord from the fuse to the inside handle of the hatch. Now if anyone opened the hatch all the way, the cord would pull tight, setting off the bomb instantly. That was his insurance against curious mercenaries in Konis.

After setting the booby-trap he stuck his head out through the hatch for a moment. Good. The other three machines had already lifted out, Peace Lords jammed shoulder to shoulder on the platforms and

clinging to the turrets as well. Others were scrambling into chariots and some of the more athletic were climbing up behind the cavalymen on their horses. As fast as each chariot or horse was loaded, the driver or rider turned it about and headed away across the plain as fast as it would go. Chara stood on the machine's platform, urging everybody on with shouts and yells. In one hand she waved the Principal Technician of War's jeweled belt, in the other she waved a Looter rifle. She waved it so wildly that Blade ducked back inside in case she accidentally fired it off. As he did, he saw two men loading Silora's body into a chariot.

Chara sprang down to the ground at a word from Blade. He lifted the machine into the air and turned it until the shimmering milky sphere that was the dimension door was centered in the forward screen. Then he gave it a small amount of forward speed, ducked through the half-open hatch, then closed it solidly behind him. He took a final careful look at the dimension door. At least he would be able to tell Lord Leighton what the damned thing looked like. The machine was perfectly on course. Then he took a quick look at the ground slipping past ten feet below, swung himself over the railing, and dropped.

He landed harder than one ankle could really take. But he closed his mind to the stab of pain and sprinted toward the chariots. His own was there, one of only half a dozen left. All the cavalry was gone, and so were all the Peace Lords. He leaped in just as his ankle gave up the struggle, sprawling on his face on the floor of the chariot. The driver needed no orders, but whipped up the horses. The chariot swung about and began to roll.

As Blade pulled himself to his feet he saw a Looter war machine sail low overhead. It was heading for the dimension door. As Blade watched, the door ceased to be shimmering and milky, and showed a clear view of rocks and grass and buildings rising beyond the grass. The door was open and through it he was looking into Konis. Among the buildings Blade saw a polished metal oval gleaming—the machine that kept open the door from the other end.

The first Looter war machine plunged through the door while Blade's bomb-carrier was still a hundred yards away. Blade's wobbled in the disturbed air behind the other and swung off course. For a moment it looked as if it would slide past the door. Then some force flowing from the door itself caught it, steadied it, guided it smoothly and surely through the door. Blade mentally uncrossed his fingers. Now his work was done, and there was nothing left but to wish for good luck and fast horses to get clear in a hurry. The bomb could be no more than five minutes from going off, less if the mercenaries in Konis got curious.

It was less. The chariots had gone no more than another two hundred yards when the heat and the light of the sun itself seemed to burst into Tharn. For one split second white incandescence gushed through the dimension door. Then the door died, leaving only a fire that now had no beginning and seemingly no end.

The flame licked out and caught the dimension door machine. The metal blackened and buckled and peeled. Something exploded inside and the vast machine heaved itself into the air. It rose high enough to turn end over end before it came down, trailing smoke and flame. It came down squarely on the cargo machine, crumpling it inward. How much ammunition was left in that machine Blade didn't know. He only knew the size of the explosion that followed, as a sheet of flame blotted out the whole scene behind him.

Bits of metal scythed down two of the chariot horses. They screamed and fell, tangling the other two. Blade clung to the chariot as it leaped into the air with a corkscrewing motion. It was still in the air when the blast wave hit. Blade's grip on the chariot failed, and he spun helplessly through the air, to crash down on the ground and smash himself into blackness.

The first things Blade saw when he could see again were two faces bending over him, both wearing concerned expressions. One face was Chara's, disfigured by a massive bruise that covered most of one

cheek. The other was his son's. King Rikard's red gold hair was matted with blood, sweat, and the filth of a long day's battle. But he and Chara both smiled as they saw Blade's eyes flicker open.

"Have we won?" was the first question that came to Blade.

The others both nodded. "We could not have won much more thoroughly than we have," said the king. "When the explosions came, it seemed that the mercenaries lost their courage. Many of them tried to surrender or run. They did not succeed. Others, who still had ammunition for their weapons, turned their weapons on themselves. Most of the mercenaries are dead by now, and those who are not dead now will mostly be dead before darkness comes."

"How long have I been out?" was Blade's next question. He was taking an inventory of his aches and pains as he did so. His ankle was swelling, his head ached, he was bruised and scraped all over, and his chest felt as though a ballet troupe had been dancing on it in logging boots. Also there were gaps where two teeth had been.

"Nearly three hours," said King Rikard. "If you had not been breathing we would have thought you dead, and that would have been a grief to all of us. We have already lost many of the people this day, for the mercenaries fought well until they lost their courage. More than six hundred of the people will not see tomorrow's sun rise, and some of those hurt will not see many more. Anyara is among the dead."

"I join you in mourning her. Tharn owes her much."

"Yes. There is another whom Tharn owes much, also."

"Silora?"

"Yes. Her body is safe in the same tent where Anyara already lies." He hesitated. "Father, I speak in this for all those who doubted Silora, including myself. It is a grief to me that I doubted her, and a greater grief to me now that I cannot apologize to her. But there is something that may still be done. Will you accept that she lie in the same tomb with the Beloved Zulekia?"

For a moment Blade felt his eyes watering with more than fatigue and dust. Then he nodded. "I accept that; I accept it gladly." He sat up, realized that his bones would not fall apart if he moved, and stood up. For a moment he had to brace himself on his son's shoulder, then stood alone.

"Let us get back to our people."

As King Rikard predicted, the last of the fighting died down before nightfall. There was not a live mercenary anywhere in sight, and cavalry patrols armed with captured guns were on the prowl to make sure that those who had run away kept on running until they dropped dead.

More than two hundred thoroughly confused and frightened Peace Lords were prisoners-or guests. They weren't quite sure which, even after Blade assured them that they would be welcome in Tharn and find good homes, freedom, and useful work there. No doubt he looked like one more dusty and blood-spattered barbarian to them. He could hardly tell them of his real origins, however.

But Blade knew the Peace Lords would come around in time, and be a valuable aid to Tharn in its groping back to civilization. There would be problems getting them settled in, but nothing that his son and the council could not solve. What Tharn needed Mazda for had been done this day, and would not have to be done again.

Blade spent some time in the tent where Anyara and Silora lay. They had washed Silora's face and then bound and covered her so that her wounds and mutilations did not show. The pale face with the long eyelashes might have been sunk in sleep. Yes, it was a good thought his son had, letting Silora lie in the same tomb with Zulekia. Whatever happened in Konis now, Silora would never go home. But at least she would not be forgotten here in Tharn, among the people she had fought for and died helping to save.

After a while Blade went out again into the camp. One of the rare plains thunderstorms was moving in from the west. The stars were vanishing overhead, and lightning flickered eerily along the horizon.

Some of the younger men and women who still had the strength were dancing among the tents. Why not? thought Blade. They are alive; the Looters are destroyed; Tharn is safe. Enough reason for anyone to celebrate. Then he saw who was leading the line of dancers as it snaked in and out among the tents.

It was Chara, wearing nothing but the technician's jeweled belt around her waist. The jewels sparkled and her bare oiled skin seemed to glow in the light from the campfires. She was magnificent, and suddenly completely irresistible.

Blade stepped forward and reached out to take her free hand. Her eyes met his, with a light in them showing that she shared his thoughts. Together they would seek out warmth and life, drive away the day's memories of death and all the ghosts that still seemed to be hanging over the battlefield. She drifted away from the dance, and hand in hand they started for his tent.

The first drops of rain spattered down on the camp as they ducked into the tent. As Blade took the belt in both hands, to draw it off from Chara's waist, thunder exploded outside, as loud as any of the battle noises that day.

In the same moment Blade felt pain and another sort of thunder explode inside his head. He staggered, partly with the pain, partly with surprise at the realization of what was happening. Lord Leighton's computer was calling him back across the unknown, back to England. His hands tightened on the belt. He saw Chara's eyes widen, heard her say, "Mazda, are you-?" Then the thunder in his ears and the thunder in his head drowned her out. She faded from view, the tent followed, then there was nothing around him but a vast dim grayness and a steep slope plunging endlessly down into the grayness.

He ran fast down the slope-he had to run, or fall down head over heels. He ran so fast that it was a while before he noticed that the surface under his feet was level. He slowed down. As he slowed, he saw two lights in the grayness ahead. They became brighter, took shape, became Lord Leighton and J. He slowed to a walk and strode toward them, holding the belt in one hand. He raised it high, as though saluting them, and spoke.

"I returned to Tharn. I saw my son, King of Tharn."

His voice faded away. So did Lord Leighton and J. Then the grayness itself turned black.

Chapter 26

Richard Blade was walking along Westminster Embankment. A London fog swirled around him, but within his mind there was total clarity. He was running his mind back over what had happened since his return from Tharn.

Lord Leighton had managed to contain himself until he heard the full story of Blade's adventures in

Tharn. Then he exploded. A return to a previously visited dimension! A people who could travel at will and regularly from one dimension to another, almost as easily as a London businessman going home to the suburbs! A people who also had antigravity, incredibly advanced power sources, at least half a dozen astounding weapons, and much else! But how much information had Blade brought back about any of these breakthroughs, other than the fact of their existence?

Nothing.

At least it was nothing from Lord Leighton's viewpoint, and as usual that was the only one the scientist would consider. Lord Leighton was a man who would maintain his views in the face of God Almighty, let alone Blade or even J. Nor would he be very tactful about how he set them out. He certainly hadn't been so this time. In fact he had set some sort of a record, for all the years Blade had watched the scientist in action.

About the return to Tharn itself there wasn't much Blade could have done, admittedly. He couldn't have expected it and it happened too fast. But the Looters, with all their marvelous scientific gifts-now that was another matter.

"What was I supposed to do?" was Blade's question.

And Lord Leighton had shrugged his shoulders and replied, "You could have always joined the Looters and found out as much about them as you could before returning home."

A silence came down in J's apartment when Lord Leighton said that. It was the deadest, coldest silence that Blade had ever heard. He took advantage of the silence to excuse himself and leave, leave so fast that he forgot his hat and umbrella. But he knew he had to leave. If he stayed around, he would say things to Lord Leighton that might make it hard for them to work together in the future. That would be bad for the project and for England. But that didn't alter the fact that he had never been so angry in his life. In some less civilized dimensions, he would probably have snatched the scientist out of his chair and dashed out his brains against the nearest wall.

But J was no doubt calming Lord Leighton down, and the long walk in the bitter foggy air had done the same for Blade. He could now admit that Lord Leighton was perfectly within his rights in being half-wild with frustration and annoyance. Half a dozen of his cherished dreams had been handed to him practically on a silver platter, and nothing would come of them because Blade had been too damned busy saving the people!

Possibly Lord Leighton was even partly right. No, Lord Leighton was entirely right-for some other dimension. In any other dimension there would have been a point beyond which Blade owed the project more than he owed the local people. In no other dimension but Tharn would he have genuinely neglected his duties to the project-to England-by being so wholeheartedly on the side of the local people that he threw aside all the opportunities for scientific discoveries.

But Tharn was different. Tharn was the land of the people he had helped create, ruled by his son, his own son. He could not have left one stone unturned to aid them, or sacrificed one of them for any number of scientific discoveries. He knew this; J knew this, and no doubt in time Lord Leighton would calm down enough to realize it also. Meanwhile the best thing he could do was stay away from the scientist and remember what he had seen and done in Tharn this time.

It was a memory that he knew would cast a warm light down all the years of his life to come, however many they might be. He might have no son that the world knew about, but there was more than one

world.

Who could be sure? Perhaps the next word about Tharn would come when someone from Tharn passed through into Home Dimension! The Peace Lords might prove a very interesting addition to Tharn-very interesting indeed.

But that was for a future Blade was quite sure he would not live to see. No matter-he had seen and done enough in Tharn, for Tharn, for the people-for his son.

He buttoned up his Burberry the rest of the way against the chill, turned, and began to walk back the way he had come.