
Blade 23: Empire of Blood

By Jeffrey Lord

Chapter 1

The salesman examined the Barclay's Bank draft with elaborate care. Richard Blade crossed one long leg over the other and clasped both tanned hands around the raised knee as he waited.

Finally the salesman raised his head and smiled. "All in order, Mr. Blade. Now, if you'll just sign here-" as he shoved a small stack of papers toward Blade. Blade bent forward, his chair creaking as he shifted his two hundred and ten pounds of bone and muscle, and drew out a pen.

He had to sign his name twelve different times on eight different sheets of paper before he'd finished. It occurred to him that if anyone ever wanted copies of his signature for purposes legitimate or otherwise, all they'd have to do was examine the files of Hollis Brothers Automobile Sales and Services Limited, London.

"Very good, Mr. Blade. The model you wish will run you about a hundred and seventy pounds less than the sum of this draft. We will have the delivery driver give you a check for the balance."

Blade shook his head. "I would advise against that. You say the model I want isn't in stock at the moment?"

The salesman shook his head. "No, sir, it isn't. I expect it will be about three weeks before we have one in."

"That's what I thought," said Blade. "Unfortunately, I'll be leaving the country for an indefinite period within the next couple of days. Family business in America-it seems they've got it into their heads that I'm the Indispensable Man. I haven't the remotest notion when I'll be back. I think the wisest thing to do would be to garage the car here until I return and apply the balance to the garage fees. Can you do that?"

"Oh, yes, by all means, sir. It will be quite easy." The salesman opened the drawer of his desk and rummaged through it, then pulled out still another form. "If you'll just sign this, here and here-"

Finally it was all over. Blade rose, shook the salesman's hand, then buttoned up all but the top button of his Burberry.

"Thank you, Mr. Blade," said the salesman. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, and I hope you find driving your new car altogether agreeable. Good day, sir."

Outside it was a sunny but brisk London morning, with enough wind so that Blade promptly buttoned the top button on his coat. Then he headed down the street toward the nearest taxi stand. As he went, he contemplated how his profession complicated even such a simple business as buying a new car.

Richard Blade was indeed leaving England within the next couple of days, but he was not traveling to America, on family business or for any other reason. He was traveling much farther, into a place where only he of all living people could go, survive, and return safely to England.

That place was called Dimension X: It was sometimes hard to realize that until only a very few years ago no one, least of all Richard Blade, had even suspected the existence of Dimension X.

Yet that was the simple truth. It was not long ago that a bad-tempered scientific genius named Lord Leighton had conceived the idea of directly linking an advanced computer and a human brain. He had found in Richard Blade the perfect combination of physical and mental development needed for the experiment.

What happened after that would have made scientific history if it hadn't immediately become the most closely guarded secret in Britain. The link with the computer did indeed alter Blade's mind, but not quite as Lord Leighton had intended. The whole world in which he'd lived until then vanished from around Blade. All his senses now registered a strange, savage, primitive world called Alb.

In that world Blade moved about, lived and loved, ate, drank, fought, killed, bled, and, by his strength and wits, managed to survive. Eventually Lord Leighton adjusted the computer, Blade's senses returned to normal, and England reappeared around him.

That was the first human encounter with Dimension X. It was not and could not be the last. Dimension X was rich in land, resources, knowledge. If that wealth could somehow be tapped, it would mean a mighty rebirth for Britain. Dimension X would have to be explored and that exploration kept a closely guarded secret.

So Project Dimension X came into existence. Richard Blade left his post as a top agent for the secret intelligence agency MI6 to begin a new profession as the world's first interdimensional explorer. Tomorrow he would begin his twenty-third expedition into Dimension X.

Blade was not only the first person to explore Dimension X; he was the only one who had ever done so and was still alive and sane. Others had possessed the qualities of mind and body needed to travel into Dimension X, but they were all dead. It was just as well that some of them were dead, for they had been agents who might have given the Dimension X secret to the Soviet Union. How much damage that might have done no one even cared to guess.

Yet there was no doubt that more people were needed for the project. One man could only do so much exploring, even a man as gifted as Blade. Dimension X was vast and varied, full of enough complexities and unknowns to baffle even Lord Leighton. Every trip into Dimension X produced a little more knowledge-and also more proof of how much there was to learn. A dozen men might grow old exploring Dimension X without more than scratching the surface, and Blade was only one man.

Even so, he was pushing back the unknown, a little bit at a time. On his last trip he had taken a ring with him from Home Dimension into the forests of Gleor and back again. No object before that ring had made the round trip. It was only a small beginning, of course, but it might promise more for the future. Perhaps in time Blade and those who came after him could travel into Dimension X and not arrive naked as newborn babes, with nothing but their wits and muscles between them and sudden death.

Perhaps. In the meantime, Blade's profession as an explorer of other dimensions made continuous trouble for him in his day-to-day existence in this one!

Take the matter of a new car, for example. Just before his last trip into Dimension X, Blade's MG had burned out a bearing. The car had been needing a lot of repairs recently, so Blade decided that it was time to say goodbye to the MG and get the best new car that he could afford. His means were a good deal better than the average Englishman's-much of what Blade brought back from Dimension X was gold

and jewels, some worked or mounted, some raw. The raw gold and jewels were examined, then judiciously and quietly sold off through MI6 channels. Most of the money went to finance the project-its appetite for new equipment and new people never stopped growing-but the elderly spymaster known only as J insisted that some of the money go to Blade. He loved the younger man as he would have loved a son if marriage and a family had ever been part of his life. He saw no reason why Blade should not receive some tangible reward for all the time he spent in deadly danger on the very secret service of Her Majesty the Queen. Blade protested, but J insisted and went on insisting.

So a secret account was set up-again through MI6 channels-and bit by bit money trickled into it. Enough bits added up to quite a respectable sum. At the moment the balance in the account stood at just under fifty thousand pounds. Even with inflation, that was not a despicable sum of money.

It was certainly more than enough to buy any sort of car Blade might let himself dream of, even a Rolls-Royce or a Ferrari. A spectacularly expensive car, however, would make him conspicuous. It was not wise for a man in Blade's position to be conspicuous.

As for something small-well, Blade figured that he got more than enough exercise in Dimension X. He didn't have to try shoehorning himself into an undersized sports car every time he wanted to go somewhere in Home Dimension. There were a good many women who liked doing this even less. Blade's Home Dimension social life was discreet, but it was active enough for him to have to consider this angle.

So he decided on a Rover--comfortable, fast enough, cheap enough to be fairly common, expensive enough to match his cover identity as a youngish man of good family and respectable private means. What else was there left to do but go down and buy the car?

Quite a bit, unfortunately. The money for the car had to creep out of the secret account into a more open one at Barclay's Bank and from there to Blade's pocket. His cover identity had to stand up under the usual host of credit checks without arousing anyone's suspicion, or even their curiosity. Then and only then could Blade go out and behave like a more or less normal man who wanted a new car.

At least his cover identity was in his own name. Beyond a certain point false names caused more trouble and confusion than they saved. That was good. There were times when, if Blade hadn't been able to sign his own name, he'd have wondered exactly who he was.

As he approached the taxi stand, a taxi came swinging by. He raised a hand to hail it, then stepped off the curb and ran toward it as it slowed. The driver threw open the door and Blade scrambled in.

"Westminster Embankment."

"Yes, sir." The driver let in the clutch and the taxi whirled off down the street as Blade settled back in the seat.

Chapter 2

The massive bronze doors in front of Blade slid smoothly open with a faint hiss. He was now two hundred feet below the Tower of London, in the secret complex that housed so much of Project Dimension X.

A familiar corridor stretched out in front of Blade, empty, echoing, and sterile. It was all concrete and polished tile and dull shades of paint. The only sign of life in it was the man walking toward Blade, the

man called J. Blade stepped forward to meet him. They shook hands. J's grip was as firm as ever. Like so much else about the man, it did not change.

There were supposed to be photographs in existence that showed J as a young man. Blade had never seen them, nor had anyone else who was willing to admit it. For all the years he'd known J, the man had looked like a thoroughly respectable senior civil servant, urbane, quiet, flawlessly tailored, a gray man who moved through life without making waves or attracting much attention. Over those years J's face gained a few more wrinkles and his hair showed more white and less gray. That was all.

Appearances were more than usually deceiving in this case. Behind J's modest exterior lay the brains, talent, and experience of one of the greatest of all spymasters. Every sensible man who had been in the same line of work over the last forty years either respected or feared him, and sometimes both. J was also a comfortable and agreeable man to work for, a quality lacking in many other brilliant people in the great game of espionage. His friendship helped make Blade's lonely and complicated life more endurable.

"Ah, Richard," said J, when they'd finished shaking hands. "I must say, your beard suits you. I'm glad that beards are coming back into respectability. It simplifies at least one of our problems."

Blade sighed. "I'm glad you like it. I can't say I share your enthusiasm. It used to be that when I came back from Dimension X with a beard, shaving it off made me feel back home again. Now I'm going to have to carry this blasted chin spinach around everywhere."

"I know," said J. "But you know the situation."

Blade nodded. "I do. Unless it's improved over the past couple of weeks?" he added hopefully.

J shook his head. "We're still exactly where we were the last time I talked to you about it."

"In other words, stalemate?"

"That's about it," said J. He turned and they began the long walk down the corridor to the computer rooms at the far end.

The "situation" bothering both J and Blade would have been ludicrous under other circumstances. It all began on a stormy night just before Blade's last trip into Dimension X, when Blade was taking a train into London. The train was wrecked, with fifteen people killed and more than fifty injured.

Blade was unhurt. He promptly went to work, using all his strength and skill to help the others in the wreck. His swift rescue work and first-aid measures saved at least a dozen lives.

Blade realized that being a hero would put him squarely in the middle of a blaze of publicity, making him conspicuous and possibly endangering the security of Project Dimension X. So he slipped quietly off into the stormy night just before the police and rescue teams arrived on the scene.

Enter the Chief Constable of the county, to hear about the mystery hero who had saved so many lives and then vanished. He immediately took it into his head that the man had disappeared because he was a wanted criminal! The Chief Constable had a composite drawing of the mystery hero prepared and took all the other steps necessary to launch a full-scale search. As Blade sailed off into Dimension X, Scotland Yard was being alerted to comb Britain for him!

At this point good luck and J both entered the picture, just in time to keep things from getting completely

out of hand. Even a dozen witnesses together could not produce a recognizable picture of Richard Blade, seen briefly on a cold, dark night. What Scotland Yard and the newspapers and BBC put into circulation was a picture of Blade that his own mother wouldn't have recognized.

J also went to work. MI6 had well-established routines for quietly blocking or sidetracking Scotland Yard in emergencies. In J's opinion this was an emergency. The public uproar might eventually threaten Project Dimension X. Even if things didn't go that far, it would certainly become difficult or impossible for Richard Blade to live a normal life in Britain. That thought made J see red.

Even Blade never learned the details of all that J did. Whatever was done, it was enough. Blade did not have to dispose of his apartment and all his possessions, assume a complete new identity, and live under cover in his own country. On J's recommendation, he kept the beard he'd grown on his last trip to Dimension X. He also took extra precautions to keep people from trailing him. Apart from that, he could live at least as normal a life as he had before the whole business of the mystery hero exploded in his face.

"Eventually I suspect that interest will fade out entirely," said J. "Then you can take off the beard and go back to normal. I could speed up the process, of course. But it would be a gamble."

"Politics?" said Blade.

"Quite. We'd need direct intervention by the Prime Minister. That would be bound to attract attention in certain places that have a nasty habit of leaking things to the press. There could easily be a public scandal about the sinister plottings of security people. The Prime Minister's in no mood to risk something like that now."

"I can hardly blame him," said Blade. "Besides, it would mean the hunt would be on again. As things stand now, it's dying down. We'll just have to wait it out."

"True," said J. "Although I must say that for once I'm rather glad that your job keeps you beyond the reach of Scotland Yard most of the time. It makes this sort of thing a dashed sight simpler to handle."

They were now approaching the door to the computer rooms. They stopped briefly while electronic monitors scanned, identified, and approved them. Then the doors opened and they passed on.

The ever-increasing mass of equipment in the first few rooms was a familiar sight to both men. They passed swiftly onward from room to room with hardly a glance to either side. They only stopped when they came to the massive door of the main computer room. Beyond that door was Lord Leighton's private sanctum, with the huge computer, the product of his genius and the heart of Project Dimension X.

Blade had seen the main computer as often as he had the supporting equipment in the outer rooms. Unlike the supporting equipment, the main computer remained interesting, even awe-inspiring. It was monstrous-ranks of towering consoles with gray, crackled finishes, rising almost to the rock ceiling of the room.

Its creator was already on the spot, as he usually was. Lord Leighton came bustling out of the shadows as Blade and J entered. In spite of a hunchback, polio-twisted legs, and eighty-odd years, he moved with surprising speed and agility, wiping his hands on his filthy lab coat as he came.

"Greetings, gentlemen, greetings." There was little age or feebleness to be heard in his voice. "We can proceed any time Richard is ready." He looked at the attach case Blade was carrying. "You have the knife?"

"I do. I also brought the sheath and a belt I've had for some time."

"Very good. I fear I cannot report much progress in our research into the matter of the ring. What about you?" he said with a glance at J.

"Nothing worth your time or mine to discuss at the moment," said J. "I'm afraid I've been rather heavily committed in this blasted 'mystery hero' affair."

"I quite understand," said Leighton. "Very well, Richard. If you would care to change, I will see about activating the main sequence."

Blade nodded and headed toward a small door in one wall, taking the attache case with him. Inside it was a commando knife he'd carried on a good many field missions over the years, along with its sheath and a belt he'd owned since he left Oxford. They all showed signs of wear and age, but the knife was as lethal as ever and the leather as tough. They had been good friends to him in Home Dimension. Perhaps they would survive to be equally good friends in Dimension X.

"Perhaps" was as far as Blade would go. The whole business of how to get something beside his own naked body from Home Dimension into Dimension X was still very much guesswork. All the hard data they had came from the transportation of one single solitary ring. It was being examined by every known method with a few techniques being made up on the spot. The examination had as yet revealed nothing.

Meanwhile, there was the theory that something Blade had owned, used, or carried for a while might have a better chance of making the trip. Lord Leighton normally hated relying on guesswork, but he made an exception for Project Dimension X. He was too good a scientist not to recognize the limitations of his own knowledge, and he did not want to see Blade endangered unnecessarily. Lord Leighton might have a computer instead of a heart where most people were concerned, but not with Blade or J.

The end result was that this time Blade would be hurled off into Dimension X with something that might help him stay alive there. That was good news, by any standard.

The routine in the changing room had been the same ever since the project began. Blade stripped naked, smeared himself all over with smelly black grease to prevent electrical burns, and pulled on a small loincloth.

Next Blade opened the attache case. The knife was already in its sheath. Blade drew it out and watched the play of light on the steel, then sheathed it again. He hooked the sheath to the belt, strapped the whole belt around his waist and drew it tight. Finally he stepped out into the main room again and headed toward the glass-walled booth in the center. Around him the lights on the consoles and control panels were already flickering and dancing in the familiar patterns of the main sequence.

Blade sat down in the metal-framed chair inside the booth. The black rubber of the back and seat were chill and clammy against his bare skin. After a little shifting about, he found that he could sit naturally, in almost his usual position, even wearing the belt and knife. Good. The fewer variations from the routine on any one trip, the better. He remembered his trip through two different dimensions, when everything seemed to be going wrong or at least becoming gruesomely unpredictable. He didn't want that to happen again.

Lord Leighton took a final look at the main board and turned away with a satisfied expression. Even by his exacting standards, everything was going smoothly. He could leave his computer to its own devices

for at least a few minutes and wire Blade up.

"Wiring up" was another routine that hadn't changed in a long time. Lord Leighton worked with the speed and agility of a monkey, attaching cobra-headed metal electrodes to every part of Blade's skin. From the electrodes colored wires ran off into the bowels of the computer consoles. When the job was done, Blade and the computer were a single unit, ready to be activated whenever Lord Leighton pulled the master switch.

Lord Leighton chose to wait a few moments, his eyes scanning the controls. J was perched in his usual place, on the small fold-out spectator seat on the wall by the main controls. On his face was the sober expression he usually wore as the time approached for Blade's leap into the unknown. In those moments J could cease to be an urbane, poised gentleman. He could openly show the concern he felt as someone he cared about headed into danger.

Seconds ticked past, turning into minutes. If Blade hadn't known better, he would have suspected Lord Leighton of prolonging the suspense for dramatic effect. Lord Leighton had been known to do that elsewhere. He'd never done it down here at this time and never would.

Suddenly Lord Leighton's right arm shot out and the fingers of his right hand closed on the red master switch. Lord Leighton's aged and misshapen body seemed to take on a grace that it never had at any other moment. The master switch slid down its slot and reached the bottom.

Between one heartbeat and the next, Blade's senses twisted in the computer's grip, and the world around him dissolved.

The floor gaped open, the walls split apart, the ceiling fell in. From some unimaginable outside a greenness swirled and boiled and roared into the room. It was not a liquid, a solid, or a gas. It was a color from some place where the laws governing nature were like nothing that Blade had ever met in Home Dimension or Dimension X.

The greenness poured down on Blade like a waterfall, rose up around him like lava bubbling up out of a volcano, roared past him like a river with a noise like an express train. The computer's consoles and controls, Lord Leighton, J and his seat—all vanished.

There was nothing around Blade now except the greenness, the color that behaved like a liquid, a gas, a solid, and many things that were none of these and should not have existed in any sane or healthy universe. The more Blade saw, the less he liked it. The less he liked what he saw, the more a chilling thought battered at his mind. Had his luck finally run out? Had some malfunction of the computer, some error of judgment by Lord Leighton, even the effects of the knife and belt, brought him to the end of his road? Was he going to live out the rest of his life in some nightmarish nowhere between the dimensions?

It was possible. It always had been possible. His mind had never recoiled from that possibility into raw panic. It did not do so now. Grimly Blade fought his way back to a disciplined awareness of what seemed to be going on around him.

The greenness was now turning steadily into a liquid, a rushing torrent of liquid that was hot and cold at the same time. It chilled parts of Blade's body, scalded others, filled his nostrils with fumes that had no odor and yet choked him, stabbed at his joints and groin with piercing daggers of icy cold, tormented him in a hundred ways. It carried him along as it did so, as if it wished to prolong the torment. It carried him on at a steadily increasing speed, until he felt that he was being whirled along like a log through rapids in flood.

Blade wondered when the rapids would sweep him over the falls to be smashed to pieces on the rocks at the bottom.

Chapter 3

Suddenly there was no more heat around Blade, only cold. What roared past him as loudly as ever was not liquid but air. He was still moving, but more slowly. As he rolled over and over, something solid struck him, now in the chest, now in the knee, now in the head.

Blade threw out his arms and legs to stop himself. They slammed against something solid and cold and rough as sandpaper. He could feel patches of skin vanishing from his fingers and toes. Then he rolled over the edge of something, fell with a thud, and stopped dead. He took several deep breaths and opened his eyes.

He realized then that his eyes had actually been open for some time. It was just that this time he'd landed in Dimension X on a pitch-black night. As his senses cleared further, he realized that the roaring coldness around him was a strong wind. It had blown him across the face of the land like a dry leaf, into the shallow depression where he now lay. He shifted position, ready to sit up. As he did, he felt the pressure of the belt around his waist and the sheathed knife against his thigh.

Blade let out a yell of triumph. He'd done it again! Once more something from Home Dimension had made the trip into Dimension X with him. Knowledge was growing, bit by bit.--His delight at this discovery drove out the last of his headache and he sat up.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Blade's superb night vision began to pick out details. He was sitting in a shallow depression that ran up and down the side of a steep hill. The hillside was strewn with boulders and rose high above him, blocking off half the dark sky and making the world around Blade even darker.

Blade did not feel like standing, not yet and not in this wind. Instead he shifted position until he was on hands and knees, then crawled slowly up out of the depression.

That move saved his life. As he sat down again, there was a faint rattle, then a series of rumbling and crashing noises from the darkness above. A boulder twice the size of Blade himself came bouncing and rolling down the depression, straight across the spot where Blade had been lying. If he hadn't moved, it would have crushed him to a bloody pulp.

Blade decided that it was time to get to his feet and get out of here, in spite of wind, cold, and darkness, before the hill rolled any more half-ton rocks down at him.

Blade moved downhill as fast as the steep slope and, the uncertain footing would let him. As always when he started moving, he felt his full strength return swiftly. Below him a spreading dark mass curled around the base of the hill, like the sea around a rock on the shore.

Several times more as Blade descended the hill the wind sent boulders crashing down close enough for him to hear them. Soon he could make out the dark mass at the foot of the hill. It was a vast expanse of pine forest, hundred-foot trees bending, bowing, and tossing their long branches in the wind. The forest seemed to stretch away, endless and lightless.

Blade practically ran down the last hundred yards of bare slope and plunged into the shelter of the trees.

Up there on the hillside he was exposed to the full force of the wind. He might not die of exposure in one night, but he would become damned uncomfortable! When daylight came he would also be as visible as a bug on a tabletop, never the best situation in a new and unknown dimension. He preferred the forest.

Inside the forest Blade moved slowly to avoid bumping into trees or tripping painfully over fallen branches. He had covered about a hundred yards when he decided to stop before he became disoriented and lost his way. The darkness under the trees was so deep and complete that it almost deserved a stronger name. It was not just an absence of light, it was an almost tangible presence that seemed to passionately hate even the idea of light.

At least the trees broke most of the wind. Only an occasional gust swept down from above, sending its chill breath across Blade's skin and kicking up the dead pine needles that lay inches deep underfoot. High above, the wind moaned and shrieked and roared continuously in the treetops, as if to remind Blade of its presence. Once or twice Blade heard the unmistakable long, tearing cracking and crash of a tree falling, giving up its struggle against the wind.

It was a forest in which a less disciplined man than Blade would have been expecting to meet vampires, ghouls, and witches. It was a forest in which even Blade was not sure he wasn't going to meet bears, wolves, and hermits or woodcutters who might swing axes and ask questions afterward. It would be a good forest to get out of--tomorrow morning, when there was enough light for him to see where he was going. It was not a forest where Blade cared to run the slightest risk of wandering around in circles. He would settle in for the night and move on in the morning.

Blade found a clump of bushes in the lee of a pair of particularly massive trees. Under the bushes the needles lay thicker than elsewhere. He crawled in and began scooping them over himself. They would not be much protection against the cold, but they would be better than nothing. He would not be spending a very comfortable night, and he doubted that he would be getting much sleep. But he would be alive and reasonably healthy, come morning.

He stopped when there were six inches of needles over him. He relaxed, and after that sleep came with surprising speed and ease.

Blade was struggling up from a dream that seemed to be nothing but golden warmth. He shivered as the dream gave way to the cold and darkness around him. Then he opened his eyes, shook his head, and was instantly awake and alert, listening to the sounds of the forest.

They were all there, the same sounds he'd been hearing when he dozed off. But there were new sounds as well. As they registered on Blade's awakened hearing, he sat up, plunged his hand under the pine needles, and drew the knife.

Far away, he heard the clang and thud of cymbals and drums, the occasional faint, thin wailing of a flute, and even more rarely the brassy voice of a trumpet.

The darkness was as solid and the wind as loud as before. Even Blade's trained ears found it hard at first to judge the direction of the music. Gradually he got the impression that it was coming from somewhere off to his left.

Blade's eyes searched the darkness. Was this lonely black forest beginning to make his imagination work too hard? Or did he really see a reddish glow flickering there off to the left, far away through the trees? After a moment, he was sure the glow was real.

It was hard to tell how far this forest stretched or how far beyond it lay the nearest human settlement. It certainly seemed endless and utterly lonely, no place for any sensible people to be lighting fires and playing music in the middle of the night.

So what was he seeing? Once more Blade could not forget that this forest was much too appropriate a setting for black masses, witches' sabbaths, and other strange ceremonies. And people involved in that sort of affair were apt to resent intruders and deal with them drastically.

True enough. Yet if he didn't seek out the musicians and their fire, it might be days before he got out of the forest, let alone found human beings. Blade slipped the knife back in the sheath but left it unstrapped for a quick draw. Then he set off again.

It took him longer than he'd expected to reach his goal. Several times the wind overhead drowned out the music. The fire seemed to flit ahead through the forest like a will-o'-the-wisp. He lost sight of it half a dozen times and once even managed to completely lose his sense of direction. He suspected that he was leaving a trail like a drunken snake's. He knew that if anyone was watching him blundering about, they were probably laughing themselves sick.

The only consolation was that the music and the roar of the wind in the trees completely covered any noise he might be making. Between the wind and the music, the people around the fire probably couldn't have heard him if he'd been approaching them in a tank!

Sheer determination carried Blade through. Eventually he reached a point where he could see the orange-red fire glow flickering clearly through the trees. He set the most direct course toward it he could manage, crouching low and moving by bounds from one tree to another. Whoever the people were, they had probably put out sentries.

The fire seemed close enough to touch when Blade came out on the edge of what was unmistakably a road. It ran in front of him, then curved around to the left toward the fire, which now showed through the trees on the other side. It was not a road that any people able to build anything better would have tolerated, even in this forest. It was barely one lane wide and totally unpaved. With his bare feet Blade could feel ruts and holes a foot deep and rocks the size of his head.

As he slipped across the road, the sound of the music grew louder than before. For the first time Blade heard human voices, cheering and shouting enthusiastically. The beat of the drums grew more rapid and the shouting grew more frenzied. Then suddenly all the instruments stopped as if the ground had opened up and swallowed the players. More cheering followed, along with applause; then that too died away and left the forest to the moan of the wind. Blade crept forward more cautiously than ever, until he could get a clear view of the camp. Beside the road was a clearing about a hundred feet square and on the far side, an enormous pile of roughly dressed tree trunks. In the lee of the pile half a dozen tents of various sizes were pitched in a rough semicircle. In the middle of the semicircle a campfire burned. Beside the tents a score of horses and pack mules were tethered to trees and bushes.

Blade's attention shifted to the people. There were at least a dozen men seated cross-legged around the fire on furs spread on the ground. All wore variations of the same outfit—a short tunic with baggy sleeves and broad trousers bloused into soft leather boots equipped with spurs. Two of the men wore tunics and trousers of material with a high sheen and had jeweled daggers stuck in broad leather belts. The others wore duller clothes, some of them showing patches and ragged edges. Every man had a weapon, either on him or within easy reach. Five held musical instruments—two drums, a flute, a pair of cymbals, and a spiraling horn with what looked like a pearl mouthpiece.

Beside the fire knelt a girl. She was totally naked except for a broad copper bangle around one wrist and another around one ankle. Blade could see her shivering in the wind in spite of her closeness to the fire. Her skin was olive-hued and beaded with sweat, her short hair was a gleaming copper-gold, tangled and damp. It was obvious she'd just been dancing to the music.

There would never be a better time to catch these people relaxed and off their guard, ready to talk first and shoot afterward. Blade rose to his feet and pushed the sheath around the belt, toward the small of his back. He could still draw fast enough in an emergency, but he would not be flaunting his one and only weapon.

Then he spread out both hands in front of him and walked forward, out of the trees and into the firelit clearing.

Chapter 4

All of the men around the fire jumped up, grabbing their weapons. The girl screeched and threw herself flat on the ground. Before Blade could take three steps, he found four crossbows, three lances, and five swords aimed in his direction. A dozen pairs of eyes stared at him over the weapons, hostile but also curious.

The older of the two well-dressed men frowned at Blade, then gave orders.

"Tzimon, Dzhai, climb up on the woodpile. Watch the forest, and call if anyone approaches."

Two of the other men bowed jerkily and scurried toward the piled tree trunks. Blade looked at the well-dressed men and noticed a strong resemblance between them. Father and son?

The older man sheathed his sword and crossed his hands on his chest. "Well, man who comes forth so strangely from the night. Who are you, and what do you in the Empire of Saram?"

"What I do is seek aid. Food and fire and clothing, to begin with. Then whatever you may wish to offer me."

"What the Empire of Saram offers those who stray into its borderlands is usually a quick death, if we are feeling merciful. If not, you go to the Emperor and a death that is anything but quick."

"I have done nothing that honorable men would consider worthy of death, either quick or slow," said Blade severely. They might take that as an insult, but these men seemed as likely to take the words as the sign of a man with a warrior's pride.

"Who are you, then, that you should ask us to believe such a lie?" said the younger man with a harsh laugh. The older man frowned but turned unfriendly eyes on Blade. "My son speaks wisdom, although his words are not well chosen. This is the borderland where Saram meets the Steppes. You are not of the Empire, and few of the Steppemen have ever traveled here without wishing us harm."

"What you have said merely proves that those of the Empire of Saram do not know everything," said Blade. "And do not draw your sword and wave it at me for speaking this truth," he added, with a pointed look at the son. The young man was glaring at Blade and had his hand firmly clamped on the silver-mounted hilt of his sword.

Blade folded his own arms across his chest. It was a gesture that would have conveyed more dignity if

he'd been wearing something besides the knife, belt, and bruises from bumping into and tripping over things in the forest. It served well enough, however. Blade's eyes met the father's and read in them a willingness to listen, if not necessarily to believe.

"Do any of you know of the lands that lie far to the south of the Steppes?" said Blade. This drew blank looks from everyone, exactly as he'd hoped. "Lands that lie far to the south of the Steppes" lay outside local geographical knowledge. They would be willing to believe anything he said about such lands, or at least unwilling to dismiss what he said out of hand.

"I came from one of those lands, a land called England. I am a prince of that land. With six of my warriors I was on my way north to come before the Emperor of Saram. Though knowledge of England has not yet reached Saram, we have heard of the power of your Emperor. We would wish to know more of such a ruler, who might do much for us, either good or ill."

"His Sublime Magnificence the Emperor Kul-Nam cares little what other people know or think of him," said the son sharply. "Why did you expect to accomplish anything?"

"We had heard that His Sublime Magnificence was a wise ruler," said Blade. "Any wise ruler would learn as much about other peoples as he could. Are you asking me to believe that in England we have heard lies, that your Emperor is in truth a fool?"

The son's mouth opened and shut several times but no sound came out. Finally he clamped his jaw tightly shut, as though distrusting what might come out if he spoke again. His father was obviously struggling to keep a straight face. Blade took advantage of all this and continued.

"We could not send through the Steppes a party large enough to fight those who live there," he said. "Yet we thought a small party of selected warriors might slip across the Steppes and reach the borderlands of the Empire undetected. We were right. We passed across the Steppes as though we were invisible. It was in the borderlands that ill fortune overtook us."

Swiftly Blade painted a vivid picture of weary and hungry men on wearier and hungrier horses entering the forests, believing that they were safe and thus relaxing their guard. He painted an even more vivid picture of the attackers who slew five of the men at once and drove the others separately into the endless dark forests. He carefully avoided giving too many details, using darkness and surprise as his excuse.

"Did they come against you on foot or on horseback?" asked the son.

Blade shrugged. "Some were on foot, some were on horseback. I do not know whether those who came on foot came that way on purpose or because they fell off their horses in the darkness and the trees. We were not far inside the forests, so it was not hard for the Steppemen on their small horses to come at us." The size of the horses was an educated guess. In Home Dimension people who lived on open plains usually rode tough, surefooted little horses or ponies.

"This is true. The Steppe horses are sure-footed enough so that in the past they have come as much as half a day's march into the forest. What happened to you and the other man who survived?"

"I do not know where he is, or whether he still lives. I do know that I sprang from my bed, naked as I was, and slew four of the Steppemen. My sword stuck between the ribs of one and he galloped away with it, dying in the saddle as he rode. I had no more weapons but the knife I wear now, and the five who died were already beyond my help. I could see no course that was not shameful-stay and die at once or flee and live to take a better vengeance later. I chose to come away. Perhaps I can ask your help in

taking the lives of a good number of Steppemen and so taking away my shame?"

The son's face remained frozen, but the father nodded. "Perhaps. But it must be seen whether you are truly a warrior, or one who has been justly shamed and punished. Those who have brought ill fortune on themselves are often so accursed that they bring it upon others as well."

Blade was tempted to ask the man if warriors of Saram were so afraid of ill fortune that they refused hospitality to honest travelers. He decided not to. "It shall be as you wish," he replied calmly. "A warrior who is a prince of England will shrink from no test. Nor did I come all this way to fail in any such test." He brought the knife around on his belt until it rode clearly visible on his thigh. Then he crossed his arms on his chest again and stood quietly, waiting for the men facing him to make the next move.

The father clapped his hands three times. The girl who'd been dancing sprang up from the ground and vanished into one of the tents. The guards and servants shifted position, spreading out until they formed a complete circle around Blade and the fire. The two leaders stepped back until they were outside the circle. Then the father turned toward the two men mounting guard on top of the piled logs.

"Ho, Tzimon, Dzhai!" he shouted.

"We come, lord," they shouted back. Both men scrambled down the logs and ran across the clearing toward the circle. They stopped in front of the father, bowed so deeply they almost fell on their noses, and then stood up. In the firelight Blade could see that both men were as broad as he was and nearly as tall. One now carried an axe, the other a mace. Both moved like tough, experienced fighting men.

The father turned and pointed at Blade.

"You see this man?"

"We see him, lord."

"He says he is a prince from England, a land far to the south- of the Steppes. He has come north to greet our Emperor, of whose strength and wisdom he has heard much."

The two men looked at Blade, then looked at each other, then wrinkled their broad noses as if they smelled some particularly foul odor. The one on the right spat into the fire. Obviously they would have liked to say something but didn't dare without their master's permission.

"He was surprised by the Steppemen in the forest, he says, and the men with him slain or driven off after a hard fight." More sour looks from the two men. "I do not know if he lies or not. In any case, he is a stranger come to Saram from the direction of the Steppes."

The father suddenly drew his sword with a rasp of steel and flourished it toward Blade. The fire sent shimmers of light up and down it.

"Tzimon, Dzhai-kill him."

Chapter 5

Blade shot a quick look at the father, trying to guess what was on the man's mind while concealing his own surprise. The other's face was as blank as Blade's own. He might have been ordering a meal in a fine restaurant instead of calling for cold-blooded murder in a dark and windy wilderness.

Then Tzimon and Dzhai began to move forward and Blade turned his attention to them. Both men held on to their weapons as they advanced but did not raise them. Blade dropped into unarmed-combat stance. He did not draw his knife. If it came to killing, he could kill with his bare hands well enough. If his best course was to disable without killing, as he suspected it might be, his bare hands were better than the knife.

Tzimon and Dzhai walked toward Blade side by side until they reached the fire. Then they separated, one moving around each side of the fire. They moved slowly, a step at a time, matching each other's movements step for step.

Blade gave ground slowly, letting his opponents gradually close the distance. He would have liked to be able to retreat until he was half-concealed in the shadows of the trees and Tzimon and Dzhai were silhouetted against the fire. That would give him a useful edge. It might also leave a bad impression on the two noblemen. Blade suspected this was one of those fights where how he won mattered as much as whether he won.

In any case, he probably didn't need the advantage. Tzimon and Dzhai were moving in on him like men who had fought side by side before, but they did not move like a team who'd trained together for years to fight as a single mind with two bodies. Against a pair like this, a single man always has the advantage.

Blade was only three steps from the shadows when his opponents suddenly charged. They came at him with Tzimon slightly in the lead, axe raised, while Dzhai whirled the mace in a great circle around his head. Anything that got inside that circle was going to get smashed, whether it belonged to friend or foe. Blade noticed that, and noticed that Tzimon was keeping well clear of his comrade as they advanced. This left a gap between the two men so wide that they could not hope to support each other against a fast-moving opponent.

Blade was going to be that fast-moving opponent.

He seemed to explode forward into the gap between his opponents. Dzhai sprang to one side, taking himself completely out of combat position. Tzimon stopped in midstride, whirled with frightening speed, and started to bring the axe down where he expected Blade's head to be.

Blade's head stayed in one piece only because he ducked just as the axe whistled down. He knew in that moment that Tzimon was his major opponent here, far more dangerous than Dzhai, as dangerous as any man he'd ever fought. It would be suicide to turn his back on Tzimon without doing him some damage first. Blade shifted his attack and put even more speed and power into it.

One arm shot upward in an eye-blurring stroke. The edge of Blade's left hand slashed across Tzimon's right wrist. The impact jarred Blade from shoulder to waist. It was like trying to chop through a log. The axe wavered in midair above Blade instead of swinging down to split him from shoulder to crotch. Blade threw his clenched right fist into Tzimon's stomach, putting all his weight and strength behind it. It felt like punching a bag of cement, but the wind went out of Tzimon with a tremendous whuffff.

Blade let the movement of the punch pivot him around in a complete circle. He let go with a back kick as he swung. He aimed for Tzimon's jaw, but the man stepped back far enough so that Blade's foot slammed across his chest in a glancing blow. Blade heard something crack, but he wasn't sure if it was Tzimon's ribs or his own foot!

Blade came down out of the circle to see Tzimon standing with his feet wide apart and his axe raised, his

eyes still focused on Blade but his chest heaving as he fought for breath. Three solid strikes from Blade were enough to slow anyone down, even a fast-moving mass of bone and muscle like Tzimon. For a moment Blade had one flank clear. He badly needed that moment, for Dzhai was now moving back to the attack, the mace whirling in circles over and around him.

Blade used that moment to time Dzhai's swings. He noticed that the man held his free arm out across in front of him.

Blade moved in. He darted under the swing of the mace, driving his left hand upward and jerking down with his right. Dzhai's right arm swung down in a perfect arc. The mace whistled past Blade's ear and grazed his shoulder hard enough to jolt him. His left hand crashed into Dzhai's descending elbow. Dzhai screamed horribly as his elbow shattered.

In the same moment Blade jerked Dzhai's free arm down and to one side, nearly pulling it out of its socket. From the corner of his eye Blade now saw Tzimon moving back into the attack, looking for an opening that would let him strike at Blade without hitting his comrade. Blade closed with Dzhai until he was embracing the man as tightly as he might have embraced a woman. His arms locked around Dzhai's chest.

Then Blade hurled himself backward, at the same moment heaving upward on his opponent. Dzhai rose into the air as Blade dropped. He came down at exactly the right moment for Blade's upthrusting feet to take him in the stomach. Blade continued rolling, balancing Dzhai on his feet. He rolled right over in a backward somersault, flinging Dzhai's entire helpless two hundred pounds squarely into Tzimon's face. There was a crunch and a gasp, the axe flew out of Tzimon's hand, the mace flew out of Dzhai's hand and landed in the fire, and the two men crashed down onto the ground together. Blade sprang to his feet, snatched up the axe, plucked a couple of thorns out of his buttocks, then looked at his two opponents. They were sprawled on the ground, both obviously out cold but still breathing.

Blade sank the axe into the ground at his feet and turned to face the two noblemen. Both were staring at Blade, their swords still drawn. To one side of them stood one of their guards, holding a matchlock musket under one arm. On the other side stood the dancing girl, now wrapped in a blanket. She was staring at Blade even more intently than the others, her eyes wide and seeming to glow in the firelight. The other men stood behind these four.

Blade bowed politely, drew his knife, laid it down on the ground with the point toward him, then bowed again. It was a symbolic disarming only. He could snatch up the knife and pick off at least one man long before any of them could do anything to him, even the one with the musket.

Everyone remained as motionless as figures in a waxworks for a moment. Then the father smiled, thrust his sword back into its scabbard, and stepped forward. His son hesitated for a moment, then did the same. The man with the matchlock blew out his match and lowered his weapon butt first to the ground.

The father stepped up to Blade, hand outthrust. Blade took it, matching the other's firm grip.

"Well, my-" began the father, then shook his head. "No, I cannot call you friend, not now, and not ever without the Emperor's permission. You are still a stranger, and the laws of the Empire are strict when they speak of strangers." He smiled. "But though you are a stranger, certainly you are no Steppeman. You are just as certainly a warrior, whom I am happy to have met, and very probably a truthful man as well. Blade, I am Boros, Duke of Kudai. This is my son, Tulu. And these"-he pointed to the other men-"serve in the House of Kudai. Though we cannot call you friend, yet we can say that here and now we are happy to have you among us.

"Prince Blade, welcome to the Empire of Saram."

Chapter 6

Blade sipped from his cup of hot, spiced wine, found that he'd emptied it, and held it out to the girl. She took it, refilled it from a large jar near the mouth of the tent, and handed it back. Blade took another swallow of the steaming liquid, feeling it warm him all the way down, and looked at the girl for about the tenth time. She now wore a blue linen shift belted around her slim waist with a gilded silk cord. She was just as pleasant to look at the tenth time as she'd been the first.

Blade sat facing the mouth of the tent. He wore a pair of leather trousers, a woolen tunic, and a leather belt, all borrowed from Dzhai. Their former owner had no use for them at the moment. He lay in another tent, his shattered elbow and cracked ribs wrapped in bandages, the rest of him wrapped in blankets, filled with drugged wine and sleeping peacefully.

Duke Boros had apologized for not being able to produce better clothing for Blade. "I hope we shall be able to find garb more fitting to your rank before you come into the presence of His Magnificence. But for the moment, only Dzhai among those whose clothes would fit you has any to spare."

Blade sipped more wine. "What is there about the Steppemen that makes them so hated and makes you so sure that I am not one of them?"

"As for what makes them hated, Blade," said Tulu, "need you, who have survived one of their attacks, ask this? What they did to you and your men once, they have done a thousand times in the borderlands of the Empire. They have done it to soldiers, both by open attack and by treacherous ambush. They have done it even more often to farms and villages and towns. They slay all the men and enslave the women and children. Only the bravest will now live within two days' ride of the Steppes. There would be fewer still if it were not for His Magnificence Kul-Nam's iron will."

"How is this?" said Blade.

"He has caused the abandoned farms to be resettled. The new settlers must hold on to the death against the Steppemen. Otherwise their lives are forfeit to the Emperor. The women and children are impaled or flogged to death. After watching this, the men are either burned at the stake or thrown into pits of snakes."

Blade nodded politely. Kul-Nam's determination to keep his borders secure was impressive. His methods were another matter.

"One can understand why your Emperor's reputation has traveled even as far as England," Blade said finally. "Indeed his will is one of iron."

"It is," said the duke. "Yet even iron has only so much strength. The army of Saram is strong, and when it can meet the Steppemen man against man and horse against horse, they must flee or perish. But this seldom happens. They choose their time and place and seldom fight unless they can bring against us numbers so great that we must flee or die. The soldiers of His Magnificence will not flee, for he is harsh with cowards. So they die. Each year our soldiers grow fewer, each year the Steppemen grow more numerous. We know they dream of a year when they will ride across our border in all their strength and sweep our army aside like the tides of the sea. We fear that year is not far off, for all that His Magnificence and his soldiers can do."

So the Empire of Saram seemed to be facing the attacks of a horde of nomadic barbarians. Blade was not quite ready to call the Empire itself "civilized"-not with their Emperor's rather bloodthirsty taste in punishments. Yet certainly they were facing a notoriously unpleasant sort of enemy. A horde of horsemen could be as elusive, painful, and sometimes deadly as a swarm of wasps.

"I can understand why they are not welcome in Saram," said Blade. The duke laughed shortly, and even his son managed a thin smile. "I am glad you decided that I was not one of them. Matters might have become difficult, for as you have seen, I would not have been easy to kill."

The duke laughed again. "No, indeed. There would have been a battle worthy of quite a number of poems, if by some chance anyone had lived to write them. In fact, we had some hopes that you might not be a Steppeman when you first appeared. Not one in a thousand of them is as large as you are. Nine out of ten have their legs bowed like the crescent of the moon from a life spent on horseback, while yours are as straight as pine trees and as tough as seasoned wood.

"Yet we could not be sure, so I ordered the fight. If you perished, it would be a quicker death than you would receive at other hands than ours. If you lived, you would be no Steppeman, and your fate a matter for His Magnificence."

"You are certainly no Steppeman," said Tulu briskly. "They are mighty warriors on horseback, but far less dangerous on foot. They have no such arts of fighting with their hands and feet as you have. Nor do they ever show mercy to a foe. I saw how you were fighting, Blade. Am I not right in saying that you were trying to spare both Tzimon and Dzhai?"

Blade grinned. "I was. They had done me no harm. If I could keep them from doing me any without killing them, why shouldn't I do it?"

The duke shook his head, his face blank. He seemed to find either Blade's words or Blade's philosophy totally incomprehensible. Blade wasn't surprised. If the Emperor Kul-Nam's bloodthirstiness was normal for the Empire, mercy would be something seldom mentioned and even more seldom shown. The idea of someone casually refusing to kill a couple of men who were doing their best to kill him would be hard to grasp.

To help the duke over his embarrassment, Blade went on swiftly. "I wish I had been able to do better. I'm afraid that Dzhai has lost the use of one arm for life. He and Tzimon were too good. I had to move too fast or they would certainly have killed me. I hope someone will be able to take care of Dzhai now that he can no longer fight."

Tulu stared at Blade. "You wish-help for Dzhai?" He shook his head, as bewildered as his father.

"Of course," said Blade. "It was not his fault that he was defeated. I am a stranger with no money and no certainty that I will be able to live here in Saram. Otherwise I myself would offer him a place in my service. The world is full of jobs that a strong man who works hard can do with only one hand."

"That-that is the way in England?" said Tulu. He was not quite able to keep his voice steady.

Blade was tempted to say "Of course"-as unpleasantly as possible. It was fairly obvious that in the Empire slaves no longer able to do their jobs were killed, discarded like worn-out furniture or a broken sword.

Instead, he said only, "Yes, that is the way of the men of England."

"It is-it is not our way, although one hears of it in the Five Sea Kingdoms," the duke said quietly. "But I will thank you for it. It is good to know that Tzimon will fight again in my service. As for Dzhai-" He hesitated.

Blade broke in. "As for Dzhai, I have said that I cannot myself be sure of doing anything for him. I am a stranger, and you say the laws of Saram are harsh toward strangers. But is it permitted to do one favor for a stranger?"

The duke nodded.

"Then I ask you to find Dzhai a post where he can continue to serve you as loyally as he has served you until now. That is the greatest favor you could grant me."

"It is also the strangest favor I have ever heard anyone ask," said the duke, his face slowly brightening into a smile. "It does you much honor, though. In any case, it will not be the only favor we grant you. Our laws are harsh, true, but not that harsh. You will sleep apart from us, in a tent of your own, and will be guarded day and night. Otherwise you shall eat as we eat, drink as we drink, and receive all else that the laws and customs of hospitality demand of us for a guest who has proven himself honorable." The duke and Tulu bowed.

The tent they erected for Blade was small and low. Its leather was pierced with holes through which the wind whistled angrily. The furs they spread on the ground for him were dirty and musty smelling. Blade insisted on holding them briefly in the smoke of the campfire to drive out the odors and any vermin that might be infesting them. Then he threw the furs down on the floor of the tent and lay down on top of them. Through the holes in the tent he could see his two guards taking up their positions. Blade rolled himself up snugly in the threadbare blankets.

He had not quite drifted off to sleep when he became aware that someone was trying to get into the tent. The front flap was jerking steadily, as if someone were fumbling at the cords. Blade lay still and waited. Whoever or whatever it was, the guards were paying no attention. A quick look through the holes on either side showed their booted feet and trousered legs exactly where they'd been before. Blade doubted if Duke Boros and his son were planning open, crude treachery, but he was quite sure he would have been happier with a weapon more formidable than his knife.

The jerking suddenly stopped. The tent flap swung open and a small figure appeared silhouetted against the glow of the fire. Blade shifted his grip on the knife for a throw but something made him hesitate. Then the figure moved forward, to take on a definite shape and recognizable features. It was the girl who'd danced and served the wine.

She went down on her hands and knees and crawled closer. Her small, neatly molded face seemed to be lit up by a joyful, almost ecstatic grin that bared two rows of perfect teeth. Even her eyes seemed to be part of the grin.

She still wore the blue robe belted around her, but the linen had grown heavy in the night dampness. It clung to her slender body, molding her graceful curves, and flowed down off her, rippling as she moved toward Blade.

As the girl's head came level with his feet, Blade sat up, keeping his hand on the knife but keeping it well out of sight under the blanket. The girl jumped, but seemingly more in delight than in fear. Her grin

widened.

"Ah, Prince Blade," she said. Her voice was low, with a slight sing-song intonation but nonetheless extremely clear. "Ah, Prince Blade," she repeated. "You wake and welcome me."

"I wake," Blade corrected her. "As for welcoming you-we shall see." He decided to be blunt. "Are you part of the duke's hospitality to a stranger?"

"Oh yes, it is so that I am," said the girl, controlling a giggle. Then her smile faded and she spoke very softly and earnestly, with none of the sing-song quality in her voice now.

"Yes, I was to come to your tent. The duke thinks I come only because I know it is my duty as a slave girl. He does not know that I also come out of gratitude." She hesitated. "He must not know it, either. I would be punished terribly for it if he knew."

"Then why do you tell me?" said Blade. "Do I need to know it?"

"Yes," said the girl bluntly. "You are a stranger in the Empire. Most strangers who come to Saram die, some very soon, some later. Some of those who die, die because they have no friends. It is against the laws of the Empire to be a friend to a stranger. But you have two friends now. You must know this. It may save you."

That depended very much on who the friends were, even if the girl was telling the truth. "Who are these friends?"

"I am one. I am Haleen, a slave girl in the house of the Dukes of Kudai as my mother and my mother's mother were before me. I have come to you because I am your friend, and because I want to tell you that I am."

Blade nodded. "I thank you for your friendship. But you said I have two friends. Who is the other?"

Haleen fell silent for a moment, apparently listening for sounds from outside the tent. Then she went on, her voice barely above a whisper. "The other is Dzhai, the fighting man whose arm you crippled and whose life you asked be saved. Saving him made both of us your friends. Dzhai is my brother, son of the same father by another woman. His mother was a free woman and his father was not known to those who had charge of such matters, so he was born free. If anyone else knew this secret, he would be enslaved or slain at once. I trust you to keep silent. You have already saved him once, so I do not think you will say anything now that would slay him."

"I understand," said Blade. "The secret will go no farther."

"Do you swear it by whatever you hold most sacred?"

"I do so swear it. I swear by my honor as a Prince of England that the secret will never pass my lips and will die with me."

"May the Three Mothers bless you and give you a long life," said Haleen. She leaned forward and impulsively threw her arms around him, kissing him on both cheeks, on the eyelids, and finally on the lips-along, warm, and lingering kiss. Blade found himself feeling warmer than the kiss alone could make him, and in places where Haleen was not kissing him or even touching him. The girl's happiness was turning itself into desire, and that desire was passing on to him and into him and finding a response in him.

He ran his own hands up and down her back, his fingers dancing along her spine and his palms cupping her firm buttocks, covered only by the robe. She kissed him again on the lips, even more warmly than before, and pressed against him so hard that he could feel her small, firm breasts through both robe and blanket.

Blade wriggled out from under his blanket, gently pushing Haleen away as she dove for his groin. He was excited enough for the moment. He sat up and Haleen sat up also, facing him. She raised her arms over her head as he reached out and unknotted the golden cord around her waist. The robe fell open and patterns of light and shadow played across the fine skin and the delicately molded breasts within. Blade took the sleeves of the robe and drew it off over Haleen's head, very slowly, tantalizing both of them.

He threw the robe aside, and in the next moment she was lunging forward to crush herself warmly against him and then on top of him as he went over backward onto the furs. He had only a moment's glimpse of dark nipples risen into solid points, a perfect dark triangle between her thighs already sparkling with moisture, trim waist and flat belly, finely molded legs, all her beauty. Then he could see nothing, only feel all the warmth and all the curves as she moved up and down on top of him.

Her hands and lips danced up and down his body, leaping wildly from his throat to his thighs, lingering at the tip, the sides, the base of his monstrously swollen manhood, working their way back up again and then down once more.

Eventually there was nothing more that she could give him or take from him without his entering her. There was neither stranger nor slave girl now in the tent as she raised herself and then came down as Blade came up to meet her. There was nothing except two people, driven together by desire, driven to being as much animal as human.

The groans and the gasps were certainly animal. So were the writhings, the twistings, the heavings as Haleen pressed down and Blade pressed upward. So was the musk of passion that filled the tent, overpowering the smell of furs and leather and wood smoke. It seemed to Blade that the girl above him was even losing the shape of a human being. He was locked with a spirit, a spirit made tangible, exquisite flesh, but whose shape changed at every moment.

Suddenly Haleen's whole body jerked, bowing backward from the waist as violently as a whipcrack, bending so far backward that her head sank down between Blade's feet and her hair stroked his ankles with a thousand tiny brushes. Blade's blurred vision could clearly see her mouth clamped tightly shut and beads of blood creeping out along her lips as she held back her cries. He could clearly see the muscles of her pelvis and flat belly writhing and twisting as her climax charged them with an explosive life of their own.

Then Blade's own climax came, and he had to fight back his own mindless roars as he found release, hold himself down to keep from writhing about and flattening both the girl above him and the tent around him. He shuddered and went on shuddering, spurting steadily upward into her until it seemed that he would never stop, that all the moisture and all the life would drain out of his body into hers and he would fall back beneath her a lifeless corpse. His vision blurred again, and he only felt Haleen toppling forward to sprawl on top of him. Then for a long moment neither of them felt or saw anything at all, even each other.

Eventually Blade realized that they were both lying naked on top of the furs and the blankets, and that it was cold in the tent. He saw that Haleen was sound asleep, her breathing regular and the grin back on her face. Without waking her, he rolled away and stretched her out, then lay down beside her and pulled

the blankets over both of them. Haleen's gentle breathing was the last thing Blade heard as he also drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 7

Blade and Haleen awoke as the gray light of early morning trickled through the holes in the tent. With tenderness this time rather than blazing, urgent passion, they made love. Then they lay in a warm, pleasant half-doze until they heard the sounds of the camp coming awake around them. Haleen pulled on her robe and slipped out of the tent, her face set in an expression of total innocence.

Blade lay quietly for a few minutes more, to give the impression that he was a heavy sleeper and a late riser, listening as he did so. He had learned never to miss a chance to hear people talking in their unguarded moments.

This time no one talked about anything more revealing than saddle galls on the horses and the rust on one of Tulu's dress spurs. Blade gave up, pulled on his clothes, and crawled out to join his hosts. After a breakfast of porridge and salted meat, they were on the march again.

They moved for three days through the grim border country. All of it was either bare, gray rock towering toward a chill blue sky or endless, gloomy forest penetrated only by a few wretched, twisting roads and trails. Blade watched Dzhai clinging to the reins of his horse with his good hand, wincing every time a rough patch of road sent pain stabbing through his broken arm.

Very few people ever came here. The area was thoroughly inhospitable to man or beast, and it was deliberately allowed to stay that way, by the orders of His Magnificence Kul-Nam, as a barrier to the Steppemen. The lack of fodder, the poor roads, and the even worse weather that prevailed for half the year kept this part of Saram's border as thoroughly guarded against the Steppemen as an army of fifty thousand men could have done. Once more Blade had to admit that Kul-Nam had a certain amount of sense as well as a great lust for blood.

Then why were Duke Boros and his party riding through this land?

The law of Saram was that every noble and freeman above a certain rank had to pay his respect to the Emperor at least once every three years. Boros and Tulu were on their way to pay their visit to the Emperor while he was in residence at one of his southern castles. They had started their journey late, and the only way to reach the Emperor in time was to take a short route through the border country. In spite of the roads and the danger of bandits or Steppemen, the route would save them several days' traveling, enough to bring them before the Emperor on time. That was worth almost any amount of risk and inconvenience. Appearing late before the Emperor carried severe penalties.

Blade wondered if there were any crime or error in the Empire of Saram that did not carry severe penalties. The more he heard, the more he doubted it, and the less he looked forward to his reception by His Sublime Magnificence Kul-Nam, Emperor of All Saram. It did not help Blade's mood to note that Boros and Tulu were almost as nervous as he was, and not concealing it nearly as well. They were of a House with a history stretching back several hundred years. He was a complete stranger, with nothing whatever except their good intentions to protect him from Saram's bloodthirsty laws and Kul-Nam's even more bloodthirsty whims.

More than once during the three days, Blade was half tempted to steal a horse and slip quietly off into the forest. He was not quite sure what he would do then. The Steppemen's ways sounded no more admirable and no more hospitable than the laws of the Empire. Perhaps the sensible thing to do would be

to fade quietly away into the wilderness and live there like a hermit until the time came to return to Home Dimension.

Unfortunately, that would only make matters worse, as he discovered after talking with Haleen. She was horrified at the idea and begged him not to think of it.

"That would prove to all that you were a spy or something else just as bad."

"Even to Duke Boros?"

"Even to him."

"Then what would happen?"

"He would have to tell the Emperor at once. Kul-Nam would not be pleased. He would take Tulu as a hostage and send the duke out at the head of an army to scour the country for you. Hundreds of people would be killed or left homeless in the search.

"When they caught you, you would be castrated, blinded, flayed, then smeared with honey and tied across an anthill to have the flesh eaten from your bones. If you were not caught, Kul-Nam would execute Tulu in the same way. Boros would have to watch it, then be impaled alive. The House of Kudai would be abolished, all its slaves executed, all its freemen enslaved, all its wealth forfeited to the Imperial Treasury."

Blade gave a long whistle of astonishment. "All because of accidentally befriending someone who might have been a spy?"

"Yes. That is the way of Emperor Kul-Nam. If you were to flee, you would be killing many people, as surely as if you took a sword and cut off their heads. My brother and I would certainly be among them. I beg you, think of us now as you did in the fight, and show this mercy that is so honored in England. Do not flee! Do not even speak of it as a joke!"

"I will not," said Blade, and kissed her.

On the morning of the fourth day they rode out of the forested borderlands and onto the southern plains of the Empire. Here the land was flat and the roads straight and well maintained. The party swept along at fifty and sixty miles a day, starting at dawn and making camp only at twilight. They were heading north, toward the Emperor's current residence and toward the Silver Sea, which stretched a thousand miles toward the east.

This was also a land of broad fields of waving yellow grain and of walled towns. The party rode around the towns, close enough for Blade to notice that only those towns with Imperial garrisons had their walls defended. Sentries strode back and forth, carrying bows and muskets. Small cannon jutted from the tops of the towers and larger ones defended the gates. Mounted patrols swept the roads for miles around.

In the ungarrisoned towns, on the other hand, the walls rose unguarded, unarmed, and sometimes half crumbled into ruins. In none of the towns did Blade see anyone armed, except soldiers of the Emperor and handfuls of thuggish-looking types who seemed to be the local policemen.

As before, Haleen was able to help Blade make as much sense as possible of things in Saram. Blade found himself respecting her more and more as he got to know her better. She was only nineteen, born a

slave and resigned to being one until she died. She could neither read nor write nor count without the help of her fingers and toes. But she had sharp eyes, a keen mind to understand what she saw, and clear words to explain what she understood.

"The Emperor does not trust anyone with weapons, except the nobles and those who serve them, the soldiers, and the constables. All others cannot even have spears or swords, let alone bows or muskets. All they can have is kitchen knives."

"What about blacksmiths?"

"They all serve either the soldiers or the army. If they sell a single weapon to someone who cannot have it, they are killed. Melted iron is poured into their mouths, or-"

Blade held up a hand to stop her. He was no longer interested in catalogs of the ghastly punishments handed out to lawbreakers in Saram. What interested him was the military problem this law must create for the Empire.

"That means that towns without a garrison have no defense against the Steppemen except their walls."

Haleen nodded. "That is true. Sometimes they do not even have their walls. You saw the walls that were falling down?"

"Yes. I couldn't understand why the people of the towns would let that happen."

"Two years ago a town did rebuild its walls when they were falling down. Kul-Nam decided that the town was plotting against him. He had a dozen of the leading people tortured to make them confess that they were going to rebel."

"They confessed, of course?" After a certain amount of torture, anyone would confess to anything. That was a basic fact of life Blade had learned years ago, long before he'd ever heard of Dimension X.

"Of course. The Emperor's army surrounded the town and stormed it. He even sent in the Corps of Eunuchs, who are the fiercest of all his soldiers. Everyone in the town was killed. Then it was burned. Kul-Nam does not trust the people of the towns."

The Emperor was probably right. Unfortunately for Saram, that was his own damned fault! After the massacre, what else could he expect?

Blade knew by now that it was not only pointless but dangerous to say anything concerning a matter about which Kul-Nam had already made up whatever he used for a mind. Certainly His Magnificence had landed his Empire in a messy situation. Only a small fraction of the people of military age had weapons or any knowledge of how to use them. His army and the nobles' fighting men were spread very thin. Behind them was nothing-no reserve, no local-defense forces, nothing at all. The towns could not even delay the Steppemen by closing their gates and holding out until the Imperial army could move to rescue them!

It was a stupid situation. It was also a waste of time to worry about it. The thing to worry about for the time being was keeping his own head on his shoulders. If he could do that long enough, perhaps he might be able to do something for somebody else in Saram.

The ride north across the plain toward the Emperor's castle took five days. On the morning of the sixth day a haze of smoke and dust on the horizon ahead told Blade that they were approaching another town.

It was not a town, but an army camp as large as a town. Thick clouds of black smoke coiled up from a row of brick chimneys, telling of a large arsenal hard at work. There were rows of wooden barracks with tile roofs stretching for almost a mile, and numerous guns lined up outside the walls. All the lamer guns were mounted on heavy sledges instead of wheels. Such guns would be useful for knocking down the walls of a rebellious town or a rebellious noble's castle, but in the field against fast-moving horsemen they would be useless. In fact, they would slow down the movements of any army that tried to use them. In spite of this, they were all polished and painted and on display like so many blooded horses.

Kul-Nam was obviously proud of them, whatever use he might expect to get out of them.

The duke's party rode on past the camp without stopping or even approaching the gates. A score of riders came out to join the duke's party as an escort-or guard. From the riders' plump, hairless faces, Blade assumed they were from the Corps of Eunuchs.

They looked like good soldiers. They rode well, and their weapons had the appearance that comes with careful maintenance over many years. Their helmets sat square and their armor fit well, with no odd pieces missing or laces dangling. Their horses looked alert, tough, and well fed. Like most of the other Imperial soldiers Blade had seen, the Corps of Eunuchs would be formidable opponents in battle. If Kul-Nam's judgment had been as good as his soldiers, the Empire would have been in no danger at all. As it was, Saram had an army that was worthy of better leadership than they were likely to get from their Emperor.

The eunuchs divided into two lines and flanked the duke's party, one line on each side. The camp vanished behind; the horizon ahead began to swell into a range of green hills. After another half hour they were riding along a road that wound through scattered estates, with whitewashed, tile-roofed houses laid out around lush gardens and artificial lakes. The breezes that blew across the road brought the smell of flowers and rich earth. They also brought the smell of too many hard-worked, unwashed people crammed together in the slave barracks behind each of the great houses.

At a crossroads stood a great pyramid of stone painted a glossy red, and on top of the pyramid rose a heavy timber frame. The frame was studded with spikes, and on each spike was stuck a human head. Some were fresh -Blade saw the head of a young girl, no more than twelve, that seemed still to wear an expression of agonized surprise. Others were blackened, rotting masses of decay, eyes and tongues plucked out by carrion birds, exuding foul stench into the warm air. Still others were bare skulls, with only a few shreds of sun-dried flesh adhering to the whitening bones, the teeth bared in monstrous grins.

Gradually Blade realized that the road was taking them toward one hill in the middle of the range. Squarely on top of the hill sat an enormous castle. Its walls formed a perfect circle nearly a mile in diameter. Twelve tall, round towers studded the wall, and in the center four even taller ones rose in a square.

Every visible part of the castle was a dull black that sucked in all the light and gave back none. It squatted uncompromisingly on the earth, seeming to weigh it down, visible, defiant, and terrifying from many miles away. If Blade had known nothing at all about the character of His Sublime Magnificence Kul-Nam, the castle would have told him a good deal. He wondered how many slaves had worked for how many years to raise it on that hilltop, and how many of them had died before the final stone was set in place.

Closer up, Blade could see that another towered wall circled the base of the hill, with several clusters of buildings just inside it. Duke Boros drew up beside Blade and pointed.

"We will dismount at the base of the hill, report to the house master, disarm, bathe, and don proper garb. Then we will wait for His Magnificence to summon us to the House of Blood."

"That is the castle on top of the hill?"

The duke nodded. "His Magnificence Kul-Nam is not ashamed to be the slayer of many he calls-of many enemies. So he calls his castles by such names as the House of Blood, the House of Death, the House of the Sword, and so on. His principal castle is named the House of the Eagle's Claw."

Boros hesitated, obviously reluctant to discuss the Empire's military strength with Blade, even in the most general terms. Then he shook his head and laughed. "It is no secret that the House of Blood is the strongest castle in the land. It was finished only three years ago, after ten years of work by five thousand men. The Emperor himself has boasted of its strength. With a strong and well-furnished garrison, it could stand off an army of fifty thousand for a year. The others are not quite as strong, but none of them would be easy to storm, or quick to starve out."

"It was said even in England that Kul-Nam made it hard for his enemies to come at him," said Blade. "I see that what was said was true."

"Indeed it was," said the duke. "But here we are, coming to the gate. We would do well to talk of this at another time and place, if we have the chance."

The preliminary formalities for a visit to the Emperor took several hours. There were horses to be stabled, the fighters and servants to be assigned quarters, scented baths to be taken, and ceremonial clothes to be unpacked and put on.

When Blade disarmed, he asked Dzhai to take charge of the belt and commando knife. This was intended to honor the man; it was also intended to put the knife in the care of someone who would have some reason to take care of it. It was as much as Blade could do to keep the knife safe.

The house master did not seem to care where Blade was from or what he might or might not be. Duke Boros of the noble House of Kudai had taken the stranger under his protection and wished to bring him before the Emperor. So be it. That placed the matter in the hands of His Magnificence, and none below him might now presume to decide upon it.

"The will of the Emperor shall be done," said the house master, bowing his head. Duke Boros and Tulu also bowed their heads. All the non-nobles within earshot knelt, eyes on the floor, and thumped the floor three times with their clenched right fists. After a moment's hesitation, Blade imitated the duke and his son.

"However, that is not the end of my duties in this matter," the house master went on, with a severe look at Blade's clothes. They were dirty, travel-stained, and generally disreputable. "If he is a prince of England, he must appear before His Magnificence in something more suitable to his rank!"

The house master would not be budged from his decision. For a while it looked as if protocol would stand like an iron gate across Blade's path to the Emperor. This was not just embarrassing; with the whimsical and blood thirsty laws and customs of the Empire, it could become dangerous at any moment.

Eventually they had to borrow clothes for Blade. This took several more hours, but when Blade finally looked at himself in a mirror of polished bronze mounted in a silver frame, he had to admit the results were impressive. He wore black silk trousers bloused over the silver-embroidered tops of white kidskin boots. Above the waist he wore a white linen shirt, a short red tunic, a vest so stiff with gold lace that it could stand by itself, and a long blue coat that reached to his knees.

The sun was setting as Blade, Duke Boros, and Tulu left the outer wall to climb the hill to the House of Blood. The way up the hill lay up an immense flight of white marble steps with a gilded bronze railing on either side.

Blade noticed that the steps of the great staircase were too wide to climb in any sort of dignified fashion. A man had to climb them with a sort of scuttling movement that destroyed his dignity and also wasted his breath. As a man climbed, above him stood the terrible black castle, growing larger and more grim as it loomed higher and higher over him. Blade was quite sure that Kul-Nam had deliberately planned all this, to make sure that his visitors arrived in a properly intimidated frame of mind.

The black walls ahead were studded with glistening, elaborately carved cannon muzzles, and more cannons peered down from the tops of the towers. A deadly and continuous rain of stone and iron and lead would fall on the heads of any enemy trying to climb the hill. As long as the ammunition in the inner castle held out, any attacker would be lucky to get past the outer wall.

They came up to a ridiculously small gate in the base of one of the corner towers. Duke Boros pulled the silver knob that jutted out from the center of the gate. Incredibly faint and far away, a bell tinkled. Then the gate slid aside, opening on a dark tunnel. It slanted upward, and Blade could see light at the far end, so distant that it seemed no brighter than a firefly.

They strode forward into the tunnel and began to climb. As they did, the gate swung shut behind them and they were in total darkness except for the pale speck of light far ahead. Kul-Nam was obviously going to leave nothing undone to keep his visitors nervous and unsure of themselves right to the end.

They moved up the tunnel slowly, feeling their way a step at a time. The floor seemed smooth and regular underfoot, but none of them was willing to trust it. Blade could not believe that the Emperor had built his impregnable castle with a tunnel running straight up into its heart. Doubtless there were spyholes, traps, gates that fell, pits that yawned, shafts for boiling oil or stones. It would be best to move slowly and make sure that those who watched took no alarm.

Whatever traps may have lain in wait, none were sprung. After what seemed like hours, the three men came to the end of the tunnel. Boros and Tulu stepped to either side and let Blade look out upon what lay beyond.

The chamber was square and nearly a hundred feet on each side. The floor was entirely covered with polished, blood-red tile separated by strips of black marble. The walls were gleaming white, set with great swirling, glittering mosaic patterns done in slivered glass. The roof swelled out of sight into what seemed to be a dome. Some complicated array of mirrors high in that dome caught the last remaining daylight and focused it down in a vertical, glowing, reddish shaft into the center of the chamber.

On the floor in that center stood a black marble throne, and on that throne sat a broad, totally immobile human figure. Blade looked from Boros to Tulu and back again. Their eyes answered the question he didn't dare put to them aloud. Then Duke Boros straightened himself and strode forward, leading the way out into the chamber, toward His Sublime Magnificence, Kul-Nam, Emperor of all Saram.

Chapter 9

The Emperor sat squarely on the black marble throne, as solid and unmoving as if he himself were part of the marble. His feet in cloth-of-silver boots with black spurs were spread slightly apart, his hands rested on the arms of the throne, and his large, dark eyes stared straight at the three men approaching him.

Kul-Nam was a good six inches shorter than Blade, but he must have been nearly as heavy. All of that weight was bone and muscle. Blade could see this clearly. The Emperor wore black trousers with a gold sash and above the waist only an embroidered red vest that left most of his massive torso visible. His olive-brown skin was tanned and weathered even darker, and seamed and corded with a warrior's muscles and a warrior's collection of scars. His head was shaved completely bare above the eyebrows, except for a long, black pigtail caught up in a silver ring. The emperor's bare skull gleamed so brightly that Blade had a moment's ludicrous thought that it might be waxed to give it that high polish.

Against one side of the throne leaned a long, curved sword in a jeweled scabbard, within easy reach of the Emperor's right hand. Against the other side leaned three short throwing spears with razor-sharp, silvered heads and red tassels on the butts. Three daggers were stuck in the Emperor's sash. He looked well equipped to deal with any armed opponent, ready to turn from emperor to warrior in the blink of an eye.

In each corner of the chamber stood four of the Corps of Eunuchs, in black tunics and red trousers. Three of each four carried two swords apiece, one long and one short. The fourth carried a crossbow slung across his chest. They stood as motionless as groups of statues, no sign of life showing in any of the sixteen except for an occasional flicker of an eyelash.

Duke Boros strode toward the throne, Tulu fell into line behind him, and Blade brought up the rear. Twenty feet from the throne they stopped, spread out, and prostrated themselves on the tiles of the floor. Blade was only seconds behind the other two men in going down on his face.

The Emperor's sharp eyes caught Blade's slight delay. A chill, harsh voice rang out, sending echoes chasing each other around the vast chamber.

"Who is this clumsy fool who knows not the proper forms of obedience to us? And why are you, Boros, so unwise as to bring him before us at a time when you should make all efforts to please us?"

The duke quivered, not in fear but in an obvious effort to restrain his anger at these lashing words. Without raising his head he spoke quickly. His words were muffled and distorted by his chin pressing against the tiles.

"This man is a stranger. He came to us in the borderlands, while we journeyed toward Your Magnificence. He told a tale of being a prince of a distant land, beyond the Steppes."

"There is no such land. We would have known of it if there were."

"Your Magnificence, I only repeat what this man said to us the night he came from the forest to meet us. Have I your gracious permission to continue?"

The Emperor made a fly-shooing gesture with his left hand. "Very well. We shall hear you out. It will be interesting to see how the House of Kudai has come to harbor strangers who tell monstrous lies."

Both the duke and his son visibly winced at those last words. Blade suddenly felt a sensation like a hundred thousand ants with very cold feet marching up and down his spine. There was deadly danger in this room, danger for all three of them. Kul-Nam was not just bloodthirsty, whimsical, and tyrannical. He was mad or close enough to it to be a constant threat to those for whom his lightest word or whim meant life or death.

Duke Boros had the immense courage and coolness required to get through his whole story without stammering, hesitating, or leaving out a single detail. When he'd finished a long silence descended on the chamber like a weight. Blade could almost feel it pressing him against the floor until he began to find it hard to breathe.

The silence continued. Then suddenly the Emperor clapped both hands together. After the silence the clap sounded like a crash of thunder. Blade half expected the walls and ceiling of the great chamber to shatter and crash down on everyone inside.

Footsteps echoed around the chamber as four of the eunuchs ran out from the far left-hand corner. As they approached, the Emperor picked up his sword, drew it, and laid the naked weapon across his silk-clad knees. As the eunuchs came up, he raised the sword and pointed at Blade.

"This man is a stranger come within the Empire. He says he is a prince of England, come to learn of the Empire. He lies. There can be no such land as England, therefore no princes from it. Kill him."

Blade had only a moment to realize that he was about to die. Then he heard a cry of surprise from Duke Boros. The duke sprang up, dropping back onto his knees and reaching out both hands in a begging gesture toward the Emperor. Blade saw Kul-Nam's drawn sword swing around until its point was aimed directly at the duke. Light ran up and down the engraved steel like fire. The four eunuchs stared now at Blade, now at the duke, shifting their feet uneasily and keeping their hands on their weapons.

"Your Magnificence," said the duke earnestly. "Can we ask of you that this man live?"

As polite as his tone was, the duke's words made the four eunuchs gasp in astonishment. Speaking to the Emperor without being spoken to first-monstrous! Blade sensed that now Duke Boros' and Tulu's lives as well as his own hung by a very thin and already frayed thread, one that the Emperor could snap for good with a word or a gesture.

The Emperor jerked his head up and down three times, in a grotesque parody of a gracious nod. "We shall hear your words, Lord of Kudai."

"Your Magnificence is gracious beyond my poor deserts."

"They are poor indeed. But speak, and we shall give you such attention as you may deserve."

"This man is a stranger, true. He may or may not be telling the truth. But certainly while he has been within the borders of Saram he has done nothing against your peace, your honor, or any of your subjects. In fact, he did not kill my fighting men Tzimon and Dzhai when he could have done so. Thus he spared at least one good fighter for service against the Steppemen."

The Emperor's eyebrows rose. "He spared a man he had defeated?"

"Yes, Your Magnificence."

"It would seem then that this man who calls himself Prince Blade is quite mad. We are thus even more certain that he lies. If there were such a land as England, they certainly would not make madmen princes and send them to us.

"It does, however, seem to us that since he is a madman, he has small ability to do us harm. You say he is strong?"

"I have seldom seen a man so strong, Your Magnificence."

"Good. Then it is our decree that this 'Prince Blade' be sent to the service of our galleys upon the Silver Sea. Let him use his strength there, and call himself a prince if he wishes. He will do us no injury by it."

The Emperor pointed at Blade and the four eunuchs stepped forward to surround him and separate him from Duke Boros and Tulu. As they did so, the Emperor went on.

"We also wish to remind you, Boros of Kudai, that you have in some measure displeased us by speaking so boldly. We shall give only a light punishment, however. You shall within the next ten days give over to us for our service fifty fighting men and fifty serving men and women from your house. Those who have been free shall also be free in our service, and all shall return to you at the end of five years." Blade had never in his life heard a more obvious lie. "Clearly, though, some will not return at all if you displease us further."

At this point Blade was quite certain that there was indeed a madman in the chamber, and equally certain that it was not himself. He would have liked to express this opinion by walking over to the black marble throne and strangling the creature sitting on it very slowly with his bare hands.

It would in fact have been quite practical to dispose of the Emperor, although in a somewhat less stylish manner. The eunuch carrying the crossbow was standing just a little too close to Blade, and his weapon was cocked and loaded. Blade was quite sure he could snatch the bow and put the bolt through the Emperor's thick torso before anyone else could lift a finger, let alone a sword.

Then what? He would have earned himself certain death. He would also have earned it for Duke Boros and Tulu, and for how many others besides? With the Emperor dead, Saram would fall into chaos. Feuds, intrigues, plots for the throne, and the vengeance of the dead Emperor's men would take tens of thousands of lives. In that chaos the Steppemen would have a golden opportunity to strike. Their rule in Saram would probably be worse than even the rule of Emperor Kul-Nam.

No, he would not try to bring down the Emperor unless and until there was someone better to put in his place. He would go off to the galleys, looking like a good slave tamely submitting to his fate. He had been a slave before, in half a dozen different Dimensions. He was still alive, unlike most of the men who had themselves been his masters. He was reasonably sure he could do it all again.

So he stood where he was as the eunuchs closed in and drew out cords to bind his wrists behind him.

Chapter 10

Blade spent the night in a cell deep below one of the buildings along the outer wall of the House of Blood. He was alone in the cell with the usual amount of dampness, filth, bad smells, fleas, and rats. Morning brought a breakfast of sour, watery porridge and four more armed eunuchs with chains and shackles for his arms and legs. They fastened him up quietly and efficiently, then led him up and out into

the sunlight. A score of other slaves who were being sold or transferred were already chained in a long line, under the guard of four mounted men. Blade was added to the end of the line; then they were marched out through the gate and off into the morning. Blade caught a last glimpse of Dzhai standing on the wall and watching the slaves depart, but neither man risked signaling to the other.

It was a long day's march in the heat and the dust. One of the women and two of the men could not stand the pace and collapsed. They were unchained, dragged to the side of the road, and disposed of quickly and efficiently with a sword-slash across the throat.

Blade was not surprised at the weaklings being killed. What did surprise him was that they hadn't been flayed or blinded or disemboweled before being killed. Instead, they'd been executed, with no mercy but without great suffering either. That was not something Blade had expected to find in Saram.

Perhaps indulging sadistic whims was a monopoly of the Emperor? In that case the Emperor's underlings might do their own jobs quietly and efficiently, killing only when somebody stepped out of line. If that were true, Blade realized he might enjoy a long if not exactly happy life as a slave, provided that he behaved himself.

It was certainly worth trying. In any land good slaves weren't usually mistreated on a moment's impulse. They were too valuable.

Blade set out to make himself look valuable.

At the end of the first day's march the slaves were watered, fed more porridge, and allowed to sleep in their chains in an open, grassy meadow. The next morning they started off again, with a new set of guards and four new slaves added to the chain.

So it went for ten days. The column moved steadily north, covering about twenty miles a day. That was hardly an easy day's stroll, even for Blade. Every day one or two people dropped out and had their throats cut by the roadside. But Blade had marched half again as far, on half as much food and water. He was never in any danger of dropping out.

The column avoided all except the smallest villages and towns, but they saw plenty of traffic on the road—farm carts, trains of pack animals, carriages of nobles with whole squadrons of outriders, and more columns of slaves, some of them up to three hundred strong. In spite of the threat from the Steppemen and the Emperor's taste for his subjects' blood, the affairs of Saram seemed to be in good order, even to be rather prosperous.

This too did not particularly surprise Blade. The Emperor's whims were savage, but they were probably like lightning, striking at random. For every man or woman enslaved or tortured, a hundred might go about their business quietly, living, prospering, and dying of old age.

Kul-Nam might very well be a madman and a bloodthirsty despot. Yet it was hard for Blade to believe that most of the man's subjects would gladly exchange his rule for chaos, civil war, or conquest by the Steppemen.

On the eleventh day the column of slaves, now more than sixty strong, marched through a valley in the coastal hills onto a road running north beside the sea. That night they had chunks of salt fish thrown into their porridge and were marched into the surf to bathe. Two men drowned. Blade found an enormous relief in getting nearly two weeks' filth off his body.

The next morning they reached the Imperial port of Garis. Those slaves who were to be sold on the open market were unchained and marched off in one direction. Those assigned to the galleys, a dozen of the strongest, were marched off to the naval arsenal south of the city.

The slave barracks almost entirely circled the harbor, a triple rank of brick buildings each three stories high, a hundred feet long, and obviously built to last. There was room in those barracks for the whole population of a fair-sized city.

Blade and the other new arrivals were marched up to the second floor of one of the buildings. There they were unchained, issued straw pallets, blankets, and leather buckets, and more or less left to themselves for a few days. Food and water came twice a day and the waste buckets were emptied every morning. That was all.

Blade put the time to good use. On the same floor with him were a good many men who'd been slaves for years. They despised the newcomers and would refuse to answer direct questions, or would even knock anyone down who seemed too curious. They would also talk freely among themselves, without much concern for who might be listening. Blade listened carefully and gradually built up a picture of what was facing him.

To the east of the Empire of Saram lay two large seas. The Silver Sea, on whose coast Garis lay, was about a thousand miles wide. To the north of it lay the Emerald Sea, about half as wide. The two seas were connected by a wide strait studded with islands, the Strait of Nongai.

On the eastern shore of the Silver Sea lay the Five Sea Kingdoms. They were small and weak. All five of them together had fewer people and less wealth than the Empire of Saram. They were also a long way off, so that the Empire could not do very much to them or they do very much to it.

A hundred years ago, however, matters had been somewhat different. Then the present Imperial dynasty had usurped the throne of Saram from its predecessors. A swarm of exiles fled across the Silver Sea to the Five Kingdoms, led by the heir to the fallen dynasty. The new emperor, Kul-Nam's grandfather, followed them with a fleet and an army. It was then that the great barracks had been constructed, when the fleet of Saram was five times its present size.

In spite of all the Emperor's expenditure of men and money and ships, he got nowhere. The Five Kingdoms joined forces for the first and last time in their history and fought like men possessed. Defending their homelands and home waters, they could not be beaten.

Eventually the Emperor recognized that fact. He was also a man from far inland, near the Steppe borders, and not comfortable far out at sea. So he proclaimed that he'd won a great victory, executed anybody who disagreed with him, and sailed for home. He left the Five Kingdoms to rebuild and the exiles to settle down in their new homes.

From that day to this the Empire of Saram and the Five Kingdoms had glowered at each other across the Silver Sea. Kul-Nam's father had had even less interest in the sea than his father. By the time Kul-Nam himself came to the throne, the Steppemen were moving in force against the borders of Saram. He couldn't have afforded a war against the Five Kingdoms even if he'd wanted one.

There were also the pirates of the Strait of Nongai. They swarmed out from bases on the islands, roaming the Silver and Emerald Seas and attacking ships and coasts as they pleased. The pirates were the main reason Saram still had a navy at all.

Mostly the pirates attacked the coasts, islands, and ships of the Five Kingdoms. The Empire's ships and coasts were too well defended by Kul-Nam's tough professional soldiers. The pirates respected their fighting ability and left them alone as much as possible.

Things were changing, though. As the Steppemen grew more dangerous, more and more soldiers marched away inland to guard the borders of Saram against their raids. The coasts and ships of Saram became more and more vulnerable, a tempting prize for the pirates. They in turn were becoming bolder and bolder, raiding in squadrons and even in fleets, when they'd only sent single ships until a few years before.

So Saram was rebuilding its navy. Able-bodied slaves were pouring into the barracks, old galleys were being repaired, new ones built, supplies and weapons gathered. A fleet was being assembled, the first in generations. When it was completed it would be sailing out looking for battles. Most of the older slaves seemed to expect no trouble finding them.

Blade considered that interesting and encouraging. If there was anything that offered golden opportunities to a slave, it was a pitched battle. If he were quick-witted and lucky, he could make himself valuable enough to win his freedom. If he were even quicker witted and a good deal luckier, he might find a chance to escape.

After a week, the new arrivals were taken out and assigned to galleys.

The galleys of Saram were all single-decked vessels, swinging thirty to fifty oars on each side, with two or three slave rowers on each oar. They also had two square-rigged masts and relied more on the wind than on their oars except in battle.

At bow and stern were mounted one large gun and several small ones. From the bow also jutted a massive iron and timber ram. Except for the bow and stern decks and cabins, the galleys were completely open, like gigantic rowboats. The slaves were chained to benches, exposed day and night to the sun, the wind, and the spray. Down the center line of the ship and on either side ran narrow gangways. Along them moved the slavemasters with their trumpets and whips. With a hundred soldiers and sailors and two or three hundred slaves aboard, a galley was packed solidly from bow to stern and from side to side.

The slavemasters and officers were not brutal or sadistic. They did not pointlessly neglect or mistreat the rowers any more than a Home Dimension sailor would have neglected a piece of machinery. But they were vigilant, well trained, and thoroughly ruthless in dealing with rebels. The first sign of weakness or insubordination meant a flogging. Too many slips meant being thrown overboard. The sea around Garis swarmed with enormous sharks, and a man overboard seldom lasted more than a minute.

Blade kept his temper and kept at his work, so that he was never flogged and seldom lashed at all. The food was coarse, but there was more than enough of it to maintain his strength.

Blade's galley was named Kukon, which was the untranslatable name for a common sea bird. Although Blade's brain automatically translated whatever he heard in this Dimension into English, he was never able to find an English equivalent for the galley's name. It was one of the few times the alteration of his brain as he passed into a new Dimension had not been complete. For a little while it bothered him; then he had too much else to think about.

Day after day he labored at his oar. Day after day Kukon slipped out of the harbor of Garis for maneuvers in the open sea. Sometimes she went out alone. Most of the time she went out with four or

five other galleys. Once the whole fleet went out together, fifty galleys strong, and held a mock battle that suddenly became much too realistic. Two of the galleys rammed each other. One promptly sank, the chained slaves drowning at the oars and most of the sailors and soldiers being eaten by the sharks. The other limped back to harbor, thirty dead men on her decks and the slaves on the lower benches up to their waists in water.

Blade rowed back that evening in a grim frame of mind. He'd been forcibly reminded of his precarious existence as one of Kul-Nam's galley slaves. He might survive for months at Kukon's oars. He might also die in the next accident or the first battle if his luck ran out. He had to regain his freedom as soon as possible. When would that be?

As Kukon was being hauled into her berth by the gang of dock slaves, Blade noticed a cluster of men standing on the pier. They were under guard, but they carried seabags and wore sailor's clothes and no chains. One of their guards hailed Kukon's captain.

"Ahoy, Kukon! Here's your new lads. Six sailors, a carpenter, a cook's mate. Free all."

The captain nodded and waved back. Kukon bumped alongside the pier and her gangplank slammed down on the stones. The guards barked out commands and the eight men scuttled forward, up the gangplank and onto the galley's deck.

The bo'sum met them as they came, counting them off.
"Sailor-sailor-sailor-carpenter-sailor-sailor-cook's mate-"

Blade stared at the cook's mate. The man was big, as wide as Blade and nearly as tall. He moved slowly, though, as if he'd recently been hurt or sick. Over one shoulder he carried a long-handled axe. The other arm rode in a sling, the elbow stiff and wrapped in heavy bandages that had once been white.

Blade stared again, then accepted what he saw as fact. Unmistakably, the new cook's mate was Dzhai, the man he'd fought in Duke Boros' camp in the forest, the man he'd crippled, the man who owed his life to Blade's mercy.

Chapter 11

Blade had no idea how Dzhai had wound up aboard Kukon. Was it pure coincidence, or had someone-possibly Duke Boros-been behind it? It didn't really matter. The important thing was that Dzhai was aboard Kukon, free, and with a weapon in his hand.

Also one in his belt. Blade's second look at Dzhai told him the man still wore Blade's commando knife. That meant Blade had a chance of getting it back and returning it to Home Dimension. He'd resigned himself until now to having seen the last of it.

Nothing would come of this if Dzhai didn't recognize Blade, or if he recognized him and showed it too openly. That would be a disaster, ending with Blade and Dzhai both going overboard to make a dinner for the sharks. Blade knew he could keep his own face straight. He only hoped Dzhai could do the same.

The arrival of Dzhai and the other new sailors seemed to be a signal for an even heavier training schedule. Kukon and the other galleys spent nearly every daylight hour of the next week at sea. Then they went out and stayed for three solid days, lying-to on their oars at night.

Dzhai gave no sign of recognizing Blade, but Blade had plenty of chances to watch the man in action. His

right arm was clearly crippled for life, and apparently still caused him considerable pain. But that didn't stop him from doing a full day's work with his left arm. He could balance a log of firewood on end, then split it squarely down the middle with a single one-handed axe blow. He could empty a forty-pound sack of grain into a boiling pot of porridge, then stir it steadily for half an hour. He could swing a cleaver and chop ten-pound chunks out of a log of salted pork.

A day finally came when the galleys returned to harbor and the slaves were unchained and led up to the barracks. The Emperor was coming to Garis, or so the rumors said. All the galleys would be cleaned for his inspection. When he had finished the inspection, the fleet would at last sail in search of the pirates of Nongai.

The next morning the slaves were marched back aboard their galleys and once more chained in place. The benches now smelled of salt, soap, and the ashes of things burned to kill the odors of human filth. On some of the benches oil and paint still glistened wetly and stuck to the skins of the slaves as they took their positions.

The excitement among the soldiers and sailors was so thick Blade could almost see it hanging over the harbor like a fog. The slaves were more silent than usual, but otherwise seemed indifferent. A visit from the Emperor was just another part of a fate most of them no longer hoped to change. They would row as well as they had to, live as long as they could, and die when they must.

An hour after dawn the galleys cast off and rowed out of the harbor. A mile offshore they formed a long line, then dropped anchor. When the last galley took her place, the line stretched for nearly four miles down the coast.

The day wore on, the breeze dropped, and the sun began to strike down uncomfortably, even on Blade's tough and tanned skin. It was well after noon when a distant murmur of many people on the move drifted out from shore. Then the faint but unmistakable sound of trumpets and drums joined in.

The sailors and soldiers all had their weapons and gear polished until it gleamed, and they wore their cleanest clothes. Orders began crackling up and down Kukon's deck. The sailors and slavemasters lined up on either side of the guns at bow and stern. The officers assembled in a cluster amidships.

The sound of drums beating out a slow rowing stroke grew louder. From the galley off to port three trumpets sounded three long notes apiece, and a cannon went off with a great thudding roar. Someone was shouting words that Blade could not quite catch.

The drumbeat grew louder. Blade saw a stir on Kukon's foc'sle as the men there took off their hats and bowed their heads. Then the bo'sun's voice roared out, audible from one end of the galley to the other.

"Slaves of Kukon-rise and look upon the Emperor's justice. Look upon it and learn obedience!"

Chains rattled, benches creaked, and calloused bare feet scuffed and scraped on planks as three hundred slaves lurched raggedly to their feet and turned to look where the bo'sun was pointing. The sound drowned out the blast of trumpets from forward and nearly obliterated the boom of the great gun. A cloud of greasy, gray-white powder smoke blew back along the galley's deck, sweeping over Blade and making his eyes water for a moment. When they cleared, he could see clearly what the bo'sun meant by "the Emperor's justice."

A gorgeously decorated barge with twelve oars on each side was passing along the line of galleys. It flew the Imperial banner-black eagle on a red field-from a gilded and carved mast amidships. Under a

black and silver canopy on the stern sat the unmistakable squat figure of His Magnificence Kul-Nam. He wore gilded armor from head to toe, and the scabbard of the sword resting across his knees glowed with jewels.

Behind the Imperial barge moved half a dozen smaller vessels, all flying the banners of various noble houses. Blade saw one flying the banner of the House of Kudai.

Then a man's ghastly scream made Blade start and drew his eyes to another part of the passing show. The Emperor's barge was pushing ahead of it another, smaller barge, undecorated, oarless, painted dull red. On its deck stood eight sharpened stakes. Chained beside seven of the stakes were naked men. At the bow stood six more huge men, apparently eunuchs, naked except for black loincloths and long swords.

On top of the eighth stake a man writhed and twisted, his face contorted in appalling agony, his mouth opening and closing frantically like that of a dying fish. His eyes were bulging out of his head, staring but sightless.

The scream was still sounding in Blade's ears when the six eunuchs moved. They passed the dying man on the first stake and stopped by the man chained to the second. Six pairs of huge hands gripped the man, raised him high in the air in spite of his struggles, poised him over the point of the stake, then slammed him down on it.

The man screamed, drowning out the trumpets and the cannon on the next galley in the line beyond Kukon. He went on screaming, writhing from side to side in futile efforts to ease his pain.

Suddenly Blade felt a cold prickling at the back of his neck. He recognized the man impaled on the second stake, in spite of the agony distorting his features. It was Tzimon, Duke Boros' other fighting man, whom he'd fought and defeated that night in the woods.

Tzimon must have been one of the fifty fighting men the House of Kudai had given up to the Emperor's service, which in itself was not particularly surprising or sinister. It was much more sinister that Tzimon had been picked out of thousands of soldiers in the Emperor's service to be among the eight men used for this ghastly demonstration of "justice." Doubtless, the Emperor had done it deliberately, to remind a watching Duke Boros that the House of Kudai was not in the Imperial favor at the moment.

The barges were moving out of Blade's line of sight now. Tzimon was still screaming. Blade recalled a book he'd read once, in which impalement was called "one of the most savage and gruesome methods of execution ever devised by human ingenuity."

After today's spectacle, Blade had to agree.

Blade looked toward the place where Dzhai stood on the port gangway, as straight as one of the masts. His good arm held his axe over one shoulder. Blade knew he was risking attracting at least the attention and the whip of one of the slavemasters, but he felt he had to see how Dzhai was taking the spectacle of his former comrade's ghastly death.

Luck drew Blade's eyes to Dzhai at the exact moment when Dzhai swung his own gaze inboard. The two men's eyes met. Dzhai's face did not change, but he swung the axe off his shoulder for a moment, letting the head thump on the deck. The motion was so swift that the bo'sun had no chance even to notice it, let alone yell at Dzhai for breaking formation.

Blade also kept his face expressionless, but he clasped both hands together and shook them up and down in front of his chest. It was as open a gesture as he dared make, and he hoped it would be clear and unmistakable to Dzhai.

Blade felt more relief than he'd expected to feel for some time. He and Dzhai were not just aboard the same galley now. Each had recognized the other. Each knew the other was an ally and a friend. With luck, something might come of this.

Blade found himself beginning to smile, in spite of the sound of Tzimon's screams fading away in the distance.

Chapter 12

The fleet set sail the next morning with fifty galleys and twenty heavily laden sailing vessels. Blade wondered why the sailing ships were accompanying the fleet, since their dependence on the wind was likely to slow it down.

As the fleet worked its way north along the coast of Saram, Blade grasped the answer to that question. The sailing ships carried extra water and food to transfer to the galleys at sea. That meant the galleys with their enormous crews could stay at sea for weeks at a time, rather than days. The short range of galleys had always been a problem in Home Dimension naval history. In fact, it had been one reason why they had slowly given way to the sailing ship, slower and more dependent on the winds, but carrying a smaller crew and far more food and water.

A close look at the sailing ships told Blade of another good reason for their presence with the Imperial fleet. From stem to stern they bristled with guns, and their decks swarmed with armored soldiers of the Corps of Eunuchs.

Again Blade remembered Home Dimension naval history. Another reason for the galley's decline as a warship had been its lack of fighting power compared with the sailing ship. A sailing ship might not be able to escape a galley in a calm sea, but it could carry more and heavier guns and carry them higher above the water, with far more ammunition. Kukon and her sisters carried six or eight guns apiece. The sailing ships carried twenty or thirty on each side.

True, galleys could close in and ram. But galleys were lightly built, compared to sailing ships. They had to be, or they could never be rowed easily. A galley closing in to ram could be smashed to pieces by heavy cannonballs before she reached her goal. Even then, the heavier timbers of a sailing ship's hull meant she could shrug off a ram blow that would send a galley straight to the bottom.

So it did not always matter if a sailing ship were caught in a calm by a galley, or even by a fleet of galleys. With good guns and good men behind them, she could stand off the whole fleet and then go on her way when the wind rose. The sailing ships were not only a floating supply base for the galleys. They were also a solid support for them in battle.

The fleet worked its way slowly northward, both sailing ships and galleys relying on the wind. This gave the galley slaves a comparatively easy time, apart from the dampness and chill of the nights and the broiling sun by day. A few of the newer slaves were painfully sunburned, until their backs, necks, and arms were red, peeling messes. One man came down with a congestion of the lungs and was thrown overboard, to be quickly taken by the sharks. Otherwise, Kukon's slaves had as much peace, quiet, and rest as galley slaves at sea could expect.

Blade had no illusions that this voyage under sail was intended to make things easy for the slaves. It only kept the fleet together and saved the strength of the slaves for the days when it would be badly needed—that was all. When the time came to pursue the pirates, the whips would be cracking and the drums beating harder than ever.

For three days the fleet sailed north past a coast of rugged mountains with small fishing villages nestled in lonely coves. Here the mountains that formed the northern boundary of the Empire came down to the sea. Not far inland, Blade could see summits rising three and four miles toward the blue sky, crowned with snow even though summer was approaching.

Blade noticed that the fishing boats from the villages scuttled frantically for shore as the Imperial fleet came in sight. They had good reason for this. Blade saw one galley swing out of formation and chase down a fishing boat. The five fishermen were snatched from their own deck and vanished aboard the galley, no doubt to start a grim life at her oars.

North of the mountains the coast leveled out into a series of low, barren headlands, with occasional clumps of stunted trees. Here was a land held by no ruler's hand, and by few people of any sort. It was said that it was part of a great plain that reached all the way around the world and joined the Steppes.

One morning the fleet swung in toward shore and anchored. Blade saw Dzhai looking toward the gray, rocky headland that was nearest with a longing expression on his face. Dzhai was in theory a free sailor, but he was aboard Kukon as much against his will as any slave at her oars. He was also chained to the ship just as thoroughly as they were, by the maimed arm that would make swimming nearly impossible. Blade felt slightly guilty about that arm. At the same time, he could not help feeling slightly relieved that Dzhai would be staying aboard, not throwing his life away in a probably futile attempt to escape to the dubious safety of this nearly lifeless country.

Hundreds of sailors in scores of boats rowed ashore from both the galleys and the sailing ships. They carried with them empty barrels and brought them back filled with water from inland streams. Other sailors went out with nets and lines, bringing up a rich catch of fish. These were split, gutted, dried in the sun, and salted down in more barrels.

The fleet swung around its anchors in the windless, broiling hot bay for three days. About noon on the fourth day it weighed anchor and put to sea again. This time the rams of the galleys and the bowsprits of the sailing ships turned almost due east.

Blade did some calculations based on his mental map of the Silver Sea. The fleet's present course would take it well to the south of the Strait of Nongai. The idea seemed to be to keep out of sight of the strait and its islands and out of reach of any strong pirate force until the fleet was well to the east of the pirates' main bases. Then they would turn north, cutting in between the pirates and the mainland, and approach their bases from the rear.

Blade went to sleep with the stars shining in the black sky overhead, the wind rippling in the sails, and the faint splash and gurgle of water alongside. He could not call himself happy until he was free again. But he had the feeling that those who for the moment had control of his fate knew their business. For the moment that would have to be enough.

The feeling didn't last more than five minutes after Blade awoke the next morning. He sat up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and the crusted salt from his face, and looked around. The ship was still under sail, and around him the other slaves were awakening one by one. Beyond-

That was when Blade sat up with a jerk and stared at the sea all around Kukon. At sunset there had been galleys in view almost everywhere and a solid mass of sailing ships bringing up the rear. Now the sea seemed as empty as if a storm had swept it clear. Blade counted the galleys in sight, got up to seven, searched for more until his eyes watered from the sunlight on the sea, and realized that he wasn't going to find any. There was not a single sailing ship in sight either.

"We've lost the fleet," he muttered, more than half to himself.

The lead man on the oar two benches forward turned back to look at Blade, then shook his head. "Nuh. Sukar did it, arter all."

Blade looked around to see if any of the slavemasters were within earshot before asking, "Who's Sukar?"

The man jerked a thumb toward the lead galley. "Man w' t' pennant. Sayin', he want ter lead his ships orf 'lone, sprize pirates, do tall hisself. Want gold hisself, nob'dy t' share it."

Blade nodded. "Why no sailing ships?"

"Slow," the man said. "No sprize w' them."

"Why-?" began Blade, then noticed a slavemaster turning and looking toward him. He and the other slave both tried to look as innocent and occupied with their own affairs as they could. The other man started combing his fingers through his long, gray beard, as if searching for vermin. The slavemaster glowered at both of them, then turned away without bringing down his whip.

Blade considered what the other man had said, mentally translating his brief, crude words. What they added up to was this: Sukar was the admiral commanding the galley squadron to which Kukon belonged. Apparently, he had conceived a plan to take his squadron away from the main fleet and sneak up on the pirates, completely surprising them and winning a decisive victory all by himself.

So far so good. Blade had already guessed this would be the fleet's strategy. But he'd assumed the whole fleet would be making the attack. Instead, Admiral Sukar was dashing off with only seven galleys and no sailing ships. He hoped to win the victory all by himself, without having to share the gold or glory with anyone else in the fleet.

That made no sense at all. The pirates could send to sea ten times as many galleys and fighting men as Sukar had. If the admiral managed complete surprise, he still might not have the strength to win. If he lost surprise-if the pirates had ships or men on watch over the channels through the islands-he was sailing into a massacre. If he didn't lose every man and ship in his squadron, it would be a piece of good fortune he didn't deserve.

How had Sukar gotten permission to do such a foolish thing? Blade thought he could guess. Sukar would be someone with influence at Kul-Nam's court, or the son or brother of someone influential. Blade had heard enough to suggest that a good number of naval and military posts now went to such men. The Empire's fighting men were still well led, by and large-but there were already far too many exceptions to this rule, and more every day. It was just bad luck for Blade that he'd happened to end up in the squadron of one of these court pimps!

Blade did not consider doubting the bearded man's words. He did not know the man's name. No one aboard Kukon did. But practically everyone knew his reputation. He was a man with no education-a

laborer or a fisherman, perhaps, before fate brought him to the galleys. He had rowed in the Imperial fleet for twenty years, which was in itself a fair-sized miracle. During that time he'd kept his eyes and ears open every waking minute and had learned much.

There were advantages to being a slave, considered no better than an animal incapable of understanding or repeating what his masters said. After twenty years of listening, there was almost nothing in the Imperial fleet that was still a secret to the bearded man. If he said that Admiral Sukar was leading the squadron off on a wildgoose chase that might lead it to disaster, Admiral Sukar was doing just that.

Blade swore to himself. He felt like swearing out loud. The feeling that those in command knew what they were doing was suddenly gone. In its place was the feeling of being dragged along by fools. He was as helpless as before-and in far greater danger.

Chapter 13

That afternoon the squadron swung onto a new course, toward the northeast, and the wind began to die. For the first time in two weeks the oars were broken out at sea and the rowers set to work. Fortunately, they only worked at the steady cruising stroke, rather than the back-breaking, lung-searing attack or ramming strokes.

They rowed on through the rest of the day. As night fell they kept on, but with only half the oars in action and half the rowers at work. The other half sprawled on or under their benches and tried to sleep.

Blade was in the half that remained on duty. He rowed on steadily as the last of the daylight faded from the sea. He found it easy by now to row without any use of his conscious mind. His body swayed, his arms strained, his oar dipped and rose and dipped again without his really being aware of any of it.

Eventually the slavemasters called for a change in the rowers. Blade stretched out on the deck under the bench and made himself as comfortable as possible. The planks were filthy, they seemed as hard as iron, and they were full of splinters that Blade always had to pick out of his skin the next morning. But he'd slept on them for months now and was resigned to sleeping on them for quite a while longer. He fell asleep quickly, with the clunk of the oars, the rattle of chains, and the creak of the galley's timbers sounding in his ears.

Blade awoke to the bellowings and whip-crackings of the slavemasters as they turned out all the rowers. Toward the bow he saw Dzhai, his axe flashing as he chopped up firewood with machinelike precision and stacked it beside the stone hearth on the foc'sle. Closer at hand he saw the bearded man, already awake and pulling steadily at his oar, seemingly as tireless and indestructible as a statue of solid iron.

They rowed on slowly and steadily through a broiling hot day, the air so heavy and windless that the sails hung as limp as dishrags. Toward noon the sailors sent down the yards and sails onto the deck. Only the masts rose, now gaunt and bare, with the lookouts perched in the tops like crows on top of dead trees. Now the galleys had no power but their rowers. On the other hand, they were much less visible from a distance.

Barely two hours after the sails came down, the northern horizon began sprouting the dark shapes of rugged, heavily wooded islands. Once again half the oars were pulled in and half the rowers allowed to rest. The galleys crept toward the islands all through the afternoon, the lookouts scanning both the land and the sea for any sign of a watching enemy. Both horizons were empty of friends or enemies.

Toward evening the fleet swung in toward the lee of an uninhabited island a mile long and nearly as high.

A landing party of soldiers went ashore to set up a lookout station and make sure the island stayed uninhabited. All seven galleys dropped anchor and sent all hands to dinner.

As he ate his porridge and salt fish, Blade noticed Kukon's captain pacing up one side of the quarterdeck and down the other. He wore a crumpled blue tunic and a thoroughly grim expression. Blade remembered what the bearded man had said of Kukon's captain: a thoroughly efficient, professional sailor and fighting man, risen to captain by sheer ability, with no friends in court to help him rise farther. Not a man who would be happy with Admiral Sukar's wild chase after personal glory.

If they still had surprise on their side, things might go well enough. Yet here they were, anchored for the night, not knowing what word might be racing across the islands to bring the pirates' fleet swarming out.

Admittedly, it might be sheer suicide to try moving through the islands by night. The passages were known to very few pilots outside the pirates' fleet. A night move could simply run the galleys aground or rip them open on submerged rocks, without any help from the pirates.

There was danger on either hand and in any course of action. The only way for the squadron to be sure of getting safely out of its predicament seemed to be for Admiral Sukar to have a sudden attack of common sense. Blade suspected, though, that it was too late.

As it turned out, Blade was quite right.

Blade and everyone else in the squadron learned the hopelessness of their situation at dawn the next morning. A wild cry from the masthead jerked Blade out of sleep like an electric shock. He stood up as the lookout shouted again.

"Pirates! The pirates! Dead to seaward! The pirates are on us!" Another wordless cry, turning into a choking scream of sheer terror. "We are lost! Lost! We areaaaagh!" A crossbow went sprung and the panicky squalling broke off; the lookout plunged to the deck with a crunch of shattering bones. He was already dead, the crossbow quarrel driven deep into his chest. Kukon's captain nodded briefly to the archer who'd fired. Duty had been done and cowardice punished. The look on the captain's face, though, was utterly grim. There was good reason for it.

The seaward horizon was sprouting lateen sails and low, rakish black hulls, five, ten, more than twenty in all. They were sweeping in toward the Imperial galleys in a long crescent, hemming them in, trapping them. If the squadron fled into the islands, they would be split up, overtaken, and destroyed one by one. If they fled seaward, they would meet the pirates head-on. The long line of black galleys would coil around the squadron like a great snake around a deer.

Either way, the Imperial squadron had no hope now of doing anything except dying gallantly-not against odds of better than three to one. The pirate galleys were smaller than the Imperial ones, but they carried no slaves. Every man aboard, from captain to cook's boy, was free and armed. The lighter pirate galleys could not stand up well to Imperial gunfire or do much damage by ramming, but they could and did maneuver swiftly, choosing the moment to close in and pour a superior force of boarders onto an enemy's deck.

Then there would be red, bloody slaughter, as always. The pirates ransomed very few prisoners. Able-bodied men they sold to the mainland tribes in return for lumber, tar, cordage, and salt meat. Able-bodied women they kept for themselves. Those who could neither pay nor labor were killed on the spot.

Now the drums were beating out the alarm. Even louder than the drums were the pounding feet of the sailors running to weigh anchor and the soldiers and gunners running to their posts. The slavemasters dashed forward and aft, wide-eyed and wide-mouthed with desperation and fear, furiously and pointlessly cracking their whips across the backs of slaves who were already scrambling into position.

The anchor windlass rattled around as the sailors heaved furiously on it. The anchor broke water, dripping and slimy green with weeds. As the sailors worked to stow it, the drummers began beating out the rowing cadence. Cruising stroke for the moment, but that wouldn't last long!

Kukon's ninety oars rose high in the air, like the wings of a bird ready to take flight, then dipped in a swirl of foam. She was underway, heading out to battle, the other six galleys with her.

Blade settled into the stroke, then took a brief look around him. Admiral Sukar's flagship was moving up into the lead, one, two, three Imperial battle standards flying from her masts beside the admiral's personal flag. The admiral was at least going to die grandly. Blade would have been more sympathetic if the dying hadn't been so bloody unnecessary!

Closer to hand, Kukon's captain stood at his battle station between the great drums. His face was now as expressionless as the planks of his ship's deck, but it was also as white as the foam churned up by her oars. He was a man who knew he was doomed, hated the fact and the folly that had made it a fact, but also accepted it as part of his duty.

Blade accepted no such thing. If the coming battle didn't offer him an opportunity to improve his situation, he would bloody well make that opportunity! He hoped Dzhai would see things the same way. Together they could do far more than either could on his own.

The pirate fleet was now striking their sails and closing up their formation. They had seen Admiral Sukar's challenge and were accepting it. A gun crashed out from the bow of one of the Imperial galleys. Some nervous gunner, Blade thought. The pirates were still more than three miles away. There wasn't a gun in the squadron that could reach more than half that far.

Now the pirates' crescent stretched two miles from tip to tip, squarely across the path of the Imperial squadron. The pirates' oars hardly seemed to be moving. Why should they waste the strength their men would need for fighting? The enemy was coming straight into their arms.

The drummers flourished their drum hammers over their heads. One dropped his, drawing an explosion of curses from the captain beside him. The man was not quite as calm as he seemed. The clumsy drummer snatched up his hammers; then both drummers began beating out a new stroke—the approach to battle.

Kukon's heavy bow gun went off with a deafening roar and a shock that made the deck seem to ripple and heave under Blade's feet. For a moment he thought he would lose his balance. A man on the oar opposite him did fall, knocking down one of his mates. Their oar wobbled and fell out of the stroke as the remaining man struggled to control it.

Instantly two slavemasters were at the fallen men, laying on furiously with their whips. Both men struggled to their feet. One screamed in agony as a whip caught him across the eye.

The lighter guns forward went off, all three of them together, and the deck shuddered again. Their foul-tasting smoke swirled back, making Blade cough, then swirled away. The heavy gun fired again. This time Blade held his breath until the smoke was gone, then gulped in air and looked forward.

He was in time to see the shot from the heavy gun throw up a white fountain of spray only a hundred yards from the bow of a pirate galley. He also saw that Kukon was farthest to port in the Imperial squadron. If she held her present course, she would slice through the pirates' crescent near one tip.

That could be helpful. Certainly the first and fiercest fighting would be in the center of the crescent, as Sukar's flagship and its flankers crashed into the pirates. The pirates would be doing their best to give Sukar the gallant and spectacular death he seemed to want. They might not pay as much attention to their wings, and a fast-moving galley might-

The thunder of Kukon's guns interrupted Blade's thoughts. This time all four fired together. As the smoke cleared, Blade saw fountains of spray rising practically alongside an enemy.

Then smoke and orange flame spurted from the bows of all the pirate galleys. A noise like immense sheets of canvas ripping apart sounded overhead as a ball flew low over Kukon's deck and struck the sea just astern. Blade felt himself sweating from more than his labor at the oars. Each side was in range of the other now, and Kukon was approaching the pirates almost bows-on. Only a little lower, and a shot would strike her in the bow and plow the length of her deck, straight through the massed rowers.

Another shot ripped through the air above Kukon's deck. This one flew straight into the foremast. Splinters flew in all directions. Then there was a crackling and tearing sound of tough wood giving way and the mast itself toppled.

Men shrieked as flying splinters gouged their flesh. The lookouts on the foremast screamed as they felt the mast hurling them down to death in the sea. Then the mast fell across the port gangway and the bulwarks with a tremendous splintering crash. More screams sounded as oars were jerked out of rowers' hands, the weighted shafts lashing about like giant clubs. Blade saw a man struck across the forehead by an oar, the solid bone of his skull split apart so that the brains showed. Then the mast heaved up and rolled over the side, to be left astern as the galley's oars steadied onto the stroke again.

The slavemasters leaped down from the gangways, cutting the wounded and dead loose from their oars, dragging them clear. The drummers began pounding out the attack stroke. The clatter and crash of flailing oars swelled, fighting against the roar of the cannon forward and the terrible whistle and rip of enemy shot overhead, drowning them out. Blade heaved back and forth on his oar, fighting to maintain his awareness of what was going on around him. He could not afford to miss any chance to strike for freedom, not when he might get only one.

The guns forward were now firing so fast that smoke streamed back from them almost continuously. Kukon seemed to be ploughing through a thick fog of her own making. Blade could only occasionally manage to see anything beyond the ship's sides.

He saw that Sukar's flagship had lost both masts but still flew battle standards from both stumps. She seemed to be moving crabwise, as if she had lost too many oars on one side. Then two pirate galleys swept in toward her, all the guns of all three ships fired at once, and smoke blotted them out.

He saw a pirate galley trailing a steadily swelling mass of black smoke with red flame pulsing at its base. At least her rowers were not chained. If the fire gained control, they could take their chances with the sharks rather than burn to death.

There was a tremendous clang from forward, a peculiar thud, then screams of horror and a second thud. Blade saw one of the gunners sprawl backward on the deck, something like a stepped-on fruit where his

head had been. A shot must have struck the ram and bounced upward, smashing up under the man's jaw.

The guns fired again. They made a continuous roaring in Blade's ears, rising and falling like the sound of a stormy sea on a rocky coast. At the same time the roaring came to him more dimly, as if the clouds of powder smoke were packing his ears full of cotton.

The drummer to port increased his beat still more, to the ramming stroke. Blade and all the other rowers on his side hurled themselves at their oars, then heaved them savagely backward, arms straining and backs painfully bent. The galley began to swing to starboard as the furious beat of the port bank of oars turned her. Then the starboard drummer increased his beat as well, the starboard oars thrashed just as furiously, and Kukon straightened out, racing in toward whatever prey her captain had picked out. Blade had no idea what that might be. Ahead he could see nothing except a solid wall of gray-white smoke, seamed with columns of black from burning ships and every now and then lit up with the orange furnaceglow of guns firing.

Then the masts and bulwarks of a pirate ship burst out of the smoke, the black paint scarred by shot and glistening in places with fresh blood or mangled bits of human flesh. On her foc'sle her gunners frantically struggled to swing their pieces around to rake Kukon.

Before they could do so, Kukon's pounding oars drove her ram hard into the pirate's side. Oars flew into the air, a few of them with the rowers still holding onto them. Blade saw one pirate flung high, to smash down on Kukon's deck head first and lie still. The tons of sharp iron and massive timber at Kukon's bow tore through the pirate ship's hull like a knife through parchment. Planks shattered, knees cracked, ribs bent inward and split apart. Then Blade heard the gurgle of green water foaming and flooding in through the huge breach in the pirate's side.

The ramming shook Kukon from stem to stem. Every piece of wood and metal in her seemed to be adding its own separate voice to the uproar. Blade was hurled forward, crashing into a man on the bench in front of him. They both went down, sprawling on the deck in a tangle of arms and legs as the oars flailed wildly over them. They were both luckier than the rowers who didn't duck under the oars. Blade saw an oar shaft fly up and strike one man under the chin. He flew backward as if he'd been kicked by a mule and fell to the deck, his head bent at an impossible angle on his shoulders.

Blade gently pushed the other man's head out of his stomach and tried to gather his legs under him. The slavemasters dashed up and down the gangways, screaming at the top of their lungs and waving their whips furiously. Blade saw one wrap his whip around the mainmast so violently that he fell off the gangway with a crash. The soldiers and sailors forward were all firing bows and muskets into the men on the pirate's deck. The rest of the soldiers and sailors were rushing forward to join them. Blade saw the captain running with them, his sword out, his face no longer expressionless and pale but black with powder smoke and half hysterical with battle rage.

Blade saw swords and spears tossing about wildly on the foc'sle. Some of the pirates were pressing forward, trying to board Kukon across the precarious bridge made by her ram and the splintered oars and timbers of their own ship.

Two of the guns on Kukon's foc'sle had been dismantled in the ramming. The gunners were frantically struggling to reload the others as arrows and musket balls from the pirates whistled about their ears. Finally they succeeded. The guns crashed out together, and a veil of smoke swept across Blade's vision, blotting out the scene forward for a moment. It did not blot out the hideous chorus of screams that exploded from the pirate's deck.

Then the smoke cleared. Where a mass of pirates had stood on the deck of their ship was a mass of bodies and pieces of bodies. Some of the bodies were still moving and screaming. Most lay still. Kukon's guns must have been crammed halfway to the muzzle with musket balls or small stones. The massed pirates could not have been more thoroughly slaughtered by a pair of machine guns.

Blade thought for a moment that Kukon's fighting men would now board the pirate ship. But the slavemasters were shouting and lashing out again, to get the rowers back on their feet and back to the oars. The drummers began pounding a frantic reverse beat as the oars clattered out.

A moment later Blade saw why. Out of the smoke to starboard loomed another pirate ship, bearing down on Kukon at full speed. Her oars leaped forward and back and foam curled from her ram. On her foc'sle musketeers and archers blazed away at Kukon. Blade saw the bo'sun stagger and fall to the deck, clapping his hand over a spouting wound in his thigh.

Kukon drew clear of the rammed pirate ship with a great cracking of timbers. Both forward and aft her gunners furiously worked to bring their guns to bear on the oncoming enemy. The men at the heavy gun aft made it first. Blade turned his head in time to see the master gunner apply his match to the touchhole. Then a vast sheet of flame and smoke erupted from Kukon's stern as the gun exploded.

Jagged chunks of iron the size of a man's head flew in all directions at the speed of musket balls. Blade threw himself flat on the deck, with a dozen men under him and a dozen more on top of him in a packed mass of panic-stricken humanity. He was momentarily blind, but not deaf. Nothing could drown out the screams of those torn apart in the explosion of the flying fragments of iron.

Like a swimmer struggling up from deep water, Blade rose out of the tangle of bodies and stood up. He took the single step that was all his chain would allow him, nearly tripped over a severed head, then slipped on a patch of plank covered by a man's scattered guts and fell backward. Fortunately, the man he landed on was already dead or at least beyond feeling Blade's two hundred and ten pounds crashing down on his chest.

Before Blade could make a single move to rise again, the pirate galley drove her ram into Kukon's side. It did not go in deeply, but the starboard oars were scattered in all directions. For the moment Blade didn't even try to get up. It would do nobody any good if he got his skull split open by a swinging oar.

Then the screams and the clattering of oars gave way to shouts and shrill war cries. The pirates were swarming forward along their deck to board Kukon.

Blade sprang to his feet, looking around for something he could use to cut himself free or at least to defend himself. He didn't know what the exploding cannon might have done to Kukon's fighting men. He doubted if there were enough of them left to defend her against the boarders.

In the smoke and confusion he saw Dzhai making his way along the port gangway. He had a sword thrust into his belt and his axe over his shoulder. Blade cupped his hands and shouted. Dzhai turned and stared. Blade shouted again, waving one hand furiously.

Dzhai nodded, and the axe flashed in the gloom as he swung it over his head. Then it was flying through the air toward Blade, settling into his hand as neatly as a homing bird.

Chapter 14

Blade knew he had to work fast. Nothing, not even a pirate boarding party, would keep a slavemaster

or an officer from killing a slave he saw trying to escape. A live man was lying across the heavy iron ring in the deck to which Blade's chain was attached. Blade prodded the man in the ribs, not gently. He rolled clear.

Blade went to work, hacking away furiously at the deck. Splinters flew and the wood began to gape white around the ring.

Blade shifted his grip on the axe, now smashing the back of the head against the ring. Bit by bit, he felt it loosening. He dropped the axe and bent down to grip the ring with both hands. Every muscle and every breath in Blade's body went into a single tremendous heave. Torn wood groaned, strained metal protested, and the ring sprang out of the deck so suddenly that Blade nearly lost his balance and sprawled backward again.

He stayed on his feet and snatched up the axe from the deck. "Here," he said, thrusting it into the hands of the nearest slave. The man gaped at Blade, gaped at the axe, then suddenly realized what he held in his hands and started hacking away at the deck as furiously as Blade had done.

So far no one had noticed Blade, either pirates or Kukon's own fighters, but that might change at any moment. Blade looked around for a weapon. All of the living fighters were on the starboard gangway, and none of the bodies lay anywhere near Blade.

As he looked around, he saw an eight-foot length of shattered oar lying almost at his feet. He picked it up and swung it experimentally. It wasn't a perfect weapon, but it was the best he could do and anybody he hit with it wasn't going to get up again for a while. Blade lifted the oar in both hands, raising it high over his head. Then he advanced into the battle, the chain on his ankle clattering behind him.

He reached the starboard side just as the first pirate leaped across onto an undefended portion of the gangway. Blade let out a yell and charged. The pirate saw a gigantic, naked figure charge out of the smoke at him, a figure smeared from head to foot with soot and blood, whirling a broken oar around his head like a straw and bellowing at the top of his lungs.

The pirate stopped in midstride, his mouth open and his sword frozen over his head. If he didn't die of fright in that moment, he died seconds later as Blade swung the oar. The lead-weighted end crashed against the pirate's skull and he vanished over the side as if he'd dissolved into the smoke.

Blade sprang up onto the gangway and thrust the oar forward. The splintered end caught a pirate in the mouth as he clambered over his own ship's bulwarks. He roared an oath through smashed teeth and tried to climb back to safety. Blade whirled the oar end for end, smashing it down on the man's shoulder. He screamed, lost his grip, and splashed into the water between the two ships.

A third pirate sprang into view. He held a loaded musket, swinging the muzzle toward Blade. Blade jabbed forward with the weighted end of the oar and caught the pirate in his unprotected stomach. The man gasped and toppled over backward. The musket clattered to the deck beside him and went off with a bang. Blade threw the oar into the murk ahead of him, then leaped after it onto the pirate galley's deck. He had always been a believer in carrying the fight to the enemy.

The pirate who'd carried the musket was gasping and trying to sit up. Blade chopped him across the throat with the edge of his right hand. Someone in the smoke fired at Blade, sending a ball whistling close over his head. Blade dropped flat on the deck, in case there were more muskets out there. With his left hand he groped for the fallen oar. Two pirates loomed above him. Blade swung the oar like a scythe across their legs. They yelled and fell forward. Blade jumped up as they fell, landing with all his weight on

one man's back. He kicked the other one in the head, took a good two-handed grip on the oar, and sprang forward.

How many men Blade killed or drove over the side of the pirate galley in the next few minutes, he never knew. He could not even have made an intelligent guess to save his life. Somehow he swept the pirate's deck from end to end, with nothing but a broken oar, his own colossal strength made greater by his rage, and the sheer terror he inspired in the pirates.

As Blade cleared the pirate's deck, her boarding party died one by one at the hands of Kukon's fighting men and a growing number of freed slaves. Eventually Blade found himself standing on the enemy's deserted deck, looking back over a litter of corpses toward Kukon. Kukon's captain and the bearded man stood side by side, staring back at him.

A voice Blade recognized as Dzhai's began shouting for the rowers to get back to work. Blade heard the rattle and splash of oars being run out. He ran back along the pirate's deck and sprang aboard Kukon just as she pulled clear of the enemy. Looking over the side, he saw the pirate's ram break free and remain stuck in Kukon's side. Good. That would help to plug the leak until they could work out something better.

Now the rowers bent to their oars with a strength Blade would not have thought was left in them. He noticed that a good many slaves now stood at bow and stern, holding swords, bows, and muskets. A good many sailors and soldiers, on the other hand, now strained over oars. There were no live slavemasters anywhere in sight, and only two dead ones on the deck. Blade was not surprised at that, nor did he much care. The slavemasters would not be missed.

Kukon backed slowly away from her derelict enemy. Blade started forward, looking for Dzhai. It was time to get a party down into the hold to check the leak from the ramming. A bucket brigade would probably be enough for the moment.

As he moved, Blade looked out across the water. As hard as he strained his eyes, he could see almost nothing except a swirling, gray-white murk, with orange flame flaring up briefly here and there. Once he thought he saw the dim bulk of a ship, distorted and wavering, but he couldn't be sure of that or of anything else he saw in the smoke. It was as if a fogbank had risen from the sea to swallow up the rest of the battle.

Blade was hardly going to complain about that. He would be quite happy if all the rest of both fleets stayed swallowed up in their own smoke for several hours. That would give Kukon time enough to get away, repair some of her damage, sort out her mixed crew, and be ready to flee or fight again.

Blade reached the galley's stern, noticed that the cabins had been shattered by the exploding gun, and looked forward again. The beat of the oars quickened. Now he recognized Dzhai on the foc'sle, supervising a crew working to remount the two disabled guns. He had the axe stuck in his belt now, along with the sword, to leave himself a hand free.

Then a gun boomed in the smoke and a ball whistled low over the sea, skipping off the water in a burst of spray and sailing only feet over Kukon's deck. Blade controlled the urge to duck, looked off to starboard, and swore.

A pirate galley was closing fast on Kukon, racing along in a cloud of foam and spray. She was apparently undamaged except for the loss of her masts, and her guns were all manned. More men were lined up on her deck, ready to board when the moment came. She was closing in to ram Kukon on the

already damaged starboard side. Kukon could not move fast enough to escape the blow and she could hardly survive a second ramming, even if she could fight off another boarding party.

Blade stopped swearing. It was a waste of breath. The pirate galley had to be stopped or slowed, and the guns were the only way to do it. Blade ran forward, leaping a gap in the gangway, and reached the foc'sle. The bearded man was yelling at the rowers, and Kukon was already beginning to swing around to meet the enemy bows-on. They wouldn't be able to avoid the ramming that way, but they would make it easier for the bow guns to bear.

Blade ran up to Dzhai and jerked a thumb at the heavy gun. "Loaded?" Dzhai nodded. Blade snatched up a handspike, rammed it under the gun carriage, and began heaving the gun around. Half a dozen men leaped to join him, sweating and swearing. Slowly the gun moved. Finally Blade could look along the barrel straight at the center gun on the foc'sle of the oncoming pirate ship. Her gunners had stopped firing and were lying down on the deck. Apparently they now expected the ramming and the boarders to do all the work.

Blade lit a length of slowmatch and waited, as the enemy ship grew steadily larger. He was only going to get one shot, and he had to make it a good one.

The pirate ship was only two hundred yards away when Blade decided his moment had come. He sprang to one side of the gun, thrusting the match down into the touchhole as he did. The gun went off with an earthquake roar, leaped backward, and crashed halfway through the bulwarks. It hung precariously for a moment, then slipped overboard with a crackling of shattered wood and a tremendous splash.

Seconds later a thundering explosion made Blade spin around. Another second, and an even bigger shock wave knocked him and everybody else on the foc'sle flat on the deck. Blade tasted blood from a split lip and a battered nose, rose to his hands and knees, and looked toward the pirate ship.

A tremendous cloud of smoke was still rising from the spot where she had been. Out of the smoke rained oars, planks, guns, ropes, and human bodies. A charred block of wood clattered down on Kukon's deck and rolled against Blade. A human arm, the hand still wearing a leather glove, struck Dzhai on the back. He picked it up with a sour look and threw it over the side.

Blade had aimed his shot to smash down the length of the enemy's deck, slaughtering rowers and boarders. Instead, his aim and good luck had put his shot squarely into the magazine.

Now the smoke was drifting aside, merging into the general murk hanging over the sea. Blade could see the pirate galley again. The forward third of her hull was blown off clear down to the water line. As he watched, he saw the charred timbers of the bow dip under. Then the water climbed up the deck, the stern rose, and the whole black hull slipped down out of sight. Foam bubbled up for a moment; then there was nothing left but a mass of drifting wreckage and a hundred or so heads, dark against the silver-blue water. Beyond the heads Blade could already see the upthrust gray fins of approaching sharks. Sharks, he'd read, were attracted by vibrations and explosions in the water. There'd certainly been enough of those around here today. Anybody who found himself swimming here and now would be very lucky to get to shore. Blade stood up, helped Dzhai to his feet, then turned to the bearded man and the captain.

Blade noticed that the captain still wore his sword and armor. His face was now gray with fatigue and dirt.

The bearded man turned to the captain and said, "Cap'n-ye ken be w' us effen y' wish. Weel na fight w' ye now." The man looked up at Blade and Dzhai. Blade nodded. If the captain could be trusted, why not let him come with them? He'd fought well today and they all owed him much. Besides, it was time to bring the killing to an end.

After a moment, Dzhai also nodded. It was the captain who shook his head. "Thank you-gentlemen, may I call you? The offer does you honor. But a man who has survived today's battle will not be in the Emperor's favor. One who has also lost his ship to its rowers will be still less so. And there is my family's fate to consider, as well as my own. You know the ways of His Magnificence."

The captain drew off his helmet and laid it and his sword down on the deck. "I have sons who should by custom receive these. I ask you to do what you can for them. Farewell, and safe voyaging." Without another word he turned, climbed onto the bulwarks, and stepped off into the air. The splash as he struck the water sounded unnaturally loud in Blade's ears.

At least the captain's armor would draw him down quickly. The sharks would have no chance at him.

Blade sighed and turned to the other men. "Come on," he said, with a briskness he did not feel. It had been a very long day, and it was not over yet. "It's time we started on our way out of here."

"True," said Dzhai. He reached down to his waist and unbuckled the belt and knife. "Prince Blade, I believe this is yours?"

Chapter 15

The bearded man set a course to the southeast. Heading due south would have taken them away from the battle and the islands of the Strait of Nongai faster, but it would also have taken them straight away from land, out into the Silver Sea. Kukon was afloat for the moment. Before they could safely take her on a long voyage, she would need repairs of a sort they could not give her in the open sea. They would also need fresh water, firewood, and jury masts.

Then there was the matter of sorting out those who had been slave rowers and those who had been free sailors and soldiers. For the moment there were neither slaves nor freemen aboard Kukon, only men fleeing for their lives. If this happy situation didn't last, there would be trouble of a sort best prevented before it got started. Blade, Dzhai, and the bearded man all-agreed on that.

No ship from either side followed Kukon as she limped away from the battle. Perhaps no one noticed her; perhaps no one cared enough to follow. Or perhaps there was no one left alive to either notice or care.

Blade suspected it was the last situation. The rest of the battle had probably been fought as savagely as Kukon's part. If so, there would be neither pirate galleys nor Imperial galleys left afloat-nothing except wreckage and a lot of well-fed sharks.

The sun set a couple of hours later. Kukon crept on through the darkness, a weary drummer beating out a very slow cruising stroke to the half of the rowers who remained on their benches. The other half had not been released from duty; they had simply collapsed on the deck from sheer exhaustion and fallen asleep where they landed.

Blade wouldn't have minded joining them. His head throbbed, his throat and mouth felt as if he'd been eating porridge made out of gunpowder and sand, his eyeballs felt swollen to three times their normal

size. He had no serious wounds, but he was bruised, scratched, and generally battered and sore from head to foot. Dzhai and the bearded man were hardly in better shape, but none of the three could afford to sleep as yet.

At dawn they swung north again, toward the coast. The leak was growing slowly, so that Kukon was noticeably more sluggish. They had to get her beached within another day at the most. If they had to fight, they were probably finished. There was one serviceable cannon and a dozen muskets left aboard. There was practically no dry powder. There were plenty of spears and swords, but there was hardly a man aboard Kukon who could lift a finger by now, let alone a weapon.

The bearded man, who now admitted to the name of Luun, put it accurately.

"T'ree old wimmin-tey catch us, den hit us on t' head w' brooms." He made a thumbs-down gesture and spat into the water alongside.

Toward sunset they finally crept into a wooded cove. Kukon's bow crunched gently onto the sand and gravel of the beach, and a sigh went up from more than two hundred exhausted men at once. They were not out of danger by any means, but for the moment they no longer had to worry about their ship sinking under them and leaving them to thrash about until the sharks came.

Blade and his two co-captains didn't try to get any work out of the men that night. The men wouldn't budge. All of them, slave and free both, wanted to drink fresh water, breathe air that smelled of growing things, sleep on pine needles instead of hard planks.

After seeing the wounded carried ashore and a small guard posted, the three leaders retired to what was left of the after cabins. They had to decide which of them should be the new captain. All knew that a ship could have only one.

Inevitably, the choice fell on Blade. He was a nobleman and the only one who had commanded a warship in the past-although he didn't tell them when or where. He also knew gunnery, tactics, and swordsmanship enough to be the best leader in any fight. Last, he was by far the strongest of the three. That could be important with Kukon's assorted and perhaps unruly crew. Her new captain might have to back up his authority with his own fists and sword.

The next morning the new captain of Kukon addressed his crew. Blade stood on the galley's ram. The tide was out, and twenty feet of the ship's bow rested on land. Luun and Dzhai stood on the damp sand at the water's edge, one on either side of the ram. Both held drawn swords. All the rest of the men who could stand stood in a rough half-circle facing Blade and their ship.

"Men of Kukon," he began. "You have fought in a great battle and won a victory. Three galleys of the pirates of Nongai will never sail again because of your victory." Everyone cheered loudly. Blade held up his hand for silence.

"You and your ship have come away from this victory and come safely to land. There are repairs to be made and then another voyage to make.

"When Kukon sets forth on that voyage, she will not be as she was before the battle. Then she was a galley of the Imperial fleet of Saram. She is one no longer, and she will never be one again?" More cheering, much louder than before, practically all of it coming from the rowers. They were half hysterical with joy. Most of those who had been free stood silently.

"We sail for the Five Kingdoms and whatever fate awaits us there. All of us shall work to make Kukon fit for the voyage, but no man shall sail to the Five Kingdoms who does not wish to go. No man aboard her shall be chained by the ankle, or have a whip lashed across his back, or a sword pointed at his throat.

"There are those among you who were slaves at our ship's oars. There are also those who were freemen, soldiers, sailors, gunners. It does not matter to me what you were before the battle. When we sail for the Five Kingdoms, all of you will be the men of Kukon, no more and no less.

"There may be some among you who do not wish to sail for the Five Kingdoms. So be it. You will not suffer in any way for this choice. It is yours to make. Come to me, say that you have chosen, and I will inscribe your name on a list. All on that list will be set ashore where there is food, water and people who may send messages. All of them will have the chance to return to the service of His Sublime Magnificence Kul-Nam of Saram."

Blade rolled out the name of the Emperor as sarcastically as he could. He drew a good deal of laughter, and he was interested to see that not all of it was from the rowers. Apparently some of the freemen felt as Blade did and were happy to be able to show it, now that they were for the moment beyond the Emperor's reach.

Blade again waved the men to silence and continued. Now both his face and voice were grim. "If you do not return to Saram, do not think to continue serving the Emperor by trying to betray your shipmates. The first sailor or soldier who speaks a word or raises a hand against us will not only be ending his own life. He will put all those who were his comrades in danger. We sail as the men of Kukon, with no place aboard for traitors or cowards." He touched the hilt of his sword to give extra force to his words.

Blade did not care to end his speech with a threat, but he didn't feel he had any choice. There were too many men aboard of the sort likely to respect nothing but force, or at least the threat of it. The men of Kukon, were not yet a band of brothers, and there was no sense in thinking otherwise.

Most of the freemen were glad to stay beyond the Emperor's reach if Blade was willing to have them and lead them. Very few came to ask him for help in returning to Saram. Most of them were older men, with families or property at home. None of them had much hope of saving their own lives by returning home. The Emperor's wrath would fall on anyone who had been at all involved in the disaster to Sukar's squadron. But they all hoped to keep their homes from being razed into rubble, their wives sold to brothels, their children sold as farm slaves, and the old or infirm among their families killed outright.

Blade felt sorry for these unfortunate men and determined to find some way of avenging them. Fortunately, there were less than thirty of them. The attitude of the rest was summed up fairly well by the words of one young gunner.

"Captain Prince Blade, I haven't anything to keep me in Saram, thank the gods. I can live better on crusts of bread out of Kul-Nam's reach than on beef and fine wine in Saram. The Five Kingdoms for me."

When everyone finished making up his mind, Blade found he had more than a hundred and eighty able-bodied men. That would not be enough to take Kukon into battle. It would be more than enough to take her across to the Five Kingdoms.

Then everyone went to work. Trees were cut down, trimmed, then wedged and tied into place as new masts. Water barrels were refilled, fish and birds caught and salted down, and edible nuts and roots

picked or dug and stowed away. The gunpowder was dried out in the sun. The smashed decks, gangways, and cabins were patched up as well as possible. In the smelly darkness of the hold, twenty men worked night and day with timber, nails, pegs, and a barrel of tar, patching up the hole torn by the pirate galley's ram.

All of this took ten days-disagreeable and nerve-wracking days for Blade. He was the captain of a ship as helpless as a beached whale. Every day spent here meant one more day when either pirates or Imperial galleys might enter the cove and finish the work done in the battle.

Thanks to Blade's driving leadership and the hard work of everyone under him, Kukon's work was finished first. On the eleventh day he took her out to sea for a brief trial cruise. On the morning of the twelfth day, Kukon's men saluted their shipmates who lay buried on the shore of the cove, then weighed anchor and set sail for the Five Kingdoms.

Chapter 16

The voyage from the coast where the cove lay to the nearest landfall in any of the Five Kingdoms normally took a week in good weather. Blade hoped they could slip across the Silver Sea without seeing anyone or being seen. Although Kukon and her men could now fight something more than three old women with brooms, Blade still had no wish to risk his undermanned, battered ship against an enemy. A few of the hotter-headed crewmen thought otherwise, but Luun and Dzhai kept them in line.

Kukon made it across the Silver Sea without even sighting another ship. She also made it in five days instead of a week, but she nearly went to the bottom in the process. A freak gale blew up out of the northwest, driving them along faster than Kukon had ever gone before. Both the jury-rigged masts were lost, as were half the remaining oars. But the oars didn't matter, because no one was rowing. Those who weren't manning pumps and buckets to keep the galley afloat were huddled in corners out of the wind and spray, vomiting or praying or both.

Blade, Luun, and Dzhai got very little sleep during those five days. If they were not urging on the men at the pumps, they were struggling with the tiller. If they were not struggling with the tiller, they were helping to lash the cannon securely. Several of the wounded died, and several able-bodied men were maimed when half the water barrels broke loose, smashing themselves to pieces and drenching the powder all over again.

Dzhai found a grim amusement in joking with Blade about the weather. "It's your fault, Captain. You prayed too hard to the weather spirits to send us concealing weather. They heard you, and they do their best for those they hear!"

Blade nodded, trying to match Dzhai's tone. "I know. But I didn't ask them to hide us by sinking us to the bottom of the sea!"

The storm finally began to fade on the fifth day, although gray seas still rose high around the laboring galley and her weary crew. The men at the pumps worked in water only up to their knees instead of up to their waists. Even the seasick began to crawl out of their corners and get back to work. Once more luck and seamanship and a stout ship had brought them safely through.

The island rose out of the sea to greet them, looming against the dawn. The face it presented to them seemed to be all towering gray cliffs and enormous, jagged boulders with white fringes of foam as the last dying waves of the storm broke over them. The wind had died away, and the boom of the surf and the scream of gulls clearly reached Blade's ears.

"Where are we?" asked Dzhai.

Blade frowned. "That should be the West Cape on the island of Parine."

"Should be?" said Dzhai.

Blade shrugged. "If my navigation is right, it should be."

That was a good-sized if. For five days the storm had completely shut out Blade's view of the sun and stars. The island rising out of the sea before them should be Parine, seat of a semi-independent principality under the Kingdom of Nullar. In any case, they were not going to make a landing here, whatever the island might be. Anyone who didn't die in the surf would face a first-class job of mountain-climbing on the cliffs. Blade mentally flipped a coin to decide whether they should turn to port or starboard, then nodded to Luun.

"Starboard. We'll look for an easier landing spot."

As Kukon ran to within a mile of the cliff, Blade saw red smoke whirling up from a signal fire just inland. Small figures scuttled along the top of the cliff, and then three white smoke puffs appeared as three cannon fired, seemingly as signals or warnings rather than with the idea of hitting the galley. As a precaution, Blade ordered the rowers up to fast cruising stroke and held them at it until they were a good three miles offshore. At that distance nobody on land could do more than make faces at them.

As Kukon swept along the coast of the island, Blade became more and more certain he'd found the correct landfall. The island seemed endless. The coast remained steep and rugged, but inland Blade could see the green of fields, vineyards, and olive orchards. A single mountain like a black stone tooth rose against the sky, a faint shimmer of snow still crowning it. All of this matched what Blade had learned of Parine from the charts and sailing instructions salvaged from the officers' cabins.

Kukon rowed steadily along the coast throughout the morning. Fishing boats began to scuttle frantically for shore as they sighted the approaching galley. Finally they rounded a tall headland crowned by a square-towered castle and found themselves off the narrow entrance to an almost completely landlocked harbor.

"That's Parine," said Blade decisively. There was no other island in the whole Silver Sea this large and with a harbor like the one they saw before them. "Let's go in and pay our respects to the prince."

"Princess, Cap'n," said Luun.

"Princess?"

"Aye."

Blade extracted from Luun a brief explanation. The current ruler of Parine was the Princess Tarassa, widowed daughter of the previous ruling prince and regent for her son until he reached the age of eighteen. As he was now only five, Parine faced a long regency. It was said the King of Nullar doubted the wisdom of leaving a woman in charge of such an isolated and valuable part of his realm. However, no one on any of the nine islands that made up the principality would submit to any other rule. The princess was a formidable woman, not necessarily loved but greatly respected and trusted by her subjects. So the King of Nullar held his peace and Princess Tarassa held the regency of Parine.

The principality itself was neither wealthy nor poor. Its people seldom made great fortunes, but equally seldom went hungry. The islands had few trees, so the principality had few ships. It did have good, strong forts and notoriously tough fighting men. It had defended itself magnificently a hundred years ago against the usurping Emperor of Saram and had fought off pirates raids several more times since then. By now all nine islands had a firm reputation as nuts too tough to be worth cracking.

Kukon rowed in through the entrance to the harbor in the shadow of high cliffs crowned on both sides by heavily armed forts. Inside the harbor, three oared gunboats took up a raking position off her stern. Two more rowed up to her bow. An officer standing by the mast of one shouted across.

"Ship your oars, bring your men up on deck, and we'll tow you in. You've got five minutes; then we open fire."

"Friendly bastards, aren't they?" said Dzhai sourly, as he started giving the necessary orders.

Blade wasn't surprised. This was a Dimension where everybody seemed ready to behave like hungry wolves. The only way a small principality like Parine could survive was by looking like too tough a mouthful for even the biggest and hungriest wolves.

The gunboats towed Kukon up to the main quay and rested on their oars, guns loaded and aimed, while the mooring parties tied the galley firmly in place. A welcoming committee came down the quay, two officers on horseback and two more in sedan chairs. All four came stamping up the gangplank onto Kukon's deck as if they owned it and faced Blade as if he were a criminal under interrogation.

"You will chain your rowers at once," said the first officer.

"I will do nothing of the kind," said Blade, crossing his arms on his chest. "All are freemen now, and none of them shall ever be chained again aboard this ship."

"Then-you are a pirate ship?" said the second officer, tugging at his beard in apparent confusion.

Blade shook his head. "We are not a pirate ship," he said sharply. "In fact, barely two weeks ago we sank two pirate ships and slew the crew of a third in a great battle off the islands of Nongai."

"We have heard of no such battle," said the third officer, and the other three nodded in agreement.

"The officers of the principality of Parine don't know everything, even if they think they do," put in Dzhai, grinding the words out one by one between clenched teeth. His face was turning red with irritation that would be rage in a moment.

The first officer shrugged. "Very well. You are neither a galley of the Emperor nor one of the pirates of Nongai. Then what in the name of all the spirits of all the seas are you?"

Blade had to admit that was a reasonable question. After battle, mutiny, rough repairs, and the storm, Kukon and her crew looked like nothing ever seen before on the Silver Sea. Her designer would have a heart attack if he could see her now, and her builders would die laughing.

"We were once a galley of the Emperor's service, this is true. We have fought in a great battle against the pirates, a battle that did take place whether or not you believe us. Now we are a crew of freemen, sailing under no flag. I am the captain of Kukon. My name is Blade. I am a Prince of England, a distant land

south of the Steppes, enslaved by the Emperor of Saram. I and all the men of Kukon come to Parine in peace, seeking a friendly reception, which we have not as yet received-

The first officer laughed. "There is no such land as England. Whoever and whatever you are, you lie. Her Grace Tarassa of Parine has no love for liars. We, her officers-

"-are not worthy of her," put in Blade, his voice hardening. "I would have expected them to show better manners to strangers than does His Sublime Bloodthirstiness Kul-Nam of Saram. I see that I am likely to be disappointed and that the tales of Her Grace's wisdom were just tales."

There was an angry growl of agreement from the men on Kukon's deck and a ripple of movement that ran from aft toward where Blade and the four officers stood. Blade realized that his crew might soon reach the end of their patience and heave the four officers into the harbor or batter them to death with oars and boathooks. Then there would be a bloody shambles, ending in death for everyone aboard Kukon.

The four officers seemed to realize the same thing and lost interest in having more fun at Blade's expense if the price of their fun would be their own deaths. Their eyes met, and the first officer spoke to Blade.

"Captain-Blade, it is not for us to decide who you are or what this ship may be. That is for Her Grace to decide, and Her Grace alone. Do you consent to accompany us into her presence, along with one of your officers?"

Luun and many of the crew laughed out loud at the officers' sudden about-face. Blade kept his own expression serious and turned to Dzhai.

"Captain Dzhai, will you accompany me to pay our respects to Her Grace Princess Tarassa and assure her of our friendship?"

Dzhai took his cue and nodded soberly. "I will, my lord prince."

Now it was Luun's turn. "Officer Luun!"

"Aye?"

"You are in command of the ship until Dzhai or I return."

"Aye."

"If neither of us has returned by sunset, you may assume that we have met with treachery. You shall then put all Her Grace's men ashore, send the men to their battle stations, and depart from Parine."

Luun frowned. "We 'ud rather coom up arter ye."

Blade shook his head. "There will be no effort made to rescue either of us. Think only of the safety of the ship and the other men, not of us."

Reluctantly Luun nodded, and raised one knotted, hairy hand in a ragged salute. "Aye, lord."

Blade turned back to the four officers. "Are you ready to take Captain Dzhai and me before Her Grace?"

The four officers stared, and one of them waved a hand in Blade's general direction. For a moment Blade was certain someone was going to raise objections to his or Dzhai's clothing. He counted to ten, then twenty. By the time he'd counted to thirty, the officers had apparently thought better of making any such remarks.

"Come, then," said the first officer. He turned and led the other three down the gangplank. Blade followed, and Dzhai fell in behind him.

Chapter 17

Beyond the fortified gate at the foot of the quay, Blade and Dzhai mounted small, sturdy horses and rode up the narrow, twisting street from the harbor.

Overhead the upper stories of the stone houses almost touched, throwing the street below into shade. On either side cobbled streets hardly wider than alleys wound away out of sight. Blade caught distant glimpses of yellow- and red-tiled roofs with white brick chimneys. Beyond the roofs was blue sky with patches of clouds and mountains studded with olive groves.

At the top of the hill the city's walls curled around the rim of the harbor. Here a dozen more mounted men joined the party. They rode on through a gate that was almost a tunnel. The walls were thirty feet thick at the base, built of enormous blocks of blackish stone now crusted and green with immense age. Then they rode out into the sunshine.

Blade looked back at the city's fortifications as they rode on. At intervals of a hundred yards the great wall was broken by towers. From ports in the towers peeped the muzzles of guns. Everything in sight was massive and square. The fortifications of Parine were old, but certainly the city would not fall easily. An army with less than five thousand men and a good array of heavy guns would be wasting its time trying to take Parine. As for anything in the harbor-

As for anything in the harbor, if it did come to a fight Kukon and her men were finished. All they would be able to do against the guns and the forts would be to die gallantly.

Blade had never expected anything else. He and Luun had been putting on an act for the benefit of the officers. They were pretending to be completely careless of the odds against them, ready to fight, apparently believing they had some chance to win, but ready to die.

Their bluff might work. A man who appears not to care whether he lives or dies is a terrifying opponent. Most people will get out of his way, and few will casually provoke him. Blade had done his best to intimidate Tarassa's hot-tempered officers into keeping the peace.

The road from the city wound toward a range of hills that spread across the northwest horizon. It passed through more olive groves, vineyards, stone-walled fields where goats roamed, and groves of squat, spreading trees with dark wood and pale bark. Blade saw men at work in those groves, cutting down some of the trees and sawing them up into planks. The wood seemed as hard as iron-Blade saw the man gasping and their bodies running with sweat. The planks- themselves looked far too small to be of much use for building.

Dzhai noticed Blade's curiosity. "They make barrels, Prince Blade. They cut the planks up into staves and then make barrels, which are very tough and strong. Sometimes they last for years on the bottom of the sea, and when they are picked up the wine or grain inside is still good."

Blade nodded politely, but he could not take much interest in even the best barrels. Not until Kukon was assured of a safe reception.

The road now twisted its way back and forth up into the hills. Several times everyone had to dismount and lead their horses in single file.

Here and there the hills were crowned by low, squat stone forts, hard to see unless you were looking for them. At least two of them overlooked every pass and valley in the hills, and deceptively narrow paths formed a network linking them all together. Blade realized that he and Dzhai weren't just riding into a range of hills. They were riding into a well laid out and well defended stronghold. The beauty of the day and of the island scenery couldn't conceal this fact.

A few minutes later the party turned left and began rapidly descending a steep slope. They went down it at a clumsy trot, the horses barely staying on their feet and loose stones clattering down along with them. They swept through a pass that was hardly more than a slit in a solid rock wall, with another squat fort overlooking it. Then they rode into the valley beyond.

Blade could not keep from staring about him as they made their way into the valley. He'd guessed that they were approaching Princess Tarassa's private citadel and had expected to see a structure as grim and forbidding as the House of Blood, bristling with guns and towering above a lifeless wasteland of gravel and bare stone.

Instead he saw a low, rambling building of white marble with a roof of gilded tile. In its windows was stained glass richly colored with powdered coral or screens of bronze or worked driftwood. The building was set around several marble pools, where fish of a dozen different colors swam lazily. White gravel paths ran up to it between rows of tall, straight pines. Under the trees lurked lowering shrubs, great patches of roses flaming red and yellow, and beautifully kept lawns dotted with marble benches and fountains.

Blade forced himself to stop staring, but he could not force himself to stop wondering. This was the home of Princess Tarassa of Parine. This was a house so gorgeously sensual that it was almost erotic.

What sort of woman lived in it?

The princess had been warned of her approaching visitors. A dozen servants and two armed soldiers in silk tunics and silvered helmets waited for the party as it rode up to the house. Blade suspected that if the princess hadn't been warned, there would have been nobody in sight, but musketeers, archers, and spearmen would have been lurking behind every window and in every tree. The forts up in the hills were a formidable barrier in themselves, but anyone wise enough to maintain those forts would also be wise enough to take precautions against soldiers slipping by them.

Blade was hoping for a chance to bathe and put on clean clothes. This lush little palace was making him very much aware of the amount of dirt and salt encrusted on his clothes and body.

Instead, the two soldiers stepped up to Blade and Dzhai and helped them dismount. Then they barked orders to the servants, who led the rest of the party aside. Finally they bowed respectfully to Blade and Dzhai.

"Honorable Prince Blade, Honorable Captain Dzhai. It is the Princess Tarassa's wish to see you at once. It is our wish that you come with us into her presence." Blade put a hand on his sword, ready to draw it

and present it to the man hilt-first. The man shook his head. "No, it is not needful for you to disarm. What you bear will aid Her Grace in passing her judgment upon you, and no harm will come to her in any case."

The last statement was made as boldly as if the man had said that water runs downhill or the sun rises in the east. Tarassa's personal guards seemed to be sublimely confident that they had the measure of any possible opponent. Blade suspected they might be right. He nodded, let his hands fall by his sides, and followed the soldier off toward the palace.

The inside of the palace matched the outside. Blade stepped across the threshold, and his scarred and salt-stained boots sank inches deep in a thick rug. The floor around the rug was inlaid wood in half a dozen different colors. The walls showed swirling mosaic designs of fish and waves where they weren't covered with flowing silk hangings. Somewhere in the palace water trickled gently over stones. Somewhere else someone played skillfully on a flute. In a third place someone was burning incense that gently floated out on the currents of air through the whole palace. Along with the incense, Blade smelled fresh flowers and the lemony tang of waxed wood.

Princess Tarassa might be ruler of a land that stayed free only behind a grim face of forts and garrisons and cannon muzzles, yet here in this little palace she had created for herself a refuge from which all grimness was banished, a refuge where she and those she admitted could forget about the real world. This refuge told Blade a good deal about Tarassa that he hadn't guessed before and made him want to learn more.

The warm, heavily scented air made it hard to concentrate. Blade found his mind wandering to consider what might lie in the other rooms of the palace, beyond the doors he noticed opening off on three sides of this chamber.

His mind wandered so far that he did not notice the plain, whitewashed wooden chair in an alcove on one side of the chamber. Nor did he see a tall, graceful figure slip in through one of the doors and sit down in the chair until Dzhai coughed gently and elbowed him in the ribs.

Then Blade did not need the soldier's signal to go down on one knee. Princess Tarassa compelled that respect by nature; she would have compelled it at any time and in any place.

The princess rose from her chair and came toward Blade and Dzhai. She stood more than six feet tall, and her figure was that of a Home Dimension high-fashion model-sparely fleshed but beautifully molded. Her olive skin and great black eyes needed no makeup, nor did her dark hair need a hairdresser. It seemed to float about her head like the foam on the top of a wave.

She wore a long, flowing robe of dark blue silk, belted in with sealskin. On her head was a golden circlet, at her throat a necklace of silver and coral beads, and on her long-toed feet she wore leather sandals bleached such a dazzling white that they seemed to glow. She carried no scepter or other sign of office, and she carried no weapons either.

She hardly needed them. Blade sensed watchers behind the screens that closed off two of the three doors, as well as above the ceiling. The princess might not flaunt her guards to terrorize her visitors as Kul-Nam did, but she kept them just as ready. Let anyone in this chamber make a single suspicious move and his blood would be soaking into the rug before he could take two more breaths.

The princess stopped about ten feet from Blade, looked him up and down, did the same for Dzhai, then laughed. It was not a mocking or cruel laugh. It was rich with life and also with satisfaction.

"Yes, gentlemen, my guards watch and wait," the princess said. "But they will not move without my bidding. We of Parine do not treat strangers as enemies until they have done us some wrong. You have done us none, as yet. In fact, you passed the test my officers set you and your crew."

Dzhai couldn't keep from gaping, then bursting out, "A test!"

The princess nodded. "Yes. It was their plan to find out how well you, the leaders, could control both your tempers and your men. They discovered that you are both wise and strong. The wise and the strong are not always our friends, but they are seldom our enemies."

Blade smiled thinly. "If we are going to exchange praise, may I then praise your officers for their acting skill-and for their courage? They were not altogether safe, playing the game they did with my men. The men of Kukon have endured much and their patience has worn as ragged as their clothes."

"So one might gather," said the princess. "You also deserve praise for the game you and Luun played on my officers. They could not be sure whether you were foolish enough to think you could escape, mad enough to fight against certain death, or possessed of some secret weapon that would get you safely out of the harbor. They are still not sure."

"And you, Your Grace?" said Blade politely. "You seem to know more than they."

Tarassa nodded. "There are those who serve me who know ships well. They have watched Kukon and sent me word. You have no secret weapon. Furthermore, your ship is so badly battered and short of stores that she could not reach another port even if by some chance she survived a battle with the guns of Parine."

Dzhai started to explode again, but Blade clamped a hand on his shoulder. Dzhai's mouth hung open for a moment; then he snapped it shut and sputtered down into silence.

Blade nodded. "I had not thought there were many in Parine who knew ships well."

"You have heard the truth. Yet we have enough ships so that we also have some men who know them. Have they not spoken truly about your galley?"

Blade made his face and voice deliberately expressionless. "What your people have said agrees with what I have heard from those of my men whose business it is to tell me such things."

"Then you have heard the truth, and my people have seen it," said the princess briskly. "Your people must be skilled; otherwise your ship would not have come through the great battle off Nongai and the storm you faced on your way to Parine. If they are skilled, they told you the truth about your ship. Therefore-" She spread her slim hands in an eloquent gesture, as if to ask whether she needed to continue.

Relief and admiration for Princess Tarassa's skill and wit overcame Blade. He threw back his head and let out a great, whooping roar of laughter that echoed around the chamber. The soldier looked slightly scandalized. Dzhai seemed to be wondering if Blade had gone mad. Princess Tarassa smiled, then joined in the laughter.

Blade caught his breath. "Your Grace, you are served by people worthy of you, and they have a ruler worthy of them. I am glad to be in Parine, and I do not believe that we of Kukon shall be treated as

enemies."

"You shall not," said the princess. "Now that we have settled that point, I shall ask you to tell me of yourself and your ship. Be brief.

"When you have finished, I shall send Captain Dzhai back to the ship. I shall also send orders that all supplies and repairs your ship may need are to be provided at my expense."

"You are generous," said Blade. "But what about the crew?"

"Yes, they have been long at sea, have they not? I shall also send a sum of money for each man and permit them to come ashore. They may do all that which is lawful. Those who violate the laws of Parine will be dealt with, of course, but those who do not have nothing to fear."

The princess turned away and strode to her chair, then sat down and beckoned Blade toward her. "Now, Prince Blade, consider that. I have been praised and thanked enough for the moment. Tell me your tale, and remember that I asked you to be brief."

Blade managed to compress the tale of his own adventures and those of Kukon into five minutes without leaving out any essential details. The princess listened in silence, but a rapidly growing interest and excitement was written all over her face.

When Blade finished, the princess shot a quick glance at Dzhai.

"Is all this true?"

Dzhai said quietly, "All of this that I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears happened as Prince Blade has told it."

Tarassa laughed. "You have or are quickly learning some of your captain's gifts. Very well. You may go and take charge of the work upon your ship."

Dzhai bowed awkwardly, turned with a final look at Blade, then allowed the soldier to lead him out of the chamber.

The princess rose. "You shall remain here. In due course my servants will come to you. Follow them, and make use of them as you see fit. From this hour until I say otherwise, my house is yours." She turned and seemed to glide out of the chamber, her robe swirling about her ankles.

Chapter 18

Blade was slightly uncomfortable at being so suddenly left alone in the chamber. Those unseen but vigilant guards were still in place. If Princess Tarassa were still plotting some treachery, he could be killed as easily as swatting a fly.

On the other hand, if he tried to leave the chamber, he probably would be killed by the guards before he took five steps. It was a good thing the princess had decided that he and Kukon were friendly or at least harmless. If she'd decided otherwise, he and Dzhai would already be dead and the rest of the men would have died as soon as orders reached the harbor. Their deaths would be quick-Princess Tarassa did not seem to have Kul-Nam's love of torture and pain. But they would be sure.

Blade barely had time to complete this thought before the screens across one door were pushed aside. Five women filed out into the chamber. The one in the lead was a gray-haired matron who looked well past fifty. The others were barely more than girls.

The matron coughed to get his attention. "Prince Blade, it is desired that you come with us."

"I hear." He walked across the chamber toward the women. They formed a circle around him and led him through the door and down a long, winding corridor. The corridor walls were covered in plain white plaster, smoothed to perfection, and the floor was polished stone.

The matron wore baggy black trousers and a knee-length green tunic and carried a long, leaf-shaped knife in her belt. The four girls were unarmed and wore fine cotton robes, nearly transparent. The glimpses of graceful young bodies under the robes reminded Blade of how long he had been without the sight, let alone the touch, of a woman.

He refused to feel at all sorry for himself. It had been even longer for most of the men aboard Kukon. He hoped they would not run completely wild when they went to town with Princess Tarassa's silver in their pockets.

The corridor ended in a bath chamber, even more richly decorated than the audience chamber. Everywhere was white and pale green and black marble, gilded bronze, enameled copper, tile in a score of colors, censers and intricate lamps burning perfumed oil. An enormous couch half buried in silken cushions stood at one end of the great sunken bath. At the other end rose a carved wooden stand sagging under the weight of gold and silver flasks.

Now the girls fluttered around Blade like four butterflies. They undid his weapons belt and handed it to the matron, who hung it over the wooden stand. Piece by piece, they stripped him until he stood naked on the edge of the bath.

The matron pulled a weighted cord at one end of the wooden stand, a long, bronze pipe swung down out of the ceiling, and steaming hot water gushed out of the pipe into the bath. In a few minutes the tub was filled.

The first few minutes in the tub were sheer delight for Blade. He could not have found more pleasure in taking any or even all four of the girls to the couch. He could feel the dirt and sweat and salt floating off his skin and the strain and aches dissolving out of his bones. He felt that he could gladly stay in the steaming tub for a week.

After a while he began to hope that the girls would peel off their gowns and join him in the tub. The chamber was now full of steam, and the dampness made their gowns cling enticingly. None of them did so, however. Instead, they scuttled around the edge of the tub, putting sponges, brushes, soap, and powdered coral within Blade's reach. Apparently there were some uses he was not supposed to make of them. Well, he was a guest, his hostess had made the rules—and besides, there was the matron standing by with her knife to enforce them.

Blade soaped himself thoroughly, brushed every inch of his skin, then rinsed. He did this three times before he felt clean enough to climb out of the tub. Then he lay down on the couch and waited for whatever was to happen next.

Blade's muscles were warmly relaxed, but his mind was still cool and alert. Baths were good places for murders that could be made to look like accidents. And if they didn't care about making death look

accidental, there was the matron's knife and the scrapers and razors the girls were now picking up.

The girls went over every inch of Blade's body with the scrapers, with the powdered coral, with a cool, lightly scented oil, and with their strong, skilled fingers. Their touch was warm and firm, but so entirely impersonal that they might have been kneading bread dough.

Then the women left him, vanishing between one moment and the next, almost as silently as spirits. Bare feet pattered away across the stone, and a distant door slammed shut. There was a moment's silence, and another door opened, more softly and much closer. The sound of bare feet came again, this time moving fast and straight toward the couch.

Blade turned over, raised himself on one elbow, and smiled at Princess Tarassa as she emerged from the steam.

Surprise at finding him awaiting her so calmly flickered briefly across her face. Her voice showed none of it.

"Greetings, Prince Blade."

"Greetings, Your Grace."

"Have my servants pleased you?"

"They have pleased me in all the matters in which they were expected to please me. Your hospitality will live long in my memory."

"That is as it should be, Blade. There is honor in hospitality. There is also pleasure." She reached down and clasped Blade's right hand. Slowly she bent her head to kiss his palm, then ran her lips slowly up his arm. As she did so, her eyes flickered up and down his body. Blade could sense her glances as something almost tangible, like tiny feathers brushed across his skin. The arousal he'd kept down so thoroughly for so long began to flow through him. He could almost feel it beginning to steam gently, like the hot water in the great bath.

The princess' lips now crept up across Blade's shoulder to his throat. He could feel the healthy woman's warmth that seemed to flow out of her and around him. She wore no perfume, yet there was a sweetness in that warmth, a sweetness that both calmed Blade and excited him still more.

She still wore the blue silk robe, but her jewelry was gone and her feet were bare. Like the girls' gowns, the silk was now damp enough to cling to her body. It was not a body to arouse sudden, urgent, immediate passion. Its curves were too elegant for that. Yet there was an enormous grace in the princess as she bent over Blade, a grace that made him increasingly eager to strip aside the robe and see what lay beneath it.

His hands rose and encircled her long, fine neck as if he was going to strangle her. His fingers played lightly along the line of her jaw, then crept around and stroked the nape of her neck. They crept lower, found the hook that held the gown, and slipped it open. Tarassa shrugged her shoulders, and the gown slipped from her body and flowed down off the cushions onto the floor with a faint hiss.

Somehow that hiss was one of the most exciting sounds Blade had ever heard. After it died away he could see all of Tarassa's equally exciting body. Her olive skin was evenly tanned from head to foot. Her breasts held their subtle curves through every movement. Her flat belly seemed to flow down into

superbly turned thighs with a neat triangle of dark hair nestling between them. Blade ran his hands down her spine to cup and stroke her firm buttocks. She gasped and lowered herself until her body was resting against his from head to toe, her hair flowing over his face and her lips still nuzzling the side of his neck.

She seemed to want to ride him, but this was not Blade's pleasure at the moment. For once, it mattered to him to take a woman the way he wanted her. She was a princess and the ruler of Parine's thousands of subjects, but here and now on this couch in her palace she would for once submit to the will of another.

Tarassa suddenly found herself being gripped by two arms with steel muscles. The long fingers of two large hands closed on her so gently that they could not have bruised, but so hard she hadn't a chance or a hope of escaping or moving except by Blade's will. He rose, and she rose with him. Then he was turning her over, lowering her onto her back on the cushions with enormous strength and determination and yet also an enormous gentleness. She felt herself in the grip of a will so powerful that it didn't need to show off, but merely proceeded straight to its goal. She was that goal, and the realization filled her with an excitement she had never known or even imagined possible.

Blade sensed that excitement in the woman he held and rejoiced in it. His own arousal was mounting with terrible force and terrible speed. A fight to wait while the woman under him rose to meet him would be a fight he was certain to lose. For once he would not have to wage that fight.

Blade thrust with enormous force and eagerness into the princess. He felt her match that force as her arms and legs clamped tightly around him, match the eagerness as her cries of delight echoed around the chamber. He pressed upon her, driving her body down as deeply into the cushions as he drove himself down into her.

Such fury and excitement could have only one ending. That ending came for both of them with a sudden force that was still more terrible than what had gone before. The princess screamed as if she were in deadly pain. Her body jerked and twisted under him; she would have writhed and heaved herself about desperately if Blade's weight had not been upon her.

Then Blade soared up to his own peak and passed it. He let out a great gasp instead of a cry and held to the princess like a drowning man holding onto a log. He heard her gasp in turn as his arms locked around her like steel bands and his legs thrashed wildly between hers, as if he were struggling to drive himself still deeper into her and pour out the last of his enormous desire and excitement. He would have controlled himself if he could have, but for the moment that was far beyond him. He was as helpless in the grip of his exploding desire as a child in the arms of its nurse.

The explosion came swiftly. It passed as swiftly. Blade found the strength to roll off the woman, and she found the strength to roll toward him so that they lay together, her breasts and thighs against his shoulders and buttocks. It was in that position that a quick, infinitely relieving sleep came over them.

The sleep lasted only an hour or so. Then they rose, bathed, and returned to the couch for a more leisurely, more tender joining.

They spent the rest of the day and all of that night in the bath chamber, sleeping, bathing, making love, eating and drinking from the silver platters and cups brought in every few hours, and talking. As Princess Tarassa had promised, Blade had ample opportunity to tell of his adventures in detail. Whenever the princess thought his interest in storytelling was fading, she would draw him to the couch. Somehow he always rose from there ready to continue telling his tale and answering her questions as fast as she threw them at him.

It was obvious that Tarassa was not just gratifying her personal curiosity. In this chamber she was a woman, indulging in all the pleasures she was capable of enjoying and giving all that she was capable of giving. Yet she was still the ruler of Parine, ruler of a small and lonely land whose safety depended heavily on learning all that could be learned about those who might become its enemies. Blade had seen more of the inner workings of the Empire of Saram than anyone who had come her way in many years. Because of this, she would have spent hours or days in his company if he had been foul-mouthed and ugly, or even seventy years old, diseased, half blind, and impotent. That she was able to find so much pleasure in doing her duty was an extra gift.

Often she made reference to things that Blade did not understand without immediately explaining them to him.

"Would you say that His Magnificence Kul-Nam is mad?"

Blade sipped wine and nibbled on a rough sandwich of flat, dark bread and goat's-milk cheese while he searched for the right words.

"I would say that he is not entirely sane at the moment. He is likely to become less and less sane as time goes by, but how rapidly I do not know."

"Does his present madness affect his ability to rule?"

"It seems to be making him dangerously sensitive to anything that seems to threaten his dignity, let alone his power. It has already led to some unjust and unwise moves. Remember that rebellious town?"

She nodded. "But he is not yet unfit to rule?"

"Ask a question I can answer," he said, slapping her playfully on the rear. Then he went on, soberly. "He is not the best ruler that Saram might have. But so far he is not so bad that civil war, chaos, and the onslaught of the Steppemen would be preferable. If it were left up to me, I would probably grit my teeth, hold my nose, and do what I could to keep Kul-Nam alive and on his throne until there was someone better to put in his place."

Tarassa nodded. "You sound very much like Count Durouman."

"Who is Count Durouman?"

"Oh, a nobleman who commands a squadron in the Royal Fleet of Nullar. He was a friend of my husband's, and I have taken his counsel on several occasions."

Blade was absolutely certain that Tarassa had told him the truth about Count Durouman. He was just as certain that she had not told him the whole truth. He made a mental note of the name, for some occasion when he could catch Tarassa off her guard.

Blade found no such occasion that night, and after a while he gave up listening and waiting. No matter what pleasures Princess Tarassa might allow herself, the statesman and the ruler were always there along with the woman.

Eventually they fell asleep in each other's arms. When they awoke it was dawn. Blade knew that, because sometime during the night a panel had been opened in the ceiling of the chamber. Pale pink dawn light and a cool, scented breeze crept in.

Tarassa was sitting beside him, propped up on a stack of pillows, still entirely naked. She had a carved board across her knees and a piece of parchment spread on it. She was writing on the parchment with quick, bold strokes, dipping her pen in a silver inkpot held out to her by a kneeling servant girl.

Finally she folded up the parchment, shoved it under her pillow, and dismissed the girl. Then she turned to Blade, who was watching with an expression carefully intended to show a polite lack of curiosity.

"That was a letter to Prince Durouman."

"I thought he was a count."

"Indeed, he is that, among the nobility of the Kingdom of Nullar. But he is by right a prince, for he is the true heir to the throne of Saram."

"He is of the house that Kul-Nam's grandfather overthrew?"

"Yes. He is the great-grandson of the emperor who perished. The kings of Nullar have been good to the exiles over the past century, for they have no great love for the usurpers of Saram. At the same time, they have been cautious. They have given the exiles titles and honor, wealth and positions of trust. They have never been willing to aid them in an attempt to return to their rightful place upon the throne of the Empire."

"That is not unwise of them. The attempt might fail, with nothing to show for it but another war with the Empire."

"That is true. Or rather, it has been true. What you have told me and what I have heard from others suggests that times are different now. As Kul-Nam grows more and more bloodthirsty in gripping his power, he will put more and more people in fear of him. In the end he will weaken that which he seeks to strengthen."

"So you think it is time for Prince Durouman to strike?"

"It is time for him to know all that I have learned and to consider what he should do. I will ask for your help in speaking to him."

"You think he is so much better than Kul-Nam that it is worth a civil war to place him on the throne of Saram?"

"I do. I would ask you to take my word for it, but you are not a man to do that."

"I am not. I gather you have summoned him here?"

"Yes. I do not know when he will come, for he must come alone and secretly. He is negotiating a marriage with the king's daughter, Princess Varra, and he will be careful to do nothing to endanger it. But he will come, sooner or later."

"That is good," said Blade. He reached out a hand and stroked her hair, then her cheek. "We have time for ourselves, then."

"We do," she said with a smile. Her own hand reached out and stroked Blade intimately. Her other hand

moved under the pillow and drew out the letter, then placed it on the floor beside the couch.

"So that it won't get wrinkled," she said, and turned to him.

Chapter 19

The letter to Prince Durouman could not go off for several days. After it was sent, nothing Blade or Princess Tarassa could do would bring Prince Durouman to them any faster. So they put him out of their minds and turned to the work at hand.

Blade quickly understood why Princess Tarassa's subjects respected her and were willing to bear the expense of her little pleasure palace and her other indulgences. Out of every ten waking hours, she devoted nine to the work of ruling Parine and only one to her personal affairs and pleasures. When she was not at her desk reading or dictating state papers, she was in her audience chamber hearing complaints, dealing out a brisk but even-handed justice, presenting or receiving gifts. When she was in neither of those places, she was in the saddle crossing and recrossing the island. Once she even boarded one of Parine's few galleys and spent an exhausting and uncomfortable week touring the other eight islands that made up the principality.

The only thing she did for her own pleasure was to move her household from the marble palace to the Prince's Suite in the main castle overlooking the harbor. That way, Blade could more easily keep an eye on his ship and still spend each night with her. Even that meant giving up the luxury of the palace for a sparsely furnished, dank, and generally grim suite of cramped rooms at the top of the castle keep.

Blade had no real work after the first few days. The workers of Parine's modest shipyard knew their business, their tools were good, and their backs were strong. As the days went by, Blade realized that by hovering over the workers he could do nothing except annoy them and probably slow down their labor. His ship was in the best possible hands.

The galley's crew was just as well off. Word rapidly got around the town and the island beyond it who these men were and what they'd done. They found themselves greeted as heroes of a battle against the pirates, who were cordially hated in Parine, and victims of the tyranny of Kul-Nam, who was hardly more popular. They were wined, they were dined, they found all the women the loneliest sailor could hope for, and they seldom had to pay for anything.

Blade had been worried that his crew might be jealous of his relationship with the princess. Instead, he occasionally found himself being almost jealous of his sailors. On an average day they saw a good deal more of their girls than he saw of Princess Tarassa. Their girls did not have to work twelve hours a day ruling Parine!

Blade found himself spending many hours of his free time talking war and politics with the commandant of the castle. The commandant was the first of the four officers who'd visited Kukon upon her arrival. When he was not putting on an act, he was a sensible enough man, well educated and obviously a competent soldier. He came from one of Parine's oldest families-in fact, from one older than Princess Tarassa's own.

"Three hundred years ago we had as strong a claim to the principality as her forefathers," he said. "As little as a century ago the prince had to cast two of our house from the West Cape cliffs for plotting against him. But those days are long past, and no one wishes our princess anything but prosperity and happiness, and her son after her. What the gods send to them, they send to us also."

"To Princess Tarassa!" said Blade, raising his cup, and they drank.

Two days after that, news reached Parine that made everyone start, and sent cold chills up and down the spines of those who understood what the news meant.

A pirate galley had been caught in a squall off the north coast of the island, driven ashore, and wrecked. Half the crew perished in the surf, but the other half made it to shore and were promptly rounded up by the local farmers and fishermen and a force of soldiers under Tarassa's personal command. The prisoners talked so freely that there was no hope of concealing the news that they brought.

A force of Steppemen had ridden out of nowhere and camped along the western shore of the Emerald Sea, just north of the Strait of Nongai. They made no hostile move against the tribes there, but sent word of their coming to the pirates of the islands. The pirates sent back an armed mission, to find out what the Steppemen were doing so far from home and what they might want.

It turned out that they wanted an alliance with the pirates against the Empire of Saram. They would move south along the coast toward the northern border of the Empire. As they went, they would drive out the local people and permit the pirates to set up bases in the harbors there. Then the pirates could raid the coast of the Empire as they had never done before. The Steppemen would sail aboard the pirate ships, to strengthen the landing parties. The Empire of Saram would be caught between attacks from the sea and attacks from the land and crushed like an eggshell.

Details didn't matter. All the pirates told so nearly the same story that it was obviously true. It was also just as obviously grim news.

"Such an alliance would indeed be a terrible danger for the Empire," said Tarassa. "Even if the Steppemen are on the northern border of Saram, they could not easily get through the mountains.

"But aboard ships of the pirates they would not have that problem. The pirates have seldom raided the coasts of Saram with much effect. They do not greatly care to fight on land to begin with, and if they land they cannot ride. So they cannot go far from the coasts or escape from the Emperor's cavalry.

"The Steppemen, on the other hand, live in the saddle. Put a thousand of them ashore in Saram, mount them on captured horses, and they would keep ten thousand of the Emperor's soldiers busy chasing them. Before they were caught they could slaughter and burn along a hundred miles of coast. A few such raids, and not even Kul-Nam's executioners could keep his people from fleeing inland.

"Then the pirates will have nothing to fear from the fleet of Saram. They will swing to the east, ravaging the coasts of the Five Kingdoms. Parine stands in their path, and it will be among the first to feel their attack. Blade, this alliance is the greatest danger to my people since the great war with Saram a century ago!"

Blade frowned. The situation certainly seemed as grim as the princess said. But there was a possibility she hadn't mentioned, one fast taking shape in the back of his mind. It was a wild and desperate idea, but so was the situation.

It was also an idea there was no point in putting into words yet. It would be useless without the cooperation of Prince Duroman, and the prince was nowhere in sight yet. Even when he arrived, it would probably take many hours of persuasive argument before he would agree to such a gamble. Blade did not blame him. The prince sounded like a statesman who disliked gambles that would kill others. But what else was there to do—wait while the Steppemen and the pirates of Nongai forged an axe and

brought it down on the necks of everyone within their reach?

So keep silent, and wait for Prince Durouman.

Good luck and a brisk wind brought the prince's galley into the harbor of Parine only two days later. The whole island was still buzzing with excitement and growing alarm over the news from the north.

Prince Durouman was followed off his galley by some thirty guards, all in anonymous green liveries, all bristling with weapons and armor. They were obviously alert, tough, and superbly trained fighting men.

"You have strengthened your bodyguard since last you came," said Princess Tarassa politely.

Prince Durouman nodded. He was a well built and alert-looking man just under six feet tall, with a darkly tanned skin and an even darker brown beard. The hair on his head was thinning, although he could not have been more than thirty. In ten years he would probably be as bald as Kul-Nam. He did not look as if he would have many of the Emperor's other qualities.

The prince looked around to make sure that no one but his own guards were within easy hearing. Then he grimaced. "I dislike giving the impression of so great a fear for my own skin. But I have no choice. Kul-Nam seems to be striking out more wildly at his enemies than ever before. If he can afford to send an army and a fleet against the pirates, why can't he afford a few assassins to put an end to me? I decided I could not afford to leave him an easy path."

"That you have not," said Blade, looking at the guards again. Any assassin who tried for the prince would be very lucky to get through them. He would be even luckier to get out again.

There was something else in Durouman's words, something Blade didn't understand. An Imperial fleet and army going against the pirates? This was something new. Here was no place to talk of it, either.

Princess Tarassa was playing the gracious hostess now. "Prince Durouman, Prince Blade. He has traveled here from a distant land called England. On the way he has seen and heard much that will be of great interest to you."

"Indeed?" said Prince Durouman. Blade half-expected him to add, "There is no such land as England." That seemed to be a popular answer in this Dimension.

Instead, Prince Durouman bowed deeply and gracefully, hand over his heart. "It is a pleasure to meet a man who has traveled far and seen much, and whom I see to be in the favor of Princess Tarassa. She is a woman of good judgment and high wisdom."

"Indeed she is," said Blade.

The princess had the grace to blush slightly at this spray of compliments. She put one hand on the shoulder of each man and smiled. "It is time we sought another place, to dine and speak more of what I think concerns all three of us."

They were able to talk freely during a lavish dinner in the keep because the regular servants were replaced by Prince Durouman's guards. After the last plates were cleared away and the last wine jugs brought in, even they were sent away.

"You spoke of a fleet and army that Kul-Nam sends against the pirates," said Blade.

"I did, and he does," said Durouman, grimacing and setting his wine cup down. "He has assembled nearly two hundred ships, armed sailing ships, war galleys, and merchant vessels. As for the army, no one knows how many soldiers he has put aboard the ships. Many thousands, certainly, including most of the Corps of Eunuchs."

"He means to grind the pirates like a miller grinding grain, then," said the princess. "Where does he get the sailors to man all the ships?"

"He does his best," said Durouman. "He has even pardoned the men of the other galley that escaped from Admiral Sukar's little disaster."

Blade shook his head. "I imagine that grieves His Magnificence terribly. A perfect excuse to dip his hands in blood, and he cannot afford to indulge himself!" He sat up and his voice and face both turned sober. He sensed the time was at hand to spring his proposal. "What are the pirates saying and doing against this menace hanging over them?"

"No one seems to know," said the prince. "The alliance with the Steppemen can only help them if the Steppemen launch an attack on the borders of Saram. The Steppemen have no ships, and horses cannot swim that well." He sipped more wine. "If the pirates have any sense, they are frightened."

Blade's face split apart in a broad smile. Now was his moment. "I quite agree. They are probably terrified. In that terror lies a great opportunity for us." Both Tarassa and Durouman looked at him. "Yes. We can approach the pirates and sign an alliance with them."

Prince Durouman's mouth fell open. "You're mad!"

Blade shook his head. "Perhaps. But not as mad as I'd be if I proposed we just sit here and let the pirates and the Steppemen work out their alliance."

"I-" the prince began, then sighed. "Very well. I may be as mad as you are, but I shall listen."

Blade outlined his proposal quickly, reducing it to a series of points:

The pirates faced a deadly threat from Kul-Nam's fleet and army.

They would be afraid and perhaps willing to ally themselves with anyone who could help them against the Empire.

The Steppemen could not help them.

Prince Durouman could help them. The Five Sea Kingdoms could help them even more.

Prince Durouman exploded indignantly at the idea. "You are mad, Blade," he growled. "The king would never support any plan that might involve him in war with Saram. He would break off my marriage to Princess Varra, dismiss me from his service, and perhaps take my fortune and even my head."

Princess Tarassa was looking skeptical. "That may be true of the King of Nullar, Durouman. We all know that he is weak. But what of the other four kingdoms? Can you be sure that all of them will hold back?"

"No."

"And if one joins you and the pirates, will not the others hasten to join, in order not to be left out?"

"I suppose so."

"Then Blade is making sense and you are not. Let him go on. "

Blade grinned. "The princess has said half of what I had yet to say. Consider. You sail to the islands of Nongai and propose an alliance to the pirates. With even one or two of the Five Kingdoms on their side, they will have enough men and ships to make a strong defense. With four or five, they may very well win."

"Perhaps," said Durouman. "Then what?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Blade, his smile broadening. "Then you become Emperor of Saram."

Prince Durouman's mouth fell open again and stayed open. He seemed to have completely lost all powers of speech. His hands clutched at the tablecloth. Blade went on.

"Again, consider. If Kul-Nam's fleet and army are destroyed in battle, he will lose much of his reputation. So many of his people will be looking for a ruler to take his place, that no amount of terror will keep all of them quiet. If you come forward then, it may be the best chance you'll ever have to take the throne of Saram without a civil war.

"In fact, you may have to step forward. If Kul-Nam loses a good part of his army, he may not have enough left to hold the borders against the Steppemen. Then you'll not only have to move, but move fast."

That was the end of Blade's case, but it was not the end of the argument. That began as soon as Prince Durouman regained control of his voice, and it went on all night, fueled at intervals by more food and wine. It went back and forth, both men speaking with equal determination, both speaking from a great deal of experience, and both speaking with growing respect for each other.

There were times during the night when Blade felt like a door-to-door salesman trying to sell a vacuum cleaner to a particularly stubborn customer. But it wasn't a vacuum cleaner he was trying to sell. It was a plan that could bring a new and just Emperor to Saram, peace to this whole Dimension, and life to thousands and thousands of people who would otherwise die unpleasantly. That thought kept Blade going, as hoarse as he became and as stubborn as Prince Durouman remained.

Dawn was breaking when the prince finally threw up his hands in a gesture of resignation. Blade noted that those hands were shaking slightly with fatigue or excitement.

"Very well, Prince Blade. You seem to have thought of everything. You have great wisdom and you have used all of it in making your plans."

"Thank you."

"That does not mean that we will succeed, of course. It only means that you are not simply trying to get me to join you in committing suicide. Anything is better than sitting and waiting for our doom to come to us. That way gives no hope of either honor or victory." He picked up the last wine jug, discovered that it was empty, and set it back down on the table.

"So. Are you willing to take my men and me north in your galley?"

"I am. This is a mission that some aboard Kukon may not enjoy. They have no great love for the pirates."

"Do you doubt the loyalty of your crew, Blade?"

"No. They have even less love for Kul-Nam. Overthrowing him is the only hope most of them have of seeing their homes again."

"Indeed. Well, then I shall accept your judgment on your crew. We must all stand together as we sail north."

That, Blade reflected, was much too true. They would all have to stand very solidly together as they sailed north to thrust their heads into the jaws of the lion and hope that the beast wasn't hungry!

Chapter 20

Kukon sailed north three days later with nearly three hundred men aboard her, all capable of rowing or fighting.

The commandant of the main fort of Parine, his two aides, and a dozen of the best musketeers among Parine's soldiers were also on board. They had volunteered to accompany the mission in order to strengthen it and to observe the events on behalf of Princess Tarassa.

The princess herself would gladly have accompanied them. Blade turned her down politely but as firmly as he could. "There are no proper accommodations for a lady aboard a war galley as crowded as ours." Before she could bristle or flare up at that, he went on. "Also, Parine must be placed in a proper state of defense. Can you be sure the job will be done as well as it must be without you here to oversee it?"

Tarassa sighed. "As usual, Blade, you have the right of it." She clenched her fists and waved them in front of his nose in mock rage. "Damn you, you are so often right!" Then she kissed him on the lips and said more softly, "Very well. Go to the pirates, but come back safely to me."

After two days' sail to the north, the commandant made a suggestion that intrigued everyone. Blade was not only intrigued by it; he was worried.

"The pirates may not believe in our good faith unless we give them proof," said the commandant. "If they do not believe in our good faith, they may open fire on us the moment we sail within range, flag of truce or no."

"Perhaps," said Dzhai. "But I doubt it. The pirates are very proud of their honor. Even now it would take much to make them fire on a truce flag."

The commandant ignored Dzhai, as he almost always did. He consistently refused to be more than minimally polite to those of "lower rank." When he was not flaunting his lineage, he was still a good soldier, but his manner was beginning to grate on Blade.

"The pirates will not trust us if we simply approach them as we are. But suppose we approach them in company with a ship we have taken from the fleet of the Emperor? They will know that we have

committed ourselves to their side. Also, we may have a valuable batch of prisoners, who can be useful in many ways."

Blade merely looked polite. Prince Durouman seemed openly delighted. "That's a marvelous idea, Commandant. But where do we find such a ship?"

The commandant looked around the little cabin. "This is knowledge we have received in Parine, but which does not seem to have reached the mainland. The Emperor is sending out armed sailing ships toward the eastern part of the Silver Sea, to watch the coasts of the Five Kingdoms."

"And land spies and assassins?" put in the prince.

"Probably," said the commandant. "The ships will be sailing alone, many miles apart. Our fighting men would easily outnumber the crew. Once we boarded, it would be all over."

"Yes," said Dzhai, "but-" He hesitated.

"But what?" said the commandant severely. Blade fought down an urge to kick the man in the shins under the cabin table. "What is your objection, Captain Dzhai?"

"It is not easy for a galley to attack a sailing ship if the ship has good guns and brave men behind them."

"It is not easy to sink it, no," said Prince Durouman, obviously sharing the commandant's annoyance. He was only trying to be polite to Dzhai out of respect for Blade. "But we wish to capture it. That is a matter of boarding and hand-to-hand fighting."

Dzhai shrugged. Blade said nothing. He had some thoughts of his own about how galleys might sink sailing ships, but he didn't want to say a single word about them in front of the commandant.

Blade did not care very much for this idea of an attack on one of the Empire's scouting vessels. It meant an unnecessary battle and therefore an unnecessary risk. Blade had fought in more battles than any ten ordinary men, but he had never liked unnecessary ones and always avoided them when he could.

Besides, what was this about the scout ships? He hadn't heard anything of it until just now. If it had been known in Parine, as the commandant said, why hadn't he been told?

Blade firmly reined in his suspicions. It was quite possible that he was looking for sinister implications that weren't there. There was no good reason why he should have been told everything that Princess Tarassa learned. Besides, Prince Durouman was obviously falling in with the commandant's idea. That was the best argument of all for Blade's keeping his mouth shut. If he didn't, it could lead to an open quarrel between him and Prince Durouman. That would be a much greater danger to their success than anything that might come of this attack on the Imperial scout ship.

So Blade kept silent as Kukon made her way steadily toward the north.

They sighted the Imperial ship at sunrise on the morning of the seventh day out. At the lookout's wild cry, Blade started scrambling up the foremast shrouds to the crow's nest.

He saw the two masts and high-castled hull of a large sailing ship rising slowly above the horizon. There was only the faintest of breezes. If the calm held, Kukon would be able to run rings around the enemy. Perhaps she could even take a position off her bow or stern that would be safe from the enemy's heavier

guns. Perhaps the commandant's idea would turn out to be a good one after all. Perhaps

Never mind the "perhaps." There was a battle to fight. Blade leaned over the railing of the crow's nest and shouted down to the deck.

"Dzhai! Luun! All hands to battle stations!"

Dzhai nodded. Luun cupped his hands and shouted back, "Tek doon t' sails?"

"No time!" That wasn't strictly true, but Blade wanted to make absolutely sure that Kukon had something beside her oars to rely on if something-anything-went wrong. He swung himself back into the shrouds and slid down to the deck.

Two hundred of Kukon's men were now scrambling to their places on the rowing benches. Each man had a sword, bow, axe, spear, or musket ready under his bench. The rest of the men not needed for handling the ship were manning the guns or lining up, ready to board. Blade saw Prince Durouman take his place on the foc'sle, surrounded by his thirty green-clad guardsmen. The prince's face seemed one great smile.

Most of the other men on the deck were smiling as well. Some of them might not have gone out of their way to fight against the Emperor Kul-Nam, but none of them seemed to regret the chance to do so, now that it had come to them.

The drummers were beating out the cruising stroke. They would approach slowly, saving the rowers' strength for the final dash across the last three miles when they would be in range of the enemy's guns. Blade looked toward the Imperial ship. She was now hull-up, even from Kukon's deck. Her sails still hung as limply as wet wash from the yards.

Blade strode up and down Kukon's deck as she crept across the sea toward the enemy. He talked briefly with Dzhai, more briefly with Luun, still more briefly with Prince Durouman. The prince wore a full mail hauberk and a plate helmet and breastplate over that. In spite of the damp coolness and the breeze, he was sweating heavily and his dark beard was as limp as the enemy's sails.

The commandant was also sweating as he stood by the heavy gun forward. He wore no armor and carried no weapons except a sword and a dagger. Doubtless he was planning to rely on speed rather than protection. He was a first-class swordsman. He was also a man who'd been a soldier for twenty years without ever seeing a real battle. No doubt that was why he was sweating. The first taste of the real thing was always a nerve-wracking moment for any man in any Dimension.

Now the enemy was showing signs of alarm and alertness. Blade could see sails being hastily furled and hear a faint roll of drums as the enemy's crew scrambled to their battle stations. Kukon swung more sharply to starboard to cut across the enemy's bow.

A puff of white smoke came from the sailing ship's side. There was a long moment's wait, then a fountain of spray three hundred yards short of Kukon.

"Not shooting very well, are they?" said the commandant. His voice was brittle.

"They'll be doing better before long," said Blade.

The galley continued her crawl across the sea toward the sailing ship. The enemy continued to fire single

shots, testing the range. Six fell short. The seventh landed just astern. The eighth sailed over Kukon, with the familiar ripping-canvas sound, and splashed into the water on the other side.

Blade looked back along the swaying ranks of the rowers. All were sweating heavily, but most still smiled and none showed signs of strain. Some were eyeing their weapons. There was plenty of strength left in them.

Blade sprang up onto the breech of the heavy gun, drew his sword, and flourished it over his head. The pale sunlight glowed along it.

"Men of Kukon-forward! Drummers-the attack stroke!"

The roar of the drums was almost instantly drowned out by the furious clatter of the oars. Kukon seemed to dig in her stern like a speedboat as she shot forward. Water fountained up over the ram and spray doused Blade and the commandant. The gunners turned their backs to shield their lighted matches with their bodies.

The enemy ship grew steadily larger. Now Kukon's bow gunners spun around, holding their matches. They shouted, and Blade and the commandant sprang clear. Then four gunners pressed four matches into the touchholes of four cannon. All four went off together with an eruption of sound, flame, and swirling smoke. By the time Blade's eyes stopped watering, all four balls were nearing their target. Two struck home. Blade saw splinters fly and a chunk of the enemy's bulwark suddenly vanish.

"Good shooting!" he shouted. The gunners acknowledged the praise with brief smiles, white teeth showing in powder-blackened faces, then bent to their work again.

The commandant licked his lips and clamped a white-knuckled hand on the gold-chased hilt of his sword.

Blade ordered the boarding party to lie down on the deck. Prince Durouman's guards grumbled, but a dark look from the prince sent them down on their bellies with the rest. The prince himself continued to stand beside Blade.

Blade no longer kept track of the firing of Kukon's guns or the answering shots from the enemy. His attention was concentrated on judging the angle between the two ships. As soon as the enemy's broadside could no longer bear on Kukon, he would close straight in as fast as the rowers could move the ship.

The moment arrived. At a sharp order from Blade Kukon began a turn so fast and so tight that she heeled far over to one side. Blade and the commandant had to hold onto the railing to keep from losing their footing. Only Prince Durouman stood by himself, feet braced wide apart, helmet shoved back on his head, hair and beard blowing. He was a magnificent sight, and Blade only hoped he wouldn't also be a magnificent target.

As Kukon approached the sailing ship, Blade saw that the enemy's decks were surprisingly empty. A little cluster of men stood with muskets and bows on the foc'sle. Another cluster stood on the stern castle. The deck amidships was empty except for a few half-naked sailors standing by with axes to cut loose fallen masts and rigging.

"She must have just enough men aboard to man her guns," said the commandant.

"That's their problem," said Blade cheerfully. "We'll swing around her bow and run along her port side, grapple, and board. If she's that short-handed, this should be easier than I expected."

The commandant seemed to quiver all over at Blade's words, and his eyes widened. Realization was striking him that his first moment of hand-to-hand combat was fast approaching.

Kukon swept onward. Her guns were firing steadily, hammering away at the enemy's foc'sle. Blade saw a swirl in the little cluster of figures there as a shot ploughed through it. Several did not rise. Splintered wood showed white in a dozen places around the enemy's bow.

Then Kukon was rounding the enemy and swinging back to run alongside. Without waiting for orders, the men of the boarding party sprang to their feet and ran to the port gangway. Some of them swung ropes and grappling hooks in their hands.

The port rowers heaved their oars back in through the ports and sprang up from the benches. Kukon ran alongside the enemy with a great squealing and grinding and bumping of wood. Ropes hissed through the air and bright steel hooks dropped over the enemy's bulwarks. Blade opened his mouth and filled his lungs to roar out, "Boarders away!"

Then there was a flurry of movement among the cluster of figures on the enemy's foc'sle. A knotted rope sailed over the bulwarks and came snaking down to land on Kukon's deck between Blade and the commandant.

At the same time there was a tremendous clatter as hatches and gratings flew open all along the enemy's deck amidships. The gunports on the ship's side dropped open with rattles and bangs. Blade saw helmeted heads thrusting forward from the gloom below decks, looking out past the muzzles of the guns. He recognized the helmets and armor of the Imperial Corps of Eunuchs.

Then the commandant whirled, his sword leaping from its scabbard. He slashed down at Blade so quickly and so hard that only Blade's miraculously fast reflexes kept his head on his shoulders. He ducked, went down, rolled, and sprang up again.

The commandant was just as fast. He gripped the knotted rope and shouted. Above, the men on the enemy's foc'sle heaved. The rope tightened, and the commandant flew straight up into the air as if he'd been shot out of a circus cannon.

Then the eunuchs at the gunports pushed forward, raising muskets. At the same time dozens more eunuchs with both crossbows and muskets sprouted from the enemy ship's bulwarks. All the muskets and bows seemed to go off at once with one tremendous, ringing crash. Bolts and balls whizzed past Blade, struck the deck, clanged off the gun barrels, drove into human flesh. Screams of agony and the smell of blood and powder surrounded him.

From forward one of the enemy's guns fired at pointblank range. Its ball smashed squarely into the muzzle of the heaviest gun on Kukon's bow. The gun flew backward off its carriage and right off the foc'sle, to smash down onto the deck below.

It also smashed down squarely on top of Luun. The man had time and breath to let out one blood-freezing scream of agony and terror as the tons of bronze crushed him into the deck. Then there was silence, soon broken by the sound of more muskets and crossbows going off.

Prince Durouman was still on his feet, although blood was streaming down his face and both helmet and

breastplate were dented. He waved his sword, and his guards crowded around him, raising their muskets.

"Fire!" he roared. More than twenty muskets crashed out in a single volley, and as many helmeted heads vanished from along the enemy's bulwarks. Blade saw one eunuch throw up his arms and fall backward, a great hole gaping squarely in the middle of his forehead. He wouldn't have believed such shooting possible with matchlock muskets.

But for every eunuch shot down by the prince's guards, two more appeared. Their fire grew steadily. In another minute Blade knew that the only thing left for Kukon was to get clear, if she still could.

"All rowers man your benches!" he thundered, in a voice that carried over the swelling noise of the battle. "Port side rowers, push us off. Then everyone to ramming stroke!"

Oars clattered out through the ports and a gap of water began to open between Kukon and the Imperial ship. Some of the rowers on the starboard side continued to stand, firing muskets and bows, until they saw their comrades to port beginning their stroke. Then all the rowers went furiously to work. Kukon slid rapidly along the enemy's side and passed her stern.

"Why, Blade?" screamed Prince Durouman. "Why? We can take her and kill that traitor. We can!"

"We can't!" shouted Blade. "We haven't a chance. She's got two hundred of the Corps of Eunuchs on board besides her regular crew. Maybe more. We'd lose every man aboard Kukon trying to board against the eunuchs!"

"No!" the prince cried.

"Yes," said Blade more quietly. "The commandant led us into a trap. There's nothing more we can do about it except get clear if we can."

The prince stared at Blade, his eyes wild and red, his sword shaking in his hand. He snatched off his helmet and threw it down on the deck with a clang. Then he crumpled. He lurched and would have fallen to the deck if he hadn't been able to brace himself against the breech of a gun.

Blade had no more time to spare for Prince Durouman. He leaped off the foc'sle onto the main deck and ran aft. Reaching the stern, he ordered the gunners there to elevate their pieces and open fire on the enemy. They obeyed with a will. They hadn't been able to take any part in the battle until now, and most of them had comrades to avenge.

Kukon's stern guns kept up a steady fire until the two ships were out of range. Blade kept the rowers at the ramming stroke for another few miles, then let them slow down to the fast cruise stroke. It was not until the enemy ship was out of sight even from the masthead that he let the rowers leave their benches. Kukon's sails filled, and she swung away toward the north once more.

Then at last there was time to check the damage and casualties. Except for the dismantled bow gun, there was little serious damage. There were half a dozen shot holes, none of them below or even near the water line. That was all. Blade promptly set men to work with tackles and levers to remount the gun.

Casualties were another matter. Beside Luun, nearly thirty men had been killed and more than fifty wounded. Kukon's scuppers were running with blood, and wounded men lay groaning and screaming along every gangway.

Most of the casualties were among the boarding party rather than among the rowers. Only fifteen of Prince Durouman's guards were still on their feet, and some of those were wounded. The prince himself had been grazed by three balls.

The prince sighed with more than the pain of his wounds when Blade reported the casualties. "It was all my fault for listening to that-!" Words failed him and his shoulders slumped again. He looked as if he wanted to jump over the side and let his armor carry him down into the depths, into an oblivion where he could forget the men his error had killed.

"Cheer up," said Blade. He had long ago learned that there was no point in lamenting mistakes already committed-only in learning from them. "We've still got a seaworthy ship under us and a crew that can row and fight her behind us. We can approach the pirates just about as well as we could have anyway."

"The pirates, yes," said the prince. "But what will the commandant say to Kul-Nam? What will that monster do? How much does the commandant know?"

"He knows most of what we've planned," said Blade reluctantly. "He also knows that you're making this move on your own, that the Five Kingdoms have nothing to do with it. So they may not be attacked."

"You're assuming that Kul-Nam is sane," said the prince bitterly. "You know perfectly well that he isn't."

"Not sane, perhaps," said Blade. "But he probably still has enough common military sense not to attack the Five Kingdoms for something they haven't done."

"I hope so," said the prince. "Does he know about Princess Tarassa's support of us?"

"If he doesn't know it for certain, I'm sure he can guess it. Why?"

"Kul-Nam might not attack the coasts of the Five Kingdoms. But he might attack Parine if he thinks Tarassa has aided his enemies."

Blade laughed. "Let him. Parine is about the toughest proposition he could tackle. If he does try there, he's likely to get his fleet and army well mangled, enrage the Five Kingdoms, and have little to show for it."

"I hope you're right," said Prince Durouman. It was growing chilly as the sun sank toward the western horizon. The two men pulled their cloaks about them and went aft toward their cabins.

Chapter 21

The next morning Kukon hove to and buried her dead, slipping them over the side sewn up in hammocks with a cannonball at their feet. There was hardly enough of Luun to bury properly. Then the galley's sails rose again and she headed on toward the north and whatever awaited her there.

Blade ordered the lookouts doubled and all the cannon and muskets kept loaded at all times. If the commandant's word reached Kul-Nam or his admirals swiftly enough, a galley squadron might set out after Kukon. Blade was determined to give such a squadron no easy prize, and every man aboard Kukon agreed with him.

Neither Blade nor Prince Durouman had any more doubts about the crew's willingness to fight side by

side with the pirates. For a chance to fight Kul-Nam's soldiers the crew would gladly have signed an alliance with demons.

They made their landfall in the Strait of Nongai toward evening of the eighth day after the battle. Then they began their approach to the mountainous island where the pirates kept a lookout station, flying the truce flag at both mastheads.

They were also ready for a pitched battle. Blade was willing to believe that the pirates would not fire on a truce flag. He was not willing to risk Kukon and her men in case he turned out to be wrong. The pirates were frightened men now, and frightened men did not always behave as they normally would.

Kukon anchored four miles offshore, beyond gun range, and waited for any signal that might come from the land. None came. The sun sank, and Blade set night stations. Half the men would sleep; the other half would remain awake and alert. The guns would remain loaded, the oars trailing, the sails bent to the yards. No one would creep out of the darkness to surprise Kukon without being detected, or attack without getting a warm reception.

They spent that night, the next day, and all of the next night anchored and alert. The strain began to tell on Prince Durouman.

"What are they waiting for?" he burst out. "For us to die of old age and the worms to eat holes in Kukon's bottom so they won't have to fight us?"

Blade laughed. "I doubt it. I suspect they're trying to decide what we are. That will take them a while. Then it will take them another while to decide what to do about us. Then we will see them coming out to do it, whatever it is."

The waiting ended the next morning. The lookouts reported four pirate galleys and what looked like a fishing boat heading slowly toward Kukon from the west. It was an hour before they were hull-up from the deck. Eventually the four galleys rested on their oars just outside gunshot range while the fishing boat swung in toward Kukon. Blade ordered the anchor weighed and made ready to receive whatever message the pirates wanted to send.

As the fishing boat came within hailing distance, a gray-bearded man in a faded red tunic stood up in her bow. "Ahoy, the Imperial galley!"

Blade cupped his hands and shouted back, "Ahoy, the boat! We are no Imperial galley. We are the galley Kukon, in the personal service of Prince Durouman of Nullar and under the command of Prince Blade of England. We bear a message for those who guide the destinies of the Free Brothers of Nongai." Like most pirates Blade had seen, the pirates of Nongai had given themselves a dramatic and not particularly accurate name.

The man seemed to frown and hesitate, then shouted back, "What is that message?"

"We would bear it privately to the captains and to the Seven Brothers." The seven senior captains of the pirates formed an unofficial but effective ruling council, with a dramatic name of its own.

There was silence in the other boat. Prince Durouman fidgeted nervously. The offer of alliance was not something to be shouted out across thirty yards of water, where everyone might hear it. On the other hand, being too closemouthed might in the next minute send the battle signals soaring up to the mastheads of the four galleys. Blade could only hope he'd struck the right balance.

The silence went on for what seemed like half an hour, but could not have been more than a couple of minutes. Then the man gestured to someone in the stern of the fishing boat. Two men stood up, waving a green flag on the end of a long pole. Blade saw the oars of the four galleys begin to move. Then the red-clad pirate hailed them again.

"We judge it fit that you come before the Seven Brothers, for you have come to us under a truce flag. Remain where you are. Our four galleys will form a square around you. You will be given a course to follow. Remain within that square and on that course, or it shall be your death."

The man sat down and four sailors leaped into action. The boat's sail filled again and she came about, heading away from Kukon. Beyond the boat, the galleys were now moving steadily closer.

Blade let out breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "So far so good. They seem to be willing to believe we've got a message and willing to let us bring it before their ruling council." He turned and hailed Dzhai, who was standing on the foc'sle. "Captain Dzhai! Call all rowers to their benches and prepare to get underway."

For two days Kukon and her escorts moved west against a fluky wind that kept the rowers in all five ships at the oars most of the time.

On the third morning the five galleys entered a broad river mouth where some thirty black-hulled galleys were already anchored. On the shore rose a roughly built log house, with the flag of the Seven Brothers-seven gold rays on a green field-floating above it.

Beyond the house in one direction were the rough lean-tos and huts of the mainland tribesmen. In the other direction was a sprawling mass of tents, tethered horses, and cooking fires sending up spirals of smoke. The Steppemen had indeed come in force. Prince Durouman counted the pirate galleys and frowned.

"Is that all they have left after the battle against Sukar's squadron? If they are so weak, can they be of any use to us? If-"

"I doubt that is all their strength," said Blade. This was the first time he'd interrupted Prince Durouman, and he realized this might give offense. Yet the prince's constant worrying out loud was beginning to get on Blade's nerves. The prince was brave and daring and intelligent, but he also seemed exceedingly high-strung. Perhaps too high-strung to make an effective leader.

Blade counted the tents and horses in the camp of the Steppemen. That led to another unpleasant thought. The Steppemen had come with at least three thousand men, perhaps four thousand. That was not just an embassy. That was an army-an army that could start a war or launch an invasion on a moment's notice.

Blade did not in the least like having so many armed warriors of a people he was about to turn into enemies so close at hand. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it. He also realized that there was nothing he could do about it, except perhaps not mention it to Prince Durouman. The man was already nervous enough.

Those aboard Kukon had time to eat breakfast before anything happened. Then a flat-bottomed barge came out from shore toward the galley. In the stern sat the same man in the red tunic who had spoken to them three days ago. He now wore a leather cuirass and a high-crested steel helmet and carried a short,

curved sword. The other men in the boat were also armed and armored.

"They don't seem to trust us," said Prince Durouman. "Or perhaps it's the Steppemen they don't trust. With three thousand of them two miles away, I wouldn't sleep easily more than a foot from my sword."

So Prince Durouman had made his own count of the Steppemen-yet did not seem so worried that he was unable to make a light-hearted remark about it. That was good. The better the prince kept his head, the better would be the impression he made on the Seven Brothers.

The barge bumped alongside. The man scrambled forward from the stern and sprang lightly up Kukon's side onto the foc'sle. Blade, Prince Durouman, and Dzhai met him there, all dressed in their best clothes, weapons, and armor.

"Greetings," said the man. "I am Emass, Speaker for the Seven Brothers."

"Greetings, Emass," said Blade. He introduced the other two men. Wine was brought, and all four men solemnly drank a cup and ate bread and salt fish.

"It is our wish to bring our message before the Seven Brothers," said Blade when they'd finished. "Is it the wish of the Seven Brothers to hear us?"

"It is," said Emass. "It is also their wish that I bring you before them now."

Blade and Prince Durouman exchanged looks, then both nodded in unison. Blade turned to Dzhai. "Captain Dzhai, Kukon is in your charge. Let nothing happen that is unworthy of all she has done before." There was no harm in reminding the pirates that this galley and these same men had fought furiously against them before and could do so again if necessary. It might help the pirates keep their tempers enough to remember their honor and the truce.

Dzhai nodded and raised his good arm in a salute. "It shall be done, Prince Blade."

Blade and Durouman turned and followed Emass down into the barge.

After it was all over, Blade was never quite able to sort out the details of the negotiations with the Seven Brothers. The negotiations lasted three days. After the first few hours, everything became a blur in Blade's mind, and he retained only a few clear impressions.

There were the four Steppemen, observers who sat in on all the negotiations, the first Blade had ever seen in the flesh. They were short, squarely built men, with skinny legs spectacularly bowed from a lifetime on horseback. They wore leather vests and trousers; their main weapons were long, curved, two-handed swords worn slung across the back. Their dark hair was braided into two pigtails and they wore beards trimmed into points and stiffened with strong-smelling grease.

The seven Brothers of Nongai, along with Emass, sat at a long table of waxed driftwood pegged and tied together. All wore faded tunics, most wore fur jackets over the tunics in spite of the warmth of the room, and all were armed to the teeth. No two of them wore their hair or beards in the same style, but all had one other thing in common. All were in deadly fear of the attack Emperor Kul-Nam was preparing to launch against them.

They concealed it well, of course. The Steppemen did not appear to notice it, but Blade and Prince Durouman were more experienced observers, with keener eyes. They knew that they were negotiating

with men desperate for aid against a dreaded enemy, and not much caring from where it came as long as it came.

They were also negotiating with men who tended to think more in terms of ships at sea than of horsemen on land. That was an advantage. The Seven Brothers would more readily accept an alliance that offered them a fleet than one that offered them an army. Now all that remained was to convince the Seven Brothers that Prince Durouman would indeed bring a fleet to their aid.

That was the hardest part of the whole job of negotiating. Once more Blade felt like a door-to-door salesman. The customers were even more stubborn, and this time the sales talk went on for days instead of hours.

The Steppemen listened intently, their dark eyes switching from Blade to the Seven Brothers and back again. They seldom spoke, and when they did, it was usually through an interpreter. When they spoke themselves, their accents were so thick that neither Blade nor the prince nor the Seven Brothers could understand more than about half of what they said.

Eventually the Seven Brothers and Emass declared that they had heard all they needed to hear from both sides. They would go forth, speak to all the Free Brothers, and return with their decision.

It was two days before that decision was announced. Blade and Prince Durouman were too busy catching up on lost sleep and missed meals to have time to be nervous during those days. But they were still surprised at the decision of the Seven Brothers.

"We have decided," Emass said solemnly, "that we shall make no decision at this time. That which we have heard and seen is not enough for us to decide with the wisdom that is needed for the safety of the Free Brothers."

Emass looked at Prince Durouman. "Lord Prince. Have you in your company a warrior of great strength and skill, fit to serve as your champion?"

Prince Durouman hesitated a second, then nodded. "I have. He is Prince Blade, who stands here before you."

"Good." Emass asked the same question of the Steppemen's envoys. Their champion was not among the four envoys, but they could produce one-or even a dozen-if necessary.

"It will be necessary," said Emass drily. "We have decided that a champion of Prince Durouman and a champion of the Steppemen shall do battle to the death. They shall do battle tomorrow, on horseback, before all those present here. That side whose champion gains the battle shall be permitted to enter into alliance with us, according to our laws and customs. This is our decision. Go forth and prepare for battle."

If Blade had indulged in his first impulse, he would have drawn his sword and started hacking off the heads of the Seven Brothers, one by one, until he was killed. That impulse did not last long. But rage and incomprehension were still bubbling inside him when he and Prince Durouman returned to Kukon.

"This is as mad as anything Kul-Nam himself might have done!" he exploded.

Prince Durouman pulled at his beard, his face screwed up in a particularly intense frown. Then he shook his head. "I wonder. There may be a good reason for this-or a reason that seems good to the Brothers."

Blade laughed. "For the moment, that's the same thing. All right, I'll believe just about anything at this point. What is their reason?"

"It helps conceal the fact that they're frightened. Would frightened men let a major decision rest on something so frivolous as a battle between champions? Of course not. That's what they hope we and the Steppemen will think. Then they can drive a harder bargain with the winner."

Blade grimaced. The reasoning of the Seven Brothers made a good deal of sense, if Prince Durouman was right about it.

Unfortunately, that reasoning was going to put him squarely in the middle of a duel to the death!

Chapter 22

Blade slept well that night. Before going to bed he spent a couple of hours with Prince Durouman discussing the fight tomorrow.

"You must strike at the man, not at the horse," the prince said. "You can only strike at your opponent's horse if you yourself are dismounted and somehow survive long enough to launch an attack."

Blade nodded. "Perhaps I shouldn't even bother mounting a horse in the first place."

"I doubt very much if they would allow that, Blade."

"Very well. The swords are designed for use from horseback, certainly. I have used such before. I see no problem."

That was not entirely true. If he was not on foot, he would be riding a Steppe horse. There was no other kind on hand. The Steppe horses were tough, strong, and extremely agile. The battle tactics of the Steppemen made full use of these qualities.

Blade knew that he could manage any horse and use any kind of weapon from horseback. What he doubted was the ability of the horse to stand up under what he might have to make it do. The average Steppeman was six inches shorter than Blade and sixty pounds lighter. How long could even a Steppe horse twist and turn under a load so much greater than normal?

The morning dawned dry and bright, with scattered clouds and a brisk west wind. As Blade stepped ashore from Kukon's boat, all the banners and flags stood out bold and stiff in the breeze—the horsetail banners of the Steppemen, the great rayed flag of the Seven Brothers, the pine branches of the tribesmen, the personal flags of the pirate captains, the truce flags still flying aboard Kukon.

The dueling ground was a marked-off square three hundred yards on a side, lying exactly between the house of the Seven Brothers and the tents of the Steppemen. Blade walked up and down across it while his horse was prepared, checking the footing. The earth was hard and the grass just long enough to keep down the dust. Neither side would have much advantage from the ground today.

Now they were leading out his horse, and on the opposite side of the field his opponent was mounting up. Blade examined his horse and its gear from nose to tail and from mane to hooves. He tested the fit and strength of every piece of harness with all his knowledge and all of his muscles. Emass watched him, a skeptical frown on his face.

"Prince Blade, is this needed?"

"I do not know that it is. I do not know that it is not, either. Therefore I shall do it."

"We would permit nothing that might do you harm or make the duel less than fair."

"Emass, I believe you. Yet not even the Free Brothers of Nongai can prevent that which they cannot recognize. There is nothing you do not know of the ships and the sea. Horses and what may be done with them are another matter."

Blade swung himself up into the saddle. Although the stirrups were let out to their maximum, he still had to keep his knees bent to keep his feet in them.

Prince Durouman approached and handed Blade the great two-handed Steppe sword. Then the trumpet calls started-the brass signal trumpets of the pirate ships and the long wooden trumpets of the tribesmen. Drums joined them-the horse drums of the Steppemen and the deeper-toned rowing drums of the ships. All joined and swelled into a continuous uproar, calling all the men of all the peoples gathered here on the shore to come and watch the duel. Blade gently urged his horse forward, out into the middle of the dueling ground. He wanted to be there waiting when his opponent rode out, to watch the man and his horse in movement.

The mass of Steppemen at the other end of the ground churned and broke apart, and Blade's opponent came trotting out. Like Blade's mount, his horse was fully equipped for the field, with bags and pouches and water bottles dangling from odd places on the harness.

Two Steppemen rode out into the middle of the grounds and two pirate captains walked out from the other side. Apparently the captains had decided it would be less embarrassing to walk than to try riding. Blade agreed. He'd seen some of the pirates try to ride Steppe horses and seen most of them fall off within minutes.

The two duelists reined in their horses ten yards apart and sat listening while the rules of the duel were called out.

The fight would be to the death. Neither might strike at the other's horse unless they were dismounted or use any weapons at all other than the great swords and their bare hands. At the end of each half hour, each contestant might receive a fresh horse. This would continue until the end of the duel.

The fresh horses might be to his advantage, Blade realized. On the other hand, would he have the same chance to inspect each new one as he'd had with the first? He doubted it.

All the trumpets and drums sounded again; the four referees drew back and motioned the duelists to do the same. Blade could not help noticing that as the referees drew back far enough to be out of the way, they also drew back far enough that they would not be able to see very well. It would be entirely up to the two duelists to keep an eye on each other's conduct.

That didn't bother Blade. Somehow, no matter how many rules well-intentioned people tried to make, a fight to the death usually ended up at the level of a barroom brawl. People who forgot that fact in a fight usually didn't get out of it alive.

Blade hefted his sword. His opponent did the same. Both men whirled their weapons over their heads,

so that the watery sunshine gleamed along the polished steel. Then the Steppeman threw back his head until his beard seemed to be pointing at the clouds, filled his broad chest, let out a tremendous yell

"Niiliyaaaaarrrrggggg!"

-and spurred his horse into motion.

Blade did the same. As his horse swept forward he swung his sword down from a striking position into one for blocking. The other horse moved up from a walk to a trot. Blade heard the thud of hooves on the hard ground and the wssssh of air as the other man whirled the sword around his head.

At the last moment the Steppeman swerved his horse and swung his sword sideways. He obviously expected Blade to keep on course, straight into the deadly arc described in the air by the slash of the sword.

Instead Blade dropped one hand from the hilt of his sword to the reins of his horse. He pulled back hard on the reins, jerking the horse to a sudden stop. His other hand locked tightly on the great sword and swept it forward and down from the vertical position. Halfway down it met the Steppeman's sword. There was a terrific clang and the Steppeman's sword was deflected downward so violently that the point nearly struck the ground. The Steppeman raced past as Blade whirled his sword up and out at the other's head, still using one hand. With his own horse motionless, Blade could launch his attack as precisely with one hand on his sword as the other could with two.

The Steppeman went by just a little too fast. Blade saw the tip of his sword whistle by the back of the man's neck close enough to cut off one pigtail. He also saw a look of amazement burst onto the other's face. The man had just seen the impossible-or at least what all Steppemen had thought to be impossible until now!

If there was fear behind the Steppeman's amazement, it did not last long. With the pressure of his knees he swung his horse into an incredibly tight turn. It seemed to practically spin around on its hind legs. Then he was coming in at Blade again. This time he held his sword vertically and well out in front of him.

Blade did not move. He simply swung his own horse around on the spot, bringing its head and his face toward the Steppeman's attack. This time when Blade raised his sword he had both hands locked on the hilt, and this time it was he who struck first, swinging from the waist with all of his enormous strength.

If there had been any flaw in the other man's sword it would have split apart like a stalk of bamboo. If there had been any weakness in his grip, the sword would have flown out of his hands. If there had been any fault in his seat on his horse, he would have gone sailing over its rump and crashed to the ground. Steel and grip and seat on the horse were all sound. The clash of swords sounded like a stamping machine coming down on a sheet of metal, but the Steppeman rode on past Blade, still in his saddle and his sword still in his hands. He was shaking his head at the jolt Blade had sent up his arms, but he seemed unharmed.

Blade instantly swung his horse and kept it swinging as the Steppeman rode around him in a tight circle. He knew now that he faced a first-class opponent, strong and quick and tough. He would need to put all his own strength and skill and endurance into this duel and hope for good luck as well. He could not be certain of the good luck, but he could be certain of one thing.

This was going to be a long fight.

It was. The minutes followed each other in grim succession, until the first half hour was gone. Each of the duelists used every one of those minutes to do what he knew he had to do to win. The Steppeman circled and passed and backed and charged, trying to come in from an angle Blade could not hope to guard and get a stroke home. One stroke with the great two-handed sword would be enough.

He never succeeded.

Blade also circled and backed, but within a circle no more than a few feet across. He was happy to let the Steppeman ride around and around, working both himself and his horse into a sweat. Blade could stay where he was, meet each attack as it was launched, and try to get one of his own strokes home. He was not sure that one would be enough. Blade's enormous strength made it possible for him to wield the great Steppe sword with one hand, something that drew awed gasps from the spectators. He could not put all his power into a one-handed stroke, and half the time that was what he had to use. Still, one good cut sent home would be a good starting point toward his own victory and the victory of Prince Durouman.

Blade didn't succeed either.

Eventually the first half hour was gone. The Steppeman raised a hand to signal the trumpeters and drummers. They blew for a truce, and the Steppeman spurred his lathered horse to a trot, away from Blade.

Blade was tempted not to change horses. That would be a grand gesture, certainly. It would also be a dangerous one. His horse was sweating and beginning to lose speed. No doubt it would help his side if he put on a good show in this duel, but not at the risk of getting his head cut off.

So he rode back, inspected the harness and gear on his new horse, and rode out onto the dueling ground for the second round. As the Steppeman approached, Blade scanned every detail of his clothing and horse. There were no changes that he could see. So far the Steppeman seemed ready to play this game by the rules.

The second round went by in the same way as the first. By now both sides were shouting in amazement at the skill of both riders, so loudly that Blade could barely hear the drums and trumpets that signaled the end of the round.

The third round began and passed. So did the fourth round. Two hours in the saddle, two hours with the sword in his hand, two hours of split-second alertness.

By now the sun was well up, the wind had dropped, and a blanket of stifling, sticky heat had fallen over the dueling grounds. Blade felt his body pouring sweat until he swore he could feel and hear it sloshing around in his boots.

When he rode back out for the fifth round, he noticed that one of the bags on the Steppeman's saddle now bulged and bounced. Apparently the man had decided to fill it with water so that he could take a drink from time to time, whenever he moved out of Blade's range. Not a bad idea. Blade made a mental note to hook a water bag onto his own saddle at the next change of horses.

The duelists settled into the same grim, deadly routine as before. Blade forced himself to remember the danger and forget about the routine. Otherwise, he knew he might forget that things could still change drastically and murderously at any second.

On and on. The Steppeman's horse seemed to be losing speed, though. He was also looking down more and more often at his water bag, although he hadn't yet taken a drink from it. Blade wondered if he would, or if his warrior's pride would make him fall out of the saddle first.

Blade also wondered how long this duel could go on. Perhaps one or the other of them would get lucky. Perhaps one or the other would collapse from the heat. And perhaps they would go on and on, round after round, until all the horses in the Steppemen's camp were dead or exhausted. Then they would go on fighting on foot, still circling round each other, still swinging at each other, until the stars went out and the sun turned cold and the universe itself came to an end.

Blade knew that couldn't possibly happen, but it was hard to fight off the feeling that it might.

He forced himself back to alertness as the Steppeman rode in again. He seemed to be going more slowly than before, and Blade got ready to launch an attack that might finally get through. He allowed hope to rise in him. This might be the moment. This had to be the moment. This-

In a sudden explosive movement, the Steppeman shifted his sword to one hand. The other hand plunged down and snatched at the mouth of the water bag. A jerk, and it sagged open. Something long and dark and writhing spilled out, seeming to fly through the air to land with a hiss almost under the feet of Blade's horse.

Blade had only a split second to realize what was happening. As fast as his reflexes were, they were not fast enough. His horse's instincts about snakes took over. It reared with a scream, so high that no one who wasn't tied to the saddle could have stayed on its back.

Blade felt himself going down, knew in the same moment that he had to stay clear of both the horse and the snake and hold on to his sword as well, then hit the ground with a crash. His breath went out of him and consciousness nearly went with it. Somehow he rolled clear of the horse's flailing hooves as it also went down and thrashed about. Somehow he did not roll within range of the snake's fangs before the panic-stricken horse rolled over it and crushed it flat.

Somehow, also, the sword flew from his hand and thudded to the ground yards away.

Blade sprang to his feet just as the Steppeman turned his horse and rode toward the fallen sword. Blade lunged at it too. The Steppeman swung his own sword wide, and Blade sprang back to avoid having his belly sliced open. The Steppeman swung his sword down like a polo mallet, catching Blade's fallen weapon. It sailed glittering into the air and fell to the ground nearly fifty feet away.

This time Blade did not dash wildly toward it. He knew perfectly well that he had no hope of outrunning the mounted Steppeman. The Steppeman would be there first, no matter how often he tried to retrieve his sword. In fact, he would be giving the Steppeman an easy victory by moving along a predictable path.

Blade could not use speed or the power of his sword any more. That did not mean he had no resources left.

There was still his own enormous strength and the element of surprise.

Blade pushed the cheers of the Steppemen and the howls and groans of the pirates and Kukon's men out of his mind. He concentrated all his attention on the Steppeman, as his opponent whirled his horse around and swung back in toward him. This was going to require extremely fine timing, and he would get only one good chance.

As the Steppeman approached Blade, he slowed his horse almost to a trot. Perhaps he too wanted to put on a show. Perhaps he wanted to slice off Blade's head with a single neat stroke. Or perhaps he wanted to come in slowly merely so there would be no chance of a miss or a sloppy cut to the chest or arm or belly.

As the Steppeman's sword swung toward him, Blade fell into a crouch. The sword hissed over his head. Blade sprang up, whirling as he did so. His arms shot out and his hands clamped on the horse's tail as it swept past him. Then Blade threw himself backward. The horse screamed as it was dragged to a stop in midstride with its tail half pulled out by the roots. It reared. The Steppeman forgot about Blade, clutched his sword with one hand, and tried desperately to get his mount under control with the other.

That was a mistake-the Steppeman's last one. Blade let go of the horse's tail. As it settled back onto all fours he vaulted up onto its rump behind the rider. Again Blade's arms shot out and his hands clamped shut. This time they clamped shut on the Steppeman's throat.

Again Blade heaved. Both men sailed backward off the horse and landed with a crash on the ground behind it. The Steppeman's sword flew out of his hand. The horse snorted, shook its aching tail to make sure it was still there, and trotted off, obviously happy to have nothing further to do with this nonsense.

Blade landed with the Steppeman on top of him but almost helpless. The man tried to struggle as Blade's hands tightened on his windpipe. Then he stopped trying. His eyes bulged out, his swollen tongue thrust itself out between his teeth, and he stopped moving completely. Blade stood up and let the body drop to the ground at his feet.

There was a moment of the most total silence Blade had ever heard, as nearly ten thousand men tried to realize what they'd seen. Then the pirates and Kukon's men began to cheer. Their cheering swelled from a murmur into a roar and from a roar into a sound that was something tangible, battering at Blade like a landslide.

He started to brush himself off. Before he could finish, Emass ran out onto the field, just ahead of Kukon's men, led by Prince Durouman. The Speaker for the Seven Brothers was practically dancing with excitement.

"Prince Blade, that was magnificent, that was unbelievable, that was done by the favor of the gods to you and yours. The Free Brothers will stand beside Prince Durouman. Yes, absolutely, they will, now and forever. Oh, yes, it is certain that they will."

For a moment Blade considered mentioning the Steppeman's treachery with the snake. Then he decided against it. In the present mood of the pirates, that would lead straight to a pitched battle with the Steppemen. The Steppemen were probably ready for a battle, but the pirates certainly were not. Such a confrontation could very well undo the results of his victory by getting the pirates and himself and Prince Durouman all slaughtered together. Even if they won, the pirates would be weakened, and many hundreds of men would die for no reason.

No one would hear of the snake if he kept his mouth shut. He hoped that the pirates kept a very good watch tonight-and that dawn would see the Steppemen well on their way home.

Then Prince Durouman and Dzhai were each catching him under one arm and hoisting him upon their shoulders. All of Kukon's men were crowding around, screaming at the top of their lungs, waving swords, spears, and muskets, and beyond them were the pirates making even more noise.

Chapter 23

Blade munched a piece of boiled salt pork on a toasted ship's biscuit and looked out across the dark water toward the shore. Lights flickered there, cooking fires among the tents of the Steppemen, lanterns in the house of the Seven Brothers, campfires and torches among the huts of the tribesmen, where the pirates were celebrating Blade's victory and their new alliance.

Blade did not blame them for celebrating. The new alliance meant an end to the terrible feeling of being alone against whatever Kul-Nam might hurl at them.

Unfortunately, it also meant a relaxation of their guard. Blade didn't like that at all, and he spoke against it as long and as loudly as he dared. He accomplished nothing, and neither did Prince Durouman. In the end both men gave up. Their new alliance might not survive their openly telling the pirates that they were fools.

The pirates were still prepared to meet attack from the sea. All thirty galleys were anchored in a great half-circle, bows pointing seaward. Their guns could easily fire on an enemy approaching from that direction. It would also be easy for them to weigh anchor and row out against that same enemy, as soon as the rowers were back on board.

There was the problem. Tonight at least half the pirates were ashore, drinking beer and captured wine, gambling, wrestling, competing for the favors of the tribal girls and women. Their barges, boats, and fishing craft were lined up three deep along the beach, ready to take them back aboard their ships at dawn. How fast could they regain their ships in the darkness?

Inside the half-circle Kukon lay at anchor. She was in the place of honor, normally reserved for the senior captain's own ship. There all could see her and no enemy could come at her without passing through the ring of galleys around her.

The honor was flattering, even to Blade and Prince Durouman. It seemed to mean that the pirates were genuinely interested in making this strange alliance work.

It also meant that Kukon lay anchored within two hundred yards of the shore. To both Blade and the prince, that was far more important. Both expected trouble tonight; both expected it would come on land-from the Steppemen.

Neither man could believe the Steppemen would do nothing to avenge their defeat. If they'd been prepared to stoop to treachery to win the duel, they would almost certainly be unprepared to tamely accept losing it. With more than three thousand warriors camped fifteen minutes' fast walking from the celebrating pirates, they could do a good deal. Perhaps they could do enough to cripple the pirates, making them fatally vulnerable to Kul-Nam.

Not that the Steppemen would really wish to serve the cause of His Magnificence Kul-Nam. They would not be thinking of him or of Saram at all, only of vengeance on enemies who had humiliated them. They would take that vengeance if they possibly could, and in taking that vengeance they might give Prince Durouman's cause a blow from which it could never recover.

The Steppemen could afford to be indifferent to that. Blade and Prince Durouman could not.

So after the two men failed to persuade the pirate captains to keep their men aboard ship until after the

Steppemen had left, they returned to Kukon. There they gave certain orders, and then settled down to wait out the night.

Blade had been waiting in the darkness now for nearly four hours.

"Aaaarrgggh!"

The cry carried faintly across the water. Blade strode to the extreme bow and scanned the shore. He couldn't see anything unusual. Probably the cry came from a drunken pirate caught in a brawl or trying to-

Blade stiffened. A shadowy figure was stealing along the water's edge toward the pirate boats drawn up along the beach. Behind it crept at least four others.

Someone on one of the boats shouted, in surprise or as a challenge. Fire flared in the darkness as one of the moving shadows lit a torch and raised it over his head. Then the shrill, yipping warcries of the Steppemen exploded and the shadowy figures darted forward. They moved clumsily, as Steppemen always did on foot. But they moved forward with a furious energy that told Blade all he needed to know.

More shadows were springing out of the darkness along the shore as Blade spun around to give his orders. He did not shout so that he would not warn the enemy. In any case, the key men aboard Kukon already knew what they had to do and were doing it without waiting for Blade's orders.

To port, twenty sailors were scrambling down into a barge tied alongside. Each sailor carried a bow across his back and a sword in his belt. Oars flashed and dipped into the water, and the barge shot away from the galley's side toward the shore.

Dzhai and Prince Durouman came running forward along the starboard gangway. Both were armed. In addition to sword and dagger, the prince carried a wicked-looking mace swinging from his belt.

In his good hand Dzhai carried an axe. He sprang up onto the foc'sle, raised the axe high, and brought it down with a chunk! It bit through the anchor cable, and Kukon was free to move.

Prince Durouman turned as his guards came clattering up on deck, gesturing furiously, waving them to silence. Fifteen of the green-liveried musketeers were there. So were the eight surviving guards of the treacherous commandant of Parine. They had begged to be allowed to join in the next fight, to regain the honor they'd lost through their leader's treason. Blade and Prince Durouman listened to that plea. Now the eight would have their chance.

To starboard a fishing boat was tied to the galley's side. The men in its bow pulled it in; then Prince Durouman's party began scrambling down into it. The prince himself waited until all were aboard, then leaped down. He misjudged the distance, landed off balance, and fell with a clatter of armor and an explosion of curses from the men under him. Plenty of noise there to carry across the water and alert the Steppemen! Or rather, there would have been plenty of noise if the battle on shore hadn't already been making its own uproar.

Blade watched and listened. Flames were already flickering around several of the pirates' boats. The glow of torches showed where Steppemen were moving among the boats to set more fires. Slowly the light grew.

Around the house of the Seven Brothers moving figures swirled light occasionally playing on swords and

armor. From farther back in the darkness came the flashes and bangs of muskets. The pirates were slowly waking to realize what was happening. Would they wake fast enough? Blade doubted it.

He had no doubt at all of what was happening. The Steppemen knew that half the pirates were ashore, so they were sending a small party—perhaps no more than a couple of hundred men—to set fire to the boats on the beach. That would trap all the pirates on shore and keep the ones on board the galleys from sending reinforcements. Then the main force of Steppemen would sweep in on horseback against the trapped and disorganized pirates. It would be a massacre, not a battle.

Perhaps. But suppose a force of tough, well-armed men came out of the darkness to fight the Steppemen among the boats? Suppose the Steppemen were taken by surprise as badly as they'd taken the pirates?

The fishing boat shoved off, sailors and soldiers all manning the oars together. On shore the fires still grew. They seemed to be silhouetting the Steppemen nicely, without sending much light out to sea. Blade grinned savagely.

Behind him he heard an occasional faint thump or clatter as the rowers took their places, but there was little noise. All of these men knew their ship blindfolded, and all of them were entirely sober. The pirates had sent some wine aboard for Kukon's men during the afternoon, but Dzhai had promptly locked it up.

"Anybody breaks out the wine," he snapped, "I'll throw the jug overboard and him after it! Then he can drink all he wants from the sea!" Not even the toughest of the men wanted to argue the point with Dzhai. By now he could do easily with one arm things that most men had trouble doing with two, including breaking the heads of unruly sailors.

Blade raised both arms, then dropped them in a silent signal to the rowers. The oars ran out and Kukon began to move slowly toward the land.

The pirates there seemed to be rapidly awakening now. The shadows around the huts were alive with moving figures, stumbling and lurching and shouting in fear or warning or drunken defiance as they ran. Anybody who wasn't awake by now might not live long enough to wake up. The Steppemen were moving steadily along the beach, and some of them were also among the huts. Flames were spurting up from at least three thatched roofs, pouring more light over the battlefield but still leaving the water in shadow. The boats from Kukon were nearly in range now. If the darkness over the water lasted just another couple of minutes

It lasted until suddenly the flash and rattle of muskets broke it apart. Between the musket shots Blade could hear the wicked metallic snick of crossbows. Every man in the two boats was picking a target. Most of the men brought their targets down. Blade saw the Steppemen on the beach waver. A ripple seemed to run through them, like grass rippling in a high wind. Then the lines and clusters were breaking up and scattering, leaving dozens of dark forms on the ground. Some writhed and screamed; others lay still.

The men in the boats reloaded frantically. Blade saw one yellow flash, heard one hissing explosion and then a scream of agony as a man set off his powder accidentally. Blade held his breath, half expecting the boat to disintegrate in a roaring explosion. Instead he heard a splash and then another hiss. The burning man had jumped overboard to put out the fire, willing to drown rather than risk endangering his comrades.

The rippling rattle of muskets and bows came again. More Steppemen went down or reeled back.

Some were taking cover behind the pirate's boats along the beach.

The light was bright enough now that Kukon's two boats stood out clearly. Blade saw the men dig in their oars again. The boats surged forward and ran up onto the beach. Before they'd stopped moving, the men in them were leaping over the sides and wading to shore, holding their bows and muskets high, reloading and recocking as they moved. Blade saw Prince Durouman splashing furiously through the water, brandishing his mace, to take the lead.

Blade looked out to sea. Lanterns and torches now glowed aboard some of the pirate galleys. Drums and trumpets rolled and called out. Boats were putting off from other galleys, but none of them were moving yet. For a while longer the battle against the Steppemen would be in the hands of the pirates on land, with whatever help Kukon and her landing parties could bring them.

Then new sounds joined the uproar on land. Blade caught the unmistakable rapid roll of the horse drums of the Steppemen and behind them the swelling sound of hundreds of fast-moving hooves. The Steppemen were pushing in their main attack. If it struck now, it might sweep right into the pirates' camp. It would certainly sweep away Kukon's landing party. Just as certainly, it had to be stopped.

Blade roared orders to the gunners around him. Then he spun around and called out to Dzhai. There was no need for him to speak quietly now—a raging thunder storm would have been drowned out in the crash and roar of the battle. Kukon's rowers put their backs into a faster stroke without waiting for a signal from the drummers. The men at the tiller heaved furiously, feet scrabbling on the deck. The rudder went hard over and Kukon began to turn.

As she did, the first line of enemy horsemen swept out of the darkness. They were moving along the shore at a fast trot, eyes forward, swords in their hands, guiding their horses by the pressure of their knees. They were so completely intent on pressing home their charge against their enemies on land that they did not think of the sea, or of what might come from it. So Kukon caught them totally by surprise when she swept out of the darkness and fired her bow guns into their ranks.

All four guns went off together with a flash and a shock that temporarily blinded everyone on the foc'sle and knocked everyone except Blade flat on the deck. Before anyone could rise or regain his sight, Blade's ears told him that Kukon's salvo had reached its target.

All four guns had been crammed to the muzzle with every stray bit and piece of matter the ship's gunners could find. Beach stones, nails, jagged chunks of wood, old musket balls and old muskets—flying death in a thousand shapes tore through the Steppemen. A hideous chorus from screaming men and screaming horses filled the night, nearly as deafening as the blast of the guns, drowning out every other sound just as thoroughly.

Blade opened his eyes and looked toward the land. The details of the slaughter, mercifully, were half lost in the darkness. At least two hundred Steppemen must have gone down. Nearly as many more had fallen as their horses stumbled over corpses or panicked at the blood and mangled bits splattered all over them.

Blade also saw that Kukon was coming up fast on the shore—much too fast. In their enthusiasm to get in close and get at the enemy, Dzhai and the rowers had worked too hard. Before Blade could open his mouth to shout an order, Kukon ran aground with a tremendous jolt and a horrible grating sound as her keel ploughed over the gravel of the beach.

This time everyone aboard went off his feet. Blade included. Screams sounded as some men fell over benches or were hit by the flailing ends of oars. Other men went clear over the side.

Blade scrambled to his feet. There was no need to tell the gunners what to do. They were getting up as fast as he was and leaping to clean and reload their pieces. He sprang up onto the heavy gun and looked at the scene on shore again.

It was impossible to make out what was happening among the tribesmen's huts. Flames rose in a dozen places. Around the flames, lost in their glare or lost in shadow, swirled scores and hundreds of savagely fighting men. Blade could hear a continuous roar of cries and shots and the clash of steel.

Beyond the piles of dead or dying men and horses, more Steppemen were riding out of the darkness. These saw Kukon. Some of them realized what she was, some of them realized what she had done-and some of them even realized who the tall man standing on her bow was. Steppemen began leaping off their horses, slinging their swords across their backs, and unslinging bows and quivers. Arrows began to whistle toward Kukon, sinking into her timbers and sometimes into the bodies of her men.

Under cover of the archers, other dismounted Steppemen began picking their way over the bodies of their comrades, heading for Kukon. Blade saw these men coming on, heard the whistle of arrows around him and the screams from his own crew. He realized that the Steppemen had thoughts of capturing Kukon. He also realized that they very well might do it. The pirates on land weren't going to help-they were much too busy with their own battle. Prince Durouman's men-where the devil were they?

As Blade tried to pick out the landing party from the tangled scene on shore, he heard a choked cry behind him. He turned to see Dzhai reeling, convulsively trying to pluck an arrow out of his stomach with his crippled arm. Then a second arrow sliced down and struck him just below the left eye. His mouth opened to let out a gush of blood, and his eyes rolled up in his head. Blade leaped to catch him and lowered him gently to the deck. As he did, he felt the pulse fade out of Dzhai's wrist, and the body went limp.

Blade suddenly realized that he'd been holding his breath. He let it out between his teeth with a long hiss. Then he rose to his full height, unslung the great Steppe sword from his back, and raised it high over his head.

"Men of Kukon!" he roared. "For our ship, for Captain Dzhai, for all our comrades, for our allies the Free Brothers of Nongai, for our ruler Prince Durouman-follow me!"

Then he turned and leaped through a gap in the bulwarks.

Blade landed precariously on Kukon's ram, which now rose a few inches above the surface of the water. As he struggled to keep his balance on the slippery surface, Kukon's heavy gun fired again. The blast knocked him off the ram into the water. He went completely under, came up spluttering, and found his footing. The water was only a little more than waist deep.

He raised his sword again and plowed forward, water churning about his armored torso. Around him he heard the whistle of more arrows; behind him he heard more splashes as Kukon's men at last started following him.

He hoped enough would stay at the oars to back her off the beach into deep water, but for the moment he couldn't care too much about that. He was no longer thinking of tactics or strategy or high-level politics. He thought only of closing with the enemy, of fighting and killing.

So it was not a man who emerged from the sea and charged into the oncoming Steppemen. It was a

giant who roared warcries in a voice as terrible as that of the sea itself. It was a giant who swung a two-handed Steppe sword as easily as if he'd been swinging a feather fan.

Yet the sword was not made of feathers. It had the weight and the deadly edge of steel. Where it struck, Steppemen died. They died with their heads lopped off or split apart like rotten fruit. They died trying to hold their guts inside their gaping bellies or trying to stop the spurting blood from hacked-off arms and legs. They died, sometimes, before they could even cry out or fall to the ground.

In one way or another, all whom the giant struck died. The giant did not die. He kept on, blood and water dripping from his sword and his armor. He no longer shouted or cursed. He saved his breath for fighting.

Archers might have brought him down. But the press of men around him was too thick for the archers to shoot without hitting their own comrades. Some tried anyway. None of their arrows struck the giant. Some struck down the men around him; most struck the ground or men who were already past feeling anything that could happen to them.

Blade had long since lost track of the number of men he'd faced and struck down. He was beginning to lose track of time. He could hardly see any more, with the darkness and the blood, sweat, and water dripping down into his eyes. He could still see clearly enough, though, to know when Prince Durouman and the landing party from the boats came to join him.

He saw the prince in the lead, sword in one hand, mace in the other, both weapons continuously striking and smashing. He saw the prince's musketeers following behind their leader, trying to keep up with him as he crashed into the enemy. Most of them were no longer trying to shoot. They held their muskets by the barrels and swung them like clubs. The butts of the muskets were already matted and glistening with blood and hair.

The commandant's guards were also there, thrusting savagely with their short swords. Blade saw only five of them, but saw each one of them kill a Steppeman. They would certainly win back their honor tonight, if any of them lived to enjoy it.

Would anyone on either side live through this night? Blade wondered if they would go on tearing at each other, hour after hour, even day after day, until the last man on both sides slumped to the ground dead.

Another wave of Steppemen came in, mounted and trying to ride their horses into the battle. Kukon's guns blasted scores of them out of their saddles. Blade and Prince Durouman led their men in against the rest, ducking low, thrusting or slashing up at the bellies of the horses, then clubbing the riders out of their saddles.

Kukon's guns roared again. Blade turned to see her backing away from the shore, a few Steppemen clinging to her ram. They still clung to it as it submerged. Some of them surfaced briefly, to thrash about screaming until they sank.

Kukon nearly backed into two pirate galleys moving in toward the shore. But both ships had alert rowers, and both swung wide and continued to approach the beach until they could bring their guns to bear on the Steppemen without hitting the men around Blade and Prince Durouman. All the guns crashed out and more Steppemen died. Farther along the beach, Blade could see other flashes of gunfire as pirate galleys moved in to bombard the Steppemen's camp. Flames were rising there also. Landing parties must have made it to shore and gone to work among the tents.

Then the shouts and drums signaled more Steppemen coming in, both on foot and on horseback. Blade and Prince Durouman had time to shake hands and slap armored shoulders dented and caked with blood. Then the battle swept them apart again.

To Blade's mild surprise, the battle did not go on forever. It ended shortly before dawn. All the Steppemen who were still on the shore lay dead or dying. All the Steppemen who still lived were fleeing inland as fast as their own legs or their horses would carry them. The pirates counted more than three thousand Steppeman bodies strewn along the shore between the two camps.

The pirates' casualties were not light. More than three hundred were dead, twice as many wounded. The tribesmen had lost their share as well. They had primitive weapons but stout hearts and only one simple idea of what to do with an enemy: kill him. It had been a good night for such simple, practical philosophies.

Kukon had twenty-five dead besides Dzhai and fifty more wounded. All the unwounded men were exhausted, and there was hardly a cupful of gunpowder left aboard. This was the price paid for disposing of better than five hundred Steppemen and, for all practical purposes, saving the whole battle.

There was no denying it, and the pirates didn't try. The work of Kukon's landing party and Kukon's guns had broken up the Steppemen's first attacks, saving the boats and giving the pirates on land time to rally. Without Kukon, there would have been no rallying-and three thousand pirates lying dead on the beach when dawn came.

Emass put the pirates' gratitude eloquently, although he spoke from a cot where he lay with one leg bandaged from thigh to calf.

"Prince Durouman, Prince Blade. The Free Brothers of Nongai owe you their future. We did not expect that our alliance would bear such a mighty fruit so soon. Now that it has, we have only one question to ask of you.

"How may we best serve you?"

Prince Durouman's answer was nearly as brief. "Gather all the ships and all the fighting men, all the guns and powder and stores you can. Bring all of them to Parine as fast as you can.

"Sail in strong fleets-thirty or more galleys together. Do not waste time and powder attacking the Emperor's scout ships. Protect and defend the ships of the Five Sea Kingdoms wherever and whenever you find them in need. Lose no time for anything else. We have only one goal now-Kul-Nam's fleet."

"We have another," said Blade. "Kul-Nam's head. And after that, a third. The Eagle Crown of Saram, on your head."

Prince Durouman's face was unnaturally sober as he nodded slowly. Emass smiled. "It shall be done as you wish, Your-Your Magnificence Who-Is-To-Be."

There was little else to do. Kukon was undamaged-the grounding had done no harm. Her dead were buried, her wounded carried ashore, and her magazine replenished. Fifty pirates came aboard to fill the gaps in her crew. Five hundred would have gone if there had been room for them.

Just before sunset Kukon weighed anchor. Her sails filled, and her rowing drums sounded the cruising stroke. The cheers of the pirates on shore and aboard their galleys roared louder than the night's battle.

Kukon turned and headed out to sea.

Chapter 24

They first guessed what had happened to Parine when they were a day's sail away.

Kukon took a course that swung to the east of the principality, toward the coast of Nullar. In those waters there would be less danger of meeting the Imperial fleet. There would also be a greater chance of meeting a ship from Nullar or one of the other Five Kingdoms, one that could take the message of the new alliance to the kings and fleets on the mainland.

They found neither. Instead, they found a fishing boat of Parine, drifting aimlessly. Aboard were four men, three dead and one dying. All four of them showed the unmistakable signs of prolonged and horrible torture in the style of Saram. The dying man died without speaking a coherent word, but no one aboard Kukon needed to be told what had happened. Blade doubled the lookouts and pressed on.

Two hours later they began to smell smoke on the wind that blew out of the west-from Parine. Just before sunset they passed a mass of floating timber, much of it charred black. They moved on through the darkness, the rowers setting a fast cruising stroke whether the drummers beat it out or not. The smoke smell grew stronger hour by hour. Three more times they passed floating wreckage or abandoned fishing boats.

Then the dawn came, and with it gray smoke smeared all across the western horizon. Under that smoke they found Parine, but so changed that it hardly seemed right to call it by the same name as the island they'd left. It was as if mad giants had swarmed across the island, killing everything that lived, burning everything that would burn, and stamping into rubble everything that was neither living nor burnable.

They swung in close enough to the harbor and town to see that the harbor was a mass of floating wreckage and the town a mass of rubble that still trickled smoke. The main fort on top of the cliffs had been blackened and split open by a tremendous explosion.

Bodies floated or lay everywhere-men, women, and children of Parine, soldiers of the forts' garrisons and the princess' household troops, mules and horses and goats, and a surprising number of the soldiers and sailors of the Empire of Saram.

"Our friends of Parine died hard," said Prince Durouman quietly. "I hope the gods give them better thanks for that than I can."

Blade nodded. "I wonder-did they all die?"

The two men's eyes met. Each knew without a word what was in the other's mind. Finally Prince Durouman shrugged.

"We can only go and find out."

Kukon left the ruined town and harbor and headed toward the north coast of the island. The shortest overland route to the little white palace in the valley started there. Blade did not want to take much of an overland journey now or leave his ship very long. Some of Kul-Nam's soldiers might still be roaming the interior of the island or his galleys sweeping along the coast.

They found nothing except more death and destruction all the way to their landing place. It was no

different when Blade and Prince Durouman led inland a party of forty men, all of them armed to the teeth. The only variation was the number of Kul-Nam's soldiers among the corpses. Usually there were a great many-sometimes half the total. Blade's spirits could not rise among such ghastly scenes, but he began to wonder just how many men Kul-Nam had lost here on Parine. Enough to weaken him? Perhaps.

There was no surprise when they finally reached Princess Tarassa's private valley. The bodies of soldiers from both sides lay thicker here than anywhere else, and from them rose such a stench that the air was almost unbreathable. Blade could see that many of Tarassa's guards had died literally fighting tooth and nail, biting and clawing at their enemies. But they had all died in the end, and so had Princess Tarassa.

They found her lying behind the blackened rubble of the palace. She had been a long and horrible time dying. Her face was already so swollen and blackened that it was impossible to see what expression had been on it when she died. That was just as well.

They buried Tarassa as deeply as they could and piled blocks of marble from her palace over the grave to make it safe. It was only after the princess was buried that Prince Durouman finally went off behind some blackened stumps and vomited himself empty. When he returned his face was still pale, but there was a ghastly, cold control in his voice when he spoke.

"I think there is no more question of whether the Five Kingdoms will come to aid us. The only question is which one will send the first ships." His face split in a grim smile. "Would you care to make a bet on it, Blade?"

The first ships came in on the evening of the next day, three galleys from Belthanor, the southernmost of the Five Kingdoms. Blade and Prince Durouman told the captains all they needed to know of the situation and organized the crews into search parties. Prince Durouman would gladly have left the island and its dead behind. Blade thought otherwise. He was determined to comb Parine thoroughly for survivors and anything Kul-Nam's men might have left behind that might be useful in the coming war.

"Besides," he added, "what better way to convince people of what is at stake in this war than by showing them Parine? You will have few traitors among those who have seen this." He swept a hand around them, taking in all the rubble and corpses.

Prince Durouman had to admit Blade's point.

The search parties turned up two welcome surprises in the first two days. One was Princess Tarassa's son, alive and reasonably healthy. Two of the household servants had fled with him before the palace was surrounded and had hidden in a cave. The other surprise was more than a thousand of Parine's famous barrels, seasoned and ready for use, left completely intact in their sheds in the countryside.

"Kul-Nam's soldiers must have found them too bulky to carry away and not valuable enough to be worth destroying," said Prince Durouman. "I imagine they'll be useful for our supplies when we sail, but-Blade, why are you smiling like that?"

So Blade finally had to explain the weapon he had conceived for use against the sailing ships of Kul-Nam's fleet.

It was extremely simple. Put a sealed barrel of gunpowder on the end of a long spar, preferably at least sixty feet long-

"A ship's mast?" asked the prince.

"Perhaps. Something long and strong, in any case."

In the end of the barrel, put an iron rod, moving back and forth through a hole sealed with greased leather. Fasten the other end of the spar to the ram of a galley. Row the galley straight at a sailing ship until the barrel strikes the enemy's side. The iron rod is driven in through the hole, passing across a piece of flint. This strikes sparks. The sparks set off the powder. Anything from sixty to four hundred pounds of gunpowder- explodes against the enemy's hull well below the water line.

"That will blow a hole large enough for a man to ride through on horseback," said Blade. "The ship will be on the bottom in minutes."

"It will also knock the caulking out of every seam in the galley and the teeth out of the jaws of every man aboard her," said Prince Durouman. "Assuming the sailing ship's guns haven't sunk the galley on the way in."

"True. There is a risk. But it is only a risk on the way in. Once the barrel has exploded, the galley can back off with little further danger from her victim. If the enemy's men are still on their feet at all, they will be thinking about bucket brigades or sharks, not about manning their guns."

"Very well," said Prince Durouman. "I can think of all sorts of petty objections. But this is no time for them, and besides, I know better by now than to try arguing with you."

"Good," said Blade. "Men should immediately be put to work filling and arming barrels and trimming down spars. If we have enough material, I would like each galley to have several of these weapons aboard when we sail. No one should be told exactly what they are making or how it will be used until we sail, not even the galley captains."

"Spies?"

"Exactly. This is a weapon that can be used successfully in only one battle, and it cannot even be used in that battle unless it is a complete surprise. Otherwise Kul-Nam's admirals will be able to think of tactics to meet it."

"If they are still interested in winning battles for a ruler who shows such poor judgment as Kul-Nam."

"They may not be interested in victory for its own sake. They will still be interested in winning for the sake of not being tortured to death by the Emperor."

The galleys were now coming in from the mainland, three, five, eight each day. As fast as they came, Blade snatched their carpenters and other skilled workers ashore. Some of the galleys were sent back for more powder and masts. The armed and filled barrels and the trimmed spars began to pile up. They were kept under close guard in dry caves not far from the sea.

There was no problem getting the men to work, even without knowing exactly what they were making. They knew that whatever they were making would help destroy Kul-Nam's fleet and bring him down. Any man who had seen the ruins of Parine or helped bury its dead in mass graves could imagine the same thing happening to his home and family, and he would return to his work with more enthusiasm than ever. The workers would in fact have gladly stayed on their jobs twenty hours a day. Blade refused to let them do so, fearing that exhaustion would set in and lead to carelessness, and carelessness to accidents. He was not going to see many weeks' work and the best chance for victory wiped out by the mistake of

some worker too tired to see straight.

The pirates of Nongai came as they had promised. They were fifty galleys, each crammed with all the fighting men and supplies she could hold and a little bit more. The officers and men from the galleys of the Five Kingdoms looked dubiously at the pirates at first. Then they saw the pirates behaving themselves on shore, standing guard like disciplined men, and obeying the orders of Blade and Prince Durouman without question. Old suspicions did not vanish overnight, but nothing remained to keep pirates and Five Kingdom sailors from fighting side by side as long as the enemy was Kul-Nam.

Two days after the pirates arrived, the entire royal fleet of Nullar appeared, twenty-six galleys. Prince Durouman was openly astonished and asked their admiral what had inspired the king to such unusual boldness.

"The lady who shall be your wife inspired him," replied the admiral. "She said that if the fleet were not sent to aid you, she would set forth to do so, though she had to set forth in a fishing boat clad only in her night shift."

"She will make a fine empress for Saram," said Durouman, only half to himself. He seemed to be getting accustomed to the idea of himself on the throne of Saram.

In another two days the fleet received its last reinforcements. These were small, but surprising and very welcome, especially to Blade. They consisted of two galleys, formerly of the Imperial fleet but now flying the flag of the House of Kudai. Aboard them were Tulu, now Duke of Kudai, and as many of the guards and servants of the house as he'd been able to save after his father's arrest and execution.

Tulu looked ten years older than when Blade had last seen him. His voice was brittle as he told his tale. "I will spare you the details of my father's death. They were as vile as you may imagine."

"What was the charge?"

Tulu shrugged. "The Emperor had never much cared for my father's independent spirit. He had doubtless been accumulating grievances for many years. In the end, though, there was no charge at all. It was Kul-Nam's whim, and he made no effort to disguise it as anything else."

Prince Durouman's eyebrows rose very high. "If he has reached that point, he is mad indeed. What is said of this is Saram?"

"Very little is said," replied Tulu. "There is still too much fear of His Bloodiness's long arm. But little is done against those who wish to take themselves out of reach of that arm. That is how I was able to escape."

"The galleys surrendered to you?"

"Yes. Still, I do not think they would have surrendered to me alone. But-Blade, this was your work. I remembered you and Tzimon and Dzhai and the ways of England. The lesson went home to me. Instead of fleeing alone, I gathered together all the fighting men and servants who would come with me, and we marched to the coast. There we found the galleys. Everywhere the men of Kul-Nam stood aside from us. The strength of my company gave them an excuse, but one man alone would not have given them that excuse. I owe you my life, Blade, and so do all those who came with me. I hope they will be welcome in your ranks."

"They will be."

"I thought so," said Tulu, and smiled for the first time. "One of them should be even more welcome than the rest. Haleen is among those who fled with me." Blade said nothing, only smiled in turn.

"This is welcome news indeed," said Prince Durouman. "if there is so little enthusiasm for Kul-Nam among those who must fight for him, our task begins to look easy."

"Easier," corrected Tulu. "The Corps of Eunuchs will fight to the death. They know they are doomed if Kul-Nam falls. Everyone else will also fight as long as there is any chance that Kul-Nam will live to take vengeance."

"Very well, then, easier," said Prince Durouman. "But would it be fair to say that if we strike off the head-Kul-Nam-the body will submit without more fighting?"

"If you are proposing yourself as the new head, yes," said Tulu.

"I am," said the prince. He rose. "I think we have done and said all that is necessary before we strike. Let us prepare to sail. Blade, do you agree?"

Blade nodded. A hundred and forty galleys were assembled at Parine now, all as well manned and well equipped as they ever would be. Each had at least three of the exploding barrels stowed in her hold, apart from her other weapons. Nothing worthwhile would be accomplished by further delay. He also had to admit that he was impatient to strike.

"Very well," said the prince. "I shall give no commands as Emperor of Saram until the Eagle Crown rests on my brow. But I shall make one request of you, Blade, as a friend and battle comrade."

"That is?"

"If I am to ride into battle aboard Kukon once more, I would like to see her name changed."

Blade opened his mouth to object. He had found here, as in practically every Dimension that had ships, a superstition against changing ships' names. It was bad luck, pure and simple.

Prince Durouman went on. "I should like Kukon to be renamed Avenger."

Blade's mouth snapped shut, his objections suddenly meaningless. No one in his right mind could object to that name. Even the most superstitious would consider it a good omen.

There were so many to be avenged. Tzimon, Dzhai, Duke Boros and all of the House of Kudai who had not escaped with Tulu. Princess Tarassa and all the thousands of her people. Kukon's first captain. Prince Durouman's ancestors and those ancestors' supporters, a century ago. Hundreds of thousands of anonymous victims of Kul-Nam and those who had preceded him over an entire century and in half a dozen lands. Men tortured, women raped, children worked to death. A toll that it turned Blade's stomach to think about.

"Yes," he said finally. "I think Avenger is a very good name for our flagship."

That was the end of the conference. Blade went in search of Haleen. Somewhat to his surprise, he found that she did not need much consolation for Dzhai's death.

"He always knew that he would not live to grow gray," she said with a sad smile. "That was his fate. Indeed, he was fortunate, for he died a warrior's death in a great battle for a good cause, and he never hoped for that much even in his dreams. I do mourn him, Blade. But-I would not care to be alone here, at least at night."

Blade took care to see that Haleen was not left alone during the next three nights. On the fourth day, the fleet set sail from Parine.

Chapter 25

The fleet descended on the Sulphur Islands, off the southern coast of the Empire of Saram.

Blade and Prince Durouman chose the islands as the point of attack because of something Duke Tulu had said. As Blade put it at one conference:

"Somewhere there has to be something so important to Kul-Nam that an attack on it will bring him and his fleet down on us at once. We cannot afford a long campaign. It will exhaust our supplies and wear out our ships and crews. It will also give time to rebellion, other pretenders to the Eagle Throne, and to the Steppemen."

So Duke Tulu suggested the Sulphur Islands. "From their mines comes nearly all of the sulphur used in making the Empire's gunpowder. Kul-Nam certainly cannot afford to lose them."

"Is he short of powder?"

"He has far less than he needs. Much was used against Parine. If he has to fight another great battle, there will definitely not be much left."

Then rebels could spread everywhere. The Steppemen could cross the borders with relative impunity. Even Kul-Nam's vast and expensive fortresses and castles would be far less formidable without powder for their artillery and muskets.

"We will move against the Sulphur Islands, then," said Prince Durouman.

The islands fell without any resistance worthy of the name. Their garrison had been stripped of ships and men in order to reinforce the Imperial fleet after the losses at Parine. Four galleys and less than a thousand men remained to defend the islands against the attack of a hundred and forty galleys and twenty-five thousand men.

The galleys fled. A few of the men threw themselves off the cliffs or down the mine shafts. Most surrendered. A few of the bolder ones joined the attackers.

Along with the guns on the island, Blade found a number of old-fashioned non-explosive siege engines, designed for throwing large stones. He had them taken aboard the larger galleys, to be used for throwing barrels instead of stones. Some of the barrels would be filled with gunpowder and bits of iron, designed to explode murderously; others would be filled with sulphur, to spread flames, fumes, and ghastly smells across the decks of an enemy.

"With these coming down on their heads, I don't imagine even the best gunners will be able to shoot very well," said Blade.

After they had loaded the siege engines and their ammunition, it was finally time to reveal the secret weapons. Blade called all the captains aboard Avenger to tell them what he had done and what the new weapons ought to accomplish in the coming battle.

The captains cheered him and they cheered Prince Durouman. They also stood silently for a moment in memory of the barrel-makers of Parine. They would gladly have drunk enough wine to float one of the largest galleys, but there was none aboard. So they cheered some more, then went back to their own ships.

From Avenger's foc'sle Blade and Prince Durouman watched them go.

"If the barrels work as well as the captains expect them to, Kul-Nam and all his fleet are doomed," said Blade.

"Yes, but are they expecting too much?" said the prince.

"There is no way to answer that until we fight our battle."

The allies did not have long to wait. Toward sunset of the fourth day a scouting galley hove into view, one mast gone and the signal for the approaching enemy flying from the other. The fleet weighed anchor and crept out to sea as the last light drained from both the sky and the water. They settled down to wait, the crews sleeping at their battle stations, masts bare and oars trailing, all guns loaded.

Aboard Avenger Blade, Prince Durouman, Duke Tulu, Emass, and the admirals of the Five Kingdoms held their final council of war. The tactics Blade had planned for the battle were simple-so simple he'd expected arguments against them.

He got none. Prince Durouman, Tulu, and Emass clearly understood the reasoning behind the plan; it was important to capture Kul-Nam's flagship, and every other consideration was secondary at the moment. The five admirals didn't care about that, but they did see that Blade's tactics involved a headlong charge at the enemy. That was the style of fighting they liked, the style of fighting that gave them the best chance to prove their warrior's courage.

Normally Blade would have felt like beating the admirals over the head until he'd beaten some sense into them. Commanders who thought more of courage than of skill usually led their men into disaster. This time he was able to ignore the problem.

Now all that remained was for Kul-Nam to do his part.

The Emperor seemed to be cooperating. Dawn brought the Imperial scouts up over the horizon. Two hours more and the rest of the fleet was hull-up and bearing down on the allies. Blade waited until he could count the Imperial fleet-forty armed sailing ships, a hundred galleys-and saw it shifting into its usual broad crescent. Then he ordered the formation signal hoisted on Avenger's foremast-and Prince Durouman's battle standard hoisted on the mainmast.

This was the next to the last signal he planned to make, the next to the last he could hope that the whole fleet could see. Galleys scuttled about in all directions like a swarm of mad waterbugs, as though all one hundred and forty captains and crews were suddenly drunk. Blade hoped that Kul-Nam's admirals would think just that and allow their own confidence to swell accordingly.

It was half an hour before the allied formation was pulled into the shape Blade intended. By that time Kul-Nam's fleet was only a couple of miles outside gun range, coming on now like a solid moving wall of wood and canvas, silent gun muzzles and rhythmically beating oars. The sailing ships had all their canvas spread and showed no signs of shortening it at all.

That was not good, but under the circumstances it was inevitable. There was more wind today than Blade liked -not enough for a sailing ship to outrun a galley moving at full speed, fortunately, but plenty to let the sailing ships maneuver freely. Most of Kul-Nam's admirals had more sense than the late lamentable Sukar; they would probably take advantage of the weather.

Blade-scrambled up to Avenger's foremast to take a last look over his fleet. In theory every one of the hundred and forty galleys should now be where she could do her intended part in the coming battle without any more signals. He hoped so. There was only going to be one more.

He cupped his hands and shouted down to the men on the signal halyards.

"Hoist the attack."

They must have had the flag already bent on. A ball soared up to the masthead and broke apart into a great black flag, streaming out on the wind. Avenger's bow guns went off, one by one. Cheers floated up to him on the wind as the crews of nearby galleys jumped up and down, waving hats, helmets, and swords. Then Avenger's drummers broke into the attack stroke, and the flagship surged forward.

Behind her and around her surged a hundred and thirty-nine other galleys, in Blade's special formation. It was not the standard simple-and simple-minded-crescent. Instead, it looked like a gigantic, squared-off letter U, with the open end of the U facing astern, away from the Imperial fleet.

Each side of the U was formed by a single line of forty light galleys. The base was formed by a triple line of larger ones, twenty in each line. In the center of the second line were ten of the largest, including Avenger. Each of the ten mounted a siege engine on her stern, with barrels stacked ready to load. Every one of the hundred and forty galleys had a barrel and spar lashed to her ram, jutting out sixty feet ahead and six feet below the surface, invisible and hopefully lethal.

The idea was to drive home a straight thrust with the sixty larger galleys, while the others protected either flank. Extended in its usual crescent, the Imperial fleet would try to fold its wings around the attackers' flanks. At the same time it would be weaker in the center, more vulnerable to the massive punch that Blade hoped to drive straight home.

"Home" did not mean just the enemy's center. It meant Kul-Nam's own flagship, and ultimately the Emperor himself. Blade was scanning the enemy lines now, trying to make out the ship flying the Imperial standard. He doubted if Kul-Nam would refuse to fly the standard or permit it to be flown aboard several ships to conceal his location. The man was too arrogant and too jealous to take that kind of sensible precaution. Still, Blade could not see the black eagle on red anywhere in the forest of masts and sails and other bright flags and banners ahead.

Finally he decided to leave that job to the lookouts and get back to his own duties. He swung himself into the shrouds and slid down to the deck so fast he scorched the palms of his hands on the rough rope.

Prince Durouman met him as he landed. The prince was pale and sweating with excitement and anticipation.

"Did you see the flagship?"

Blade shook his head. "The man must be holding well back."

Prince Durouman cursed and pounded one gauntleted fist into the palm of the other hand. It was his dearest wish to see Avenger laid alongside the Emperor's flagship and personally lead her boarding party into the Emperor's private cabin to kill him there.

Blade understood that a hundred years of frustration and anger and waiting for this moment of vengeance lay behind Prince Durouman's desire. He still didn't think much of it. As far as Blade was concerned, it would be putting the prince and therefore his whole cause into unnecessary danger. There would be no boarding party or death grapple with the Emperor if it could be avoided. Blade would be perfectly happy to blow the flagship apart or send it to the bottom with all hands. That would be less melodramatic but just as effective.

White smoke rose from one enemy ship after another, and whiter fountains of spray began to rise among the advancing allied fleet as the Imperial sailing ships opened fire. They were shooting badly, but not so badly that all their shots missed. Blade saw a mast go overboard from one allied galley, saw another swerve wildly as half the oars on one side were suddenly smashed or tossed into the air.

Beyond the flanks of the allied fleet Blade could now see Imperial galleys sweeping forward. They too were opening fire, but no galley captain would depend on guns if he saw an opportunity to close and ram. Then the lighter allied galleys would have their chance-and so would the Sunday punch they were thrusting ahead of them under the water.

A determination to watch his invention work under battle conditions filled Blade. He sprang into the rigging again, ignoring the steadily increasing beat of the enemy's guns. He had barely settled into the crow's nest when he saw a pirate galley swing out on the left flank, driving in against an Imperial opponent that had wandered too close. Blade held his breath, cursing mentally. The captains were supposed to save the barrels for use against sailing ships first, not against galleys. But a pirate captain who saw a chance to strike down an Imperial opponent would be sorely tempted. This one had obviously yielded to temptation.

The two galleys seemed to be drawn together as if both were magnetized. Then the sea erupted all along the port side of the Imperial galley. Oars, planks, and men flew into the air on top of a great upheaval of dirty water. The water seemed to hang suspended for a moment, then crashed down on the Imperial galley's deck and the wreckage along with it. Before the spray stopped falling the wounded galley was already beginning to list sharply to port.

The pirate galley slid to a stop with her ram almost against her victim's side. Then she started backing away. A puff of smoke from her foc'sle told Blade that at least one gun remained in action. Both masts were tilted at unlikely angles, but both still stood. Otherwise she showed no signs of damage.

Blade swung his gaze to the opposite side of the fleet as another explosion roared out there. Black smoke towered up from the sea, and at the base of the tower the broken halves of a galley from Nullar were slowly settling into the water. Not as agreeable a sight as the first explosion.

The enemy's gunfire still mounted steadily, most of it apparently aimed at the flanks of the allied fleet. One of the galleys in the first line of the center was dropping back past Avenger with her foc'sle a splintered and smashed wreck. Otherwise only a few shots seemed to be passing close enough for Blade to hear them or even see their fall.

He could ignore that. What he could not ignore was the damage the lighter galleys on the flanks were taking. One galley after another was dropping out now. There were no longer fairly neat lines on either side but a series of ragged clusters of ships, some of them already too crippled to maneuver their secret weapons. Imperial galleys were swooping down on them like vultures on dying animals, guns hammering and the sun gleaming on the armor of the boarding parties that crowded their decks.

Not all of the damage was on one side, of course. An Imperial galley made the mistake of stopping a hundred yards in front of a galley of Belthanor that still had her full speed. There was a sudden surge forward, a barrel driven hard against the Imperial galley's stern, and an explosion that made Blade wince. Half of the Imperial galley was gone when the smoke lifted, blown to pieces by the magazine explosion. The other half floated for a couple of minutes, then slipped down out of sight.

The Belthanor galley backed away slowly, only a few oars working on each side. She was not fast enough to escape an Imperial galley that drove in past the floating wreckage and swept alongside. Instantly the decks of both ships were a tangle of fighting men. The battle was still going on when smoke from guns and burning ships laid a curtain across that stretch of sea and cut off Blade's view.

Blade was a worried man. The barrels were working. He'd conceived and built a successful weapon. But they weren't doing what he'd planned. The Imperial attack was hammering on his flanks as if there were no other ships in the whole allied fleet that could be any danger to them. It was all galley against galley so far, and he had not expected this to happen. He had built a sailing-ship killer, and now there were no sailing ships within range.

In another fifteen minutes there would be. The Imperial center was holding position and formation as if every ship were tied to every other. But in another fifteen minutes his attack on the center would have no protection for its flanks. From what he'd seen, he guessed that twenty of his flanking ships were out of action entirely, another twenty too slowed to use their weapons. That left-

A rocket soared up above the enemy's center, trailing a broad cloud of green smoke. Instantly other rockets rose from either end of the first line of the Imperial sailing ships. A moment later Blade realized that the ships of that line were beginning to turn, separating into two groups as they did so. One group was swinging to starboard, the other to port. Behind them Blade could at last begin to make out the Imperial second line.

He forgot about the flanks now as his mind leaped ahead, painting in seconds a complete, detailed picture of the Imperial battle plan. The sailing ships that were turning now would go on turning, swinging far out to port and starboard. By that time the Imperial galleys would have fought their way through the allied flanks. They might have to trade galley for galley to do it, but they would if they had to. There would be no holding back, not under Kul-Nam's eyes and particularly not when he now stood a good chance of living to take vengeance.

So half the Imperial sailing ships would sweep in to the allied rear. The other half-Blade could see them clearly now, and see them slowly swinging to open their broadsides-would wait where they were, hammering away with their guns, standing against the attack of the allied center. The allied galleys would be caught with enemies ahead and enemies behind, no room to maneuver, and shot whistling about their ears every minute.

It was ironic. The exploding barrels were obviously a complete surprise to the enemy and every bit as deadly as Blade had intended. It was just as obvious they weren't going to win the battle. They weren't causing any panic- no one in the Imperial fleet would fear anything half as much as the wrath of the

Emperor. Nor could they do much against the Imperial battle plan—a plan perfectly designed to meet a weapon that the planners hadn't dreamed existed.

Had he miscalculated? Perhaps. Yet certainly neither he nor anyone else could have predicted this freakish coincidence. Freakish—and lethal. If something was not done and done fast, before this day's sunset the coincidence would end the lives of twenty-five thousand men and all hope for Prince Durouman's cause.

Fortunately, there were still things that could be done. Blade scanned the sea and the ships ahead, rapidly calculating speeds and distances. If the attack of the allied center could be shifted to one end of the Imperial second line instead of charging straight at it—

Blade again leaped into the rigging and slid down to the deck. He went even faster than before, stripped more skin off his palms, but ignored the pain. Then he ran aft along the port gangway, heading for the drummers and the men at the tiller.

As he leaped up onto the quarterdeck, he nearly collided with Prince Durouman. The prince seemed half hysterical with excitement and delight. Blade wondered if the man were completely ignorant of what was happening to the allied fleet, or if he'd finally cracked under the strain, or if

Then Blade noticed that the prince had drawn his sword and kept pointing with it in one direction, over Blade's shoulder. Blade turned and saw what was drawing the prince's attention.

Squarely in the center of the Imperial line facing them, half hidden by the smoke of its own guns, lay a highcastled, three-masted sailing ship. From all three of the masts floated enormous standards—red, with a black eagle in the center.

Chapter 26

Prince Durouman regained his voice. "The flagship!" he screamed. "The Imperial flagship! Kul-Nam himself! Steer for the flagship, tillermen! Steer for—"

"No!" Blade roared. Somehow he managed to shout even the hysterical prince. Durouman jumped into the air and came down glaring at Blade, his sword raised:

For a moment Blade was certain he was going to have to knock the prince down and send him below for the rest of the battle. That would do nothing for their future relations, but letting Durouman guide Avenger in his present frame of mind would do absolutely nothing at all except lose the battle.

The moment passed. Durouman's mouth snapped shut and he turned away, shaking all over. Blade slapped the chief tillerman on the shoulder. "Get ready to swing us to port when I give the word." Then he shouted down to the drummers. "New stroke—all oars, reverse!" The drummers broke off to stare up at him for a moment. Then they shrugged and started beating the reverse. Avenger began to back off.

There was only one way to make sure of shifting the direction of the allied attack. Avenger would have to lead it on its new course. That meant getting clear of the close formation so that she could turn and be clearly seen turning. "Follow the leader" was the only reliable signal in a battle like this.

Avenger could not break out of the formation by going ahead, into easy range of the Imperial guns. So there was nothing to do but drop back through the formation to the rear.

During the next few minutes Blade was quite sure that he would finish up this day with his hair and beard as white as milk, if he lived through it at all. As Avenger slowed, the other galleys seemed to be racing past her. For one ghastly moment it seemed that Avenger's next astern was going to ram her barrel straight up the flagship's stern and set it off almost under Blade's feet. By a margin so narrow that it made Blade sweat, that disaster was avoided.

Another galley shot up from astern and, by an even narrower margin, avoided plowing along Avenger's starboard side. That would have smashed half of the flagship's oars and flattened a good many of her rowers for good.

A third galley swerved in plenty of time to avoid coming close to Avenger. In the process she found herself almost across the bows of still another galley. This one had to swerve in turn, missed blowing her comrade to bits, but came so close to her stern that one anchor caught in the other's main rigging. Shrouds parted with dismal twangs and the mainmast went over with a tremendous crash, amid a chorus of furious yells. For the moment it looked as if those two galleys were about to start a private war of their own.

Finally Avenger slid out of the formation. As Blade watched from the quarterdeck, he could see some of the other galleys in the allied center already following his lead and coming about to port. Still others were trying to follow but were too mixed up with their comrades to maneuver safely. Around and among and occasionally on all of them the shot from the Imperial line still fell. Kul-Nam's captains either had unlimited powder or were less afraid of wasting it than of seeming not to be doing their best for their terrible master.

Avenger was now racing along almost parallel to the Imperial line, within range but not taking any fire for the moment. Blade looked away toward the rest of the battle. A bank of smoke was slowly swallowing everything astern, but he could see no real changes. He could barely make out the rest of the Imperial sailing ships. Apparently they were following through on their planned movements.

Fine. If he couldn't see the ships, neither could Kul-Nam. If Kul-Nam couldn't see them, he couldn't signal to them. If he couldn't signal new orders to them, they would go right on obeying the old ones. Fear of the Emperor was making his captains incredibly brave and stubborn. At the same time, it would also make them incredibly rigid in obeying what they thought were his orders.

Rule by fear was a two-edged sword.

Twenty galleys were now moving after Avenger in something that might be called a formation. Even better. They were gaining on the sailing ships. Soon they could swing around and cross the bows of the Imperial line. Instead of twenty sailing ships shooting at sixty galleys, there would be twenty galleys surrounding two or three sailing ships at a time, with full room to maneuver-and full room to swing in and strike with what they thrust ahead of them.

It had been a bloody battle and it would become still bloodier before it was over. But it might also turn into a victory. Blade mentally crossed his fingers-he'd done everything else that could be done for the moment.

Eventually the Imperial ships noticed Avenger and the galleys following her. They couldn't figure out what the galleys' maneuvers meant, but they could see a lot of targets. By now, though, Avenger was using the room created by all the confusion to swing still farther to port. Most of the other galleys were following her. Two-thirds of Blade's attacking force was now out of range from the Imperial line, but the Imperial captains didn't seem to realize this. They went on blazing away as if the galleys were practically

alongside.

"They can't see very well, can they?" said Prince Durouman.

"No," said Blade. "Or perhaps they can see nothing but Kul-Nam's flag-and Kul-Nam's rage if they stop firing. We shall have to ask them, after we win the battle."

Durouman looked sharply at Blade, realized that Blade had spoken with a perfectly straight face, and nodded.

Blade was glad to see that the galleys were drawing ahead of the Imperial ships. They were moving at a pace the rowers could not hold for much longer, if they were to have any strength left for the actual attack. That would have to be made at absolute top speed, for they would be closing to ranges where a gunner blind drunk and half paralyzed could hardly miss.

Avenger was a mile out ahead of the leading Imperial ship when Blade ordered the helm over again and the rowers to increase to the ramming stroke. Looking astern, he saw one galley after another doing the same. He heaved a sigh of relief. They had done all the complicated things he'd wanted them to do as if all the captains had been reading his mind. Now it was going to be a straight, uncomplicated attack again, with every galley for herself.

Avenger swung in a wide circle around the head of the Imperial line. Some of the galley captains behind her were too impatient to do that. They put their helms hard over and drove straight in at the enemy. Blade prayed that no more than half of them would be sunk as a price for that magnificently foolish courage.

It was not Avenger that drove home the first attack with Blade's secret weapon against a sailing ship of the Empire. It was a galley of Nullar and a pirate galley, racing in almost side by side, not firing their guns, every man aboard except the rowers lying flat on the decks. They raced in, waves rising so high over the bows that Blade half expected them to drive right under.

They struck. There was a thudding roar, and a great column of water spewed up alongside an Imperial ship, then broke apart in a cloud of smoke and spray. Moments later the other galley struck, farther forward. Her barrel must have risen clear of the water at the last second, for it went off with a great sheet of flame. From the enemy's foc'sle guns, men, and planks flew in all directions, and the bowsprit cartwheeled through the air to splash into the sea a hundred yards away. Then the mainmast tottered, toppled, and crashed down squarely on the deck of the first galley. She was dragged in alongside her dying enemy as the fallen mast twisted about. Blade saw the smoke of muskets suddenly spring up from both ships as both crews leaped to board or repel boarders.

It was bad luck, being caught that way. Blade had anticipated the risk, but there wasn't anything to be done about it. When a large sailing ship started falling violently to pieces, there was no predicting where the pieces would land.

Avenger was now around on the far side of the enemy line and beginning to work her way back along it toward the flagship. The smoke and the enemy's ships now cut off Blade's view of the attack. He heard two more thudding roars as barrels were driven home and saw two more clouds of smoke rising through and above the murk from the guns. He saw one tremendous flash high in the rigging of a ship, as a powder barrel hurled by a siege engine exploded in her tops. Both masts went down in a rain of spars and blocks and sails; then the dismasted hull was blotted out in the smoke. All this time the guns still rolled.

Then Blade saw something that made him take off his helmet and wave it wildly, because he could no longer control his excitement. Two, three, four of the Imperial sailing ships were coming about, turning away out of line, turning their sterns to the allied galleys-turning to flee! At last the courage of Kul-Nam's captains and crews was beginning to fade. The death that was coming at them out of the smoke filled them with a fear that drove any thought of what Kul-Nam might do out of their minds. All they could think of was what the enemy galleys would do if they didn't flee.

Now the whole enemy line was falling into confusion as ship after ship tried to turn away. It looked like a stampede of drunken elephants, as fifteen or more large ships tried to maneuver in an area of sea that would have been cramped for half that number. All of the ships were clumsy to begin with, and none of them had been improved by the damage they'd sustained.

Blade saw a barrel crash down on one ship's deck and explode. It must have been filled with sulphur, for an enormous cloud of yellowish smoke swirled up from the deck. Flames followed, rapidly climbing the masts and reducing the sails to blackened shreds. Blade heard the crackle and roar, heard the explosions of powder charges on deck, saw men jump over the side with clothing and hair aflame, preferring drowning or sharks to burning alive.

Then another sailing ship loomed out of the smoke too close to the burning one to avoid her. They crashed together and all the masts of both ships went down. Now they were as firmly linked as if a dozen sailors had spent hours tying them together.

Then a galley attacked. Her barrel smashed into the second ship-and it touched off the ship's magazines.

The explosion could not have been louder if a volcano had risen from the bottom of the sea to create a new island. Blade clapped both hands over his ears, quite sure that he was going to be deaf for a week. The entire sea around Avenger seemed to be blotted out by the great flash and the smoke that followed it.

The smoke was so thick that Blade never saw or heard any of the pieces of the three ships and their men fall back into the sea. It was as if all three ships and crews had been blown into dust so fine that the wind carried it away.

Avenger moved on. By now her rowers were deaf to everything except the beat of the drums. She swept through the smoke without slowing down and broke out into the daylight again.

Three hundred yards away rose the towering mass of Kul-Nam's flagship.

Instantly the ship let fly with an entire broadside, thirty or more guns. In spite of the range, only one or two shots struck Avenger. Even the Emperor's eye directly on them could no longer make the Empire's gunners shoot straight. Without any orders, the boarding party began rushing forward, the men from the stern guns joining them. Avenger surged forward, and in that moment the big galley seemed as alive and eager as the men on her decks.

Blade yelled what he hoped everyone heard as "Get down!" and threw himself flat on the deck. The heavy gun on the bow went off. Several balls from the flagship whistled overhead. Then Avenger drove her deadly weapon hard against the flagship's bow.

Instead of a roaring explosion, all Blade heard was a great craak of splitting wood. Then he heard a tremendous crashing and crunching and was hurled violently forward as Avenger plowed into the

flagship.

Blade slid several feet forward on his belly, picking up splinters in every piece of skin that wasn't protected by his armor. Above him the flagship's bowsprit and Avenger's foremast were hopelessly tangled together. Then with a popping of breaking ropes and a crackling of wood the mast leaned gently forward and came down across the enemy's foc'sle. Suddenly there was a perfect bridge from Avenger onto the deck of Kul-Nam's flagship-or the other way around.

Blade wasted no time worrying about why the barrel hadn't gone off. A glancing blow, wet powder, who knew? In any case, there was Prince Durouman, waving his sword and mace, leaping onto the mast and scrambling up it as nimbly as a monkey. He was going to get his chance at a hand-to-hand grapple aboard the Emperor's flagship after all.

This might be folly, but it was a folly the prince could not be left to commit alone. Blade sprang to his feet. Turning aft, he shouted to the men around the siege engine, "Dump the barrels-now!" The deck of a galley locked in close combat with Kul-Nam's flagship was no place for nearly a ton of powder and sulphur. Then Blade drew his own sword, flourished it toward the foc'sle that loomed high overhead, and roared in a voice that carried all over both ships:

"BOARDERS AWAY! FOLLOW ME!"

There were those aboard Avenger who said afterward that Blade went onto the enemy's deck in a single leap or flew up the mast without his feet touching it. Certainly he had no memory of his feet touching anything from the moment he left Avenger's deck to the moment he landed on the enemy ship.

There were seventy or eighty eunuchs and armed sailors on the flagship's upper deck. Blade ran up to join Prince Durouman; then the two leaders leaped down from the foc'sle almost together and went to work.

The eunuchs and the sailors fought well because they were fighting for their lives, but they could not fight well enough to stand against men who were more than half berserk, who did not care about living or dying, only about killing anyone who wore Kul-Nam's colors and lifted a weapon to defend him. They did not fight at all against Blade and Prince Durouman, who strode forward shoulder to shoulder, their swords never still, carving a path through their opponents like a mowing machine through ripe wheat.

Behind the leaders Avenger's musketeers and archers crowded the foc'sle. They fired and shot, reloaded and recocked their weapons, fired and shot again. Their bullets and bolts sailed over the leaders' heads into the rear ranks of the defenders. Man by man the sailors and the eunuchs fell away; rank by rank they dissolved under the attack from front and rear together.

Blade saw a sailor in front of him hesitate, turn away, and make a dash for the ship's side. He had one leg over the bulwarks, ready to leap, when a spear suddenly drove into his back. He looked down at the sharp silver point thrusting out through his chest, coughed up a huge mass of blood, then fell back onto the deck.

Blade's eyes leaped from the fallen sailor to the red tassel on the end of the spear, and from there to the squat figure in the gilded armor standing in the cabin door at the far end of the main deck. Another spear flashed across the deck, this one aimed at Prince Durouman's face. The prince leaped to one side and took the spear in his shoulder. It drove through his armor, slamming him back up against the foremast. Before Kul-Nam could throw his last spear, Blade was charging him, hoping to strike him down before he could draw his sword.

Kul-Nam was too fast. The sword seemed to leap from its scabbard, then split the air inches from Blade's nose. The force of Kul-Nam's swing took the sword around in a great arc, biting through the seasoned wood of the railing as if it were balsa. Blade realized that Kul-Nam was wielding a sword that would go through his armor and his body too if the Emperor had room to swing it with all his strength. The Emperor did.

Blade knew he had to close in to live. He drew his short sword and the commando knife. Then he charged again.

Kul-Nam drove Blade back three times, scraping the point of his sword across Blade's armor twice, slashing his cheek the third time. Then Kul-Nam's own lust to kill overcame him at last, and he tried to close.

His sword flashed in from Blade's left, and Blade's short sword met it. The two weapons came together with a terrible clang and Kul-Nam's sword bit halfway through Blade's. For a moment the Emperor's weapon was locked and immobilized.

Blade didn't dare move his sword. That would have risked snapping it off and freeing Kul-Nam's sword. Instead he held his left arm steady and pivoted on his left foot. His booted right foot crashed into Kul-Nam's face. The Emperor's brute strength kept him on his feet, but he was not seeing too clearly. Blade let go of his short sword and pivoted again. His left hand closed on the Emperor's pigtail where it hung out from under his helmet and jerked hard. Then Blade's right hand struck, thrusting the commando knife up under Kul-Nam's jaw into the Emperor's brain. Kul-Nam died on his feet, his eyes staring into Blade's as the life went out of them.

Blade pulled his knife free and let Kul-Nam's body fall to the deck with a thud. Then he turned. Prince Durouman was leaning against the foremast, his face twisted as he slowly worked the spear out of his shoulder. Finally it came free. He threw it to the deck and his eyes shifted to Blade-and to Kul-Nam sprawled at Blade's feet. His breath went out of him in a great sigh. For a moment it seemed that he would fall to the deck.

Somehow Prince Durouman found the strength to stay on his feet. It was Blade who went down onto the deck-down on one knee, the commando knife raised, wanting to shout with triumph. Instead he was silent as he gave Prince Durouman the salute due the Emperor of Saram.

Chapter 27

Kul-Nam was not the last man in the two fleets to die. It took a while to hoist Prince Durouman's standard to the flagship's masthead. It took a while after that for every one to see it and realize what it meant. It took an even longer time to convince everyone aboard the ships of Saram that they could surrender safely. Most expected to have their throats cut or be pitched overboard the moment they laid down their arms.

No one gave such promises to the Corps of Eunuchs. It would have been a waste of breath, and anyone who even suggested it would probably have been heaved overboard, along with most of the corps. Like Avenger's former slavemasters, they were no great loss. They had been Kul-Nam's personal terror weapon, and now that Kul-Nam was dead there was nothing for them to do except follow their master.

There was another man whom Blade and Prince Durouman would cheerfully have dealt with in the same way-the treacherous commandant of Parine. He had not only told Kul-Nam of the princess's moves

against him, thus provoking the attack. He had also revealed all the secrets and weaknesses of Parine's fortifications, thus helping to make the attack a success.

Emass was frank about what should be done with the commandant. " We should take him back to Parine and there torture him to death the same way Princess Tarassa died."

Blade shook his head. "As much as I want his blood, I don't want it that way. There should be no more torture or painful executions under Prince-ah, Emperor-Durouman rule. That will make a great and welcome contrast with Kul-Nam." They would not have understood his suggesting that torture was wrong-it was that sort of Dimension.

In any case, the question turned out to be meaningless. They discovered that the commandant had fallen in the attack on Parine, along with nearly five thousand more of Kul-Nam's men. He had made the attack on Parine a success, but he had not made it easy, nor had he lived to collect his hoped-for reward of becoming Prince of Parine. Along with the five thousand men had gone twenty galleys, five sailing ships, and nearly half of Kul-Nam's store of ammunition.

Two large groups of men who had spent most of the day trying to kill each other did not become sworn comrades overnight. But everyone was too exhausted and too relieved that Kul-Nam was dead to bear anyone any ill will. By morning everyone had slept enough to realize that a new and perhaps better time for all of them was dawning with the new day. The battered fleets set sail for Garis with everyone in much better spirits.

The voyage to Garis took three days. The arrival of the combined fleets and the news they brought first stunned the people, then set off wild rejoicing. Word spread rapidly through Saram, and the rejoicing steadily mounted. By the time Emperor Durouman rode inland toward his capital, his progress had the air of a triumphal procession. Blade rode with him, hailed as the mightiest of the mighty and the champion of champions, a savior to all, second only to the new Emperor himself.

The only thing that marred the procession was the number of bodies that littered the streets and road-Kul-Nam's informers or officials, his police or merely those who had supported him too loudly in the past and hadn't turned their colors fast enough. Durouman didn't much care for the sight.

Emass was delighted. "Your Magnificence," he kept saying, "this is a great stroke of good fortune. These people are your enemies, whom you would have had to destroy sooner or later. Here they are, dying by the thousands without you having to lift a finger or take the smallest portion of the blame."

Blade shook his head. "Some of them may be your enemies," he said. "But I suspect that a great many personal feuds are also being settled. You would be wise to bring the killing to a halt as quickly as possible."

Durouman threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Blade, Emass-what am I going to do if you two stay around and keep giving me advice? You always make exactly opposite suggestions."

"I do not know about Emass," said Blade, "but you will not have to worry about me much longer. I have carried out the mission my king gave me-"

"And done a good deal more besides," put in Durouman.

"True. But I have no more business here in Saram. I will be gathering a company of stout fighters before long, then riding south."

"Are you sure you would not rather wait until we have fought the Steppemen?" said Durouman. "I would be glad of your sword beside mine again. Also, your journey will be safer when the Steppemen are broken."

"I would be happy to join you," said Blade. "But I was sent on this journey with strict orders from my king. He is not Kul-Nam. He will not have my head or title or estates if I do not return swiftly. He will merely not think me wise, and in England, to be thought unwise is to be thought dishonorable."

"I will say no more," said Durouman. "Is there anything I may do to speed you on your way?"

"There are things that will ease my mind," said Blade. "First, there is-

"Avenger's crew," put in Durouman.

"Yes."

"If it were possible, I would make every one of them a nobleman," said Durouman earnestly. "That cannot be. I can swear solemnly that no man who fought under you aboard your ship will go hungry or homeless as long as he lives and I and my sons rule in Saram."

Blade smiled. "Very good. Second, there is-

"Haleen?" said Durouman.

Blade laughed loudly. "Has the Eagle crown given you the power to read other men's thoughts, my friend?"

"No. It is merely that you obviously care for her, and she for you. Why should you not therefore wish her in good hands?"

"True. I take it that you have a plan for her?"

"Yes. Princess Tarassa's son will need a nurse for some years, until he is old enough to be placed in the care of men. I was thinking of making her principal nurse to the young prince. She seems a very honest and wise young woman."

"She is." Wise enough, in fact, so that by the time the young prince no longer needed a nurse, Haleen would have the money and position to do whatever she pleased. Blade suspected that she would end up marrying at least a wealthy merchant's heir, if not a nobleman.

"Is there anything else I can do for those you must leave behind?"

"No," said Blade sadly. "There are no others. Too many of those who have been my comrades in this land are dead."

Haleen was waiting for him that night when he returned to the small palace that was his temporary home in the capital. He kissed her, but she wriggled gently out of his embrace and stood at arms' length, looking at him with an impish grin on her face.

"No, Prince Blade. Not until you have bathed. I am going to be a lady of some rank now, or so I have

heard."

"That is true."

"Then I shall have in my bed no man who has not bathed first." She raised one slim arm and pointed toward the bath chamber. "Go, my prince. Go and bathe."

"Will you join me if I do?"

"In time, in time."

That time was short. Five minutes after Blade climbed into the great golden bathtub, the chamber door opened and Haleen entered. She wore a pink silk robe that neither revealed nor clung but was somehow all the more enticing for that. Blade reached out toward her. She let him grasp her by one hand, then reached up with the other and undid the clasp of the robe. It whispered to the floor. Nude and lovely, she turned toward him.

Then she noticed the commando knife and belt hanging over one of the projecting ornaments on the edge of the tub. Her face clouded.

"You bathe with your knife?"

"I would rather not be without a weapon ready to hand until all the people who might want to send me after Kul-Nam are no longer dangerous."

"I am not unarmed, Blade," she said, putting her hands behind her head and giving her body a sensuous wiggle.

"No. But your weapons are no danger to my life."

"You are that confident of your powers, Blade?"

"Are you planning to put them to a test?"

"I am." Haleen put one hand on the edge of the tub and got ready to climb in. Then suddenly she jerked the hand back as if the tub had turned red-hot.

"Blade-what is the matter?" Her voice was half a gasp, half a scream.

"No-it's-" Blade managed to grunt. Then he could not have spoken a word to save his life. The pain was in his head, the pain that told him the time had come to return to Home Dimension. It tore at him, roaring in a way he'd never felt before. He saw nothing, felt nothing except the pain.

It eased for a moment, long enough for him to see an open-mouthed and staring Haleen, already fading away. The tub was still solid around him, the water hot against his skin, the knife and belt still hooked solidly to the ornament.

He had a moment to be aware of these things. He had another moment to raise a hand in farewell to Haleen. Then the pain crashed down on him again, and he was aware of nothing else.

J's telephone rang shrilly. He pushed the file he was examining to one side and picked up the phone. Lord Leighton's voice sounded in his ear.

"Good evening, J. Trust I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all, Leighton, not at all." That was truer than it usually was. Even if it had been entirely untrue, J would still have said it. Leighton hadn't changed a bit in all the time they'd been working together-he would have interrupted God if the impulse came over him. But he tried to do it politely now.

"Very good, very good. I'm afraid we're facing a rather serious problem with the underground complex."

J winced. "Indeed? What sort of a problem?"

"You remember that Richard came back this time in a golden bathtub filled with water?"

J certainly did. The golden tub had been appraised at thirty thousand pounds by MI6's confidential experts on such matters. That would be a useful sum of money. But Leighton didn't sound too happy about the gold. Of course! The water.

"I gather the water was a bit dangerous?"

"It certainly was. Fortunately, the tub landed upright. But imagine what would have happened if it had overturned! We'd have blown circuits all over the complex and probably electrocuted ourselves and Richard as well. I'm afraid there's no alternative, J. We'll just have to move everything out of the underground complex to another site that's less vulnerable to flooding."

For a moment J's mouth hung open as he struggled for both words and self-control. "What?" he began to explode. "Do you realize that will cost at least seven million-!" Then he broke off. Something in Leighton's voice wasn't quite what it should be for an announcement like this. He took several deep breaths, then spoke again.

"Leighton-is there by any chance a sly grin on your face at this moment?"

An unmistakable chuckle came over the wire. "I'm rather afraid there is, J. I couldn't resist the impulse."

J resisted an impulse to tell the scientist exactly what he thought of the joke and another impulse to take a taxi to the man's apartment and smartly box his ears in the best schoolboy manner. When both impulses were firmly under control, he went on.

"Never mind the impulses. What's the real situation?"

"Well, if that tub had gone over it could have been rather expensive-we'd very likely have to replace the booth and the chair. But as far as the rest is concerned, I had ninety-five out of a hundred chances of cutting all circuits before any really serious damage was done."

"What about the odd five chances?"

"I would like an automatic monitor hooked into the circuit controls. It would be activated as soon as the return sequence is completed and Richard is safely back with us and go into action if there were any flood or fire or other anomaly. That will cost some money, but it will be rather closer to seven thousand

pounds than to seven million."

"That sounds within reason," said J. He could not help adding, "Even if you aren't." The response to that was another chuckle and then a click as Leighton hung up.

J sighed. As if there weren't enough problems already! Now Leighton was developing a taste for practical jokes.

Then J reminded himself to keep things in proportion. The situation could be far worse. Consider.

Richard was back safe and sound, alive, healthy, unwounded, with the commando knife (which he had put to very good use), and the great golden bathtub.

The mystery hero problem was not getting any better, but it wasn't getting any worse either.

Leighton might be developing a taste for practical joke, but he hadn't conceived any new lines of research that would have to be started at once at the cost of several million pounds.

No, when all was said and done, Lord Leighton's new vice was hardly a problem worth worrying about.

It complicated things, of course. But J knew that if he'd really wanted a simple life, he would never have decided to stay in espionage work so many years ago. He would have made a modest and secure career in the army. Or he might even have followed in his father's footsteps, living quietly on his estates, collecting Byzantine art and manuscripts and keeping bees. No, he had made his choice all those years ago, and he'd made it with his eyes open.

Nor had he ever really regretted it.

J laughed quietly to himself, drew the file back in front of him, and began to work through it again.